

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND ITS EFFECT ON ADULT RELATIONSHIPS IN *IT ENDS WITH US*

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Abstract: *It Ends with Us* by Colleen Hoover is a novel inspired by the author's personal experience witnessing her mother endure domestic violence. The story follows Lily Bloom, a woman who grew up in an abusive household and later faces similar patterns in her adult romantic relationship. This study analyzes Lily's psychological development using Anna Freud's psychoanalytic theory, particularly focusing on defense mechanisms. The objective is to explore how Lily's unresolved childhood trauma influences her thought processes and decision-making in adulthood. Through a qualitative method, the study examines narrative passages and character dialogues from the novel to identify psychological patterns. The analysis focuses on five of Anna Freud's defense mechanisms: repression, denial, rationalization, displacement, and suppression, highlighting how Lily both consciously and unconsciously relies on these strategies to cope with trauma. The findings reveal that Lily's exposure to domestic violence as a child profoundly impacts her adult emotional responses, making it difficult for her to confront abuse, assert boundaries, or think rationally in her relationship. Ultimately, the study emphasizes how defense mechanisms serve as psychological tools to shield individuals from the lasting effects of childhood trauma, as reflected in Lily's behavior and emotional struggles throughout the novel.

Keywords: *childhood trauma, defense mechanism, relationship*

INTRODUCTION

Childhood trauma is widely recognized as a significant contributor to psychological and emotional difficulties in adulthood, often resulting in disrupted attachment styles, challenges with intimacy, and patterns of self-sabotaging behavior

(Downey & Crummy, 2022). While the psychological impact of early trauma has been extensively examined in clinical research, its depiction within contemporary popular fiction, particularly romance literature, has received comparatively less scholarly attention. Hoover's *It Ends with Us* (2016) offers a compelling exploration of the lingering effects of childhood exposure to domestic violence on adult romantic relationships. The protagonist, Lily, grapples with emotional conflict and hesitation in the face of intimate partner violence, reflecting trauma-related behaviors such as denial, repetition, displacement, and rationalization. This study aims to analyze the representation of trauma in Hoover's novel and explore how such fictional narratives can enhance our understanding of trauma's impact on adult relational dynamics.

Trauma is a complex emotional response to stressful occurrences that can exert a long-lasting impact on a person's sense of self, safety, and emotional control. Historically, the definition of trauma has evolved from a simple "stress or blow that may produce disordered feelings" to a "state or condition produced by such a blow" (Heidarizadeh, 2015). This experience is not strictly physical, it becomes traumatic when it contradicts an individual's worldview and surpasses their inherent capacity for coping. As Perrotta (2019) notes, psychological trauma consists of incidents that potentially alter a person's psychic system and jeopardize mental unity. These definitions emphasize that the external event is often less significant than the individual's subjective experience and their ability to process the situation within their prior psychological framework.

In the realm of literature, trauma serves as a transformative force that shapes character identity and behavior. Caruth (2016) played a pivotal role in trauma studies by illustrating how literature presents trauma as a force that fundamentally reshapes perceptions of the world. For instance, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the protagonist struggles with the haunting memories of slavery, illustrating how trauma disrupts the sense of time and self (LaCapra, 2014). Similarly, in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991), the psychological effects of World War I demonstrate how trauma alters both individual and societal consciousness. Through these narratives, readers understand the profound disorientation of the traumatized individual, often reflected through storytelling techniques like repetition and disruption (Ingerslev, 2024).

Anna Freud's theoretical framework provides a vital lens for understanding these literary portrayals, particularly through the use of defense mechanisms. As a pioneer in child psychoanalysis who expanded upon the work of Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud focused on how individuals especially children create unconscious defenses to shield themselves from overwhelming anxiety (Freud, 2018). Mechanisms such as suppression, denial, and displacement help manage intense emotions, yet they can simultaneously hinder the full processing of the traumatic event. In literature, these defenses are frequently personified through characters who attempt to navigate their pain by avoiding or repressing traumatic memories.

In conclusion, trauma is a profound and complex experience that dictates emotional health and influences life choices, frequently establishing a character's identity. Literature serves as an essential tool for studying these effects, as seen in works ranging from Pat Barker's *Regeneration* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us*. While theoretical frameworks from Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, and Anna Freud offer significant insights into how trauma appears in literature, a notable research gap exists in the transition from individual behavior to relational outcomes. Most existing scholarship focuses on how childhood trauma dictates general adult behavior and development, how an individual 'acts' as they grow up. However, the specific longitudinal effect of childhood trauma on the mechanics of adult romantic relationships remains under-researched. By applying Anna Freud's defense mechanisms to *It Ends with Us*, this study addresses that gap, illustrating how internal defenses manifest as external relational patterns. As van der Kolk (2014) argues, trauma essentially alters how people recall and interpret experiences, leading to the emotional detachment and disjointed narratives often reflected in trauma literature. By examining these narratives, readers can better comprehend not only how individuals repress their history, but how those repressed traumas actively bridge the gap between childhood pain and adult intimacy.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several previous studies have established a foundation for analyzing childhood trauma in literature. Donia and Haikal (2022) utilized a qualitative approach to examine the quest for self-realization in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*, revealing how

parental rejection based on skin color functions as a primary traumatic stressor. Similarly, Perennia (2022) focused on the character Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, identifying specific clinical markers of traumatic grief and PTSD, such as intrusive thoughts and avoidance following sexual assault and loss.

While these studies focus on identity and clinical symptoms, others have explored the broader aftermath of trauma. Hudáková (2020) analyzed the long-term psychological consequences of early-life distress, arguing that trauma fundamentally disrupts the victim's trajectory into adulthood in *The Gathering and The Hiding Place*. Building on this, Wardani (2022) further examined *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, specifically categorizing the types of childhood traumatic experiences that lead to personality fragmentation. Additionally, Salman and Marlina (2022) investigated Joseph Moldover's *Every Moment After*, concluding that childhood trauma acts as a catalyst for chronic mental illness and personality shifts in later life.

Despite these valuable contributions, a significant gap remains in the current body of trauma literature. While previous research extensively examines how trauma impacts individual behavior and internal personality development, there is a distinct lack of exploration into how these internal shifts specifically dictate the interpersonal dynamics of adult romantic relationships. Most existing studies focus on the 'survivor in isolation' analyzing their symptoms and coping mechanisms as solo traits. However, Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* provides a unique opportunity to bridge this gap by illustrating how childhood trauma functions as an active, albeit unconscious, participant in adult intimacy. Unlike the aforementioned studies that focus on general PTSD or self-realization, this research applies Freud's (2018) theory of defense mechanisms to analyze how the protagonist's unconscious reliance on repression, denial, and displacement directly shapes her choices in love and trust. By shifting the focus from 'how the character acts' to 'how the character relates to others', this study provides a necessary evolution of the existing trauma narratives in contemporary literature.

Several important defense mechanisms are used by the ego to deal with internal conflicts and external pressures. According to Anna Freud, there are several types of defense mechanisms (2018). Defense mechanisms help individuals cope with distressing emotions and experiences in various ways. **Repression** involves unconsciously suppressing painful memories, while **regression** causes a person to revert

to an earlier developmental stage when faced with stress or anxiety. **Denial** occurs when someone refuses to acknowledge reality, acting as if painful memories or feelings do not exist. **Projection** involves blaming others for one’s unpleasant emotions, ideas, or desires. **Reaction formation** leads a person to act in a way that opposes their true feelings to conceal them. **Identification** happens when individuals adopt the behavior of those they fear or admire. **Displacement** redirects emotions or impulses toward a less threatening target. **Rationalization** provides logical explanations for actions that might otherwise be seen as embarrassing or disappointing. **Isolation** serves as a way to avoid thoughts and actions that cause distress. Lastly, **sublimation** channels undesirable impulses into constructive or socially acceptable activities (Novrianti, 2025).

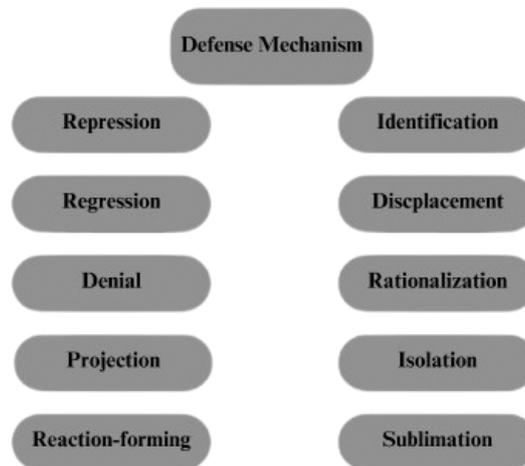


Figure 1. Defense Mechanism described by Anna Freud (2018)

This study distinguishes itself from previous scholarship by shifting the analytical focus from individual behavioral symptoms to the complex machinery of trauma-informed romantic partnerships. While earlier research primarily examines how childhood trauma impacts a character’s isolated development, there is a limited exploration of how these internal shifts specifically dictate the dynamics of adult intimacy. By utilizing Anna Freud’s theory of defense mechanisms, natural coping strategies the mind employs to shield against anxiety or guilt (Claney, 2024) this research decodes how ‘blind spots’ are formed within relationships. In *It Ends with Us*, Lily Bloom demonstrates this through the unconscious use of denial and displacement; despite Ryle’s abusive behavior, she convinces herself he is fundamentally different from her father. Consequently, this study moves beyond a simple clinical diagnosis to

reveal how specific defense mechanisms facilitate the repetition of cycles of abuse, thereby bridging the gap between childhood pain and adult relational choices.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how childhood trauma influences adult relationships in Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us*. As Creswell (2009) explains, qualitative methods aim to capture the depth of human experiences and social behaviors through detailed contextual analysis. The primary data source is the novel itself, with a focus on Lily Bloom, whose experiences illustrate the long-term impact of childhood trauma on romantic relationships. Through close reading, this research identifies scenes that reflect Lily's psychological responses to trauma. Guided by Anna Freud's theory, the study highlights five defense mechanisms, repression, denial, rationalization, displacement, and suppression as strategies Lily unconsciously uses to cope. These mechanisms both protect and hinder her, revealing how unresolved trauma shapes harmful relational patterns. Data was collected by: (1) reading the novel thoroughly, (2) highlighting trauma-related passages, (3) organizing key themes, and (4) applying relevant theory to interpret the evidence. The analysis links these mechanisms to Lily's behavior, offering deeper insight into her emotional journey.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section analyzes Lily Bloom, the protagonist of *It Ends with Us*, through the lens of Anna Freud's defense mechanisms, emphasizing the impact of childhood trauma on adult relationships. Through a close examination of Lily's thoughts, behaviors, and emotional struggles, this study demonstrates that her use of defense mechanisms is a coping strategy for childhood trauma, which ultimately influences her decisions in relationships. Larsen et al., (2019) emphasize, early trauma profoundly affects emotional regulation and behavior. Lily's exposure to her father's abuse normalized violence in relationships, leading her to initially tolerate similar patterns with Ryle. Her childhood trauma also led to social avoidance during her father's funeral, as she avoided meeting with both the neighbors and her mother. This behavior reflects an external factor (Intarini & Thohiriyah, 2024).

Lily's Childhood Trauma

Lily, who spent her teenage years witnessing her father abuse her mother, grew up surrounded by domestic violence. Even in a school environment, Lily does not have a big group of friends, and it is shown in the novel that she often sits on the bus alone instead of socializing with the other students. This may also be the effect of the domestic violence that she witnessed at home. As she witnessed that abuse, she wondered why her mother did not divorce her father. After going through a similar experience as her mother, Lily came to her own understanding, “*She did not have the financial stability that I have.*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 282). Unlike her mother, Lily owns a business and is financially independent, whereas her mother relied entirely on her husband. This dependence may have been a key reason she stayed in the marriage to ensure Lily was taken care of until she was grown. Lily's diary entries reveal that her father played a major role in her childhood trauma. She described how her father often abused her mother, and she often witnessed it happening. Her father never physically harmed Lily until one particular incident. During a heated argument over a parking spot, Lily intervened by jumping on her father's back as he was choking her mother. Her father threw her off, and Lily ended up with a bleeding forehead. Rather than taking her to the hospital, her father simply drove away, leaving Lily behind with her mother. This event clearly highlights how her father contributed significantly to her childhood trauma. The emotional pressure she felt as a child was too much, so she used a defense mechanism as a strategy to protect herself.

Defense mechanisms can both protect and harm the individual, serving as unconscious shields against unbearable anxiety. In Lily's case, these mechanisms, specifically denial and rationalization, become her primary tools for coping with domestic violence in her adult relationship with Ryle. While the novel's first-person perspective provides direct access to her psychological state, her reliance on these defenses becomes clinically evident when she endures physical abuse: “*Ryle's arm came out of nowhere and slammed against me, knocking me backward.*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 185). Instead of recognizing the danger, Lily utilizes denial to minimize the trauma, a behavior rooted in the cognitive dissonance of her childhood. As a young girl witnessing her father's violence, her inner thoughts revealed a complex duality: she felt profound pity for her mother but was simultaneously frustrated by her mother's refusal

to leave, famously declaring, “*I hope to hell I never do*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 156). This internal conflict suggests an early use of repression, where she pushes away the fear of vulnerability. However, by choosing to dismiss Ryle’s actions as isolated incidents, Lily unintentionally employs rationalization, effectively ‘explaining away’ the abuse to preserve her psychic unity. Ultimately, her actions reveal that despite her conscious vow to be different, her unconscious defense mechanisms influence her to repeat the very cycle she once despised.

While defense mechanisms are designed to protect the ego, they often trap the individual in destructive cycles. In *It Ends with Us*, Lily Bloom utilizes these unconscious shields to navigate the escalating violence in her relationship with Ryle. For example, after a physical altercation that results in Lily falling and her head bleeding, Ryle immediately shifts the narrative by claiming she simply ‘fell’ (Hoover, 2016, p. 231). In response, Lily attempts to justify the situation by stating, “*He’s here and he’s trying to make me understand his past.*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 181). This statement exemplifies rationalization, a defense mechanism where the individual provides logically consistent reasons to justify her boyfriend’s abuse. By focusing on Ryle’s own tragic history, Lily ‘brushes off’ the physical trauma, effectively using his past as a shield to avoid the painful reality of her own victimization. This behavior is particularly significant because it contradicts her lifelong determination to avoid her mother’s path. Lily was determined to never endure what her mother did, yet she eventually observes the grim reality of her situation, stating, “*My mother went through it, I went through it*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 361). Despite her conscious intentions, her unconscious reliance on rationalization and denial created a psychic ‘blind spot’, leading her to repeat the very generational trauma she was desperate to escape.

The Effect on Adult Relationships

Lily’s traumatic childhood profoundly influenced her adult relationship with Ryle, who transitioned from a supportive friend and romantic partner to her husband. When Ryle’s behavior escalated into physical aggression, exemplified when “*Ryle’s arm came out of nowhere and slammed against me, knocking me backward.*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 185). Lily did not immediately terminate the relationship. While a critic might argue that certain physical expressions vary across cultural contexts, the narrative context here clearly delineates abuse from affection through the use of forceful impact

and the resulting physical injury. Lily's decision to remain and offer Ryle 'another chance' is not a reflection of cultural norms, but rather a manifestation of traumatic bonding and the defense mechanism of denial. This pattern directly mirrors her childhood observations of her mother repeatedly forgiving her father's violence. Growing up in a household where domestic abuse was a recurring domestic reality normalized the presence of pain within love for Lily. Consequently, her psychological framework was conditioned to tolerate and rationalize abusive behavior, leading to a documented cycle of three distinct instances of domestic violence within her marriage.

Lily's decision to stay with Ryle despite his abusive behavior is deeply rooted in psychological issues, particularly attachment and defense mechanisms. According to Bowlby's attachment theory, expanded by Mary Ainsworth, and later applied to adult relationships by Hazan and Shaver, attachment issues often originate in early relationships with caregivers (Honor, 2019; Smith & South, 2019). Lily grew up witnessing her father's abuse toward her mother, which likely shaped an anxious or preoccupied attachment style in her adult life. Craving emotional stability, she is drawn to Ryle's initial affection and struggles to let go even when the abuse begins. Her insistence that "*He's not like my father.*" (Hoover, 2016, p. 188) highlights her internal conflict and fear of abandonment, causing her to rationalize Ryle's behavior and seek reassurance. This behavior aligns with Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanisms, which explains how individuals unconsciously employ these strategies. In this case, Lily utilizes five specific defense mechanisms, which are repression, denial, suppression, displacement, and rationalization, to shield her ego from the trauma of Ryle's violence. These strategies function as a progressive shield: while denial and rationalization allow her to initially 'explain away' the abuse (such as the incident on the stairs), displacement and repression help her manage the deep-seated anger toward her father that Ryle's actions reawaken. By employing these defenses, as evidenced by her repeated attempts to normalize Ryle's outbursts, Lily psychologically distances herself from the reality of her situation to maintain the marriage.

Repression as a defense mechanism

Repression involves not only the unconscious suppression of memories but also the avoidance of emotional wounds. In Lily's case, instead of repressing memories, she represses emotional wounds. Lily remembers the violence she witnessed in her

childhood; she represses the emotional wounds caused by it, which still fits the definition of repression as a defense mechanism. Lily has buried many of the painful experiences she both witnessed and endured in her childhood. As discussed earlier, repression is an unconscious defense mechanism where a person pushes away distressing thoughts and emotions from conscious awareness (Patel & Patel, 2019). This emotional repression is seen when Lily gives Ryle another chance after he abuses her, “*He deserves at least one chance of forgiveness*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 192). Instead of recognizing the danger, Lily unconsciously repeats her mother’s pattern. Her buried emotional pain clouds her judgment, making her believe that forgiveness will prevent her from living the same life her mother had — when, in reality, she is beginning to repeat the cycle of intergenerational trauma. Lily’s decision to give Ryle another chance shows that her emotional wounds are repressed because she unconsciously repeats the cycle of abuse she witnessed in her childhood. Although she remembers her mother’s suffering, the emotional pain remains buried, causing her to normalize forgiveness toward abusive behavior without fully realizing the danger. It shows Lily repressing her pain and fear by convincing herself that Ryle is different.

Lily’s tendency to hide the truth about Ryle’s abuse is a clear example of emotional repression. When Allysa notices the injury on her face, Lily accepts Ryle’s false explanation that she slipped on olive oil without protest, thinking, “*Fair enough. I would have done the same thing*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 193). Instead of confronting the abuse, Lily internalizes her emotions, minimizing the event’s seriousness. According to Anna Freud (2018), repression involves unconsciously pushing away painful emotional experiences (Villines, 2025). This defense mechanism, shaped by childhood trauma, is also evident when Lily avoids acknowledging her father’s violence, recalling, “*He does not like to hit her when I’m in the room*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 65). Rather than reflect on her emotional pain, Lily distances herself from it, showing how repression influences her adult relationships.

Lily unconsciously reenacts the trauma instead of fully facing it. In Lily’s case, despite knowing what Ryle has done, she struggles to accept the reality of his abuse. This pattern is closely tied to intergenerational trauma, a phenomenon where trauma is passed from one generation to the next through emotional patterns and learned behavior (Marschall, 2025). Growing up witnessing her father abuse her mother occasionally

shaped Lily's perception of relationships. As a teenager, Lily witnessed her mother being abused and made a firm vow to never end up like her. When her mother dismissed her concerns with "*You don't understand,*" Lily internally responded, "*I hope to hell I never do.*" (Hoover, 2016, p. 156). This moment reveals her conscious determination to avoid repeating her mother's mistakes. However, in adulthood, Lily unconsciously follows the same path when she gives Ryle another chance after he physically abuses her. Despite her strong beliefs, she begins to excuse his behavior, unknowingly mirroring her mother's response to abuse. This reflects emotional repression: Lily does not forget her traumatic past, but she buries the emotional weight of it. Rather than fully processing the fear and pain she experienced, she suppresses those feelings, allowing them to silently influence her decisions. Her choice to stay with Ryle shows how unhealed emotional wounds can override even the clearest intentions.

Denial as a response to trauma

Lily Bloom exhibits denial as a defense mechanism when confronted with Ryle's abusive behavior, choosing to minimize and rationalize his violence rather than acknowledge its resemblance to her father's abuse. This denial is first seen when Lily internally insists, "*He's not like my father. He can't be. He's nothing like that uncaring bastard.*" (Hoover, 2016, p. 188). Despite witnessing Ryle's violent outburst, Lily refuses to admit the parallels between Ryle's actions and her father's past abuse. Her rationalization may stem from the fact that this is Ryle's first violent episode, whereas her father's abuse was frequent and severe, sometimes requiring Lily to get stitches. This difference in frequency and familiarity likely causes Lily to separate Ryle's behavior from her father's, convincing herself it is a one-time mistake rather than a pattern. Furthermore, Lily justifies giving Ryle another chance by telling herself, "*He deserves at least one chance at forgiveness.*" (Hoover, 2016, p. 142). The phrase "*at least one chance*" suggests Lily's hope that Ryle can change, reinforcing her denial of the seriousness of his behavior. Although she sometimes doubts her feelings, Lily continues to reassure herself that people can change. Her internal struggle becomes evident when she pleads with Ryle, "*I know you're nothing like my father... Just... please don't ever make me doubt you again. Please.*" (Hoover, 2016, p. 191). Here, Lily's plea reveals her desperation to maintain her belief in Ryle's goodness, highlighting the broken trust and emotional pain caused by the incident. Her words

show that although part of her senses the betrayal and hurt, she uses denial to avoid confronting the reality that she may be repeating her mother's tragic experiences.

While denial and suppression both serve to protect the individual from psychological distress, they operate at different levels of awareness: denial involves the pre-conscious refusal to accept the reality or emotional weight of a situation, whereas suppression is the conscious, intentional effort to push thoughts and feelings out of the mind (Levine, 2014). In *It Ends with Us*, Lily Bloom utilizes a combination of these mechanisms following the brutal scene where her father beats Atlas with a baseball bat (Hoover, 2016). The act of 'denial' is evident in her refusal to acknowledge the depth of her emotional devastation; she recognizes the event happened but rejects its power to break her. This transitions into suppression when she adopts a conscious strategy to survive, stating, "*I'm just going to keep pretending to be okay,*" (Hoover, 2016, p. 217). Her repeated use of the word "*pretend*" proves that she is aware of her pain but is making a deliberate choice to hide it behind a mask of false hope. By saying, "*Until he comes back for me, I'm going to pretend it's okay,*" Lily demonstrates how she uses conscious suppression to manage her immediate environment while simultaneously using denial to protect her psyche from the overwhelming reality of her trauma. Consequently, these mechanisms allow her to function in the short term, but as Anna Freud's theory suggests, they ultimately delay the necessary processing of the traumatic experience.

Rationalizing abuse in a relationship

Rationalization involves the cognitive distortion of facts to make an unacceptable event or feeling appear logically consistent and justifiable. While denial involves the total rejection of a traumatic event, rationalization acknowledges the event's occurrence but 'twists its meaning' to mitigate its emotional impact. In Lily Bloom's case, this mechanism is utilized to excuse Ryle's physical aggression by reframing it as an involuntary byproduct of his childhood trauma. After Ryle's first violent outburst, where he slams Lily backward and causes a physical injury, "*Ryle's arm came out of nowhere and slammed against me, knocking me backward.*" (Hoover, 2016, p. 185), he justifies his actions by claiming he suffered a 'blackout' triggered by his history of accidentally killing his brother. Lily accepts this narrative, effectively

shifting the definition of the event from ‘domestic abuse’ to a ‘medical or psychological episode’.

This ‘twisting of meaning’ becomes clinically evident when Lily observes, “*I feel more pain for that man... than I feel for myself*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 242). By focusing on ‘what he went through as a child’, Lily creates a logical framework where her own physical pain is secondary to Ryle’s psychological suffering. Her thought process, “*He’s trying to make me understand*” (p. 243), reveals a classic rationalization: she interprets his attempt to explain his past as an act of intimacy rather than a manipulation to excuse violence. This distortion reaches its peak when she tells herself, “*Ryle is emulating my father’s behavior. But he isn’t*” (p. 242). Here, Lily recognizes the similarity between Ryle and her father, yet she uses the word “*but*” to create a false logical distinction. By convincing herself that Ryle’s ‘blackouts’ make his violence fundamentally different from her father’s ‘choices’, she avoids the painful reality that she has repeated her mother’s cycle. Ultimately, through rationalization, Lily transforms Ryle from a perpetrator into a fellow victim of trauma, a psychological maneuver that allows her to remain in a dangerous environment while maintaining her internal sense of hope.

Escapism through displacement

Lily’s use of displacement reflects a psychological process where she redirects overwhelming emotions such as fear, anger, and helplessness from their threatening source (her father) toward a safer, non-threatening outlet. While displacement typically operates as an unconscious redirection of impulses, it exists on a spectrum where the individual may semi-consciously seek out ‘substitute objects’ to manage emotional intensity (Marwenti, 2020). In Lily’s case, this process manifests through her journals addressed to Ellen DeGeneres. Because Lily is powerless to confront her father’s violence directly, her psyche unconsciously displaces the need for a witness and a protector onto a public figure she associates with safety and kindness.

This act allows Lily to channel the energy of her trauma into a trusted emotional space, processing her pain indirectly. The transition from unconscious impulse to the semi-conscious act of writing is captured in her opening: “*Before I tell you what happened today.*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 30). Her journaling becomes a ‘safe haven’ for displaced emotional burdens until a traumatic event exceeds even this defense’s

capacity. When her father brutally attacks Atlas, the emotional weight triggers a psychological retreat, leading to a long silence in her writing: “A *really long time*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 280). This retreat represents a breakdown of the displacement mechanism when the trauma becomes too acute to be redirected. However, her eventual return to the letters noted when she writes, “*I know it’s been a long time since I’ve written to you.*” (p. 280) illustrates how displacement can eventually resurface as a therapeutic outlet, allowing her to re-engage with her past by projecting her need for validation onto a distant, benevolent figure.

Suppression as an outlet

Some people may avoid certain thoughts to prevent emotional distress or maintain focus during a stressful situation. Placing their focus on work or other things they think are important is a way to keep the stressful thought away, even for a while. In the novel, Lily shows signs of **suppression** through her strong interest in gardening and flower arranging. From a young age, Lily used this hobby as a way to distract herself and find peace during her parents’ constant arguments. While her parents did not understand how important this activity was to her emotionally, Atlas, her childhood friend and protector, did recognize its value and encouraged her passion. “*My outlet used to be gardening. Any time I was stressed, I’d just go out to the backyard and pull every single weed I could find.*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 6). In her monologue, it is shown that for Lily, gardening wasn’t just a hobby, it was a way to manage difficult emotions by keeping them under control, especially in this passage, “*My outlet used to be gardening.*” In the next passage, she also explains how gardening can soothe her frustration and stress. “*I was stressed, I’d just go out to the backyard...*” This shows **active suppression**, where she chose to focus her energy on something positive instead of dwelling on pain. As an adult, Lily carries this coping method into her professional life by opening a flower shop, using the money left by her abusive father after his death. In doing so, she turns a painful memory into something beautiful and healing. This moment can be seen as more than just suppression, it also shows personal growth. Lily makes a conscious decision to turn her past trauma into a meaningful part of her future.

Suppression, as defined by Anna Freud, is a conscious defense mechanism where a person chooses to avoid dealing with painful emotions to maintain stability. In

It Ends with Us, Lily demonstrates suppression after Atlas leaves for the military. Though she misses him deeply “*It’s been fifty-three days... I’ve been too busy to really give him much thought...*” (Hoover, 2016, p. 76) she distracts herself with routines and responsibilities to avoid emotional overwhelm. This behavior aligns with Freud’s view of suppression as a short-term coping tool. Additionally, Lily’s heart tattoo, delicately placed above her collarbone, symbolizes her emotional connection to Atlas while also acting as a quiet act of suppression, acknowledging her pain without fully confronting it.

According to Bailey and Pico (2025), suppression is a more advanced defense mechanism because it involves conscious effort. This means a person is aware of the painful memories or emotions but chooses to push them aside instead of facing them directly. People who use suppression often find ways to cope by channeling their feelings into activities like working, writing, or drawing. Suppression is different from repression, which is unconscious. In repression, the person is not even aware they are blocking something painful, whereas with suppression, they are aware.

Discussion

The analysis of *It Ends with Us* proves that childhood trauma functions as an active psychological architecture in adult relationships rather than a dormant memory. Through Lily Bloom’s reliance on repression, denial, rationalization, displacement, and suppression, we see the formation of an ‘elastic shield’ that protects her psyche while simultaneously blurring her judgment. For instance, her use of rationalization (e.g. reimagining Ryle’s violence as a symptom of his ‘blackouts’) allows her to excuse behavior that she consciously vowed to avoid. These findings mirror the work of Zulfaisya and Hasra, (2020) who noted that defense mechanisms often create a ‘distorted reality’ for survivors. However, while earlier studies focus on how these defenses lead to emotional withdrawal, this research highlights a ‘repetition compulsion’, where Lily’s internal defenses (e.g. displacement via her letters to Ellen) actually facilitate her staying in an abusive environment by providing temporary emotional relief without addressing the root danger.

The practical implications of these findings offer vital lessons for readers navigating similar domestic cycles. First, the study highlights the ‘empathy trap’ created by rationalization; female readers can learn that understanding a partner’s past trauma

does not justify accepting their present abuse. Second, Lily's habit of suppression (i.e. pretending to be okay) serves as a warning that conscious avoidance only prolongs the trauma cycle; true healing requires the deconstruction of these defenses through professional intervention. While this study is limited by its focus on a single contemporary novel, it suggests that breaking a generational cycle requires more than just 'willpower', it requires recognizing the unconscious defense mechanisms learned in childhood. Future research should expand this framework to diverse cultural contexts to determine if these specific defensive patterns are universal or culturally specific.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, many survivors of domestic abuse unknowingly repeat harmful behaviors they were exposed to as children, and Lily's situation is similar to theirs. Witnessing abuse during earlier years can distort a child's understanding of love, conflict, and safety, making dysfunction appear familiar, even normal. Although defense mechanisms may hinder the healing process, they serve as a barrier between the conscious mind and traumatic memories. In the end, Lily's story is an important reminder of the long-lasting consequences of childhood trauma and the importance of breaking the generational cycle. By applying Anna Freud's theory, gaining a deeper psychological understanding of why victims often stay in harmful relationships and how defense mechanisms can both protect and hurt them.

Future research is recommended to apply broader psychological frameworks, such as trauma theory or attachment theory, to deepen the analysis of literary characters. Comparative studies across different novels or characters may also provide richer insights into the representation of trauma and resilience. Additionally, exploring socio-cultural factors surrounding abusive relationships would strengthen the analytical depth and theoretical contribution of similar studies.

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