

## Anxiety as a Narrative Force: A Freudian Psychoanalytic Analysis of Ian Lightfoot in *Onward* (2020)

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### Abstrak

Semakin banyak film-film animasi menampilkan persoalan dan pergulatan psikologis sehingga film ini menjadi teks penting untuk memahami perkembangan emosional dalam budaya populer. Studi ini meneliti representasi kecemasan dalam film animasi *Onward* (2020) melalui karakter Ian Lightfoot dan perannya dalam membentuk perkembangan psikologisnya. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis jenis-jenis kecemasan yang dialami Ian Lightfoot dan bagaimana kecemasan ini digambarkan melalui visual dan dialog film. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dan pendekatan studi film, penelitian ini menerapkan teori psikoanalitik kecemasan Sigmund Freud—kecemasan realistik, neurotik, dan moral—sebagai kerangka analitis. Tipologi kecemasan Freud berfungsi sebagai kerangka analitis utama untuk mengkategorikan respons psikologis Ian. Data untuk penelitian ini terdiri dari adegan-adegan yang menunjukkan kecemasan Ian dalam situasi tertentu. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa kecemasan realistik muncul ketika Ian menghadapi ancaman nyata, seperti belajar mengemudi di jalan raya, kecemasan neurotik terlihat pada kecemasan Ian ketika ia berinteraksi dengan temanannya, dan kecemasan moral muncul karena Ian merasa bersalah karena gagal memenuhi tanggung jawab moralnya kepada keluarganya. Melalui representasi kecemasan ini, film *Onward* menampilkan proses perkembangan karakter Ian dari seseorang tidak punya kepercayaan diri menjadi orang yang lebih dewasa secara emosional.

**Kata Kunci:** Film animasi; kecemasan; fantasi; kajian film; psikoanalisis

### Abstract

Animated films increasingly address psychological struggles, making them important texts for understanding emotional development in popular culture. This study examines the representation of anxiety in the animated film *Onward* (2020) through the character of Ian Lightfoot and its role in shaping his psychological development. The study aims to analyze the types of anxiety experienced by Ian and how this anxiety is portrayed through the film's visuals and dialogue. Using a descriptive qualitative method and a film studies approach, the research applies Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of anxiety—realistic, neurotic, and moral anxiety—as an analytical framework. Freud's typology of anxiety functions as the primary analytical framework for categorizing Ian's psychological responses. The data for this study consists of scenes showing Ian's anxiety in certain situations. The analysis results show that realistic anxiety arises because Ian faces real threats, such as learning to drive on the highway, neurotic anxiety is seen in Ian's anxiety when he interacts with his friends, and moral anxiety arises because Ian feels guilty for failing to fulfil his moral responsibilities to his family. Through the representation of these anxieties, the film *Onward* depicts the process of Ian's character development from a person who lacks confidence to someone who is more emotionally mature.

**Keywords:** Animated film; anxiety; fantasy; film studies; psychoanalytic

### INTRODUCTION

Film is a complex audio-visual medium that serves many beneficial aspects for contemporary society. Movie functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a means of representing the psychological and social aspects of humans (Rahayu et al, 2023). Films can reveal psychological issues through visuals and character dialogue (Murti & Nugroho, 2021). One animated film

produced by Pixar, *Onward* (2020), explores the themes of family and individual emotional journeys. *Onward* was launched at the year of COVID 2019, in which many cinemas were closed, so that it got underperformed at box office. However, it was high in VOD (video on demand).

*Onward* tells the story of the main characters, elf brothers named Ian Lightfoot and Barley Lightfoot, who embark on an adventure together to reunite with their deceased father. Ian is the opposite of his brother in

character. He is shy, lacks confidence, and is always anxious. Through the adventure, the audience can witness the development of Ian's character, who was initially a shy and confidence-lacking boy, but ultimately learns to face his fears and becomes a brave person. Ian's character illustrates the anxiety experienced by teenagers as they face expectations and changes within themselves.

Several studies have discussed the film *Onward* (2020) from various perspectives. They can be classified into some groups such as, the linguistics studies - the most dominant topic, and morality studies. Under the title "Determining Moral Value in Movies: An Analysis of the Movie' Onward," Ayuni (2023) found that this film highlights moral messages about courage, family love, and the struggle to become a better person.

From linguistic perspective, the study by Hakim and Novitasari (2022) entitled "Politeness Strategies Used by the Main Characters in the Movie' Onward," examined the politeness strategies of the main characters, and resulted in the notion that positive politeness strategies were predominantly used to maintain harmonious family relationships. Moreover, research by Wulandari, Wangi, and Sugianto (2023) entitled "An Analysis of Illocutionary and Perlocutionary Acts in the Movie' Onward"" examined illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts in this film and found that characters often use expressive and directive speech acts to express emotions. Similar results were also found by Sakti (2022) in his study, "The Classification of Speech Acts Used by Characters in the Movie 'Onward'," which concluded that directive speech acts were the most dominant type. The other linguistic study on this movie, done by Bakara and Rehulina (2021), is entitled "Idiomatic Expressions in the 'Onward' Movie Script." They demonstrated that idioms enhance the emotional meaning of the dialogue. The next linguistic research by Ardianti, Putri, and Santika (2022), entitled "Maxim Violation in the Movie 'Onward'" highlights the use of Grice's maxims for humorous purposes.

From a psychological perspective, we can find studies on comparative themes related to anxiety. Ayub (2025) study, entitled "Exploring the Struggle of Ian Lightfoot to Overcome Inferiority Feelings in the Movie *Onward* (2020): An Individual Psychology Study," found a sense of inferiority stemming from the loss of a father figure. The other studies related to anxiety can be found in the survey by Chrismantaru and Parmaningroem (2024) entitled "Anxiety Experienced by the Main Character in the Movie *Aus Dem Nichts*," which found anxiety due to the trauma of loss. The study by Lubis (2022) entitled "Semiotic Representation of Anxiety Disorder in the 'Thirteen Reasons Why' series, examines anxiety disorders through a semiotic approach.

Based on previous studies above, it can be concluded that research on the film *Onward* (2020) has focused more on linguistic aspects and moral values, while no studies have been found that specifically analyse the anxiety of the main character, Ian Lightfoot, under the concept of Sigmund Freud's theory of anxiety (1997). Therefore, this study is the latest and has never been done before. This research is also essential to fill this gap by analysing Ian's anxiety in depth through Freud's perspective.

The research question arise in this study is, "What types of anxiety are experienced by Ian Lightfoot in the movie *Onward*?" The question focuses on specific forms of anxiety, so that it provides a systematic foundation for understanding the protagonist's psychological construction and narrative function.

This study does not only limit itself in the aspects of Ian's emotional struggles as a general or undefined feeling of fear. More than that, this question allows the analysis to classify his experiences into distinct psychological categories, making the interpretation more rigorous and theoretically grounded. By discussing deeper on the types of anxiety, the study explores beyond plot summary toward analytical depth. The analysis borrows the psychoanalytic theory to explain how different anxieties emerge in response to social interaction, moral responsibility, and real-life challenges. Understanding the anxiety is relevant in discussing the animated film, which often communicate complex psychological states through symbolic visuals and dialogue. The research question gives the clarity of scope, and strengthens the methodological coherence of the study. This question also contributes to film and cultural studies by demonstrating how animation can articulate nuanced representations of psychological anxiety and emotional development.

Sigmund Freud's concept of anxiety is used to identify and explain the type of anxiety experienced by Ian Lightfoot. According to Freud (1997), anxiety is an emotional reaction that arises when an individual faces a threat to their ego, whether it comes from the external environment, instinctual drives, or moral guidance. Freud distinguishes anxiety into three main types, namely realistic anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety. Realistic anxiety arises due to real threats from the external environment. In contrast, neurotic anxiety is caused by tension between the id and the ego, and finally, moral anxiety arises due to pressure or guilt originating from the superego (Freud, 1997; Boeree, 2006).

Anxiety is a psychological symptom that arises due to emotional or physical pressure, causing feelings of discomfort such as restlessness and fear (Rhamadian D. et al., 2022). Anxiety can arise due to real threats, internal conflicts, or feelings of guilt. These conditions greatly affect a person's behaviour and decision-making. In many

daily contexts, anxiety happens in young and adult life (Rahayu & Rakhmawati, 2020). Anxiety is not only found in real life, but is also widely represented in literature and film.

Animated movie is a serious genre of film that is not only targeted for children audience, instead it is a genre which has capabilities to present the complexities of people's life, and to address social and psychological issues (Rahayu, 2023). As a medium that present many issues, animated movie often explores many crucial themes such as identity formation, psychological crisis, mental health, adult relations, all of which is necessary and important to be discussed. In this paper, *Onward* as an animated movie presents the complexities of psychological situation of youth through the elf characters. It explores more on the character's anxiety and emotional growth that is necessary to be observed as it happens a lot in people's life.

This concept of anxiety is relevant for understanding how Ian Lightfoot's anxiety arose and affected his personality. As a character who has lost his father, Ian exhibits various forms of anxiety as he tries to prove himself as a brave and independent figure. Using Freud's theory, this study analyzes how these types of anxiety emerge through Ian's expressions, dialogues, and actions, as well as how anxiety plays a role in the process of identity formation.

## METHOD

Using a descriptive qualitative method and film studies approach, the research applies Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of anxiety—realistic, neurotic, and moral anxiety—as an analytical framework. Freud's typology of anxiety functions as the primary analytical framework for categorizing Ian's psychological responses. The data for this study consists of scenes showing Ian's anxiety in certain situations. This study examines the film *Onward* (2020) as the object of research, with a focus on the anxiety experienced by the main character in the movie. The researchers chose a qualitative approach because this study focuses on the meanings and interpretations that emerge from the behavior, dialogue, and expressions of the main character. Thus, the analysis was conducted through in-depth observation of scenes that display signs of anxiety, such as fear and doubt experienced by the main character.

The research data consists of screenshots showing Ian's utterances, expressions, and actions. The data collection technique was carried out by watching the movie *Onward* repeatedly, and taking notes on the related scene and dialogue. The analysis was carried out through content analysis of the scenes of the film. By applying three categories, namely realistic anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and

moral anxiety, it is hoped that the results of this study show how Ian experiences several forms of anxiety stemming from fear of failure, social pressure, and unpreparedness to face the outside world. Thus, the results of this study are expected to strengthen the study of literary psychology in the context of animated films.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Onward* (2020) is animated urban fantasy adventure film produced by Pixar Animation Studio. It is a fantasy film for modern day, that tells us the story of two elf brothers, named Ian and Barley Lightfoot. They are making a journey to find artifact, a rare gem, that is able to revive their deceased father for one day. Ian and Barley are elf brothers, with the story back long ago, in a world inhabited by mythical creatures, magic, including magic spelling, was something common to solve the problems in their daily life. To master the magic spelling is hard, not easy at all, but the characters tried hard to do it. In our modern time, however, with progress of technology over the centuries, people do not use the same magic anymore. The old magic became obsolete and out of use.

Ian and Barley's father is Wilden who died before Ian's birth, and their mother Laurel has a new boyfriend, a police officer. The main character, Ian has a shy and insecure personality, while his brother Barley is an enthusiastic and impulsive boy. Throughout the film, Ian is often depicted as feeling anxious when faced with new situations, interacting with other people, or when given a big responsibility. Ian's anxiety is an important part of his character development and plays a major role in the film's storyline. In Ayub's study, Ian's insecure personality is related to his psychological condition of the loss of his father (Ayub, 2025). In more detail, the following part discusses the three types of Ian's anxieties.

### *Ian experiences Realistic Anxiety*



Picture 1. Ian shows fear and anxious when entering the highway while learning to drive a car.

The screenshot in picture 1 showing a scene that contains elements of realistic anxiety. The anxiety is also supported by the following dialogue:

**Ian shows Neurotic Anxiety**

*Instructor: Now, take this on-ramp for the freeway.*

*Ian : Okey, yeah. I'm, uh, super ready for that.*

*Ian : It's nice and fast.*

*Instructor: Just merge into traffic.*

*Ian : Yep. Just any minute.*

*Instructor: Merge into traffic.*

*Ian : Uh....*

*Instructor: Merge into traffic!!*

*Ian : I'm not ready!*

In the scene above, Ian is learning to drive with his instructor. Ian is sitting in the driver's seat with a tense expression on his face, his eyes wide open, and both hands gripping the steering wheel tightly. Next to him is his driving instructor, who continues to instruct him to enter the traffic lane immediately. The background of the scene shows a busy road with other vehicles moving quickly.

This scene represents realistic anxiety, which is anxiety that arises due to a real threat from the external environment. In this context, Ian faces the situation of driving on a highway that is full of vehicles and is high risk. Ian's fear does not come from his mind, but from real conditions of the road. He feels anxious of doing this action, because the situation of the lane with fast cars running by. As the boy who firstly learns driving car, this makes him anxious, because the driving requires skills and preparedness that he does not yet have.

A boy like Ian, who is learning how to drive in a real busy road, surely feels a high tense and anxiety. He is still not familiar with how to control the machine, and highly anxious because of the imagination in his head, stimulated by fast-moving cars passing by, impatient glances of the other drivers and instructors. The instructor said three times, "merge into the traffic!" while Ian was anxious and panic, firstly replying "just a minute," and then "um..", and at last when the instructor shouted, he replied desperately "I'm not ready". Ian shows high tense and anxious. The anxiety is triggered by his unfamiliarity to control the machine, the busy and fast moving environment, and the imagination of potential mistakes or accident.

The visual elements and dialogue evidenced Ian's anxiety. His tense facial expressions, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly, and his stiff body posture reveal the panic he is feeling and the conversation between the instructor and Ian. The highway setting with vehicles constantly moving also adds to the visual tension. This makes the audience to feel the danger Ian is facing. In the dialogue, when Ian says, "I'm not ready," it shows that he feels desperately anxious to face the threat of driving in the busy road with fast-moving cars.



*Picture 2: Ian is practicing speaking before talking to his friends*

Ian shows neurotic anxiety in picture 2. The neurotic anxiety is evidenced by the following monologue:

*Ian : Oh hey. What's up dude? Um... I am, uh, having a party tonight, and I was wondering if you wanted to come over and get down on some cake. (Groans) that's not something anyone says. Okay, don't say "dudes". "Gang"? What's up, gang? (Exhale)*

In the scene above, Ian is standing in front of the school building holding a pen and writing a few words on his hand. His expression appears nervous and uncertain, and his body language is stiff. He is trying to practice what to speak to his friends, before meeting them. Behind Ian, his peers are chatting with each other. The camera uses a medium shot that focuses on Ian, while his friends who are talking remain visible.

This scene represents neurotic anxiety, which is anxiety that comes from within oneself and fear of being judged by others. Ian feels an excessive fear that he would say the wrong things when talking to his friends. This is reinforced through Ian's monologue, which shows him rethinking and doubting his choice of words, so that he needs to prepare the words he wants to say. He is in doubt whether greeting his friends with the word "dude" or "gang". Dude is a noun commonly used in an informal way to address a person, commonly, male, an individual. The word address someone in casual and friendly ways. The use of "dude" refers to the peer relationship, which is common in American English. The word "gang" refers to a collective noun, many people, commonly used to address a group of people. This address sound friendly and inclusive in non-formal casual ways. However, the word may also have negative connotation (criminal gang). In this case, Ian wants to invite his friends for a party he has prepared. As a host of a party, he should have more

powerful tone to invite friends, but he feels anxious, even not certain with the words to say, and he might be too cautious.

From a film studies perspective, the use of internal monologues allows the audience to directly experience Ian's psychological state. The ballpoint pen and the writing on his hand serve as symbols of Ian's attempt to control his anxiety by putting his thoughts into words before speaking in front of his friends. Ian's position with his back to his friends and his tense facial expression emphasize that this anxiety comes from within him. Commonly, boys are easily mingled and talk to their peers without feeling anxious. However, in this situation, Ian's psychological state is completely different, he has to prepare what he wants to talk to his friends with anxiety, so that it clearly shows neurotic anxiety.

### Ian shows moral anxiety



Picture 3: Ian feels guilty for failing to recite the spell

The scene in picture 3 shows Ian's moral anxiety. The anxiety is also supported by the following dialogue:

Barley : Hey, block the road with those boulders.

Ian : What? How?

Barley : Arcane lightning

Ian : You said that's the hardest spell.

Barley : You are ready. "To make lightning strike with ease, one must follow all decrees." You have to do everything. Speaks from your heart's fire, trust your self, focus, all of it.

Ian : Voltar thundasir. (Sigh). (Ian tries this spell three times, but it's still not working)

Ian : I can't! I can't do it. We're not gonna see you dad. And it's all my fault.

The scene in picture 3 shows Ian standing in the middle of the road with Barley after their attempt to escape from the police. The background shows damaged cars and they are in an urgent situation. Ian is in front with his head bowed and a guilty expression on his face, while Barley is

behind Ian with a worried expression. The camera uses a medium close-up on Ian to emphasize his emotional state.

The dialogue supports the emergency situation, in which they try to escape from police, but on the road their car is broken. Barley asks Ian to block the road with the "Arcane lightning" that can be done through the secret spelling, the hardest spelling, that Ian commonly is able to do that. Arcane lightning is a fantasy term (this is the element of the fantasy adventure film), referring to magical electricity or energy produced through spellcasting, instead of natural process. Arcane means mysterious (in Latin) and it implies an ancient of magic. So, arcane lightning is formed from magical energy, that can be summoned or controlled by a magic. It functions to defence or attack or magical activation (Clute & Grant, 1997).

The fantasy element is important in this movie genre. Fantasy movie and literature commonly uses non-real forces in the plot to symbolize psychological and moral struggles of the characters (Tolkien, 2001). The fantasy element like arcane lightning that is produced through magic spell, explains how the main character, Ian and Barley struggle to accomplish their mission. In other perspective, the fantasy element in a fantasy movie genre also functions to visualize internal psychological conflicts (Bettelheim, 1976).

In the plot of Onward, when in emergency situation, Ian tries to spell the mantra three times, but it does not work. He is desperate and very anxious, can be seen from his words: "I can't do it. We're not gonna see you dad. That's all my fault." When Ian anxiously desperate, he blames himself. In line with Bettelheim's concept on fantasy, this scene shows that the fantasy element functions as visualization of psychological conflicts of the main character.

The scene represents moral anxiety, which is anxiety that arises from guilt due to feeling that one has failed to meet demands or responsibilities. Ian not only feels afraid and insecure, but he also blames himself for the possibility of failing to meet his deceased father again. His words directly show the conflict between his actions and the moral standards he believes in as a child.

From a film studies perspective, the close framing of Ian's face shows his expression of regret and the emotional burden he feels. Barley's words in this scene serve as encouragement for Ian to believe in himself. However, Ian's reaction shows guilt and despair because he feels like a failure. The mantra that Ian recites fails even though he has tried it three times, visually showing Ian's inability to fulfil the expectations he has placed on himself. Therefore, the anxiety that arises in this scene is no longer caused by external danger or internal conflict alone, but rather stems

from Ian's sense of responsibility and moral awareness. That kind of anxiety is categorized as moral anxiety.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the character Ian Lightfoot in the movie *Onward* (2020) experiences various forms of complex and layered anxiety. This anxiety does not appear suddenly but develops as the plot progresses and Ian faces conflicts as a teenager who has lost his father figure and must adapt to various demands in his life. Borrowing the concept of anxiety from Sigmund Freud, the anxiety experienced by Ian can be classified into three types, namely realistic anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety.

This study provides insights of the types of anxiety experienced by Ian Lightfoot, but it has limitations. First, this study focuses only on one main character, so the results of the analysis cannot be generalized to other characters or animated films. Second, the approach used is limited to Sigmund Freud's theory of anxiety, so that other psychological aspects, such as defence mechanisms or personality development, have not been discussed in depth. All of the limitation of study can be developed further by the other researchers interested in this topic, to enrich the debate and discussion on the topic.

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