



Trauma and Defense Mechanisms in Zach Braff's *Garden State*: A Psychoanalytic Analysis

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Abstract

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This study examines the representation of trauma and defense mechanisms in Zach Braff's *Garden State* (2004), focusing on the psychological development of the protagonist, Andrew Largeman. The research investigates how unresolved childhood experiences and strained familial relationships shape Andrew's emotional detachment and his eventual movement toward self-understanding. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Anna Freud's conceptualization of defense mechanisms, this study analyzes selected scenes using a qualitative film-analysis approach that integrates narrative interpretation with cinematographic observation. The findings reveal that Andrew's trauma is articulated through consistent patterns of emotional suppression and dissociation, which manifest in three primary defense mechanisms: repression, projection, and sublimation. These mechanisms function as psychological strategies that both conceal and expose the depth of Andrew's unresolved guilt and inner conflict. The study demonstrates that *Garden State* portrays trauma not merely as a personal burden but as a psychological process that requires confrontation, emotional openness, and relational support to achieve healing.

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INTRODUCTION

Traumatic experiences—such as the unexpected loss of a loved one, severe accidents, or other overwhelming events—can leave enduring psychological effects that shape a person's emotional and behavioral life. Although trauma is not always outwardly visible, it can fundamentally alter one's sense of control, self-understanding, and capacity for connection. Judith Herman (1992) defines trauma as an event that overwhelms an individual's ordinary systems of care, disrupting their ability to maintain meaning, stability, and emotional cohesion. This perspective highlights that trauma's impact lies not only in the event itself but in the lasting psychological residue it leaves behind.

Within psychological theory, trauma has been extensively discussed by Sigmund Freud, who conceptualizes it as an encounter with overwhelming stimuli that the psyche is unprepared to process. Such experiences often produce a sense of helplessness and provoke long-term disturbances, particularly when they occur during childhood (Zepf, 2008). Freud also emphasizes that unresolved trauma frequently leads to the activation of defense mechanisms—unconscious strategies developed by the ego to manage anxiety and internal conflict. Repression, projection, and sublimation, for example, may temporarily protect an individual from emotional distress, yet these mechanisms also keep painful memories active beneath the surface of consciousness (Freud, 1900; Kramer, 2010).

In contemporary contexts, trauma is widely discussed both in clinical research and in cultural narratives. Survivors of natural disasters, violence, and personal loss frequently report persistent emotional aftereffects that shape their daily functioning. Public disclosures by figures such as Lady Gaga regarding post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) further demonstrate that trauma is experienced across diverse social and demographic backgrounds. These realities underscore the importance of understanding how trauma shapes personal identity and how individuals attempt to cope with its enduring impact.

Film, as a narrative medium, often explores psychological conflicts in ways that illuminate internal emotional processes. *Garden State* (2004), written and directed by Zach Braff, is one such film that portrays the complexities of unresolved trauma through the character of Andrew Largeman. His long-standing emotional numbness, strained familial relationships, and difficulty forming connections reflect deeper issues rooted in childhood experiences and unprocessed guilt. The film also offers a compelling representation of how defense mechanisms surface in everyday interactions—making it a valuable text for psychoanalytic examination.

Despite the film's rich psychological layers, scholarly attention to *Garden State* from a Freudian perspective remains limited. In particular, few studies examine how Andrew's trauma is cinematically constructed and how defense mechanisms are dramatized through narrative and visual choices. This gap invites a focused analysis that integrates psychoanalytic theory with film interpretation.

Based on this rationale, the present study investigates the following research questions:

1. How is traumatic experience depicted in the film *Garden State*?
2. How does the main character cope with trauma through defense mechanisms in the film?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the representation of trauma and defense mechanisms in Zach Braff's *Garden State* (2004). A qualitative design is appropriate because this research focuses on interpreting psychological meanings embedded

in the film's narrative, dialogue, and visual elements rather than measuring quantifiable variables. As Creswell (2018) notes, qualitative research is used to explore complex human experiences through detailed, contextual analysis.

The primary data of this study consist of selected scenes, dialogues, and cinematographic elements from *Garden State* (2004). Scenes were chosen purposively based on their relevance to Freud's concepts of trauma and Anna Freud's defense mechanisms. These include scenes that visually or verbally depict emotional suppression, anxiety, confrontation, and coping strategies.

Data were collected through repeated viewing of the film, transcription of key dialogues, and documentation of screenshots to support visual analysis. The use of screenshot-based data is justified because psychoanalytic film analysis requires close attention to gesture, facial expression, shot composition, and other visual cues that contribute to the portrayal of psychological states. All selected scenes were catalogued with timestamps to ensure analytic transparency.

The analysis followed an interpretive framework grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis. The procedure involved:

1. Identifying trauma indicators using Freud's concepts of childhood trauma, traumatic neurosis, and repression.
2. Classifying defense mechanisms—such as repression, projection, and sublimation—based on Anna Freud's theoretical definitions.
3. Interpreting cinematic representation, including shot types, lighting, and framing, to understand how visual elements reinforce psychological meaning.
4. Connecting findings to narrative development, ensuring that each interpretation aligns with character behavior and thematic progression.

The analysis used an inductive approach, allowing patterns of trauma and defense mechanisms to emerge from the film rather than being imposed rigidly on the text.

As qualitative interpretation is inherently influenced by the researcher's perspective, this study acknowledges the subjective nature of film analysis. Interpretive decisions were made by referencing established psychoanalytic concepts and film analysis frameworks to minimize personal bias and maintain analytical consistency.

Overall, the qualitative descriptive method is well-suited to this study because it enables a nuanced examination of how trauma and defense mechanisms are constructed through both narrative structure and filmic techniques. This approach allows the researcher to explore psychological depth while remaining attentive to the artistic features unique to cinema.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study by addressing the two research questions formulated in the introduction. First, it examines how trauma is depicted through the characterization of Andrew Largeman in *Garden State*. Second, it analyzes the defense mechanisms he employs to cope with his unresolved psychological conflicts. Both narrative and visual evidence from the film were used to support the interpretation.

1. Trauma Depicted in Andrew Largeman in *Garden State*

Andrew Largeman's psychological condition throughout the film reflects multiple layers

of unresolved trauma rooted in his childhood and reinforced by his strained relationship with his father. His emotional detachment, persistent guilt, and difficulty expressing or accessing feelings illustrate the long-term impact of traumatic experiences. In Freud's psychoanalytic theory, trauma is defined as an overwhelming event that the psyche is unable to assimilate, resulting in disturbances that may persist into adulthood (Freud, 1917). Trauma often becomes intertwined with repression, as painful memories are pushed out of conscious awareness yet continue to influence behavior.

Freud discusses three central aspects of trauma—childhood trauma, traumatic neurosis, and the repression of distressing memories. These components are clearly woven into Andrew's characterization. His formative experiences, the emotional burden imposed by his father, and the unprocessed guilt surrounding his mother's accident collectively shape his withdrawn personality and tendency to rely on unconscious defense strategies. Thus, the depiction of trauma in *Garden State* forms the psychological foundation for understanding Andrew's emotional numbness and coping behaviors.

1.1 Childhood Trauma

Childhood trauma plays a significant role in shaping an individual's later emotional and psychological functioning. Freud argues that traumatic events occurring during childhood—particularly those involving shock, fear, or perceived threats—leave strong psychic impressions that can influence personality development well into adulthood (Freud, 1920). Such experiences often produce lingering internal conflicts that may resurface in the form of anxiety, avoidance, or defense mechanisms.

Andrew's childhood trauma centers on the accident that injured his mother, an event for which his father held him responsible. Although the incident was unintentional, the emotional weight of blame placed on him during a formative period deeply affected his sense of self. According to Freud (1917), painful childhood experiences that cannot be consciously processed are typically repressed, but they remain active within the unconscious and continue to shape behavior. This dynamic is evident in Andrew's adult life: his chronic emotional detachment, inability to express sadness, and difficulty forming close relationships reflect the lingering influence of his repressed childhood guilt.

The activation of defense mechanisms, as Freud describes, is often rooted in these early wounds. Childhood trauma not only creates the conditions for long-term emotional disturbance but also shapes the specific defense strategies individuals develop to manage internal conflict. Andrew's later tendencies toward repression, projection, and sublimation all trace back to the unresolved trauma embedded in his early experiences.

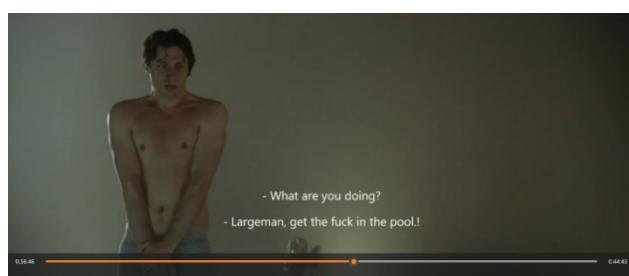


Figure 1. Andrew hesitates to enter the swimming pool.

Garden State [00:56:45], directed by Zach Braff, 2004.

Andrew Largeman continues to wrestle with unresolved childhood trauma that subtly governs his actions. A pivotal scene occurs when Andrew hesitates to enter a swimming pool

despite the playful urging from his friends. His hesitation stems from a deeper emotional wound connected to his mother's tragic death, which occurred in a bathroom. Water becomes a subconscious trigger for Andrew, evoking feelings of guilt, fear, and helplessness. While his friends shout, "What are you doing? Largeman, get the fuck in the pool!" [00:56:45], Andrew's tense body language, with his arms clutching himself, clearly reflects his inner turmoil.

This behavior aligns with Freud's theory of repression (1936), which suggests that traumatic memories are often buried in the unconscious but manifest through symbolic fears or avoidance behaviors. The pool represents more than a literal body of water; it serves as a metaphor for the unresolved grief and guilt Andrew has long suppressed.

The scene is shot in low lighting that surrounds Andrew in dim, cold tones, visually emphasizing his emotional isolation. His nearly naked body, exposed and vulnerable at the center of the frame, contrasts sharply with the surrounding darkness, capturing both his psychological vulnerability and his reluctance to let go. The camera employs a medium long shot that lingers just enough to create discomfort for the viewer, mirroring Andrew's internal resistance. This cinematographic choice encourages the audience to experience Andrew's hesitation on a visceral level and positions this moment as a symbolic confrontation with his buried trauma. Although Sam and other characters attempt to support him, Andrew's healing ultimately depends on his willingness to face these symbolic waters both physically and emotionally.



Figure 1 Andrew tells about his past.
GARDEN STATE [01.00.27], by Zach Braff (Director), 2004

In *Garden State*, Andrew Largeman experiences significant childhood trauma that continues to shape his emotional life as an adult. He carries deep guilt related to an incident that ultimately contributed to his mother's paralysis and later death. Although the accident was unintended, Andrew internalizes responsibility, and this emotional burden influences his psychological development and his interactions with others.

Andrew states, "I was the reason she was in a wheelchair, I pushed her. So there that is" [01:00:27]. In this scene, he finally opens up to Sam about his family history and the source of his guilt. His father's reaction after the accident intensified this trauma. Rather than offering emotional support, his father blamed him and placed him on antidepressant medication from a young age. As a result, Andrew grew up feeling misunderstood, emotionally muted, and chronically burdened by unresolved blame, which contributed to an unstable sense of self.

This portrayal aligns with Freud's understanding of trauma as an overwhelming experience that the ego cannot fully process, particularly when it occurs in childhood. Freud explains that "the essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness" (Freud, 1915). Andrew's repressed guilt manifests throughout the film as emotional numbness, detachment, and difficulty accessing authentic feelings. Freud

also argues that when individuals cannot confront distressing reality, the psyche activates defense mechanisms to protect the ego. This theoretical insight is reflected in Andrew's tendency to rely on repression, emotional withdrawal, and moments of denial as coping strategies.

Sam responds to Andrew with empathy and gradually becomes an important emotional anchor in his healing process. Since Andrew's return to New Jersey, Sam has offered a space for him to speak openly, which encourages him to confront feelings he has long avoided. Their developing relationship contributes to Andrew's slow shift toward self-awareness and emotional openness.

The scene is captured using medium close-up shots that highlight the characters' facial expressions and subtle emotional cues. The cold atmosphere of the room, contrasted with the warmth of the stove in front of them, enhances the sense of intimacy and signals to the audience that this moment represents a turning point in Andrew's willingness to reveal his past.

1.2 Traumatic Neurosis

Traumatic neurosis is a psychological condition that develops after a person experiences a very traumatic event that causes extreme emotional distress. This can be an experience such as a serious accident, a natural disaster, physical or sexual abuse, or a war event. The condition was first introduced by Freud, who saw a link between trauma and the development of neurotic symptoms.



Figure 2. Andrew couldn't cry until adult.

GARDEN STATE [00.55.43], by Zach Braff (Director), 2004

Andrew Largeman said to Sam "*I haven't cried since I was a little kid. I didn't cry at my mother's funeral. I tried, you know? I thought of all the saddest things I could think of*" [00.55.43-00.56.10]. This scene shows Andrew Largeman telling that he had a hard time crying until he tried to remember what was the saddest thing in the world, since childhood he had a hard time crying, even in the scene above Sam tried to tell funny things but Andrew didn't laugh then finally Andrew told that he had a hard time feeling his own emotions since childhood.

Due to past events, his father advised Andrew to take emotional suppressants, which made it difficult for him to deal with his feelings of sadness. However, Andrew found that, although the drugs reduced his pain, they also killed his happiness, making him feel disconnected from his loved ones, and Andrew eventually used defense mechanisms. The ego employs defense mechanisms to avoid being overwhelmed by anxiety, often distorting reality in the process (Freud. 1936). This illustrates how Andrew's psychological defenses served as a buffer against emotional distress, albeit at the cost of authentic emotional engagement.

As seen in the picture, the film takes a medium close-up that allows us to connect with Andrew's emotions more closely, showing a complex mix of sadness and acceptance. The medium close-up filming technique reveals only the subject's chest and head. Additionally, the

subject's head remains at a reasonable distance from the photo frame. This shooting technique makes the subject have a distance that is not too far. Through this shooting technique, the expression and body language of the subject will be more visible and detailed so that they can build intimacy with the audience.

1.3 Emphasis on Memories and Recollection

Memories, especially repressed or unresolved ones, play an important role in neurotic disorders. This aspect emphasizes that bringing these memories into awareness through therapeutic techniques such as free association and dream analysis can help individuals process and integrate these experiences, thereby reducing their neurotic symptoms.

Freud believed that unresolved traumatic memories could create psychic conflicts, which contributed to the development of various neurotic disorders. Freud stated that the repetition of negative memories can have serious effects in extreme instances, which is a primary characteristic of depression. One of the significant emotions and memories related to the activity of recollection is the sensation of loss. (Conway, 2006).



Figure 3. Coming home brings up old memories and wounds.

GARDEN STATE [00.46.00], by Zach Braff (Director), 2004

The context from that picture, Sam and Andrew in Garden, they are talking. Then Andrew told the reason he came home was because his mother died slipping into the bathtub and drowning. Sam's response was very sad to the point of crying, but Andrew's response was the opposite, very relaxed, he was not sad at all. Andrew even asked Sam why you were crying. *"That's why I'm home actually. I guess I haven't even told you that yet. My mom just died. God, that's weird to say that out loud, but... My mom just died. And... Yeah, that's why I'm home."* [00.46.00].

Sam reflected a sense of sympathetic sadness due to the tragic way Andrew's mother died, and this response was natural. In contrast, Andrew remained emotionally flat and expressionless, which surprised Sam. From this moment, Sam began to sense that there was something deeply troubling about Andrew—an emotional emptiness that suggested unresolved trauma. However, Sam was unaware of the true reason behind Andrew's emotional detachment, which was his long-term dependence on antidepressant drugs. The use of depressants served as a means for Andrew to numb his feelings, suppress emotional pain, and avoid confronting distressing memories. As a result, he became disconnected from his own emotions and found it difficult to experience any genuine emotional responses.

This condition reflects Freud's view (1915) that when the mind is overwhelmed by painful or traumatic experiences, the ego unconsciously activates defense mechanisms to protect itself. One of the most common mechanisms is repression, in which distressing thoughts and emotions are pushed out of conscious awareness to avoid psychological discomfort. In Andrew's case, his prolonged emotional numbness and reliance on medication act as a form of

repression, allowing him to avoid confronting the emotional weight of his past. According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, such unconscious avoidance is typical in individuals who have experienced unresolved trauma, as the psyche strives to preserve internal stability by keeping painful memories buried beneath awareness.

As seen from the picture, a medium close-up is needed to show the subject's expression. From the scene, it is clear that Andrew does not feel lonely or sad when he tells his mother that he has passed away. A medium close-up shot adds emotion to a scene by capturing the subject's facial expressions and body language intimately. This technique allows us to connect with Andrew's inner struggle and understand the complexity of his feelings. By framing Andrew in this way, one can observe the subtle nuances in his expression, which convey a mix of sadness and acceptance. The choice of shots not only emphasizes Andrew's immediate reactions but also invites reflection on the broader implications of his experience.

2. Andrew Largeman's Defense Mechanism Potrayed in Garden State

Defense mechanisms are unconscious strategies developed by individuals to reduce anxiety or psychological stress. These defense mechanisms serve to protect the ego from unpleasant realities or internal conflicts. Understanding defense mechanisms helps in identifying how a person copes with stress and trauma. Therefore, exploring defense mechanisms provides important insights into being able to adapt to the realities of everyday life. In the movie *Garden State* Andrew uses defense mechanisms many times. The first defense mechanism is repression.

2.1 Andrew Expressed Repression

The first defense mechanism used by the main character is repression. According to Freud (1915), repression is an unconscious process in which the ego prevents distressing thoughts, desires, or memories from reaching conscious awareness in order to protect the individual from psychological discomfort. Individuals who employ this mechanism tend to bury painful or threatening emotional experiences into the unconscious mind as a way to avoid anxiety or inner conflict. Freud emphasized that repression plays a central role in the formation of neuroses, as unresolved and repressed content continues to influence behavior from the unconscious. In *Garden State*, Andrew demonstrates the use of repression several times as a way of coping with the deep emotional trauma related to his mother's accident and the strained relationship with his father. This persistent suppression of painful emotions contributes to Andrew's emotional numbness and detachment from his surroundings.

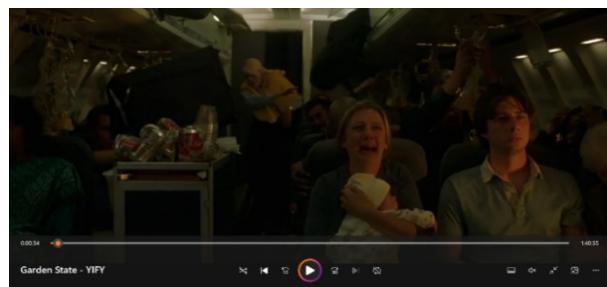


Figure 4. Everyone screams and gets panics except Andrew.

***GARDEN STATE [00.00.34]*, by Zach Braff (Director), 2004**

This scene Andrew on the plane go home to New Jersey, However, Andrew's expression stuck distinct from everyone else of the passengers for some strange reason. Generally,

everyone would fear when the plane turbulence happened during a storm, but Andrew was not like that. He did not really give any attention to what was going on.

In cinematography element, a group shot is used, where in one frame there are more than 3 subjects. This technique usually uses the same technique as a medium shot, medium long shot, or long shot. Because a group shot needs a large enough space for all the subjects to be visible, a close-up cannot capture a situation like this. Brown stated "Scenes with more than three characters generally require a good deal of coverage" (Brown, 2016, p. 88).

In addition, group shots can show how the subject and the context relate to one another. Visuals might change depending on the camera movement. Movement is a powerful tool in filmmaking; in fact, film is one of the few art forms that uses movement and timing, one of which is dance(Brown, 2016, p. 10). He stated that the movement element has a significant impact on the motion and it's important for shooting it to explain the moment.

Therefore, this scene has a visual symbol, such as the panic of the plane passengers and Andrew without expression. The anxious, panicked passengers and the dark atmosphere accompanied by a storm around the plane represent the guilt and fear that are so great that they are suppressed by the main character in this film, while Andrew, who is calm without expression, represents his feelings due to the conflict with his father.



Figure 5. Dr Cohen is talking with Andrew Largeman.

Found in *GARDEN STATE* [00.33.15], by Zach Braff (Director), 2004

Dr Cohen said to Andrew Largeman: *"I think you do need to find a psychiatrist that isn't your father. That's something that should have been remedied years ago. He knows better. And secondly, I'm in no position to comment on... whether you should stay on the meds or not because I don't know your story."* [00:33:15].

This quote shows that Andrew has something complicated in the past, the doctor then asked Andrew how he was, but he seemed to lose focus, the doctor who examined him suggested looking for a psychiatrist other than his father; Andrew seemed to show a flat expression as if there was something he couldn't let go of.

Brown stated "The two shot is any frame that includes two characters" (Brown, 2016, p. 63) the interaction between two individuals in a scene is one of the most important elements of storytelling, so the two-shot will be used frequently. The two characters do not need to be consistent precisely in the frame. They may be facing each other, both facing forward, both facing away from the camera, and so on, but the strategies you utilize to deal with this type of situation will be the same in all cases.

This scene takes using a medium close up to show Andrew Largeman freeze no expression, he has to finish the problem in situation. Medium Long shot is one angel technique of the camera captures the human figure or the object camera shoot size that adds emotion to a scene Wallis (2005).

Andrew uses one of defense mechanisms that Repression to repress his emotion, Anna freud stated that the ego of the child who has solved her conflicts by means of repression, with all its pathological sequels, is at peace. There is a dialogue at the start of the movie where Andrew wakes up from his sleep because his father calls, indicating that the main character has issues with his psychiatrist father.

"Andrew, this si your father hello? Look, you don't call me back, so I don't know how to do this... then there's no way for us to communicate... but you're gonna need to come home now. Last night... Your mother died She drowned. She drowned in the bath" [00.01.27]. Andrew just sat down and listened to his father say, "*There is no way for us to communicate*", obviously ignores his appeal from the start. Internal issues with his father start to surface in this section, which reveals how the father and son seldom ever interact and only connect when needed.

2.2 Andrew Expressed Sublimation

The following defense mechanism employed by the main character is sublimation. Sublimation involves redirecting an instinctual urge from its original, unacceptable target to a different, socially acceptable one (Freud, 1967). This strategy allows people to channel negative emotions that are disturbing and difficult to accept into positive and safe their things for the user. Sublimation is the most positive defensive strategy the ego has. The channeling of negative emotions is disguised as positive things and can be accepted in society. In the movie *Garden State*, Andrew is found several times using this strategy to overcome his trauma.



6 Andrew and Sam's first meeting.

GARDEN STATE [00.26.42], by Zach Braff (Director), 2004

In this scene, the first interaction happened when Andrew received a medical consultation in the doctor's clinic waiting room. When a dog suddenly got awake and licked Andrew as he was waiting for his turn to see his doctor, who was also waiting for a consultation, a woman on his right laughed at Andrew and asked the dog to keep disturbing him.

Finally, Andrew responded, the woman who just realized that her actions disturbed Andrew apologized. But Andrew just smiled as if it didn't matter, they then got to know each other. The woman named Sam, then continued their conversation. Sam, with her open and friendly attitude, started a conversation with Andrew and introduced herself. Their first interaction was full of awkward but refreshing honesty, where Sam showed her genuine interest and honesty in talking about herself.

Andrew knows that he is not the only one who has problems, that there is a woman in front of him who suffers from epilepsy but what amazes Andrew is that this woman shows a positive and cheerful attitude in front of others. Although brief, this meeting is the starting point of their relationship that develops throughout the film. This part highlights the dynamics of two different but complementary characters in their emotional journey.

The shooting in this scene is high angle, but this scene uses medium close-ups several

times so that the conversation is focused and highlighted only on Andrew and Sam.. High angle; when the camera is above eye height, we seem to dominate the subject. This reminds us that high angles looking down on the subject reveal overall layout and scope in the case of landscape, streets, or buildings (Brown, 2016 p.42).

On the other hand, Andrew's interaction with Sam can be seen as a form of sublimation. Andrew begins to not isolate himself and suppress his emotions anymore, Andrew begins to open up and talk about his feelings with Sam. This helps him deal with his feelings and emotions through a healthy and supportive relationship. In the next scene, sublimation is depicted again when Andrew visits Sam's house.



Figure 7 Andrew visits Sam's house.

GARDEN STATE [00.39.17], by Zach Braff (Director), 2004

Andrew then visits Sam's house, he meets Sam's mother who turns out to be eccentric too, who enthusiastically welcomes him., Mother's Sam says "*welcome*"[00:38:52]. Sam's mother's words seem to indicate that Andrew is entering a new emotional realm and journey with Sam. After meeting a dog in the hospital that connects the interaction between Andrew and Sam, it turns out that Sam also has a pet dog at home who again licks Andrew, Sam introduces Andrew to her dog, the dog seems to be a symbol of warmth and intimacy in their meeting. Sam takes Andrew to her room, where they talk more deeply about their lives. Sam shows a vulnerable side of herself by being honest about her condition and her feelings.

There is a scene that illustrates the emotional awkwardness between Andrew and Sam when they are in Sam's room. Sam expresses a subtle hope for intimacy, either through a kiss or a more emotional connection, by saying, "*We're not gonna make out or anything.*" Andrew responds with confusion, "*What?*" followed by Sam's apology, "*I'm sorry, I just totally ruined that moment, didn't I?*" [00:43:28]. In this socially tense moment, Sam's eccentricity emerges, leading to shared laughter and lightheartedness. This interaction marks a shift in Andrew's emotional state, as he begins to relax and enjoy being present with Sam. The lightness of the moment allows him, even if only briefly, to step away from the weight of his trauma.

According to Freud (1920), individuals often seek pleasure or humor as a temporary escape from psychological pain or unresolved inner conflict. Laughter and joyful experiences function as momentary releases from repressed trauma, helping the ego avoid the full confrontation with distressing memories. In Andrew's case, his interaction with Sam serves this psychological function—it enables him to momentarily suppress his emotional burdens and access feelings of joy and connection. This scene reflects how defense mechanisms do not always manifest in overt denial or repression, but can also appear as shifts toward pleasure to counterbalance internal suffering.

Meanwhile, this scene uses an over-shoulder shot, referring to the camera position

behind one character and facing another character, so that the shoulders and back of the first character face the audience. This shot is also a variation of the close-up. Brown (2016) explain that A variation of the close-up is the over-the-shoulder, looking over the shoulder of one actor to a medium or close up of the other actor. It ties the two characters together and helps put us in the position of the person being addressed.

This type of shot gives depth and visual dimension to the dialogue scene between Sam and his mother because it presents the closeness of the characters by helping to maintain visual continuity between scenes, especially when the dialogue exchange between Andrew's character, over-shoulder-shot is used in cinematography to create emotional involvement between the characters and the audience so that visual continuity is created in the scene.

2.3 Projection

The next defense mechanism used by the main character is projection. Projection is the mental mechanism underpinning the process and projective identification is the specific phantasy expressing it (Freud, 1967). The defense mechanism of projection tends to displace unwanted or threatening feelings or thoughts to others. This strategy allows individuals who use projection to avoid dealing with difficult or threatening emotions. In the long run, the use of projection can damage relationships with others around them and lead to greater conflict because unresolved issues seem to remain in the subconscious. In the movie *Garden State*, Andrew is found using projection When in his environment especially to his father.



Figure 8. Confrontation with his father.

GARDEN STATE [00.01.40], by Zach Braff (Director), 2004

In this scene Andrew woke up from his sleep by the sound of his father's phone asking him to come home immediately because his mother died in the bathroom, but Andrew showed a normal expression like he was not surprised or sad. In addition, he did not answer the call from his father who repeatedly called his name "*Andrew, this is your father hello? Look, you don't call me back, so I don't know how to do this... then there's no way for us to communicate... but you're gonna need to come home now. Last night... Your mother died She drowned. She drowned in the bath*" [00.01.27 – 00.02.01].

Andrew just sat down and listened to his father say, "*There is no way for us to communicate*", It is clear that Andrew and his father do not have a good relationship. Internal issues with his father begin to emerge in this section, revealing how the father and son rarely interact and only contact each other when needed. Therefore, the use of projection can damage relationships and cause greater conflict due to unresolved issues. By ignoring the call, Andrew is actually displacing his own pain and confusion to his father, rather than facing and dealing with his own feelings. In projection the target of the projections may be blissfully unaware of his role (Freud, 1967).

Meanwhile, the use of the camera in this scene is a medium shot. Medium shot basically stands between full and close-up shot. In other words, this type of camera shot shows a

combination of body movement and facial expression. One of the main functions of a medium shot is to capture the character's facial expressions and body movements. Medium shot provides enough space to show the emotional reactions represented by Andrew, while also allowing the audience to see the surrounding environment as well as the interaction between Andrew and his father's characters who are not so close.



Figure 9 Andrew's emotional outburst to his father.
GARDEN STATE [01.27.44], by Zach Braff (Director), 2004

In the next scene Andrew enters his father's room, his father is resting awakened by the presence of his son. Andrew then said that he had gone on a trip with his friends but his father responded that Andrew was just avoiding him, his father said: "*you've been avoiding me*" [01.27.13]. First Andrew denied it but finally he admitted that he was avoiding his father. Then his father said "*but what I do not understand is why you're so angry at me*" [01.27.31]. His father still doesn't understand why he is avoiding and angry, even though his father has until now done everything to make Andrew happy.

But Andrew asked the question "*when were we all ever happy, Dad?*" [01.27.39]. Andrew was quite angry because he was not at all happy with his father's behavior towards him, the blame for his mother being disabled and then consuming the drugs given by his father actually suppressed his emotions so that he could not feel happiness and sadness at all and he even lost the memory of happiness itself. Andrew said "*because I don't have it in my memory. Maybe if I did, I could help steer us back there*" [01.27.45]. Andrew blames his father for many aspects of his life that went wrong. This is a way for him to avoid dealing with the emotional pain and trauma of his childhood. Andrew feels that his father is responsible for his mother's death and the emotional trauma that resulted from their strained relationship.

Furthermore, this scene used close-ups to depict the interaction between Andrew and his father in the room, and the gloomy and damp environment contributes to the overall sense of gloom and darkness. Close-ups can also highlight subtle nuances in a performance, such as a fleeting smile, a tear, or a worried expression, which makes the emotional stakes of a scene more real.

Additionally, close-ups can emphasize important narrative elements or motifs, directing the audience's focus and strengthening connections to the scene. Sørup (2024) stated that the primary purpose of a close-up shot is to create a sense of intimacy and emotional connection. By isolating a character's face or a specific object, the shot allows viewers to experience the character's inner thoughts, feelings, and reactions in a way that broader shots cannot achieve.

CONCLUSION

The film *Garden State* illustrates that trauma can affect anyone and often leaves a lasting psychological impact when left unresolved. Individuals who experience trauma frequently rely on defense mechanisms to suppress painful emotions or temporarily avoid distressing memories. These mechanisms may offer momentary relief, yet they also reveal the deeper

emotional struggles that remain unaddressed. In the film, Andrew Largeman's trauma originates in childhood when he unintentionally caused the accident that left his mother paralyzed. His father's response, which included attributing psychological instability to Andrew and medicating him from a young age, contributed to Andrew's long-term emotional numbness. He lost the ability to feel sadness, express emotions, and process guilt. His return home following his mother's death intensifies these unresolved conflicts and brings his past trauma to the surface.

Throughout the narrative, Andrew employs several defense mechanisms, such as repressing painful feelings, redirecting his emotions through new activities (sublimation), and projecting unresolved anger onto others. These strategies function as his psychological defenses, shaping his behavior and emotional responses across the film. This study has explored how trauma and defense mechanisms are represented in *Garden State*, offering insight into the complex relationship between past emotional wounds and present psychological coping strategies.

However, the study remains limited in several ways. Freud's writings provide only partial explanations of trauma, since he does not dedicate a full theoretical chapter to the concept. As a result, analyzing trauma strictly through Freudian theory presents challenges. Moreover, this research does not incorporate clinical or medical perspectives that could deepen the understanding of trauma's effects. Future research is encouraged to expand on this topic by engaging more extensively with interdisciplinary perspectives, including psychology, psychiatry, and trauma studies. Scholars may also explore other literary and cinematic works to examine how trauma and defense mechanisms are portrayed across different narratives and genres. It is hoped that this study contributes to ongoing discussions in psychoanalytic literary criticism and inspires further work on trauma-related themes in film and literature.

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