

**The Unconscious Coping Mechanism and the Loss of Object:
A Psychoanalytic Criticism of Onward (2020)**

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*"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is
born for a time of adversity."*

Proverbs 17:17 (NIV)

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Pixar's *Onward* (2020) renders psychological processes, specifically grief following paternal loss, through narrative structure, cinematography, and character development. It centers on the differing responses of brothers Ian and Barley Lightfoot to growing up without their father, read through Freud's psychoanalytic framework in *The Unconscious* (1915), *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), and *The Ego and the Id* (1923), with particular attention to the lost object, melancholia, the ego-superego relation, and defense mechanisms. Using close reading of key scenes, dialogue, and visual composition, the analysis treats the father as the brothers' shared lost object and traces how each processes his absence differently. Three findings emerge: **1)** Ian, who has no memory of his father, constructs an idealized paternal image through his *"BE LIKE DAD"* checklist, an ego-ideal enforced by an anxious superego that displaces his longing onto the notebook itself. **2)** Barley, who does remember their father, carries unresolved guilt over not saying goodbye before his death; he manages this through regression and sublimation, channeling his grief into an intense preoccupation with history and magic. **3)** The brothers' shared journey then functions as a therapeutic process: Ian comes to recognize that Barley has already supplied the guidance and care he sought from their father, and his decision to forgo meeting his father's spirit so Barley can say goodbye marks a shift from melancholia toward acceptance. The study concludes that *Onward* depicts grief as a process that cannot be resolved through avoidance or repression but requires confronting loss directly, in line with Freud's account of mourning as work. It further suggests that recovery from parental loss need not depend on the parent's return: sibling relationships can substitute as a source of emotional guidance and belonging, supporting healthy psychological development in adolescents facing this kind of loss.

Keywords: *Unconsciousness, Psyche, Psychoanalysis, Freudian, Melancholia*

INTRODUCTION

Literature shapes young minds and improves cognitive ability. It allows individuals to experience different perspectives, such as various times, places, and cultures. Literature builds a wider vocabulary and strengthens literacy skills. *"Literature is news that STAYS news"* (Pound, 1934/1960, p. 29). Ezra Pound, in his treatise on reading and criticism, draws a line between

literature and journalism: journalism reports what is merely current, while literature, in his view, remains charged with meaning long after the moment that produced it. Literature can be in different forms, such as novels, poems, drama, and other media. It guides young minds to tell the difference between right and wrong. Literature develops critical thinking and encourages younger audiences to have a deeper awareness of social issues that occur in real life. Louise Rosenblatt says that literature offers individuals “*not only the sense of beauty but also in almost every case, some approach to life, some image of people working out a common fate, or some assertion that certain kinds of experiences, certain ways of feeling or acting, are valuable*” (Rosenblatt, 1938, pp. 26-27)

One of the issues includes growing up without a father figure. It shows how this issue can cause such problems and affect the child’s growth. These struggles often lead to confidence issues, which can manifest as mental health problems, identification, high cortisol levels, self-doubt, and difficulties with decision-making or public speaking. According to *the National Fatherhood (n.d.). Initiative*, 25% of kids struggle with these issues caused by not having a father figure.

Onward is a 3D computer-animated urban fantasy adventure film produced by Pixar Animation Studios and released by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures; it was officially released on March 6, 2020. The film was directed by Dan Scanlon, who also co-wrote the screenplay alongside Jason Headley and Keith Bunin. The film won several awards, including Best Animated Film at the 2021 Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films, and was nominated for Best Animated Feature at the 2021 Academy Awards. While designed for a broad family audience, it is recommended for ages six and above. Even if the film is neither violent nor inappropriate, the film faces some heavy topics and tense moments that may be too overwhelming for younger viewers. This suggests that parental guidance is beneficial for children under six. One of the main reasons the film feels heavy is how it relates to the real-life issue of growing up without a father figure.

The story begins in a world of adventure and magic. However, magic is difficult to learn, and so the world decides that there must be an easier way to live. As magic disappears, their society gets more modern, and they rely on technology instead. In this world, we are introduced to Ian Lightfoot, a shy and socially anxious teenage boy who has no self-confidence because he grew up without a father figure. He is the exact opposite of his older brother, Barley, who is an exciting, loud, and energetic extrovert who firmly believes in magic and history. On his 16th birthday, Ian creates a list of goals to improve himself, hoping to be just like his father. Upon returning home, he plays an old voice recording of his father repeatedly, trying to have a ‘conversation’ with him to feel a sense of connection. The critical issue that Ian shows here is identification: a psychological process where a person tries to become like someone else they admire by copying them, a coping mechanism that is

highly common among people who do not have a father figure. The narrative progression shifts when their mother gives them a special gift left by their late father: a magical wand, a rare gem, and a spell to bring him back for one day. However, the spell goes wrong, and only the lower half of their father appears. The brothers have to go on a journey to find another gem and complete their father's body before the 24 hours run out. The film has heavy emotional themes of grief, trauma, and the deep longing to meet their father. As they face dangerous challenges like running from the police and meeting magical creatures, Ian starts doubting himself and starts to depend entirely on Barley. Through this journey, Ian learns to use magic and becomes more confident. Later on in the film, Ian realizes that his brother successfully fills the role as a supportive father figure to him.

Onward tells the story of two young brothers who begin on a quest to bring back their deceased father. Their deep-seated desire to bring him back through old magical traditions is profoundly connected to the trauma of losing him. This issue will be analyzed through the lens of the relationship between childhood trauma and the absence of a father figure. These thematic elements resonate with the principles of *Psychoanalysis*. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) developed the theory of *Psychoanalysis*, which explores how unconscious thoughts, rooted in childhood experiences and relationships, influence behavior. To study these film themes, it is closely related to the *psychoanalytic* theory of *Mourning and Melancholia*. By analyzing scenes, dialogues, and the behavior of the characters, we will uncover the relations of this theory. Freud explains that in some cases, an object loss is transformed into an ego loss and a forsaken object. Throughout the film, Ian tries to identify his father by following his perceived traits, such as being confident and brave. Later on in the film, Ian realized that his brother had filled the role of a father figure to Ian.

According to Freud's *psychoanalytic* theory, human behavior is shaped by the unconscious mind. It holds deep emotions and past memories that people are not aware of. There are three structural components in the mind: *Id* (*Basic Urge*), *Ego* (*Logical Balancer*), and *Super-ego* (*Inner Critic*). When the ego faces an overwhelming pain, it automatically uses a defense mechanism to protect itself from reality. Freud explained that the interaction between these parts is a constant struggle; “*the ego seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavours to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns supreme in the id.*” (Freud, 1923, p. 25). Freud also believed that people face losing someone they love in two different ways. The first way is *mourning*; a healthy, conscious, and natural type of grieving. When a person is *mourning*, they accept the reality by slowly letting go of their emotional pain and eventually move on with their life. The second way is *melancholia*; an unhealthy, unconscious, and hidden type of grieving. With *melancholia*, a person cannot let go of the past. They

get completely stuck in their sadness and constantly blame themselves for the loss. He believed, “*In mourning, it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself*” (Freud, 1917, p. 246).

A recent study titled “*Anxiety as a Narrative Force: A Freudian Psychoanalytic Analysis of Ian Lightfoot in Onward (2020)*,” authored by Mundi Rahayu and Zannuba Arrifah (2026), explores how Ian portrays anxiety throughout the film by using Sigmund Freud's *psychoanalytic* theory of anxiety. Anxiety is shown in various scenes where Ian interacts with students and in the scene where he learns how to drive on the highway. Their study included how the film illustrated Ian's character, from being afraid to emotionally mature. In comparison, *The Unconscious Coping Mechanism and the Loss of Object: A Psychoanalytic Criticism of Onward (2020)* explores Ian and Barley Lightfoot's way to cope with their father's loss by using Sigmund Freud's theory of *Psychoanalysis*, supported by his book, “*Mourning and Melancholia*” (1917), to analyze the film's conflict and the grief of both brothers. In this research gap, *The Unconscious Coping Mechanism and the Loss of Object: A Psychoanalytic Criticism of Onward (2020)* examines the brothers' method of coping with the loss of their father and how their determination to bring back their deceased father had affected them.

Through Sigmund Freud's *psychoanalysis* framework, this paper analyzes how *Onward* shows Ian and Barley's struggle with the trauma of losing their father, demonstrating how both brothers use different coping mechanisms to face anxiety, grief, and the acceptance of loss. Analyzing these issues helps readers to get a clearer understanding of the film's psychological themes. The objective of this analysis is to show how growing up without a father could affect a teenager, which could also cause mental health struggles.

BINARY OPPOSITION

The Lost Object (The Father)	The Present Substitute (The Brother)
Ian is upset by the fact that his father is dead and is obsessed with the idea of meeting him or becoming him. Having heard all the amazing stuff about his father, Ian focuses all of his thoughts and affection on someone he has never actually met. This causes Ian to feel completely empty inside. “<i>Whatever it takes, I am gonna meet my dad</i>” [23:39]	Barley acts as the “present substitute.” He is the one who has been with Ian throughout his entire life journey, serving as the parental figure Ian had always wanted. Yet, because Ian is so focused on his deceased father, he cannot see Barley's value. He cannot see how loving and protective Barley has always been, instead viewing him as annoying, embarrassing, and a “screw-up” who stands in the way of his real goal. “<i>I can't believe this. You act like you know what you are doing. But you don't have a clue, and</i>

	<i>that's because you are a screw-up. And now you screw up my chance to have the one thing I never had" [01:17:00]</i>
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METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach to study and understand the film's narrative and issues used through psychological themes of the "lost object" and *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) within the film *Onward*. This study employs *Psychoanalytic* criticism, a framework developed by *Sigmund Freud* (1917). This study specifically focuses on the "lost object" and the contrast between *mourning* and *melancholia* as outlined in Sigmund Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917). The analysis prioritizes human experience and emotional interiority. By viewing the narrative through a *psychoanalytic* lens, the study highlighted the internal labor of grief of the main character. Close reading was used to analyze dialogue, character behavior, and cinematography to understand the relationship among characters. Using close reading to analyze how the narration and visual elements represent the transition from *melancholia* to the resolution of *mourning*, id, ego, superego were also examined as a holistic psychoanalytic discussion.

DISCUSSION

The way the two brothers cope with their father's death shows the difference between what Freud calls "melancholia" and "mourning," and their relationship is a representation of how a human mind works. Using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework, Ian, Barley, and even their "half-dad" (the walking legs) represent the id, ego, and super-ego trying to work together, while the magical elements and their physical journey represent the structures of the conscious and unconscious mind.

In this world, the town of New Mushroomton represents the conscious part of the mind, which is everything the human is completely aware of. At the very beginning of the film, the narrator explains, "*Long ago, the world was full of wonder. It was adventurous, exciting, and best of all, there was magic. And that magic helped all the needs. But it wasn't easy to master, and so the world found a simpler way to get by.*" [00:48]. This shift shows how their conscious minds handle the past. They built a "comfortable" world by replacing the old, complex traditions with modern technology so they did not have to deal with a harder way to live. However, the forgotten magic in the film actually represents the unconscious mind; a locked storage room where our conscious mind stores thoughts, feelings, and memories that humans are completely unaware of and are afraid to face. As Freud

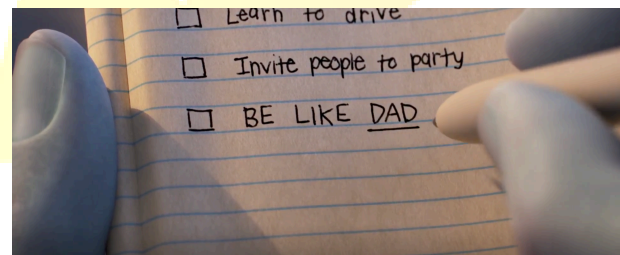
states, *“Everything that is repressed must remain unconscious, but at the very outset let us state that the repressed does not comprise the whole unconscious. The unconscious has the greater compass: the repressed is a part of the unconscious.”* (Freud, 1915, p. 116). Magic requires true, deep emotion to work, which is why it cannot exist in the modern world. To finish their quest, Ian and Barley must leave the town and go into the dangerous paths. In psychoanalysis, going down into these dark caves and secret tunnels is a visual metaphor for entering the unconscious mind. Freud argued, *“PSYCHOANALYSIS has taught us that the essence of the process of repression lies, not in abrogating or annihilating the ideational presentation of an instinct, but in withholding it from becoming conscious.”* (Freud, 1915, p. 116). Entering these dangerous and dark paths, the brothers are not just looking for the gem, but they are also walking into the deepest part of their mind to face their hidden sadness and guilt about their father's death.

Using the psychoanalytic framework, Ian represents the strict super-ego full of anxiety and a state of melancholia. The super-ego contains all the rules, moral standards, and ideas a person learned from society, acting as an inner critic that stops wild ideas by using guilt and fear. Because his father had died before Ian was born, he has no real memory of him. Freud explains that a melancholic



individual often *“knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him”* (Freud, 1917, p. 245). This is clearly shown when Ian just got home from school after Barley “messed up” Ian's birthday invitation. He walks into his room with a gloomy and sad face, sitting all by himself. He

starts to listen to a cassette tape that contains his father's voice, constantly hitting pause and play so he can talk back to the tape, making it feel like a real conversation. The camera uses a medium close-up shot and low lighting. The background is blurred, and a warm light from the desk lamp shines only on him and the cassette player, showing how lonely he feels and how his father is a comfort zone for him. To cope, Ian uses his logical conscious mind to make up a picture of his dad through a notebook checklist for a “new me,” focusing on goals like *“Learn to drive,” “Invite people to party,”* and *“BE LIKE DAD.”* This list is a literal “ego-ideal,” which is the

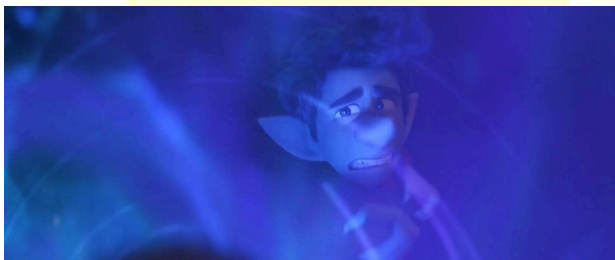


impossible standard that his super-ego forces him to follow. Rather than helping him to move on, Ian attempts to take his father's traits to form his own identity, but it causes him to feel low self-esteem

and anxiety. This is what Freud meant when he explained that in melancholia, *“the shadow of the object fell upon the ego”* (Freud, 1917, p. 249). Ian feels like his current self is not good enough compared to the father he lost. His inner critic punishes him and traps him with the rules to feel confident in himself. This is shown when he panics on the highway on-ramp, crying, *“I can't do this! I'm not ready!”* [45:45]. The camera locks onto him in a close-up shot, filling the frame with his terrified expression, while horizontal blue lens flares cut across the screen, representing his super-ego trapping him and paralyzing his ability to confidently pull into the fast-moving traffic. To use magic,



Ian cannot just use his logical conscious mind; he has to access his hidden, unconscious feelings. When Ian learns the growth spell at a gas station, Barley explains, *“Not only do you have to speak from your heart's fire, but now you also have to follow a magic decree. ‘To magnify an object, you have to magnify your attention upon it.’ While you cast the spell, you can't let anything distract you.”* [38:42]. Freud states, *“linking them up with verbal ideas is still not identical with actually becoming conscious”* (Freud, 1915, p. 148). Words alone only create the potential for magic. To actually cast a spell, it needs full concentration. The close-up in this scene focuses on Ian's panicked face filled with glowing, swirling blue light against a blurry background. His conscious focus slips, and he snaps in frustration at Barley; the magic goes out of control and backfires, shrinking Barley instead of making the object bigger. Also, Ian's mind uses a defense mechanism called displacement. This happens when the mind redirects strong feelings from a person who is gone onto a safe object, and Ian redirects his desire for a father to his notebook. Freud notes, *“our most intimate daily experiences introduces us to sudden ideas of the source of which we are ignorant”* (Freud, 1915, p.

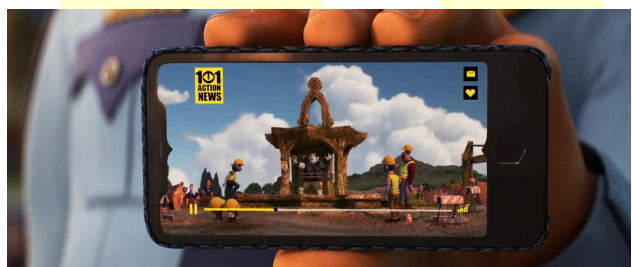


117). The unconscious mind easily switches complex emotions into new ideas. This is why Ian became completely obsessed with finishing his checklist in his notebook. He believes this is the only way to be happy and feel important.

On the other hand, Barley is the exact opposite.

He represents the id, which contains the passions, and is experiencing a healthy but delayed process called mourning. As Freud explains, *“The id, guided by the pleasure principle—that is, by the perception of unpleasure—fends off these tensions in various ways”* (Freud, 1923, p. 47). This means it only cares about fun and passion and completely ignores the rules of society. Barley constantly

breaks local parking laws with his beloved van, Guinevere, and chains himself to the historic fountain to fight the police and city construction, loudly protesting, *"I will not let you tear down this fountain! Ancient warriors on grand quests drank from its flowing waters!"* [05:19]. This scene uses a screen-within-a-screen shot on a small phone, using a wide shot to capture the protest. The digital broadcast shows how misplaced his wild desires are in a strict, modern world. This represents the conflict between a person's wild desires and a controlled society. Barley is not trying to be bad; he is simply acting on what he feels and loves from the past. Unlike Ian, Barley possesses real memories of their father, meaning the lost object is fully realized in his conscious mind. However, his mourning is delayed because of a specific childhood trauma: the guilt of being too afraid to say goodbye to his dying father in the hospital room. This is shown during the scene where Barley admits his biggest secret, *"When Dad was sick, I was supposed to go in and say goodbye to him. But he was hooked up*



to all these tubes. And he just didn't look like himself. I got scared, and I didn't go in. That's when I decided I was never gonna be scared ever again." [01:12:11]. The lighting is low, with a flickering orange light from a torch beside him, and the dark background represents the hidden guilt he carries inside. To hide from

this pain, Barley relies on defense mechanisms like regression; acting like a child to feel safe, and sublimation; turning pain into a useful activity. While society views his obsession with the fantasy game *Quest of Yore* and his van as a childish hobby, Freud explains, *"The defusion of love into aggressiveness has not been effected by the work of the ego, but is the result of a regression which has come about in the id."* (Freud, 1923, p. 55). When a person faces heavy mental pressure, it can lead to regression. But Barley is actually using sublimation. He turns his trauma by becoming an expert on ancient history and magic. This gives him the knowledge needed to guide the quest, proving his coping mechanism is what actually saves them. Freud notes that the regular work of mourning requires that *"Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object."* (Freud, 1917, p. 244). Because he ran away from the room as a child, he never processed his grief and threw his energy into preserving historical artifacts to make up for the deep guilt of failing his father.

Between these two, there are the father's resurrected legs, which physically represent the ego. The ego follows the "reality principle," balancing the wild desires of the id and the strict rules of the super-ego. Ian's and Barley's journey works like a therapy session to build a healthy ego. To survive

the journey, the brothers must change. Ian has to use his id; breaking his strict rules to cast wild magic and lying to actual police officers by pretending to be Colt Bronco. On the other hand, Barley must accept reality; he listens to the logical need of the quest and sacrifices his van, Guinevere, on a mountainside to block the police. In the end, Barley's wild desires are calmed, and Ian overcomes his fear. Ian's displacement defense mechanism also finally disappears, forcing him to accept reality. This shift happens when Ian is sitting with his father's legs by the shore after an argument with



Barley. He opens his notebook to cross out all the things he thinks he will never do with his dad because time is running out. But as he looks at the list, he remembers the past and realizes that everything he wanted to do with his father had already been done with Barley. At this

moment, the displacement shatters. Freud states that to heal, *"it is necessary that the person analysed should overcome certain resistances, the very same as those which at some earlier time placed the material in question under repression by rejecting it from consciousness."* (Freud, 1915, p. 116). Ian stops hiding from reality and checks all the boxes because he realizes the love he wanted from his absent father was already given by his big brother. This realization allows Ian to make a huge sacrifice at the ruined building, giving up his only chance to meet his father face-to-face so that Barley can say goodbye, saying, *"I had someone who looked out for me. Someone who pushed me to be more than I ever thought I could be. I never had a dad, but I always had you."* [01:25:16].

The camera uses a medium close-up to focus on the brothers' emotional faces, filled with warm, golden sunset light against a blurry background. This shows how Ian and Barley are feeling deep love and peace instead of



hiding from their pain. As the displacement shatters, the warm light shows that their heavy trauma is finally gone. Through this process, Freud notes that *"when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again"* (Freud, 1917, p. 245). The finishing of the quest did more than just help their grief; it is where wild desires and rules can finally live together in balance. Not by bringing the dead back to life, but by helping the brothers grow up into a healthier psychological state.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to explore the primary elements of the film *Onward*, which describes the development impact on a teenager growing up without a father figure. This is seen through Ian, who lacks self-confidence, and Barley, who tries to cope with his sadness through his hobbies. When Ian first made the checklist of things he wanted to do with his father, he was constantly anxious and lacked self-esteem. This reflects the psychological condition of someone lacking a father figure in their life. However, when Ian goes on a journey with Barley to find another gem and complete their father's body, he unknowingly completes every item on that list with his brother instead. In the end, when they are finally able to talk to their father, Ian chooses to defeat the dragon rather than meet him face-to-face. He does this because he realizes that Barley has actually fulfilled the role of a father figure throughout his life.

Additionally, unresolved childhood guilt heavily impacts how an individual processes loss. According to Sigmund Freud's theory, Ian suffers from melancholia because he absorbs his grief as low self-esteem, while Barley suffers from a delayed mourning process. When their father was dying, Barley was too afraid to enter the hospital room and say goodbye. His obsession with historical artifacts and magic serves as a defense mechanism to escape this emotional pain, showing that if a traumatic loss is not properly processed, it can damage the ego. On the other hand, through their journey, the brothers learn to face their struggles together.

This study suggests that healing from the trauma of an absent parent does not require the physical presence of that parent. Instead, healthy psychological growth can be achieved through alternative family support systems, like close sibling bonds. Sibling relationships can step up to give grieving teenagers the love and guidance they are missing from a parent, acting as a support system.

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