

The Underground Man's Defense Mechanism in Fyodor Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground

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Abstract

This study examines the defense mechanisms experienced by the Underground Man in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) through a psychoanalytic perspective. The study aims to identify the defense mechanisms used by the protagonist and explain what causes them and how they develop throughout the novel. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, using textual analysis to examine relevant passages from the novel. The analysis is based on psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concept of defense mechanisms developed by Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud. The findings show that the Underground Man employs several defense mechanisms, including turning against oneself, sublimation, undoing, reaction formation, reversal into its opposite, repression, projection, and displacement. These mechanisms develop in response to psychological conflicts involving humiliation, social rejection, feelings of inferiority, self-loathing, fear of vulnerability, and an unfulfilled desire for human connection. The findings further reveal that although these defense mechanisms temporarily protect the protagonist from psychological anxiety, they also contribute to his isolation, distorted perception of others, negative self-image, and inability to establish genuine relationships. Therefore, the study demonstrates that the Underground Man's defense mechanisms reflect his unresolved psychological conflicts and show how he unconsciously manages anxiety, emotional distress, and difficult experiences throughout the novel.

Keywords: anxiety, defense mechanisms, *Notes from Underground*, psychoanalysis, psychological conflict

INTRODUCTION

As part of human nature, individuals often experience stress, anxiety, and internal conflicts. These conflicts may arise from competing desires, beliefs, and social expectations, influencing the way people think, feel, and behave. In recent years, anxiety has increased rapidly, becoming a

major public health issue worldwide. Research shows that anxiety rates have reached as high as 55% in vulnerable groups (Tan et al., 2023). This sharp increase shows that we need to understand how external life stress turns into intense internal psychological conflicts, which forces people to use automatic, unconscious mechanisms to protect their ego (Tan et al., 2023).

According to Sigmund Freud (1894), this psychological conflict causes anxiety, acting as an internal sign of unresolved tension in the mind. To manage this anxiety, the ego unconsciously uses defense mechanisms, which are mental strategies designed to reduce emotional conflict and protect the person from psychological pain (Freud, 1961). Defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies that individuals use to manage emotional conflicts and reduce anxiety (Vaillant, 1977), operating unconsciously to protect the ego from psychological distress according to Freudian psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1894). Anna Freud (1936) later expanded this concept by grouping different defense mechanisms. She noted that while these mechanisms are normal, overreliance on them can distort a person's view of reality and change their behavior. Therefore, analyzing these defensive mechanisms provide a crucial framework for understanding how individuals manage internal emotional states and cope with tension (Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021), a methodology widely utilized in psychoanalytic literary criticism to decode unconscious character motivations and narrative conflicts (Tyson, 2014).

Previous studies have discussed defense mechanisms as psychological strategies used to cope with anxiety, trauma, and internal conflicts. Several studies on literary characters consistently demonstrate that defense mechanisms enable characters to manage emotional distress and psychological pressure. Studies on *Speak* and Stephen King's *Bazaar of Bad Dreams* identified a wide range of defense mechanisms, including repression, rationalization, regression, reaction formation, projection, displacement, isolation, identification, denial, and sublimation, showing that literary characters

unconsciously employ these mechanisms when confronted with emotional conflict and stressful situations (Zulfaisya & Hasra, 2020; Pakaya et al., 2025). Other researchers specifically examined the relationship between anxiety and defense mechanisms. Studies on *Defending Jacob*, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, *The Invisible Man*, and the 2015 film *Cinderella* found that characters experiencing neurotic, moral, and realistic anxiety tend to rely on defense mechanisms such as denial, repression, projection, displacement, rationalization, reaction formation, fantasy, isolation, and aggression to reduce psychological distress and protect themselves from emotional suffering (Warkey et al., 2020; Febriana & Darma, 2022; Rezeki et al., 2023; Aisyah & Susilowati, 2023). Similar findings were reported in studies examining trauma and recovery. Research on *Where the Crawdads Sing* and *The Broken Ring: This Marriage Will Fail Anyway* demonstrated that prolonged trauma, including abandonment, violence, social isolation, and separation, leads characters to unconsciously employ defense mechanisms such as denial, sublimation, projection, and avoidance as adaptive coping strategies (Marlinna & Ernawati, 2024; Pebriyana & Panggabean, 2026). Extending the discussion beyond literary texts, a study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that sublimation also functions as a constructive defense mechanism, enabling individuals to transform anxiety and emotional exhaustion into productive activities such as exercise, entrepreneurship, charitable work, and personal hobbies (Yuliastuti & Pasopati, 2021). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that defense mechanisms play an essential role in helping individuals respond to anxiety, trauma, and psychological conflict across different literary and social contexts.

In addition to studies of defense mechanisms, several researchers have examined *Notes from the Underground* from psychoanalytic, existential, and comparative perspectives. Psychoanalytic studies emphasize the relevance of Freudian concepts, including the id, ego, superego, unconscious desires, and defense mechanisms in explaining the Underground Man's contradictory personality, psychological complexity, and inner conflict, while also highlighting Dostoevsky's psychological realism in portraying the tension between reason and emotion, guilt and redemption (Mostefaoui, 2024; Banu & Udhaya, 2025). Historical scholarship further suggests that early translations of the novel minimized its political satire, contributing to the widespread interpretation of the Underground Man as a universal psychological figure who later influenced thinkers such as Nietzsche (Boulogne). Other studies approached the novel from an existential perspective. They generally interpret the Underground Man as a critique of excessive rationalism, utilitarianism, and oppressive social structures while emphasizing themes of individuality, irrationality, free will, alienation, and resistance to society (Sharma & Yadav, 2022; Shujaat et al., 2025). These studies further argue that the protagonist's hyperconsciousness, absurdity, freedom, and existential anguish lead to profound psychological suffering, trapping him between the desire for social acceptance and the pursuit of complete independence (Nasir et al., 2023; Rainville, 2004). In addition, the concept of the "underground" has been interpreted as both a physical and philosophical refuge that enables the protagonist to resist deterministic logic and oppressive social frameworks through self-

imposed isolation (Alam, 2024). Complementing these perspectives, a comparative psychoanalytic study of *Notes from Underground* and *Pale Fire* found that the Underground Man exhibits excessive self-consciousness, paranoia, obsession, neurotic tendencies, moral conflict, passivity, and psychological fragmentation resulting from unresolved inner struggles (Anmol, 2025). Overall, these studies confirm that *Notes from Underground* offers rich psychological, philosophical, and existential dimensions, making the Underground Man one of Dostoevsky's most complex literary characters.

Although previous studies have discussed defense mechanisms in various literary works and examined the psychological and existential aspects of *Notes from Underground*, the Underground Man's defense mechanisms have rarely been the focus of analysis. Most studies on defense mechanisms identify the defense mechanisms used by literary characters, while studies on *Notes from Underground* primarily emphasize existential themes, alienation, irrationality, and broader Freudian concepts. Therefore, this study analyzes the Underground Man's defense mechanisms through Freud's psychoanalytic theory, with particular attention to repression, intellectualization, and turning against the self, to provide a deeper understanding of how he responds to anxiety and inner conflict.

METHODS

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative method. Qualitative research is a means of exploring and understanding the meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018). Specifically, a qualitative descriptive approach is used because it aims to provide a comprehensive, straightforward, and plain summary of an event or phenomenon in the everyday terms of those events (Sandelowski, 2000). In this study, the design is used to analyze and describe the textual manifestations of defense mechanisms and psychological tensions throughout the narrative framework of *Notes from Underground*. The primary data source is the literary text (Dostoevsky, 1864), followed by secondary data including psychoanalytic literature on Freudian defense mechanisms, particularly Anna Freud's work on ego psychology, and existing literary criticism on *Notes from Underground*.

Data collection was conducted through systematic textual analysis and the selective extraction of passages demonstrating defense-mechanism behaviors. The relevant excerpts were identified by examining the characters' internal monologues, dialogue, behavioral patterns, and psychological responses to various situations. Selected passages were organized into categories based on the defense mechanisms identified throughout the text. The categorized textual data were subsequently analyzed using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1894), with Anna Freud's structured classification of defense mechanisms (Anna Freud, 1936) serving as the analytical framework. The findings of the analysis are presented descriptively to explain how the identified defense mechanisms are manifested in the *Underground Man's* thoughts, behaviors, and psychological conflicts throughout the novel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Turning Against Oneself

Turning against oneself is a defense mechanism that originated from Sigmund Freud's (1915) concept of displacement, which explains that psychological drives may shift their target from an external object to the individual themselves. Anna Freud (1936) later developed this idea by identifying turning against oneself as a distinct defense mechanism. It occurs when anger, hostility, or aggression that cannot be safely expressed toward others is redirected inward. Instead of confronting the source of frustration, the individual manages psychological conflict by directing these emotions toward themselves through self-criticism, self-blame, or self-punishment.

The first example appears when the *Underground Man* reflects on his appearance and his relationship with his co-workers. Although he believes that others judge him negatively, he expresses even stronger criticism toward himself.

"I often looked at myself with furious discontent, which verged on loathing... I hated my face, for instance: I thought it disgusting, and even suspected that there was something base in my expression... 'My face may be ugly,' I thought... And what was worst of all, I thought it actually stupid looking" (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 66).

His insecurity about his appearance becomes the source of his psychological conflict. Because he cannot express these feelings toward the people around him, he redirects them toward himself by describing his face with words such as "loathing" and "disgusting." Anna Freud (1936) explains that turning against oneself occurs when the hostility that cannot be expressed outward is redirected toward the self to reduce psychological anxiety.

The defensive pattern is also evident when the Underground Man introduces himself with a series of negative descriptions at the beginning of the story. He states, "I am a sick man... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man" (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 3). Because he has spent years being angry at himself without fixing his inner conflict, he develops a very negative self-image. Gradually, these bad feelings become second nature, leading him to accept negative labels as permanent parts of his personality rather than temporary emotions. According to Anna Freud (1936), turning against oneself may gradually develop into a stable pattern of self-perception when psychological conflict remains unresolved. In the Underground Man's case, his hostility is no longer directed only at specific aspects of himself, such as his appearance, but becomes part of the way he defines his entire identity. As a result, self-criticism becomes a habit that shapes how he thinks, feels, and views himself.

Furthermore, this defense mechanism reaches a more complex stage when the way he blames himself develops into a form of masochistic pleasure. In *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*, Sigmund Freud (1915) explains that masochism can develop when aggressive drives that were originally directed toward external objects are redirected toward the self. This can be seen in the Underground Man's paradoxical experience of finding pleasure in his own suffering and self-condemnation:

"I got to the point of feeling a sort of secret abnormal, despicable enjoyment in returning home to my corner on some disgusting Petersburg night, acutely conscious that that day I had committed a loathsome action again, that what was done could never be undone, and secretly, inwardly gnawing, gnawing at

myself for it, tearing and consuming myself till at last the bitterness turned into a sort of shameful accursed sweetness, and at last—into positive real enjoyment! Yes, into enjoyment, into enjoyment! I insist upon that" (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 10).

The passage demonstrates how the Underground Man's hostility toward himself develops beyond simple self-criticism and actually becomes something that gives him pleasure. The source of this psychological conflict is his awareness of the "loathsome action" he has committed and his inability to undo it. Instead of directing his frustration outward, he turns his anger and guilt against himself, as shown when he describes himself as "gnawing" and "tearing and consuming" himself. This repeated self-condemnation gradually develops into a form of masochistic pleasure, as his "bitterness" eventually turns into "shameful, accursed sweetness" and finally into "positive real enjoyment." In this way, the Underground Man becomes both the source and the target of his own hostility, reflecting Freud's (1915) explanation of aggression being redirected toward the self. Ultimately, the process of turning aggression inward allows his suffering to become a source of pleasure.

Sublimation

Sublimation is one of the mature defense mechanisms in psychoanalytic theory. Sigmund Freud described sublimation as the process of transforming instinctual drives or painful emotions into socially acceptable and productive activities. Anna Freud (1936) further explained that this defense mechanism enables an individual to cope with psychological conflict by transforming negative impulses into

constructive behavior without directly expressing the original emotion.

The Underground Man used this defense mechanism during his childhood and school years. During this period, he is frequently ridiculed by his classmates, who consider him strange and inferior. Instead of confronting them or withdrawing completely from school, he focuses on his academic performance. He states, "To escape from their derision I purposely began to make all the progress I could with my studies and forced my way to the very top" (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 105).

The humiliation he experiences at school becomes the source of his psychological conflict. These painful emotions create anxiety and threaten his sense of self-worth. This aligns with Sigmund Freud's (1905) conceptualization of sublimation, which posits that the ego can manage distressing psychological energy by diverting it from conflict and channeling it into intellectual, scientific, or artistic pursuits. Because the underground man cannot overcome this conflict by confronting his classmates, he redirects his emotional distress into studying and academic achievement. This response reflects Anna Freud's (1936) explanation of sublimation, in which unacceptable emotions are transformed into socially valued activities. By devoting himself to his studies, he replaces feelings of shame with a feeling of achievement.

Undoing

Undoing was originally conceptualized by Sigmund Freud (1926) as an unconscious process (*Ungeschehenmachen*, or "making un-happened") in which the ego attempts to psychologically erase a past action as though it never occurred. Anna Freud (1936) later formalized this concept within her

classification of defense mechanisms, defining it as a way of reducing anxiety caused by unacceptable thoughts or actions. It occurs when an individual unconsciously attempts to reverse or cancel the emotional impact of previous behavior through a symbolic action.

The dinner with Zverkov and his former schoolmates illustrates this defense mechanism. Hoping to gain their respect, the Underground Man instead loses control of his emotions, insults everyone at the table, and humiliates himself. Because he feels bad about his outburst, he immediately apologizes to those he hurt. He said, "Zverkov, I beg your pardon," and then continues, "Ferfitchkin, yours too, and everyone's, everyone's. I have insulted you all!" (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 124).

After realizing that his insults have damaged both his relationships and his own dignity, the Underground Man experiences intense guilt and shame, which become the source of his anxiety. Because he cannot accept or process these emotions, he immediately attempts to repair the situation by apologizing to everyone present. This apology reflects Sigmund Freud's (1926) concept of undoing, as it operates as an unconscious attempt to reverse a past action and treat the outburst as though it never happened. As Anna Freud (1936) explains, the ego uses such symbolic acts to neutralize immediate anxiety and the psychological threat created by earlier unacceptable behavior. In this sense, his apology is not simply an expression of regret, but an attempt to cancel the emotional consequences of his previous actions.

Reaction Formation

The concept of reaction formation was first explained by Sigmund Freud (1915) as the

reversal of an instinct, in which an unacceptable impulse is transformed into its opposite to manage internal conflict. Anna Freud (1936) later elaborated this idea within her account of ego defenses, defining reaction formation as a mechanism in which an individual unconsciously replaces a threatening feeling or desire with its opposite to reduce psychological anxiety. When emotions such as hatred, desire, dependence, or the need for intimacy are perceived as threatening to the ego, the mind suppresses the original feeling and instead expresses an opposing attitude. In this way, the individual can protect themselves from emotional distress by adopting behavior that contradicts their underlying feelings.

This defense mechanism becomes evident in the Underground Man's relationship with his schoolmate. Although his companion is described as "a simple and devoted soul," the Underground Man responds to his loyalty with immediate hostility:

"But when he devoted himself to me entirely I began to hate him immediately and repulsed him, as though all I needed him for was to win a victory over him, to subjugate him and nothing else" (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 106).

The genuine affection shown by his schoolmate becomes the source of the Underground Man's psychological conflict because he associates emotional closeness with vulnerability and rejection. His earlier experiences of "spiteful and merciless jibes" at school and his "craving... for friends" despite "strained" relationships suggest that he desires companionship but struggles to accept intimacy (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 104–105). As a result, he views genuine affection as a threat to his fragile self-image. To protect

himself from the anxiety of vulnerability, he unconsciously replaces his desire for connection with hostility, turning affection into hatred and friendship into a desire for domination. His wish to "win a victory" and "subjugate" his schoolmate demonstrates this reversal.

This process reflects Sigmund Freud's (1915) concept of instinctual reversal, while Anna Freud (1936) explains how reaction formation develops into an outward pattern of behavior that protects the ego from threatening emotions. The Underground Man's rejection and hostility, therefore, function as a form of psychological protection. By pushing away his schoolmate and attempting to dominate him, he can avoid confronting his own need for affection and the vulnerability that comes with genuine intimacy.

Reversal into Its Opposite

In contrast to reaction formation, reversal into the opposite was introduced by Sigmund Freud (1915) as an instinctual vicissitude (*Tribschicksal*). Rather than describing a fixed behavioral defense created by the ego, this concept refers to a change in the direction of an instinctual drive. It can involve a shift from an active impulse to a passive one, such as sadism turning into masochism, or a complete reversal of emotional content. This mechanism allows conflicting impulses to shift between opposite states, showing the instability of an individual's psychological drives.

This mechanism becomes evident when the Underground Man describes his relationship with his fellow clerks. Although he initially expresses contempt toward them, his feelings quickly shift to fear and a sense of inferiority. He states:

"I hated my fellow clerks one and all, and I despised them all, yet at the same time I was, as it were, afraid of them. In fact, it happened at times that I thought more highly of them than of myself. It somehow happened quite suddenly that I alternated between despising them and thinking them superior to myself." (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 66)

This mechanism develops through a step-by-step shift between two opposite emotional states. To manage his initial fear of being looked down upon, he acts as if he is superior and despises his colleagues, convincing himself that he is intellectually superior to them. However, because his self-esteem is so low, he cannot maintain this active position of superiority for long. The moment he feels intimidated by his colleagues' presence, his active desire to despise them collapses into its passive opposite, expressed as fear, helplessness, and the belief that they are superior to him.

This rapid shift reflects Sigmund Freud's (1915) concept of a drive reversing into its opposite, specifically moving between the active impulse to feel superior and the passive experience of feeling inferior. His feelings do not remain fixed in one direction. Instead, he continually alternates between active contempt and passive fear. Each time his fear of being inferior becomes overwhelming, he reverts to despising them. Each time his sense of superiority is shattered, he falls back into fear.

Repression

Repression is viewed as one of the fundamental defense mechanisms in psychoanalytic theory. Sigmund Freud (1894) described repression as the unconscious process of excluding painful or anxiety-provoking thoughts and memories from conscious awareness in order to protect the

ego from psychological distress. Anna Freud (1936) further explained that repression operates automatically, allowing the individual to remain unaware that these memories have been pushed into the unconscious.

This defense mechanism is evident when the Underground Man introduces his narrative and reflects on memories he has avoided for many years. Although these experiences continue to trouble him, he admits that he has only recently decided to confront them by recounting his past. He states:

"But there are other things which a man is afraid to tell even to himself... I have only lately determined to remember some of my early adventures. Till now I have always avoided them, even with a certain uneasiness" (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 61).

The Underground Man's early experiences become the source of his psychological conflict because they are too painful for him to confront directly. The fear of revisiting these memories creates anxiety, leading him to unconsciously push them out of his conscious awareness for many years. This process is reflected in his admission that he is "afraid to tell even to himself" and that he has "always avoided them," suggesting that the memories remain hidden while continuing to affect his psychological state.

Sigmund Freud (1894) explains that repression protects the ego by preventing threatening thoughts from entering conscious awareness, while Anna Freud (1936) emphasizes that this process occurs unconsciously rather than through deliberate avoidance. In the Underground Man's case, repression allows him to temporarily avoid

the emotional distress associated with his past experiences. However, this defense mechanism also prevents him from fully understanding himself and keeps him trapped in a cycle of avoidance. The defensive pattern only begins to weaken when he finally chooses to revisit these memories by writing his narrative, allowing the previously hidden conflict to gradually enter his conscious awareness.

Projection

Projection is a defense mechanism in which an individual unconsciously attributes their own unacceptable thoughts, emotions, or impulses to others rather than recognizing them as their own (Anna Freud, 1936). Sigmund Freud (1894) explained that psychological conflict creates anxiety, leading the ego to employ defense mechanisms that protect the individual from emotional distress. Through projection, unacceptable feelings are externalized and perceived as belonging to others rather than the self.

The Underground Man first demonstrates this mechanism by reflecting on his relationship with his co-workers and how he perceives their opinions of him. Although the feelings originate within himself, he becomes convinced that everyone shares the same negative view. He states, "I often looked at myself with furious discontent, which verged on loathing, and so I inwardly attributed the same feeling to everyone" (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 66).

The psychological conflict of the Underground Man comes from his deep self-hatred and feelings of inferiority. He cannot accept these painful feelings as part of himself, so he unconsciously projects them onto the people around him, assuming that they look at him with the same judgment that

he feels for himself. Anna Freud (1936) explains that projection allows unacceptable emotions to be attributed to external sources, making them appear to belong to others instead of the individual. This process is reflected in his belief that everyone shares his negative self-opinion, even though these feelings originate in his own mind.

The same mechanism can also be observed during the Liza tragedy arc, when the Underground Man encounters Liza in the brothel. Following his humiliating experience at the dinner party, he delivers a dramatic lecture to Liza, describing a dark and painful future that awaits her:

"You will die of consumption somewhere in a cellar, in a corner, in the dark and damp, among strangers... You are living in filth, you are a slave, and you don't even see how you are sinking into the mud... And when you die, they will hurry to shove you into the damp earth, and no one will ever remember you" (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 156).

Here, the Underground Man is not just talking about Liza's situation. Instead, he seems to put his own existential fears onto her. The dark, damp "cellar," the spiritual slavery, the social isolation, and the fear of dying forgotten reflect aspects of his own "underground" existence in St. Petersburg. Because confronting his own powerlessness and social isolation produces anxiety, his ego projects these intolerable realities onto Liza. By locating these wretched conditions in her, he temporarily avoids confronting his own trapped state and instead adopts the position of an authoritative judge (Anna Freud, 1936). Consequently, his lecture to Liza becomes an externalized reflection of his own inner misery.

A similar pattern appears in his relationship with his elderly servant, Apollon.

The Underground Man sees Apollon not as an ordinary employee, but as an intimidating figure who constantly judges and looks down on him:

"He despised me beyond all measure, and looked down upon me insufferably... There could be no doubt that he looked upon me as the greatest fool on earth... he would suddenly begin sighing while he looked at me, long, deep sighs as though measuring by them the depths of my moral degradation" (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 175–179).

Here, projection shapes the way the Underground Man interprets Apollon's passive behavior. In reality, Apollon is simply an old manservant doing routine household work. However, because the Underground Man is deeply insecure and maintains a severe "inner critic," he projects his own feelings of weakness and moral failure onto Apollon's silent gaze and heavy sighs. Unable to tolerate his internal sense of inadequacy, he convinces himself that Apollon is purposely "measuring... the depths of my moral degradation" (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 179). According to Sigmund Freud (1894), projection operates by transforming an incompatible internal self-reproach into an external perception, thereby protecting the ego from unbearable self-awareness. By projecting his own harsh self-judgment onto his servant, the Underground Man converts an internal conflict into an external threat, thereby rationalizing his spiteful behavior toward Apollon while avoiding direct confrontation with his fragile ego.

Displacement

Displacement is a defense mechanism conceptualized by Sigmund Freud (1915), in which psychological drives, especially anger or aggression, are redirected from the original

source of frustration to a safer or less threatening target. Anna Freud (1936) further explained that displacement helps protect the ego when an individual cannot safely express their anger toward the actual source of frustration. Instead of confronting the person causing the emotional conflict, the individual directs their negative emotions toward someone easier or safer to target. This allows the individual to temporarily reduce emotional tension, although it does not resolve the original problem and may cause harm to others.

This defense mechanism is clearly evident in the story with Liza. After being embarrassed by Zverkov and his old classmates at dinner, the Underground Man acts meanly toward Liza right away. He sees her as lower than himself, which makes him feel powerful and in control in front of her. However, his later explanation reveals that his cruel treatment of Liza was not caused by her alone. He admits that he had been humiliated at the dinner and had originally wanted to take revenge on the officer who had offended him. When he failed to find the officer, he redirected his anger toward Liza, using her as a substitute target for the humiliation he had experienced earlier. He later explains his actions to her:

"Yes, I was laughing at you! I had been insulted just before, at dinner, by the fellows who came that evening before me. I came to you, meaning to thrash one of them, an officer; but I didn't succeed, I didn't find him; I had to avenge the insult on someone to get back my own again; you turned up, I vented my spleen on you and laughed at you. I had been humiliated, so I wanted to humiliate; I had been treated like a rag, so I wanted to show my power That's what it was, and you imagined I had come there on purpose to save you. Yes? You imagined

that? You imagined that?” (Dostoevsky, 1864, p. 188).

This passage clearly demonstrates displacement, as the Underground Man explicitly shows how his anger shifts from one person to another. The humiliation he experiences at the dinner becomes the source of his psychological conflict. He originally wants to direct his anger toward the officer, but he cannot find him and therefore cannot express his aggression toward the person he initially intended to confront. As a result, his anger is redirected toward Liza, who becomes a safer target for his frustration.

The development of displacement can be seen in the Underground Man's own explanation of his actions. First, he is humiliated by Zverkov and the others. Second, he tries to find the officer to take revenge, but he fails. Third, because he cannot express his anger toward the original source of his frustration, he redirects it toward Liza. His statement, “I had to avenge the insult on someone,” directly shows this process of displacement. Liza does not cause his original anger, but she becomes the person who receives it. His statement, “I had been humiliated, so I wanted to humiliate,” further shows that he attempts to reduce his own feelings of powerlessness by making another person experience the humiliation that he himself has suffered. In this way, the Underground Man turns his anger away from the people who originally humiliated him and directs it toward Liza, who becomes a safer target for his unresolved frustration.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the Underground Man employs a variety of defense mechanisms throughout *Notes from Underground* as unconscious strategies to cope with psychological conflict, anxiety,

feelings of inferiority, and repeated experiences of social rejection. The analysis identifies turning against oneself, sublimation, undoing, reaction formation, reversal into its opposite, repression, projection, and displacement. These defense mechanisms develop as responses to unresolved psychological conflicts involving humiliation, social rejection, feelings of inferiority, self-loathing, fear of vulnerability, and a strong desire for human connection.

This study contributes to the psychoanalytic interpretation of *Notes from Underground* by demonstrating how defense mechanisms provide a deeper understanding of the Underground Man's psychological condition. The findings suggest that his contradictory actions and unstable relationships are not simply expressions of personality but represent unconscious attempts to protect the ego from emotional conflict. Therefore, this study also highlights the value of psychoanalytic theory as an approach for examining the psychological dimensions of literary characters and enriching literary analysis.

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