

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Altruism, the selfless concern for the well-being of others, plays a significant role not only in social relationships but also in psychological resilience. It is often viewed as a noble trait, expressed through acts of kindness, empathy, or sacrifice. However, in psychological theory, altruism can also serve a deeper function where it may act as a defense mechanism that helps individuals manage emotional pain or internal conflict. According to Anna Freud (1936), defense mechanisms are unconscious strategies the ego uses to protect itself from anxiety or psychological harm. Among these is altruism, which manifests when individuals cope with distress, such as guilt, loss, or trauma, by focusing on the needs of others rather than their own emotional turmoil. This redirection can provide a sense of purpose, control, and healing in the aftermath of psychological suffering. Cathy Caruth (1996), a key figure in trauma studies, emphasizes that trauma is not fully experienced in the moment it occurs but returns belatedly in disruptive ways. In this context, altruistic behavior may emerge as a response to unresolved trauma, serving both as a method of emotional regulation and a pathway to recovery.

In literary narratives, whether novels, films, or animated series, characters who display altruistic tendencies often do so in connection to deeper psychological wounds. Their selflessness is not merely moral but psychologically significant, functioning as a narrative device that reveals unresolved trauma and inner conflict.

Understanding altruism through this psychoanalytic and trauma-informed lens allows for a richer interpretation of character motivations and emotional complexity.

Cathy Caruth, in her book titled *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), argued that trauma is not always processed at the moment it occurs. Instead, it returns in fragmented, delayed forms, such as intrusive memories, nightmares, or irrational behavior. This delayed effect, which is something Caruth called as “belatedness,” can shape how individuals unconsciously respond to unresolved pain. One of these responses may take the form of altruism, not simply as kindness, but as a psychological defense mechanism. Thus, viewed through Anna Freud’s (1936) theory of defense mechanisms, altruism can be seen as an unconscious strategy used by the ego to convert inner distress into pro-social behavior that serves others while soothing the self.

This behavior, though often constructive, can become emotionally costly for the person who bears it. If an individual over invests in helping others as a way of avoiding their own unresolved trauma, it may result in burnout, emotional exhaustion, or self-neglect. Studies have shown that excessive altruism under psychological strain can negatively impact one’s mental and physical well-being (Zacharia & Sinha, 2023; González-Gil et al., 2023). Thus, altruism can serve as both a healing outlet and a means of internal repression.

This complex relationship between trauma and selflessness provides fertile ground for psychoanalytic analysis. It reveals how seemingly noble actions, like altruism, may stem from unconscious efforts to manage unresolved pain and internal conflict. By integrating Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory with Anna Freud’s

concept of altruism as a defense mechanism for this study, this study will show a deeper understanding of how trauma can be redirected into protective and pro-social behaviors. This psychoanalytic lens also allows for a more nuanced interpretation of character psychology, especially in narratives shaped by loss and emotional struggle, like Ekko. To fully explore this dynamic, it is important to return to the foundations of psychoanalysis itself, beginning with the groundbreaking ideas of Sigmund Freud and the theoretical expansions introduced by Anna Freud.

The field of psychoanalysis, rooted in the groundbreaking work of Sigmund Freud in his seminal work titled *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and later expanded by his daughter Anna Freud (1936) in her book *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, has long provided a framework for exploring the complexities of the human psyche. Sigmund Freud's theories, such as *the id, ego, and superego*, as well as concepts like *repression, trauma, and defense mechanisms*, have been instrumental in understanding human behavior.

Anna Freud (1936) further developed these ideas, particularly in her work on defense mechanisms, which include denial, displacement, and altruism. These concepts have not only been applied in clinical psychology but have also become essential tools for analyzing characters in literature and film. By examining how characters cope with trauma, guilt, and desire, psychoanalytic theory allows us to uncover the deeper psychological layers that shape their actions and relationships.

The animated series *Arcane* (2021) itself is set in the world of the game titled *League of Legends*. The animated series has garnered widespread popularity for its intricate storytelling and psychologically layered characters. The series explores a lot of themes within its plot, such as class struggle, identity, and trauma,

which are set against the backdrop of the divided cities of Piltover and Zaun. And among its many compelling characters within the series, Ekko stands out as a figure whose journey is deeply intertwined with themes of trauma, loss, and resilience.

Critically, *Arcane* has received near-universal acclaim. On *Rotten Tomatoes*, the series holds a rare 100% critic score and a 87% audience score, indicating widespread appreciation both from professional critics and general viewers (Rotten Tomatoes, 2021). *IMDb* rates the show at 9.0/10, based on over 391.000 user reviews (IMDb, 2025). These high scores shows its powerful storytelling, character development, and visual innovation that is loved by many people around the globe.

According to *IGN*'s review, *Arcane* is "a masterpiece of animation and storytelling," praising its ability to merge emotional resonance with stylistic brilliance (IGN, 2021). *The Verge* similarly hailed the show as "an emotionally rich and visually stunning narrative that pushes the boundaries of what animation can achieve" (The Verge, 2021). These responses shows us that *Arcane* is not only a masterpiece as an animated series but also a work of psychological and cultural depth.

For the purpose of analyzing the animated series *Arcane*, the writer has found three scholarly articles that are relevant, exploring its narrative, characters, and psychological dimensions. One such study is *Powder's Trauma in Netflix TV Series Arcane (2021)* by Vian Abdillah Khosyi (2024), which employs Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to examine the psychological development of Powder, later known as Jinx. The study reveals how her trauma manifests through hallucinations, nightmares, and psychological instability following the loss of loved ones. By

focusing on Jinx's emotional collapse and transformation, this study underscores *Arcane*'s exploration of mental health and trauma in animated media.

Another relevant study is *Character's Analysis in Ego Defense Mechanism due to Trauma and Revenge on 'Hannibal Rising'* by Demarmega Galuh Anggraeni and Agnes Widyaningrum (2024), employs Anna Freud's theory of ego defense mechanisms to explore how characters respond to trauma. The analysis focuses on mechanisms such as repression, displacement, and intellectualization as unconscious responses to childhood trauma and emotional conflict, emphasizing how defense behaviors are shaped by past experiences and internalized suffering.

Finally, the third study, *Defense Mechanism of Tyrion Lannister in 'Game of Thrones' Film Series* by Bahtiar, Singgih Daru Kuncara, and Indah Sari Lubis (2023), the writers used Sigmund and Anna Freud's theoretical framework to identify various coping mechanisms exhibited by Tyrion Lannister. The study highlights the roles of humor, sublimation, and rationalization as adaptive strategies used by the character to navigate societal rejection and familial conflict, reinforcing the idea that ego defense mechanisms play a significant role in character resilience and self-regulation.

Recent studies show an increasing trend in applying defense mechanism psychoanalytic theory and trauma analysis to understand character psychology in modern narratives. Khosyi (2024) uses Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to examine Powder's transformation into Jinx in *Arcane*, highlighting trauma-induced instability. Anggraeni and Widyaningrum (2024) utilize Anna Freud's theory to explore how trauma in *Hannibal Rising* triggers mechanisms like displacement and intellectualization. Bahtiar, Kuncara, and Lubis (2023) analyze Tyrion Lannister

using Sigmund and Anna Freud's framework, focusing on sublimation and humor as adaptive responses.

Together, these relevant studies collectively reflect the growing relevance of psychoanalysis and trauma theory in character-driven media studies. However, while these works lay solid foundations in exploring psychological development in various literary and cinematic narratives, a notable gap remains in applying such frameworks to the character of Ekko in *Arcane*. Unlike Jinx, whose trauma and transformation have been examined through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, Ekko's psychological journey, particularly his use of altruism as a defense mechanism, has not received equivalent scholarly attention. By combining Caruth's theory of belated trauma with Anna Freud's theory of altruistic defense, this study seeks to explore how Ekko's character embodies trauma's lingering effects through selfless action. This absence of focused analysis on Ekko presents a significant research gap and an opportunity to contribute original insight into psychoanalytic character studies within animated media, such as *Arcane*.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How does Ekko's traumatic experience influence the development of altruistic traits in his character in *Arcane*?
2. How does Ekko's use of altruism as a defense mechanism shape his decisions and actions within the narrative?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

1. To analyze how Ekko's unresolved trauma contributes to the emergence of altruism as a psychological defense mechanism
2. To examine how this altruistic tendency influences Ekko's decisions, actions, and character development throughout the narrative of *Arcane*.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study focuses exclusively on Ekko's character arc in *Arcane*, particularly examining how his traumatic experiences and psychological responses are depicted. This study is limited to analyzing Ekko's actions, dialogue, and narrative evolution using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanisms, specifically altruism. While *Arcane* features a broad cast of psychologically complex characters, this study confines its scope to Ekko to ensure an in-depth and focused psychoanalytic analysis. The theoretical framework draws primarily from the works of Anna Freud and Cathy Caruth, offering a comprehensive exploration of Ekko's psyche by examining how trauma and defense mechanisms, particularly altruism, shape his personal journey and character development.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The writer hopes this study contributes to the growing research of psychoanalytic literary analysis by applying established psychological theories to another animated series such as *Arcane*. This study also highlights the emotional narrative themes of *Arcane*, challenging the perception of animated media as purely

entertainment. And by examining Ekko's psychological mind frame, the writer hopes for this study to offer valuable insights into how trauma and guilt shape identity and behavior, enriching discussions on character development in modern storytelling.

