



Parental Anxiety and Defense Mechanism Reflected in Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines parental anxiety and defense mechanisms in Jodi Picoult's novel *My Sister's Keeper* through a literary psychoanalytic approach. The focus of this study is the psychological response of Sara and Brian Fitzgerald – the parents - to the severe leukemia that threatens the life of their daughter, Kate. It also examines how this response affects their relationship with Anna, the savior sister. This study asks three fundamental questions related to: (1) the causes of parental anxiety, (2) the manifestations of defense mechanisms, and (3) the consequences of these mechanisms on the parent-child relationship between the parents and Anna. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method, with close reading as the primary data-collection technique. The analysis is based on Sigmund Freud's theory of anxiety and Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanisms. At the end of the study, the researchers found that the main source of parental anxiety was the constant threat of losing Kate, which caused emotional distress, fear, and helplessness. To cope with this anxiety, Sara and Brian unconsciously used defense mechanisms such as denial, rationalization, repression, and suppression. These psychological responses shaped their decisions, including the controversial choice to conceive Anna as a genetically compatible donor. Furthermore, this study found that this defense mechanism significantly impacted family relationships, particularly by creating emotional tension and undermining Anna's autonomy as a savior sibling. The study concluded that the parents' actions in *My Sister's Keeper* were not only driven by love and sacrifice but also shaped by unconscious psychological processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Family is frequently viewed as a source of sacrifice, love, and safety, especially when one of its members suffers from a serious disease. Parents are expected to do everything they can to guarantee their child's survival in such situations. However, the worry of losing a child can also lead parents under a lot of psychological strain, affecting their choices and actions in ways that have impacts on the whole family.

This psychological conflict is depicted in the Fitzgerald family in Jodi Picoult's 2004 novel *My Sister's Keeper*. The protagonist of the novel is Kate Fitzgerald, who has suffered from leukaemia since she was a young child. Kate's parents, Sara and Brian Fitzgerald, give birth to another child, Anna, who is genetically engineered to be a compatible donor, in an effort to save Kate's life. In order to assist Kate's treatment, Anna goes through a lot of medical procedures during her life. Even though the parents' choice was driven by love and optimism, it ultimately causes emotional strife in the family and leads Anna to take a legal action to take control of her own body.

The contentious decision to conceive a child solely as a donor poses both ethical and psychological concerns. It is possible to interpret Sara and Brian's behaviour as reactions to their ongoing fear of losing Kate. From a psychoanalytic perspective, such fear can be associated with anxiety, a psychological condition that emerges when individuals perceive a threat to their emotional stability. According to Freud (1926), anxiety serves as a warning signal that warns the ego of impending danger and inspires psychological reactions meant to lessen emotional distress. Anxiety can become a powerful factor influencing a person's thoughts and choices in circumstances including long-term disease and the potential for death.

According to Anna Freud (1936), people use defence mechanisms as an unconscious reaction to fear. These mechanisms are psychological methods used by the ego to defend itself from intense emotional suffering and internal conflict. When confronted with uncomfortable reality, people try to maintain psychological equilibrium by using processes including denial, rationalization, repression, and suppression. As a result, there is a close relationship between anxiety and defence mechanisms: anxiety causes emotional strain, and defence mechanisms are unconscious reactions meant to control that tension.

Several previous research on *My Sister's Keeper* looked into bioethics, child rights, family conflict, medical discourse, and anxiety-related decision-making. The causal relationship between parental anxiety and defence mechanisms, as well as the effects of these mechanisms on the relationship between the parents and Anna as the savior sibling, have, however, received little attention. As a result, little research has been done on the psychological mechanisms behind Sara and Brian's contentious choices.

To fill this gap, the current study examines Sara and Brian Fitzgerald in *My Sister's Keeper* using Freud's idea of anxiety and Anna Freud's theory of defence mechanisms. The study specifically aims to respond to three research questions: (1) What makes Brian and Sara nervous? (2) How do the parents in the novel use defence mechanisms? and (3) How do these defence mechanisms affect the parent-savior sibling relationship? By tackling these issues, the study hopes to offer a better comprehension of the psychological complexity that underlies family strife and parental behavior during protracted medical emergencies. Review the key concepts or provide a summary of the existing works of literature. It can review books, scholarly articles, and relevant sources for particular issues.

Psychoanalytic criticism has long been employed as an effective approach to literary studies because it enables researchers to explore the psychological dimensions of literary characters and their behavior. Rooted in the theories of Sigmund Freud, psychoanalytic criticism assumes that human behavior is influenced not only by conscious motivations but also by unconscious desires, fears, and conflicts. One of Freud's most influential concepts is anxiety, which he describes as an unpleasant emotional state that arises when an individual perceives a threat to psychological stability (Freud, 1926). Anxiety functions as a warning signal that alerts the ego to potential danger and motivates psychological responses aimed at reducing emotional distress.

Building upon Freud's ideas, Anna Freud (1936) developed the concept of defence mechanisms, referring to unconscious psychological strategies employed

by the ego to protect itself from anxiety and internal conflict. According to Anna Freud, defence mechanisms enable individuals to cope with painful emotions without consciously confronting their sources. Common defence mechanisms include denial, repression, rationalization, projection, displacement, and reaction formation. Although these mechanisms help maintain psychological equilibrium, they may also distort reality and influence interpersonal relationships. Consequently, defence mechanisms have become a significant analytical tool in literary studies because they provide insight into the hidden psychological motivations underlying characters' actions.

Several studies have examined Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper* from various theoretical perspectives, including psychoanalysis, bioethics, family studies, human rights, and discourse analysis. These studies have contributed significantly to understanding the novel's complex themes; however, they also reveal important gaps concerning the psychological dynamics underlying parental behavior.

One relevant study is "Decision Problems and Anxiety: A Psychoanalytical Analysis of Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*" by Sarfraz, Shafiq, and Khalid (2022). Using a psychoanalytic framework, the researchers explored the psychological struggles experienced by Anna and Sara Fitzgerald and investigated how anxiety influences their decision-making processes. The study concludes that both characters experience significant emotional conflicts resulting from the burden of Kate's illness and the difficult decisions surrounding her treatment. Although the study successfully identifies anxiety as a major psychological factor, its analysis primarily focuses on individual emotional experiences and decision-making. It does not systematically examine the specific defence mechanisms employed by the parents or their consequences for family relationships. Therefore, the relationship between parental anxiety and defence mechanisms remains insufficiently explored.

Another important study is "The Social and Familial Analysis of *My Sister's Keeper* (2004) by Jodi Picoult: Based on George Murdock's Notion of Socialization and Functionalism" by Hassan, Torghaban, and Taebi (2023). Applying George Murdock's sociological theory of family functions, the researchers analyse the Fitzgerald family as a social institution and investigate how illness affects family roles and relationships. Their findings suggest that the family structure in the novel becomes dysfunctional because Kate's illness disrupts normal familial functions and creates emotional and psychological burdens for all family members. While the study provides valuable insights into family dynamics, it focuses primarily on sociological aspects rather than the unconscious psychological processes that shape parental decisions. Consequently, the psychological mechanisms underlying Sara and Brian's behavior remain largely unexplained.

Another relevant study is "Kematian sebagai Instrumen Kekuasaan dalam Novel *My Sister's Keeper* Karya Jodi Picoult" by Arianto (2016), which employs Michel Foucault's theory of power and discourse. The study examines how the fear of death functions as a mechanism of power within the novel and argues that modern medical discourse transforms death into an object of control, surveillance, and intervention. The research demonstrates that the characters' actions are influenced by broader social and institutional forces associated with the denial of

death. While this study provides an insightful analysis of power relations and medical discourse, it concentrates on sociocultural structures rather than individual psychological responses. As a result, the unconscious emotional processes experienced by the parents are not examined in detail.

A review of the previous studies reveals three major tendencies in existing scholarship on *My Sister's Keeper*. First, researchers frequently approach the novel through ethical and human-rights perspectives, focusing on Anna's bodily autonomy and the moral implications of the savior sibling phenomenon. Second, several studies investigate family relationships and social structures, emphasizing the impact of chronic illness on family dynamics. Third, a limited number of studies employ psychoanalytic approaches; however, these studies generally concentrate on anxiety, emotional conflict, or decision-making rather than on the operation of specific defence mechanisms.

Collectively, the existing literature demonstrates that Kate's illness profoundly affects the Fitzgerald family psychologically, socially, and ethically. Nevertheless, the causal relationship between parental anxiety and defence mechanisms remains underexplored. Moreover, little attention has been given to how these defences mechanisms influence the parents' relationship with Anna as the savior sibling. Consequently, previous studies have not fully explained how anxiety motivates psychological responses and how those responses contribute to the deterioration of family relationships.

Based on the review above, it can be argued that existing studies have primarily examined *My Sister's Keeper* from ethical, sociological, human-rights, and discourse-oriented perspectives. Although one psychoanalytic study discusses anxiety and decision-making, no study has comprehensively investigated the interconnected relationship among parental anxiety, defence mechanisms, and their consequences for the relationship between the parents and the savior sibling.

Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by applying Sigmund Freud's concept of anxiety and Anna Freud's theory of defence mechanisms to analyse Sara and Brian Fitzgerald. Specifically, the study investigates (1) the causes of parental anxiety, (2) the manifestation of defence mechanisms employed by the parents, and (3) the consequences of these defence mechanisms for the relationship between the parents and Anna as the savior sibling. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological foundations of parental behavior and family conflict in Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design because the objective of the study is to interpret and analyse psychological phenomena represented in a literary text rather than to measure them quantitatively. The study applies a psychoanalytic approach, particularly Sigmund Freud's concept of anxiety and Anna Freud's theory of defence mechanisms, to examine the psychological responses of Sara and Brian Fitzgerald in Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*. Through this approach, the study seeks to understand the

causes of parental anxiety, the manifestation of defence mechanisms, and their consequences for the relationship between the parents and Anna as the savior sibling.

The primary source of data is Jodi Picoult's novel *My Sister's Keeper* (2004). The data consists of words, phrases, dialogues, monologues, narrative descriptions, and events that reflect the psychological conditions, attitudes, and behaviors of Sara and Brian Fitzgerald. Secondary data are obtained from books, journal articles, theses, dissertations, and other scholarly publications related to psychoanalytic literary criticism, Freud's theory of anxiety, Anna Freud's defence mechanisms, and previous studies on *My Sister's Keeper*.

Data was collected through close reading and note-taking techniques. The novel was read repeatedly to identify passages relevant to the research objectives. During the reading process, textual evidence indicating parental anxiety, manifestations of defence mechanisms, and their effects on family relationships was carefully selected and categorized according to the theoretical framework. Relevant scholarly sources were also reviewed to support the interpretation and analysis of the findings.

The data were analysed using an interactive qualitative method consisting of data reduction, data classification, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. First, textual data related to the causes of anxiety were identified and categorized. Second, the selected data were analysed to determine the types of defence mechanisms manifested by Sara and Brian based on Anna Freud's theory. Finally, the consequences of these defence mechanisms for the relationship between the parents and Anna were interpreted in relation to the narrative context of the novel. The findings were then presented descriptively to explain the interconnected relationship between parental anxiety, defence mechanisms, and family conflict in *My Sister's Keeper*.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Causes of Parental Anxiety

The analysis reveals that Sara and Brian Fitzgerald experience anxiety primarily because of the continuous threat posed by Kate's leukaemia. Since Kate is diagnosed with acute promyelocytic leukaemia at an early age, both parents live under the constant possibility of losing their daughter. According to Freud (1926), anxiety emerges when the ego perceives a danger situation that threatens psychological stability. In *My Sister's Keeper*, Kate's illness represents such a threat because it confronts the parents with the possibility of death and their inability to fully control their daughter's future.

This anxiety becomes evident when Sara receives information about Kate's prognosis from the doctor:

"There's a treatment," I repeat. "Yes. With aggressive treatment, myeloid leukaemia's carry a survival prognosis of nine months to three years." Last week, I had stood in the doorway of Kate's bedroom, watching her clutch a satin security blanket in her sleep, a shred of fabric she was rarely without. You mark my words, I had whispered to

Brian. She'll never give that up. I'm going to have to sew it into the lining of her wedding dress" (Picoult, 2004, p. 25).

This passage illustrates the psychological shock experienced by Sara when her hopeful vision of Kate's future collides with the doctor's grim prognosis. Before receiving the medical explanation, Sara imagines Kate growing up, getting married, and living a normal life. However, the prognosis of "nine months to three years" abruptly threatens these expectations and forces her to confront the possibility of losing her daughter. The contrast between Sara's dream of Kate's wedding and the doctor's prediction reveals the emergence of anxiety as a response to a perceived danger that could destroy her emotional world.

Furthermore, Sara's repeated focus on the phrase "There's a treatment" demonstrates her desperate attempt to hold on to hope despite the severity of Kate's condition. Rather than concentrating on the possibility of death, she immediately clings to the existence of a treatment. This reaction indicates the intense emotional pressure generated by Kate's illness and foreshadows the psychological strategies that she later employs to cope with her anxiety. Thus, the quotation demonstrates that parental anxiety originates not merely from Kate's illness itself but from the persistent fear of losing a child whose future has suddenly become uncertain.

Although Brian also experiences the same situation, Sara appears to be more profoundly affected by the threat of loss. Her anxiety gradually becomes a dominant psychological force that influences her decisions, attitudes, and interactions with other family members. Therefore, the primary cause of parental anxiety in *My Sister's Keeper* is the fear of Kate's death, which continuously shapes the parents' emotional and psychological responses throughout the novel.

3.2 Manifestation of Defence Mechanisms

Among the defence mechanisms manifested by Sara Fitzgerald, denial appears as one of the most dominant. According to Anna Freud (1936), denial enables an individual to reject or refuse to acknowledge a painful reality that threatens psychological stability. In *My Sister's Keeper*, Sara repeatedly demonstrates an inability to accept circumstances that challenge her determination to save Kate, including Anna's desire to exercise control over her own body.

This tendency is evident during Anna's legal battle for medical emancipation. When Anna attempts to assert her autonomy, Sara responds by emphasizing her authority as a mother:

"Right now she's my daughter," my mother says, and she takes my hand and yanks me out of my chair. At the threshold of the door, I manage to look back. Campbell's fuming. I could have told him it would wind up like this. Daughter trumps everything, no matter what the game" (Picoult, 2004, p. 77).

This passage demonstrates Sara's refusal to recognize Anna as an independent individual capable of making decisions about her own body. Instead, she insists on defining Anna primarily through the mother–daughter relationship. By emphasizing that Anna is “my daughter,” Sara implicitly rejects the reality that Anna possesses personal rights and desires that may conflict with Kate's medical needs. Her reaction reflects more than parental authority; it reveals an unconscious attempt to avoid confronting a painful truth—that Anna no longer fully accepts the role assigned to her as Kate's donor.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Sara's behavior can be interpreted as a manifestation of denial because acknowledging Anna's autonomy would require her to face the possibility that Kate's treatment may no longer continue as she expects. Such recognition would intensify the anxiety generated by the threat of losing Kate. Consequently, Sara unconsciously rejects this reality and continues to view Anna primarily as a daughter whose responsibility is to support her sister's survival. Denial therefore functions as a psychological shield that protects Sara from the emotional pain associated with uncertainty, loss, and the potential failure of her efforts to save Kate.

The quotation also illustrates how denial influences Sara's relationship with Anna. By refusing to acknowledge Anna's individuality, Sara unintentionally reduces her daughter's identity to her biological function within the family. As a result, denial not only serves as a defence mechanism against anxiety but also contributes to the growing emotional conflict between mother and daughter throughout the novel.

Another significant defence mechanism is rationalization. Sara repeatedly justifies her decision to conceive Anna as a genetically compatible donor by presenting it as a necessary act of maternal love and responsibility. From her perspective, every medical procedure imposed upon Anna serves the noble purpose of saving Kate's life. Rationalization allows Sara to reduce feelings of guilt by transforming a morally controversial decision into one that appears reasonable and justified.

The analysis also reveals elements of repression. Sara rarely acknowledges the emotional suffering experienced by Anna and other family members. Instead, she suppresses thoughts and feelings that might challenge her commitment to Kate's treatment. By repressing these emotional conflicts, Sara is able to maintain her focus on her primary goal: keeping Kate alive.

Brian exhibits defence mechanisms as well, although they are less pronounced. He frequently suppresses his emotional distress and attempts to remain calm in order to support the family. His behavior demonstrates an effort to manage anxiety through emotional restraint rather than direct confrontation. Unlike Sara, whose defence mechanisms often shape major family decisions, Brian's responses are generally more passive and accommodating.

These findings support Anna Freud's argument that defence mechanisms function as unconscious responses to anxiety. The parents' behaviors are not merely expressions of parental love but also psychological strategies designed to protect them from overwhelming emotional pain.

3.3. Consequences of Defense Mechanisms on the Relationship with Anna

The manifestation of defence mechanisms has significant consequences for the relationship between the parents and Anna as the savior sibling. Sara's denial and rationalization, in particular, lead her to prioritize Kate's survival above the emotional needs and autonomy of Anna. As a result, Anna gradually feels that her identity is defined not by who she is as an individual but by her function as a donor for her sister. The emotional consequences of this situation become evident when Anna reflects on her decision to seek medical emancipation:

"What if I was the one who was sick? What if Kate had been asked to do what I've done? What if one of these days, some marrow or blood or whatever actually worked, and that was the end? What if I could look back on all this one day and feel good about what I did, instead of feeling guilty? What if the judge doesn't think I'm right? What if he does? I can't answer a single one of these, which is how I know that whether I'm ready or not, I'm growing up."

This passage reveals Anna's growing awareness of the unequal expectations imposed upon her within the family. Her repeated use of the phrase "What if" reflects uncertainty and emotional conflict, but it also demonstrates her attempt to evaluate her situation from a perspective independent of her parents. Significantly, Anna questions whether Kate would have been expected to make similar sacrifices if their positions had been reversed. This question suggests that Anna has become increasingly conscious of the imbalance that characterizes her relationship with her parents and her role within the family.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, this conflict can be understood as one of the unintended consequences of Sara's defence mechanisms. By denying the possibility of losing Kate and rationalizing every medical intervention imposed upon Anna, Sara unconsciously neglects Anna's emotional needs and personal autonomy. Although these defence mechanisms temporarily help Sara manage her anxiety, they simultaneously create feelings of frustration, guilt, and resentment in Anna. Consequently, the psychological strategies intended to protect the parents from emotional suffering contribute to the deterioration of the parent-child relationship.

Moreover, Anna's statement that she is "growing up" symbolizes her movement toward self-determination and independence. Her decision to challenge her parents legally is not merely an act of rebellion but an attempt to reclaim ownership of her body and identity. The lawsuit therefore represents the culmination of years of emotional tension generated by the parents' anxiety-driven decisions. Rather than strengthening family unity, the parents' defence mechanisms create emotional distance between themselves and Anna, ultimately transforming parental protection into a source of conflict.

Overall, the novel demonstrates that defence mechanisms may help individuals cope with anxiety in the short term, but they can also produce long-term relational consequences. In the case of the Fitzgerald family, Sara and

Brian's unconscious efforts to protect themselves from the fear of losing Kate contribute to a strained relationship with Anna, who ultimately seeks recognition as an autonomous individual rather than merely a savior sibling.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has examined parental anxiety and defense mechanisms in Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper* through the psychoanalytic perspectives of Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud. The analysis focused on three aspects: the causes of parental anxiety, the manifestation of defense mechanisms, and the consequences of those mechanisms for the relationship between the parents and Anna as the savior sibling.

The findings reveal that the primary source of Sara and Brian Fitzgerald's anxiety is the persistent threat of losing their daughter, Kate, to leukemia. Kate's life-threatening illness creates a prolonged state of fear, uncertainty, helplessness, and emotional distress that continuously challenges the parents' psychological stability. While both parents experience anxiety, Sara demonstrates a more intense emotional response due to her deep involvement in Kate's treatment and her determination to preserve Kate's life at all costs.

The study also finds that parental anxiety gives rise to various defense mechanisms, particularly denial, rationalization, repression, and suppression. Among these mechanisms, denial and rationalization are most prominently manifested in Sara's behavior. Sara repeatedly refuses to accept the possibility of Kate's death and justifies controversial decisions, including the conception of Anna as a genetically compatible donor, as necessary acts of maternal love and responsibility. These defense mechanisms function as unconscious psychological strategies that enable the parents to cope with overwhelming emotional pain and maintain a sense of hope despite the uncertainty surrounding Kate's condition.

Furthermore, the manifestation of defense mechanisms significantly affects the relationship between the parents and Anna. Sara's tendency to prioritize Kate's survival often leads her to overlook Anna's emotional needs, individuality, and bodily autonomy. As a result, tension and conflict emerge within the family, culminating in Anna's struggle to gain control over her own body. The findings demonstrate that although defense mechanisms may temporarily reduce anxiety, they can also create unintended consequences that damage interpersonal relationships and intensify family conflict.

Overall, this study concludes that parental behavior in *My Sister's Keeper* cannot be understood solely as an expression of love and sacrifice. Rather, it is also shaped by unconscious psychological responses to the fear of loss and emotional suffering. By revealing the interconnected relationship between anxiety, defense mechanisms, and family relationships, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological complexity of parental decision-making in situations of prolonged medical crisis. The novel ultimately illustrates how the desire to save one child may unintentionally affect the well-being and autonomy of another, highlighting the intricate relationship between parental love, psychological distress, and family conflict.

Future studies may explore the representation of savior siblings from the perspectives of bioethics, children's rights, or trauma studies in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical and psychological issues presented in the novel.

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Authors' Contribution

Yohanes Tuaderu worked the project and the main conceptual ideas, wrote the manuscript.

Diana Kristanti Sarereake collaborated in collected the data, providing software, and data visualization, and proofread the manuscript.

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