



Self-Diagnosis of Psychopathy Portrayed in *the End of the F***ing World* Series

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Abstract. *In contemporary media, characters who self-diagnose with psychological disorders often reflect deeper emotional and psychological complexities rather than clinically accurate conditions. One compelling example is found in the British dark comedy-drama series *The End of The F***ing World**, where James claims to be a psychopath. However, this self-diagnosis raises critical psychological questions: Is James truly incapable of empathy, or is his label a defense mechanism masking unresolved trauma from his childhood? By applying Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory—particularly the structural model of personality (id, ego, superego)—alongside Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanisms, this study investigates the role of self-diagnosis not as an objective or medically valid truth, but as a psychological shield to avoid emotional vulnerability and confrontation with repressed pain. James' behaviors are analyzed through selected scenes and dialogues in the series, with additional triangulation from the original graphic novel to support the interpretation. The analysis reveals that James' declaration of being a psychopath aligns more with mechanisms such as repression, projection, and emotional numbing, rather than the clinical criteria of psychopathy. His emotional detachment is revealed to be a constructed barrier stemming from maternal loss, neglect, and fear of connection. The study concludes that self-diagnosis in this context acts as a subconscious strategy to cope with unresolved trauma and to maintain psychological equilibrium amid inner conflict. This case exemplifies how fictional representations can mirror real-life struggles with identity, mental health, and the desire to label complex emotions through simplified diagnostic terms, especially in youth who lack proper support systems.*

Keywords: *Coping, Identity, Psychopathy, Trauma, Unconscious*

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary television and film frequently depict characters who self-diagnose psychological disorders. These portrayals reflect wherein individuals adopt diagnostic labels to make sense of emotional pain, identity struggles, and behavioral irregularities. Self-diagnosis in psychiatry is where individuals diagnose themselves rather than rely upon official diagnosticians to supply a psychiatric diagnosis (Fellowes, 2024). In such portrayals, the diagnostic label often serves as a narrative tool that reveals rather than explains the character's psyche.

A prime example is the character James from *The End of the F***ing World* series, who self-diagnoses as a psychopath in the show's opening minutes. Psychopathy is a personality disorder defined by a constellation of affective, interpersonal, and behavioral characteristics, including impulsivity, lack of empathy, guilt, and shallow affect (Hare, 1999). The label becomes the lens from his unresolved trauma through which he and the audience initially understand his emotional detachment, violent impulses, and moral ambiguity. When trauma is unresolved, the survivor remains fixated on the moment of trauma. Time stops. The terror and helplessness of the moment return again and again. Herman identifies unresolved trauma as

“frozen time”, where survivors are caught in cycles of avoidance, hyperarousal, and reenactment of trauma patterns. She particularly notes that childhood trauma often manifests later in life as identity confusion or emotional detachment. (Herman, 1992).

However, this paper contends that James’s self-diagnosis is not grounded in psychological reality. Instead, it serves as a defense mechanism that shields him from confronting the emotional aftermath of early trauma—namely, the suicide of his mother and the absence of emotional support from his father. The researcher found an article entitled *Emotional Detachment Analysis Of The Character James In The Series “The End Of The Fucking World” Episode 1* that seeks to understand the emotional detachment caused by childhood trauma that represented by the main character in the first episode of *The End of The F***ing World* series. The study likely identifies three key aspects of James' emotional detachment: lack of interest in relationships, difficulty expressing emotions, and impaired sense of danger and morality (Febrianto, 2022). Since the researcher has not found any previous study that examined self-diagnosis that is portrayed in films, a study entitled *Self-Diagnosis in Psychology Students* found that self-diagnosis among psychology students is influenced by academic exposure, personal experiences, and media consumption (Ahmed & Stephen, 2023). Furthermore, a study entitled *The Phenomenon of Self-Diagnosis Behavior on Self-Healing Style in Young People*, discovers how self-diagnosis behavior affects the style of self-healing and what self-healing concepts that are popular among the youth. The results of this research show that stigma and discrimination are still obstacles for mental health sufferers in getting appropriate and adequate treatment (Ginting & Hati, 2023). Meanwhile, a study points out that the increase of self-diagnosis is partly enabled by algorithmic social media platforms (Haltigan et al., 2023). Therefore, by analyzing James's narrative arc through Freud’s structural model of personality and Anna Freud’s expanded theory of defense mechanisms, this study aims to uncover the representations of personality structural model in James’ self-diagnosis as psychopathy and the role of defense mechanism on it.

2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Freud’s structural model of personality consisting of the id, ego, and superego offers a foundational approach to understanding internal psychological conflict. The id operates on the pleasure principle, seeking immediate gratification; the ego negotiates reality and the desires of the id; and the superego functions as a moral compass, internalizing societal norms and parental values (Freud, 1923). When trauma disrupts these internal processes, the ego deploys defense mechanisms to maintain psychic equilibrium.

Anna Freud categorized these defense mechanisms, which include repression, denial, projection, identification with the aggressor, rationalization, and acting out. In James's case, these mechanisms are not merely theoretical; they are dramatized through his behavior, speech, and self-narrative. His self-identification as a psychopath, his detachment, and his violent tendencies are not innate traits but psychological adaptations to unresolved emotional pain. When a subject has been intimidated by the aggression of another, he may identify with that aggressor in order to feel less helpless (Freud, 1936).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The study focuses on James' speech, thoughts, acts that illustrated trauma and ended up with diagnosing himself as a psychopath throughout the series. The primary data source in this study are taken from the dialogues, monologues, and subtitles from *The End of The F***ing World* Netflix series produced by Clerkenwell Film.

The researcher collects the data through James' behaviours that are taken from season 1 episodes 1-5 and 8, also season 2 episodes 2 and 8 that are relevant to self-diagnosis. Other supporting data are taken from the scenes, audio, and visuals from the series.

In analyzing the data, a few steps are taken. The first one is identifying the data from the scene and dialogues then triangulating with the graphic novel. Second is screenshot and take some scenes and dialogues for data. Third is interpreting the data. Fourth is to elaborate and examine the data using relevant theories. The first research question will use Sigmund Freud's concept about the structural model of personality to understand James' behaviour, personality, and trauma that shaped his self-diagnosis. The second research question will use the defense mechanism concept by Anna Freud to help identify James' defense strategy from his own trauma

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This chapter explores how James' self-diagnosis of psychopathy in *The End of the F***ing World* series reflects deeper psychological conflicts, particularly through the lens of Freud's structural model of personality and Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanisms. Drawing data from selected scenes in both the Netflix series and Charles Forsman's graphic novel, the analysis reveals that James' identification as a psychopath is not rooted in actual psychopathy, but is instead a defense mechanism shaped by unresolved trauma and emotional neglect.

Freud's Structural Model and Self-Diagnosis

James' personality is best understood through Freud's id, ego, and superego model:

- The **id** governs James' early violent impulses and emotional numbness, such as his enjoyment of killing animals.
- The **ego**, seeking to mediate between these impulses and reality, rationalizes his emotional detachment by adopting the label “psychopath.”



Figure 1 The portrayal of James' ego

Source: Netflix series season 1 episode 1, 2017

00:00:22,320 --> 00:00:24,520

- The **superego**, initially underdeveloped, gradually emerges as James forms a bond with Alyssa and begins to show guilt, empathy, and moral awareness.
- His self-diagnosis becomes a psychological strategy to manage internal conflict and avoid processing past trauma—especially the suicide of his mother and his emotionally distant father.

Unresolved Trauma as Root of Misdiagnosis

Rather than clinical psychopathy, James' emotional numbness and detachment are trauma responses. Witnessing his mother's suicide and receiving no emotional support afterward led him to shut down emotionally. His belief that he is a psychopath serves as a mask to cope with grief, fear, and abandonment. This trauma manifests in hypervigilance, avoidance of emotional intimacy, and a distorted self-image.



Figure 2 James witness his mother' suicide

Source: Netflix series season 1 episode 5, 2017

00:02:15,680 --> 00:02:16,960

James' reactions especially his guilt and protectiveness after killing Clive Koch to save Alyssa highlight emotional depth inconsistent with true psychopathy. The series illustrates that his trauma hasn't been processed, but rather internalized and misinterpreted as a lack of feeling.

Defense Mechanisms in Action

James displays several defense mechanisms:

- **Repression:** He hides memories of his mother's suicide.
- **Denial:** He claims to feel nothing, avoiding emotional pain.
- **Projection:** He channels violent thoughts outward, originally planning to kill Alyssa.

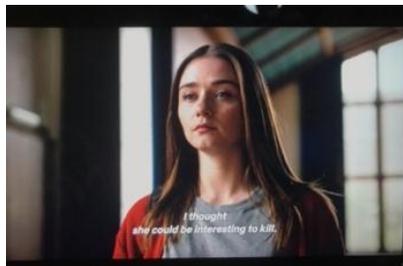


Figure 3 portrayal of James' projection

Source: Netflix series season 1 episode 1, 2017

00:05:03,440 --> 00:05:05,360

- **Acting Out:** His behavior (running away, stealing, killing) externalizes internal turmoil.
- **Identification with the Aggressor:** He mimics emotional detachment seen in male figures in his life.
- **Rationalization:** He justifies his violent impulses as logical or necessary.

These defenses shield James from confronting his trauma directly but also contribute to his confusion and emotional isolation.

Emotional Growth and Identity Transformation

Throughout the series, James' emotional evolution dismantles the "psychopath" identity:

- He develops empathy, guilt, and attachment, particularly toward Alyssa.
- He chooses to sacrifice himself to protect her from legal consequences, showing moral responsibility.
- His relationship with his father also begins to heal in Season 2, where vulnerability and communication start to replace emotional silence.



Figure 4 James sacrifice himself to arrested by the police

Source: Netflix series season 1 episode 8, 2017

00:18:18,640 --> 00:18:27,720

[James] I've just turned 18 and I think I understand...what people mean to each other

By the end, James no longer sees himself as a psychopath, but as a trauma survivor reclaiming emotional truth. His journey is a gradual awakening from repression to self-awareness, supported by human connection and empathy.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study examined James' self-diagnosis of psychopathy in *The End of the F***ing World** through Sigmund Freud's structural model of personality and Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanisms. The analysis revealed that James' belief that he is a psychopath is not grounded in actual psychopathy, but is a defense mechanism rooted in unresolved trauma, emotional repression, and the ego's effort to rationalize his inner turmoil.

James' violent behavior and numbness reflect an overactive id and a weak superego early in the series. Over time, however, as he develops a connection with Alyssa, his superego grows and he begins to feel guilt, empathy, and responsibility marking a shift in his psychological structure. The ego, in its struggle to cope, employs various defense mechanisms such as repression, denial, projection, and rationalization.

Anna Freud's defense mechanism theory helps explain James' self-diagnosis as a subconscious attempt to manage his unprocessed grief and emotional neglect, particularly related to his mother's suicide and his father's emotional absence. His transformation

throughout the series culminating in acts of empathy and sacrifice illustrates the collapse of this false identity and the beginning of emotional healing.

Ultimately, James' self-diagnosis serves as a protective façade, which is gradually dismantled through meaningful connection and emotional growth. This study emphasizes that true healing comes not from labels, but from understanding and facing one's internal reality with support and compassion.

Future research can explore how self-diagnosis and trauma are represented across different young adult narratives. Comparative studies (e.g., with *BoJack Horseman* or *Thirteen Reasons Why*) could enrich the understanding of trauma portrayals in popular media. Media literacy programs should address how visual storytelling portrays mental health. Characters like James may influence public perception of self-diagnosis and emotional disorders, making critical engagement essential. For Readers and Viewers Audiences are encouraged to look beyond labels and view characters like James with empathy and psychological insight. Understanding fictional trauma can enhance compassion in real-life emotional contexts. Further studies might include viewer interviews, surveys, or discourse analysis to assess how audiences interpret James' character and trauma. This could shed light on the broader social impact of trauma narratives in entertainment.

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