

Research Article

Hiding in Plain Sight: Calum's Defense Mechanisms in Aftersun through Anna Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory

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Abstract This study analyzes the representation of defense mechanisms in the character Calum in the film *Aftersun* (2022) through Anna Freud's psychoanalytic theory. This study departs from the limitations of previous research that primarily discussed Calum's psychological distress through depression, identity crisis, masculinity, fatherhood, memory, trauma, and psychoanalytic opacity, but did not specifically explain how ego-defense processes regulate the relationship between private vulnerability and the paternal self. The study used a qualitative descriptive design with theory-driven coding informed by directed qualitative content analysis. The primary data was the film *Aftersun*, while English subtitles were used as an indexing tool to aid in the identification of dialogue and timestamps. The units of analysis were defensive episodes, verified through verbal, visual, and contextual evidence. The analysis process included first-round coding, second-pass coding, audiovisual verification, alternative-explanation testing, and cross-episode comparison. The results showed that three defensive episodes formed representational patterns most consistent with repression and isolation. Repression is represented through restricted direct representation of certain autobiographical material, while isolation allows painful experiences to remain narratable through affective distancing. These two patterns underlie a higher-order analytical synthesis in the form of Selective Psychological Accessibility. In paternal relationships, this pattern regulates without eliminating vulnerability, allowing genuine paternal care to coexist with limited self-disclosure. The study also used Defensive Leakage as a study-specific interpretive label to explain the instability of affective containment. The findings suggest that Calum's psychological opacity is constructed through selective rather than uniform accessibility, allowing him to remain emotionally visible without becoming fully psychologically legible.

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1. Introduction

Characters in films are built not only through visible actions and dialogue, but also through the tension between what can be said, hidden, emotionally distanced, or made visible without full explanation. This tension is central to *Aftersun*, a film by Charlotte Wells that reconstructs eleven-year-old Sophie's holiday with her father, Calum. Through the interplay of camcorder footage, remembered experience, and retrospective reconstruction, the film presents Calum as an affectionate, playful, and attentive young father, but gradually reveals fragments of psychological vulnerability that are never fully explained.

Academic interest in Calum has evolved through various perspectives. Psychological readings highlight depression, identity crisis, self-doubt, and paternal mental health (Apriliana & Tandyonomanu, 2023; Ningsih et al., 2024; O'Sullivan, 2024; Shah, 2023). Other studies link Calum's character to masculinity, fatherhood, loneliness, economic precarity, and self-

violence (Planes Pedreño & Juárez Rodríguez, 2024; Recio Ruiz, 2025; Redmond, 2025). Meanwhile, scholarship on memory and cinematic form shows that psychological knowledge in *Aftersun* is constructed through home video, fragmentation, sound, glitch aesthetics, retrospective memory, and the tension between individual and shared memory (Bezerra, 2025; Fikri & Kusumaningtyas, 2026; Günevi Uslu, 2025; Kotaman, 2025; Pinasti et al., 2026; Zhang, 2023).

Psychoanalytic readings have also emerged. (Dyer & Mecija, 2025) connect childhood memory, desire, queer temporality, and sonic expression, while (Jennings, 2025) positions opacity and limited knowledge of the other as crucial components of the father-daughter relationship. Therefore, this study does not proceed from the claim that psychological suffering, repression, or psychoanalysis have not been addressed in *Aftersun* studies. A more specific focus lies on the question of how psychological distress is represented as something managed through ego-defense processes and how these processes influence Sophie's access to Calum's private vulnerability.

The distinction between identifying distress and explaining defensive processes is crucial for character analysis. Stating that Calum exhibits psychological vulnerability doesn't explain why he can talk about some experiences directly while others are difficult to verbalize. Similarly, the ability to recount painful events doesn't necessarily mean that the affective force of those experiences is fully present. This heterogeneity is the focus of this research.

Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanisms provides a suitable framework because it positions defense as an ego function in dealing with anxiety, unpleasure, affect, and difficult-to-manage psychological material (Freud, 1966). Defense is not synonymous with pathology or specific surface behavior. Silence does not automatically indicate repression, apology does not automatically indicate undoing, and emotional restraint does not automatically imply isolation. Interpretation must consider psychological triggers, behavioral manifestations, function, and simpler alternative explanations. This emphasis on function is also supported by the development of defense studies that distinguish defense from conscious coping and demonstrate that defensive processes have varying functions and levels of adaptivity (Bond, 2004; Cramer, 1998, 2000, 2015a, 2015b; Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021; Vaillant, 2000).

This approach is relevant to Calum's character because his paternal identity is inseparable from vulnerability. Scholarship on masculinity has shown that contemporary fatherhood can reconcile expectations of strength with care, interdependence, emotional involvement, and vulnerability (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Elliott, 2016; Hunter et al., 2017; Roy & Ayalon, 2023). In *Aftersun*, Calum is not simply a figure who "pretends to be a good father" to hide his true self. His paternal care is represented as a genuine relational commitment. The problem lies in how this genuine care can coexist with limited self-disclosure.

Based on this literature, previous research has explained what is represented through Calum—depression, psychological distress, identity crisis, masculinity, loneliness, trauma, or paternal strain—and how these conditions are made perceptible through memory, fragmentation, sound, camcorder footage, and retrospective reconstruction. However, attention to the specific ego-defense processes that regulate the distinction between private vulnerability and the paternal self in the Calum–Sophie interaction is still limited.

Thus, this study positions defense not merely as a psychological label for Calum's behavior, but as part of a characterological process that determines the degree of psychological accessibility. The study uses the term Selective Psychological Accessibility as a higher-order analytical synthesis to explain variations in the extent to which painful psychological material becomes available through representation, affective expression, and interpersonal recognition. Furthermore, the term Defensive Leakage is used as a study-specific interpretive label to analyze the moment when previously contained or distanced affect becomes overtly perceptible. Neither concept is derived from Anna Freud nor an addition to the taxonomy of defense mechanisms.

This study aims to identify the defense mechanisms represented by Calum's character in *Aftersun* and explain how these mechanisms mediate the tension between private psychological vulnerability and the paternal self in his relationship with Sophie. Two research questions are posed:

RQ1. What defense mechanisms are represented through Calum's character in Aftersun?

RQ2. How does Calum's defense mechanisms mediate the tension between his personal psychological vulnerability and his paternal self in his relationship with Sophie?

Through these two questions, the research moves from a diagnosis or identification of distress to an explanation of how Calum's psychological opacity is formed through uneven access to painful experiences. In this sense, the phrase "hiding in plain sight" does not mean that Calum's vulnerability is completely hidden; rather, it remains visible but never fully legible.

Calum's characterization also presents unique epistemological challenges. Sophie is close enough to observe her father's everyday behavior, but this proximity does not automatically grant complete psychological access. Instead, the audience often receives fragments unavailable to Sophie—for example, private bodily withdrawal, solitary distress, and changes in affect following interpersonal interaction. The distinction between what is visible, what is narratable, and what becomes understandable makes Calum's opacity irreducible to simple secrecy. The film instead constructs an uneven knowledge, where some experiences can be discussed, some are only apparent through indirect manifestation, and others emerge overtly without adequate explanatory accounts.

The landscape of previous studies reinforces the need for this distinction. Depression and psychiatric readings explain the seriousness of distress; masculinity studies place it within paternal and social expectations; memory scholarship explains why the past presents fragmentedly; and psychoanalytic studies show that opacity itself is part of Sophie's experience of her father. However, these categories operate primarily at the level of condition, social context, narrative organization, or temporality. What remains insufficiently explained are the micro-processes at the episode level: why one autobiographical question results in representational restriction while another painful memory remains recountable; and how these differences affect relational access in father-daughter interactions.

This study therefore maintains strict analytical boundaries between vulnerability, defense, and paternal behavior. Vulnerability is treated as representing psychological difficulty; defense is only coded when the response meets functional criteria within Anna Freud's framework; while paternal behavior is analyzed as a relational context that can interact with defense without automatically becoming a defense itself. This boundary is important to prevent interpretation from degenerating into circular reasoning—for example, considering every silence as repression simply because the character is assumed to be distressed.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Psychological Vulnerability in Aftersun

Psychological studies of *Aftersun* consistently demonstrate that Calum's distress is a crucial part of his characterization. (Apriliana & Tandyonomanu, 2023) read the film through its representation of male depression and vulnerability, while (Shah, 2023) and (O'Sullivan, 2024) place the film within discussions of mental health, paternal struggles, and children's limitations in understanding their parents' psychological states. (Ningsih et al., 2024) develop another perspective through identity crisis, emotional burden, alienation, and pressures on ideal parenthood.

These studies clarify the psychological conditions underlying Calum's experiences, but they don't always distinguish between conditions and defensive responses. For example, social isolation, withdrawal, and self-doubt can explain psychological states, but they don't automatically indicate specific defense mechanisms. This study therefore doesn't use distress as evidence of defense. Defense is only considered when a response demonstrates a specific function in regulating psychological material.

This principle allows the study to avoid retrospectively diagnosing Calum. The goal is not to determine whether the character fits a specific clinical category, but rather to examine how the film represents the difference between talkable material, material whose affect is distanced, and material that is difficult to articulate.

When read synthetically, the psychological scholarship also shows that no single label fully describes Calum. Depression-oriented readings provide language for suffering; identity-crisis readings highlight instability of self and role; psychiatric commentary emphasizes paternal mental health implications. This diversity supports the use of the defense framework as a complementary lens, not a competing diagnosis. In other words, this research does not attempt to decide which condition label is the 'most correct', but rather examines how films make difficult experiences differently accessible in interactions.

The distinction between condition and process also prevents terminological overlap. The term isolation, for example, can mean social separation or alienation in identity-based studies, but isolation in the Anna Freudian framework refers to the separation of ideational content from associated affect. Therefore, the similarity of terms should not be interpreted as conceptual similarity. This research consistently uses isolation only in the sense of defensive operation, while social withdrawal or alienation are treated as contextual descriptions.

2.2 Memory, Trauma, and Opacity

Memory is a key area of research in *Aftersun*. (Zhang, 2023) explores the role of home-video aesthetics and point of view in the Calum–Sophie relationship. (Kotaman, 2025) views memory as a nonlinear and fragmented narrative language, while (Bezerra, 2025) shows how autobiographical memory is also shaped through soundtracks and sonic distancing. (Günevi Uslu, 2025) adds a reading of glitch aesthetics, memory, and temporality.

Recent studies have expanded the relationship between memory and trauma and relational identity. (Fikri & Kusumaningtyas, 2026) analyze fragmented memory, silence, repetition, and spatial separation through the Caruthian trauma framework, while (Pinasti et al., 2026) discuss collective and individual memory in the construction of father–daughter identity. These studies demonstrate that the past in *Aftersun* is never given a complete account. Sophie obtains fragments, recordings, and remembered impressions that only retrospectively acquire possible meaning.

Psychoanalytic scholarship has delved deeper into the issue of opacity. (Dyer & Mecija, 2025) link childhood memory, psychic conflict, desire, temporality, and sound, while (Jennings, 2025) shows that attempts to gain knowledge about the father through a return to the past still result in opacity. The current research does not replace these readings. Its focus shifts from how memory makes Calum partially knowable to how Calum's defensive representation itself contributes to partial knowability.

Thus, psychological opacity can be understood through two interconnected layers: narrative opacity that emerges through memory and film form, and defensive opacity that emerges through variations in Calum's ability to represent or affectively engage with painful material.

Memory scholarship also demonstrates the importance of the distinction between the availability of evidence and the availability of meaning. Camcorder images can preserve gestures or dialogue, but they do not ensure that eleven-year-old Sophie understood the psychological significance of what was recorded. Even adult retrospective reconstruction does not completely erase this gap. Thus, the film places the viewer in an interpretive position: visible traces are available, but certainty regarding interiority remains limited.

This perspective is directly related to defense analysis because Calum's representational restriction occurs within a broader structure of incomplete remembering. However, this study does not equate narrative fragmentation with repression. Fragmented editing or retrospective reconstruction are properties of film form, while repression and isolation are only used when Calum's scene-level behavior meets functional criteria. This distinction allows the study to explain how formal opacity and defensive opacity can reinforce each other without being conflated into a single category.

2.3 Fatherhood, Masculinity, and Vulnerability

Masculinity and fatherhood provide important context for Calum's relational position. (Planes Pedreño & Juárez Rodríguez, 2024) link Calum to masculinity, paternal expectations, and self-violence, while (Redmond, 2025) situates Calum's loneliness in relation to gender, class, economic struggle, and failed masculine expectations. (Recio Ruiz, 2025) more specifically reads Calum through caring masculinity, which brings together tenderness, paternal involvement, vulnerability, and the need to remain strong.

Conceptually, caring masculinities emphasize forms of masculinity that reduce domination and allow for care, positive emotions, relationality, and interdependence (Elliott, 2016). (Hunter et al., 2017) show that caring fatherhood does not always completely replace provider-oriented masculinity; the two can coexist and produce certain tensions. (Roy & Ayalon, 2023) also demonstrate through film that caring fatherhood can coexist with emotional vulnerability.

This framework helps define Calum's paternal self as a genuine relational position, not a false mask. Paternal self encompasses attempts to care for, reassure, repair, protect, encourage, and remain emotionally available to Sophie. Therefore, defense in this study is not interpreted as evidence that paternal care is false, but as one process that can regulate the extent to which private vulnerability enters the paternal relationship.

At this point, fatherhood functions not as an explanatory substitute for defense, but as a relational field where defensive accessibility has consequences. When Calum withholds or distances aspects of his own vulnerability, the consequences are not only intrapsychic: Sophie receives a different degree of access to her father's experiences. At the same time, Calum's willingness to listen, apologize, reassure, and invite disclosure demonstrates that limited self-disclosure is not synonymous with emotional indifference.

2.4 Anna Freud and Ego-Defense Mechanisms

More broadly, film psychology suggests that cinematic experiences involve character construction, perception, memory, and affective responses, while psychoanalytic cinema studies emphasize the relationship between visual image, identification, and affective experience (Bellagamba, 2023; Tan, 2018).

Anna Freud developed a systematic focus on how the ego defends itself against anxiety, unpleasure, instinctual demands, and difficult-to-manage affects (Freud, 1966). Within this framework, defense is not solely related to repression. Anna Freud discussed regression, repression, reaction formation, isolation, undoing, projection, introjection, turning against the self, reversal, and sublimation or displacement of instinctual aims. Denial is discussed separately in relation to unpleasant external reality.

In this study, the taxonomy serves as a screening framework, not a checklist. It is not assumed that all mechanisms must be present. Modern defense research emphasizes the need to distinguish unconscious defenses from conscious coping and demonstrates that defensive functioning has varying degrees of adaptivity and consequences (Bond, 2004; Cramer, 1998, 2000, 2015a, 2015b; Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021; Vaillant, 2000).

Two theoretical distinctions are particularly important. Repression, in this study, is not equated with silence or conscious privacy. Repression is used to interpret representational patterns when threatening internal material appears to be restricted from direct representation, and simpler alternative explanations are insufficient to explain the change in response. Isolation, on the other hand, does not remove ideas or memories from representation. Content remains accessible, but the affective relationship to that content becomes distanced or attenuated. Thus, someone can discuss a painful event without full affective engagement.

These differences form the basis for the research's higher-order synthesis: Repression → Restricted Representation; Isolation → Affective Distancing. Neither form encompasses Calum's full vulnerability. In other scenes, vulnerability can be conveyed more directly without identifiable defenses. Therefore, the research uses the concept of Selective Psychological Accessibility, which refers to the varying levels of accessibility between painful material, representation, affect, and interpersonal recognition.

Operationally, repression and isolation were chosen because they provide criteria that can be observed at the level of representational patterns. Repression requires evidence that threatening material faces a restriction of representation; therefore, silence explained by privacy, irritation, or conversational closure is insufficient. Isolation requires that content be available, but the affective relationship to that content appears detached or attenuated. This distinction is important because the two mechanisms produce different forms of opacity: one limits articulation, the other permits articulation while limiting affective accessibility.

This framework also adopts the principle of conservative inference. Because unconscious processes cannot be directly observed in fictional characters, coding focuses on consistency between scene patterns and theoretical function, not claims that internal mechanisms have been clinically proven. Therefore, the terms "represented as," "coded as," "consistent with," and "interpreted through" are used more precisely than absolute diagnostic statements.

2.5 Conceptual Positioning

Conceptually, the research maps the process as follows: Psychological Trigger → Internal Conflict / Unpleasure → Defensive Operation → Verbal / Non-verbal Manifestation → Defensive Function → Interpersonal Consequence → Degree of Psychological Accessibility.

At the characterization level, this process interacts with the paternal relationship. Defenses can limit what Sophie can know without eliminating Calum's genuine care. When containment becomes unstable, researchers use the term Defensive Leakage to refer to overt affective expressions that emerge after previous affective representations of containment or distancing. Defensive Leakage is a research-specific interpretive label and does not assume a clinically demonstrable psychological causal relationship between episodes. The term is not intended as an addition to Anna Freud or a new psychoanalytic theory.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Data

This research used a qualitative descriptive design with theory-driven coding informed by the principles of directed qualitative content analysis. This approach is appropriate when existing theory shapes initial analytical categories, but the data still determines which categories receive support (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Qualitative content analysis also allows coding frames, segmentation, trial coding, evaluation, and systematic comparison to be applied to audiovisual materials (Schreier, 2012).

The primary data for this study is the film *Aftersun*. English subtitles were used as an indexing tool to identify dialogue, speakers, and timestamps, but were not treated as a substitute for the film. The film was used to verify visual and paralinguistic evidence such as facial expression, gaze, posture, gesture, silence, bodily movement, and changes in interaction.

The unit of analysis is the defensive episode, namely the scene or coherent scene segment when Calum faces a psychologically significant trigger and shows verbal and non-verbal responses that can be evaluated through the defense framework.

3.2 Data Collection and Coding

Data collection began with a scene inventory based on Calum's dialogue and Calum–Sophie interactions. Candidate episodes were then identified through psychological triggers, autobiographical questioning, emotional change, withdrawal, contradiction, interpersonal pressure, or non-verbal responses that potentially have a defensive function. Each candidate was then verified by watching the corresponding audiovisual sequence.

Coding follows the sequence Trigger → Conflict → Response → Defensive Function → Candidate Mechanism → Interpersonal Consequence. Defense is not determined based on surface behavior. Silence, crying, smiling, topic shift, apology, risky behavior, or withdrawal only become relevant when the context indicates a specific defensive function.

All candidate episodes underwent an alternative-explanation test, asking whether the behavior could be more simply explained as ordinary emotion, conscious privacy, conversational closure, parental reassurance, remorse, memory limitation, or coping. Candidates with the same or stronger alternative explanation were excluded. Coding was conducted through first-round classification and second-pass checking. The second pass included re-evaluating operational definitions, contextual sequences, audiovisual evidence, and consistency across cases. There was no minimum target number of defense mechanisms.

The analysis also maintains a distinction between primary defensive episodes and contextual evidence. Primary episodes must meet operational criteria to receive a defense code, while contextual scenes are used to test whether the interpretation remains consistent with the broader characterization. This separation allows scenes important to the paternal relationship to be used without forcing them into defense evidence. Cross-episode comparisons then consider both positive and negative cases to prevent higher-order patterns from being constructed solely from scenes that have received a code.

The initial codebook included Anna Freud's defense categories along with inclusion and exclusion criteria. Repression candidates required evidence of difficulty of direct representation that was not adequately explained by ordinary silence or conscious refusal. Isolation candidates required accessible ideational or autobiographical content but with

restricted affective engagement. Categories such as undoing, reaction formation, projection, introjection, regression, turning against the self, reversal, sublimation, and denial were filtered out during analysis but were not retained simply because surface behaviors appeared to resemble popular definitions of these mechanisms.

Visual verification plays a special role in this process. Subtitles help locate dialogue and timestamps, but coding is not done from text alone. D02, for example, requires a comparison between the seriousness of utterance and affective delivery, while D01 requires confirmation that Calum was previously comfortable being recorded before sensitive autobiographical questions arose. Thus, verbal and audiovisual evidence are treated as complementary forms of primary data.

After coding individual episodes, cross-episode comparison was used to evaluate whether the interpretation of one scene remained plausible when compared to other scenes. Direct disclosures about belonging, paternal apologies, and invitations to talk served as negative or contrasting cases. If Calum can discuss autobiographical material in certain contexts, his refusal or restriction in other contexts should not be explained by the global assumption that he simply cannot talk about the past.

The choice of a descriptive qualitative design also aligns with the research objectives, which do not measure the prevalence of mechanisms or generalize psychological traits. The frequency of coded episodes is not treated as an indicator of severity or dominance. The analysis focuses on interpretive adequacy: whether the scene provides sufficient evidence to distinguish one defensive function from another, and how the episode contributes to the broader pattern of characterization.

3.3 Analytical Rigor

Trustworthiness is maintained through operational definitions, timestamp-based traceability, audiovisual cross-verification, second-pass analysis, alternative-explanation testing, and excluded-candidate logging. These procedures form an audit trail that allows interpretive decisions to be traced back to the source scene. This approach aligns with the principles of transparency and systematic decision-making in qualitative content analysis (Elo et al., 2014) and documentation of the interpretive process in qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017).

The study did not use respondents, clinical diagnoses, or inter-rater coding. Analytical rigor was based on consistency of framework, evidence convergence, traceability, and conservative coding.

4. Results

After all candidate scenes underwent theory-driven screening, second-pass analysis, alternative-explanation testing, and audiovisual verification, three defensive episodes were retained as the representational patterns most consistent with the two mechanisms in Anna Freud's framework: repression and isolation.

Table 1. Defense Mechanisms Represented through Calum

Data	Scene	Defense Code	Defensive Function	Analytical Pattern
D01	Future self-interview	Repression	Restricts direct autobiographical representation	Restricted Representation
D02	Age and future disclosure	Isolation	Distances disturbing ideational content from affect	Affective Distancing
D03	Childhood birthday memory	Isolation	Permits narration while limiting affective engagement	Affective Distancing

4.1 Selective Psychological Accessibility

D01 occurs when Sophie uses a camcorder to interview Calum. Before the sensitive questions arise, Calum appears comfortable with the recording. He helps with the camera, jokes about being “on TV,” and interacts playfully with Sophie. A shift occurs when Sophie asks what Calum imagined he would be doing now when he was eleven (00:51:59–00:52:43).

The first question did not elicit a substantive answer. Sophie then repeated it, after which Calum asked to stop the recording and ensured the camera's red light was off. This sequence formed an autobiographical trigger pattern → absence of direct answer → repeated question → termination of recording. Turning off the camera itself was not treated as repression. The episode was coded as a representational pattern consistent with repression because the change in response occurred immediately after the question requiring a confrontation between the imagined younger self and present adulthood, while the general dislike of being filmed was not supported by prior behavior. D01 therefore formed a Restricted Representation: certain autobiographical material became difficult to articulate directly.

D02 shows a different pattern. In a conversation about age and future life, Calum says, “I can't see myself at 40, to be honest,” and “Surprised I made it to 30” (00:33:29–00:33:43). Here, the disturbing ideational content is verbally available. However, the audiovisual delivery shows a temporary discrepancy between the seriousness of the content and the relatively mild conversational affect before expression becomes more inward. The episode is therefore more consistent with isolation than repression: the idea remains accessible, while the affective force is initially distanced.

D03 reinforces the isolation pattern through the childhood birthday narrative. When Sophie asks what Calum did on his 11th birthday, Calum can relate that no one remembers the day and explains his parents' responses. When Sophie says, “That's a bit... deep,” Calum replies, “It's okay,” and the conversation moves to factual details about a red toy phone (00:53:00–00:53:49). This sequence results in painful autobiographical content → narrative accessibility → recognition of emotional significance → limited affective elaboration → return to concrete detail. Thus, D02 and D03 demonstrate Affective Distancing: painful material can be narrated without full affective accessibility.

The three episodes also differ in the type of interpersonal access they generate. In D01, Sophie receives very little autobiographical content because articulation stops before a substantive answer emerges. In D02, Sophie receives fairly explicit ideational content but without comparable emotional elaboration. In D03, she receives narrative detail and even recognizes the emotional weight of the story, but Calum's response limits the continuation of the affective exchange. This variation demonstrates that accessibility is not a binary open/closed pattern, but rather has degrees that can be observed through the relationship between content, affect, and interaction.

D01–D03 collectively form the Selective Psychological Accessibility pattern. Calum is neither a character who always hides his experiences nor is always open. The level of accessibility changes based on the material he encounters.

A comparison between D01 and D02 demonstrates why the two episodes cannot be unified under repression. In D01, the material Sophie requested was not substantively articulated; in D02, the disturbing idea emerged very clearly in speech. Therefore, the primary difference lies not in the severity of the content but in the mode of accessibility. D01 exhibits restricted access to content, while D02 exhibits access to content with limited access to affect.

D03 presents an intermediate configuration. Sophie receives richer narrative detail than in D01, but when she explicitly labels the story as ‘deep,’ the response ‘It's okay’ limits the opportunity for further affective elaboration. The return to concrete details about the toy phone reinforces the movement from emotional recognition to manageable factual narrative. This pattern does not prove an absence of feeling; rather, interpretation isolation depends on the coexistence of available painful meaning and limitedly represented affective engagement.

The three data points are therefore not treated as frequency counts. Two occurrences of isolation do not mean that isolation is quantitatively ‘more dominant’ than repression. What is analyzed is functional variation between episodes and their respective contributions to characterization. Qualitative significance lies in how mechanisms shape different routes of psychological accessibility, not in the number of occurrences.

4.2 Paternal Regulation of Vulnerability

Calum's defense also has relational consequences because it determines how much Sophie gains access to her father's private psychological experiences. However, the data do not support the interpretation that the paternal self is a false persona.

After a conflict the previous night, for example, Calum actively engaged in relational repair. When Sophie suggested the incident wasn't a big deal, Calum asserted that it was and apologized repeatedly (01:22:14–01:23:04). This episode wasn't coded as undoing because ordinary paternal repair provided a more direct explanation.

Genuine emotional availability is also evident when Sophie recounts her experiences with a boy. Calum said that as Sophie grew older, he could talk to her about parties, boys, drugs, and other experiences. He even asked her to promise to remain open with him (01:24:30–01:25:00). This pattern creates emotional asymmetry. Calum strives to create a space where Sophie can engage in broad self-disclosure, but doesn't always give her equal access to her own painful interiority.

However, this restriction is not total. In a discussion about Scotland, for example, Calum directly admitted that he never truly felt like he belonged in Edinburgh and spoke about the experience of leaving one's upbringing (00:55:03–00:56:12). Therefore, the paternal relationship is represented as a space where care and limited disclosure coexist. Defense does not eliminate paternal care, but it does regulate the degree of access to private vulnerability.

Negative cases help clarify these boundaries. Direct discussions about belonging demonstrate that painful autobiographical material does not always trigger restriction; apology sequences demonstrate that reparative behavior need not be understood as undoing; and invitations to Sophie to talk about parties, boys, or drugs demonstrate genuine endorsement of openness. Therefore, the final coding was not constructed by searching for all forms of discomfort, but rather by comparing episodes demonstrating defensive function with episodes more simply explained through ordinary relational behavior.

Relationally, this asymmetry also explains why Sophie can experience Calum as both caring and difficult to read. She receives reassurance and invitations to disclose, but information about her father's internal difficulties emerges unevenly. Paternal regulation is therefore not a simple concealment strategy; it is a pattern in which responsibility toward Sophie coexists with limits on reciprocal self-disclosure.

The scene about belonging is important as counter-evidence because it demonstrates that Calum is capable of direct autobiographical disclosure when certain material can be articulated. He acknowledges his incompatibility with Edinburgh while simultaneously directing Sophie to a future possibility—that she can live elsewhere and be who she wants. This scene demonstrates that the paternal self can also be a medium for vulnerability and generativity, not just containment.

4.3 Defensive Leakage and the Limits of Containment

The higher-order pattern emerges most clearly when the childhood-birthday narrative is read alongside the later birthday-recognition sequence. In the earlier scene, Calum recounts his experience of being forgotten about his birthday while limiting affective elaboration. Later, Sophie organizes a birthday recognition and invites everyone to sing a celebration for his father. After this social sequence, the film transitions to depicting Calum sobbing in a private space (01:25:48–01:27:08).

The study does not suggest that earlier isolation causally “caused” the crying. However, the thematic juxtaposition of the two birthday sequences produces a pattern in which affect, previously represented as distanced, becomes more overtly visible. This pattern is called Defensive Leakage, a study-specific interpretive label for the thematic movement when overt affective exposure follows a previous representation of affective containment or distancing. Leakage does not result in complete disclosure; Sophie does not receive a verbal explanation that makes Calum's condition fully legible. The audience gains greater visual access than the interpersonal access available to Sophie.

A similar pattern finds contextual support in the airport farewell scene when Calum finally says “Bye” tearfully (01:33:26–01:33:31). This farewell is not a separate defensive episode, but rather demonstrates that Calum's emotional containment is never absolute. Overall, Calum is constructed as psychologically visible but not fully legible. Vulnerability is

present in direct disclosure, restricted representation, affective distancing, and overt exposure, but a full psychological account remains unavailable.

The distinction between Sophie's access and audience access is also a crucial part of this pattern. Sophie experiences an interpersonal birthday interaction, but private sobbing is placed outside of the direct relational exchange with her. The audience therefore receives stronger affective evidence without receiving the corresponding explanatory narration. This structure reinforces selective accessibility at the film level: emotional exposure increases, but psychological legibility does not increase proportionally.

Thus, the results answer both RQs on two levels. RQ1 is answered by identifying repression and isolation as the most defensible defense codes. RQ2 is answered by a relational pattern that shows that both forms of defensive accessibility operate within paternal relationships, where genuine care coexists with unequal access to private vulnerability.

5. Discussion

5.1 Defense as Process Rather than Diagnosis

The findings extend scholarship that has identified Calum's distress. (Apriliana & Tandyonomanu, 2023), (Shah, 2023), (O'Sullivan, 2024), and (Ningsih et al., 2024) have all demonstrated psychological vulnerability, depression-related representation, identity instability, and paternal strain. The current research does not reject these readings but shifts the focus of inquiry from what Calum suffers from to how painful material becomes differentially representable.

This shift in focus is important because character analysis does not require a clinical diagnosis to explain psychological complexity. Anna Freud's framework allows defenses to be read based on function, not symptom labels. Consistency with (Cramer, 1998, 2000, 2015b, 2015a), (Vaillant, 2000), (Bond, 2004), and (Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021) also suggests that defenses must be distinguished from conscious coping and pathology.

The decision to retain only repression and isolation is therefore a consequence of methodological conservatism. The absence of projection, reaction formation, undoing, turning against the self, or other mechanisms is not a failure of the framework. The taxonomy is used as an analytical possibility, and only the representational patterns with the most defensible evidence are retained.

A process-oriented approach also reduces the risk of retrospective pathologization. If every unusual action is read as a symptom, the interpretation will tend to confirm the initially assumed diagnosis. In contrast, alternative-explanation testing requires each candidate mechanism to compete with a more ordinary explanation. In the context of film analysis, this discipline is important because fictional representations often intentionally maintain ambiguity; theoretical depth is not necessarily achieved by eliminating such ambiguity.

The limitations of the final code set are meaningful precisely because many candidate behaviors are rejected. Apology is not treated as undoing, reassurance is not automatic reaction formation, risky behavior is not sufficient to justify turning against the self, and mask incidents do not provide sufficient evidence for denial. These exclusions indicate that Anna Freud was used as an analytical framework with a threshold, not a vocabulary to label every emotional action of Calum's.

5.2 Repression and Restricted Autobiographical Representation

The future-self episode shows that Calum's psychological difficulties aren't related to his inability to discuss the past in general. He can talk about Scotland, his childhood birthday, and belonging. What's different is the specific questions that force him to confront past expectations with present adulthood.

Therefore, repression is more productively read as Restricted Representation rather than generic silence. This interpretation adds an additional layer to memory scholarship. (Zhang, 2023), (Kotaman, 2025), (Bezerra, 2025), and (Günevi Uslu, 2025) show how memory and audiovisual forms produce partial access to the past. (Pinasti et al., 2026) add that shared and individual memory shape relational identity, while (Fikri & Kusumaningtyas, 2026) show that fragmented remembering can produce belated meaning.

This research shows that partial accessibility is also formed at the level of character interaction. The camcorder is not just a memory tool; in the future-self scene, it becomes a

space of confrontation between Sophie's questioning and Calum's limited autobiographical representation. This reading also intersects with (Jennings, 2025), who suggests that opacity remains fundamental even though Sophie attempts to return to the past. The difference is that opacity in this research is also analyzed as a consequence of uneven access to Calum's own psychological material. Calum is therefore not completely unknowable. The film provides fragments that make vulnerability perceptible. What is not provided is a complete interpretive key that transforms these fragments into a coherent psychological explanation.

The future-self question also has relational significance because it is posed by Sophie at the same age as Calum, the object of reflection. Thus, the scene not only requires factual recall but also brings together an imagined childhood future with a disappointing or uncertain adult present. The study does not claim any specific internal content is necessarily repressed, but the representational shift suggests that this form of autobiographical comparison has a different accessibility than other memories she can recount directly.

This clarifies the relationship between defense and the research title. 'Hiding' does not necessarily imply conscious, intentional deception. What is in plain sight are fragments: sudden refusals, disturbing statements, emotionally distanced narratives, private breakdowns, and relational tenderness. Repression as Restricted Representation helps explain why these fragments do not consolidate into an explicit self-account.

5.3 Isolation and Affective Distancing

Isolation produces a different form of opacity because Calum can actually speak. Statements about not being able to imagine being forty or narratives about a forgotten birthday contain quite direct painful ideational content. However, verbal accessibility does not produce equal affective accessibility.

This distinction is important because psychological concealment doesn't always occur through silence. Calum can be verbally revealing while remaining affectively difficult to read. Isolation allows the content to remain narratable, but the emotional connection to it is attenuated or limited.

This finding complements previous psychological readings. While (Apriliana & Tandyonomanu, 2023) and psychiatric commentaries emphasize visible signs of suffering, isolation analysis shows that visibility itself has degrees. Pain can be mentioned, even described, without becoming emotionally transparent. At the level of cinematic form, this finding is also consistent with scholarship on fragmented and indirect meaning. (Bezerra, 2025) shows how sonic distance influences autobiographical memory, while (Dyer & Mecija, 2025) place sound, desire, and memory within psychic temporality. The current research extends this indirectness to the relationship between dialogue and affect: what Sophie hears does not always equate to what she can emotionally comprehend.

Affective Distancing also bridges the tension between apparently candid speech and persistent opacity. The statement "Surprised I made it to 30" is literally very revealing, making it difficult to maintain a reading of Calum as uniformly secretive. However, this content-level openness is not accompanied by sustained elaboration that makes affect fully shareable. Isolation therefore explains how disclosure can occur without producing transparency.

These findings support the view that emotional access has multiple dimensions. Narrative access addresses what happened; ideational access provides access to what is thought; affective access relates to how painful meaning is emotionally engaged; and interpersonal access determines the extent to which the experience is shared within the relationship. D02 and D03 show that these dimensions do not always move together.

5.4 Paternal Self as Genuine Care

The most important finding of RQ2 is that Calum's paternal self is a genuine relational position, not a false mask. Fatherhood studies help clarify this. (Planes Pedreño & Juárez Rodríguez, 2024) demonstrate the tension between masculinity, paternal expectations, and self-violence. (Redmond, 2025) expands the context through class, loneliness, economic precarity, and failed masculinity. (Recio Ruiz, 2025) positions Calum more closely within caring masculinity.

At the theoretical level, (Elliott, 2016) defines caring masculinities through relationality, positive emotions, interdependence, and rejection of domination. (Hunter et al., 2017) show that caring fatherhood can still negotiate provider-oriented masculine expectations, while

(Roy & Ayalon, 2023) show that cinematic fathers can combine caregiving with emotional vulnerability.

Aftersun's data supports the reading of paternal care as a genuine relational position. Calum apologizes when he fails, provides reassurance, encourages Sophie to open up, and strives to maintain her emotional safety. Defense doesn't undo these actions. Instead, an emotional asymmetry emerges: Calum encourages Sophie's disclosure more readily than he permits equivalent access to his own painful interiority. This asymmetry helps connect defense to the relationship. Repression and isolation not only have intrapsychic functions but also determine what Sophie can access. The paternal self becomes a space where care and restricted self-disclosure coexist.

This paternal reading also helps avoid the binary between authenticity and performance. All social roles involve forms of presentation, but the fact that Calum regulates what is available to Sophie does not mean his care is inauthentic. Instead, the film demonstrates that paternal commitment and psychological limitation can coexist. At this point, defense analysis enriches caring-masculinity scholarship by providing a scene-level account of how vulnerability can be limited without eliminating care.

Emotional asymmetry can also be interpreted as the relational cost of selective accessibility. Sophie is given the message that disclosure is safe, but reciprocity is not fully available. The film does not depict Sophie demanding equal disclosure; nevertheless, the audience can recognize the imbalance between the emotional openness Calum invites and the amount of his own shareable interiority.

5.5 Defensive Leakage and the Instability of Containment

Birthday sequences demonstrate that containment is unstable. Earlier memories can be related to affective distancing, but later birthday recognition is followed by private sobbing. This relationship does not prove causal psychology, but rather represents a movement from containment toward affective exposure.

The term "Defensive Leakage" is used to capture this movement without turning it into a new Anna Freud mechanism. Leakage marks the limits of containment: affect becomes visible even though the psychological meaning doesn't receive verbal explanation. This clarifies the difference between visibility and legibility. Sophie can see some of Calum, and the audience can see more, but neither party gets a complete psychological account.

This finding expands on the opacity discussed by (Jennings, 2025) and the temporal/psychic complexity discussed by (Dyer & Mecija, 2025). Opacity does not only arise because memory fails to recover the past. It is also maintained when affect becomes visible without becoming fully interpretable.

Defensive Leakage is not meant to imply that defenses permanently fail or that suppressed affect mechanically "escapes." The term maintains a representational level of analysis: the sequence places earlier containment and later overt affect in a thematic relation. With this formulation, interpretation still captures the film's movement without transforming montage or temporal juxtaposition into causal clinical evidence.

This concept also helps explain why audience knowledge remains incomplete even when Calum cries. Overt affect increases certainty that distress is present, but it doesn't provide certainty regarding its full cause, history, or subjective meaning. Therefore, more emotion does not necessarily equal more legibility. Films can simultaneously intensify empathy and preserve interpretive uncertainty.

5.6 Selective Psychological Accessibility

The overall findings are better explained through Selective Psychological Accessibility than continuous repression. Calum neither represses everything nor discloses everything. Instead, the degree of accessibility changes through Restricted Representation, when certain autobiographical material resists direct articulation; Affective Distancing, when painful material remains narratable but affectively limited; and Direct Vulnerability, when some painful material becomes relatively available without clear defense. Defensive Leakage is not positioned as a fourth level of accessibility, but rather as a pattern indicating the limits or instability of containment when previously contained or distanced affect becomes overtly perceptible without complete explanation.

The model integrates psychological, memory, fatherhood, and psychoanalytic scholarship without replacing each perspective. Depression studies explain suffering; memory studies explain fragmentation; masculinity studies explain sociocultural and paternal tensions; and defense analysis provides a mechanism-oriented interpretation of differential accessibility.

Thus, the novelty of this study lies not in discovering that Calum experiences distress or in being the first psychoanalytic reading of *Aftersun*. The novelty lies in using Anna Freud to explain why Calum's distress has different levels of accessibility and how these differences operate within the paternal relationship. The central argument of this study is that Calum's psychological opacity is constructed through selective accessibility. Repression limits representation to certain material; isolation allows disclosure while maintaining affective distance; the paternal relationship becomes a space where care and limited self-disclosure are negotiated; and moments of overt affect demonstrate that containment is never fully stable. In this sense, Calum is in a state of hiding in plain sight: his vulnerability is visible enough to be recognized, but never fully legible.

Selective Psychological Accessibility thus functions as an integrative explanatory model, not an additional taxonomy. It organizes findings based on the relationship between representation and affect: some material is restricted, some is narrated at affective distance, and some is directly disclosed. Defensive Leakage functions separately as an indicator that the containment of these patterns is not always stable. This separation preserves the heterogeneity of Calum's behavior, which would otherwise be lost if the entire scene were unified under continuous repression.

Theoretically, the model does not claim to extend Anna Freud universally. Its contribution is more limited but specific: it shows how functional defense concepts can be used in film-character analysis to map degrees of accessibility and relational consequences. Therefore, the transferability of the concept needs to be tested on other corpora or characters before it can be discussed as a more general framework.

Another implication of this model is the need to separate accessibility from willingness. The film doesn't always provide evidence of whether Calum consciously chooses to withhold, cannot fully articulate, or simply doesn't pursue disclosure at a given moment. Therefore, Selective Psychological Accessibility intentionally refers to the representational outcomes that can be analyzed from the film, not definitive attributions of conscious intention. This boundary keeps the argument consistent with the non-clinical orientation of the research.

6. Conclusion

This research suggests that Calum's defense mechanisms in *Aftersun* are better understood as part of differential psychological accessibility rather than as a broad catalog of defensive behaviors. Of all the candidate episodes analyzed, the most consistent representational patterns were found in repression and isolation. Repression is represented through the restriction of direct autobiographical representation, while isolation allows painful content to remain narratable with more limited affective engagement. Both patterns address RQ1 and demonstrate that Calum does not uniformly conceal or reveal vulnerabilities.

RQ2 is answered through the relationship between defense and paternal interaction. Calum's paternal self represents a genuine relational position characterized by care, reassurance, repair, and emotional availability. However, Calum is more prepared to create a space of openness for Sophie than to provide equal access to his own painful interiority. Defense thus regulates, rather than eliminates, private vulnerability in the paternal relationship.

From the overall data, the study developed Selective Psychological Accessibility as a higher-order synthesis to explain the variation between restricted representation, affective distancing, and direct vulnerability. The term Defensive Leakage is used more restrictively to refer to overt affective exposure that indicates containment instability. Both terms are analytical constructs of this study, not additions to Anna Freud's theory.

These findings also demonstrate the value of methodological restraint for psychoanalytic film analysis. When defense mechanisms are used as functional categories and tested against alternative explanations, psychoanalytic reading can yield more measured interpretations without losing depth. In this study, the limited number of codes helped clarify that Calum's

psychological opacity stems from changes in his degree of accessibility, not from the assumption that all of his behavior is defensive.

This research is limited to one film, one character, and one primary theoretical framework. The analysis is also not intended as a clinical diagnosis. Further research could examine whether patterns of selective accessibility and defensive leakage also emerge in other characters, different relational configurations, or films that similarly construct psychological vulnerability through indirect representation.

Overall, *Aftersun* constructs Calum as neither a completely hidden nor a completely transparent character. His vulnerability emerges through restricted representation, affectively distanced disclosure, direct vulnerability, and moments of overt affective exposure. Anna Freud's defense framework helps demonstrate that Calum's psychological opacity stems from uneven accessibility to painful experience, not continuous repression. Thus, Calum remains emotionally visible yet never fully psychologically legible—a condition that explains the significance of hiding in plain sight in his characterization.

The study's primary interpretive contribution therefore lies in the distinction between being visible and being legible. Calum is not constructed as a mystery because the film provides no evidence; instead, the film provides ample evidence but distributes it in a way that does not yield complete access. Defense mechanisms help explain this distribution at the character level, while paternal relationships demonstrate the interpersonal consequences of uneven accessibility.

By maintaining the distinction between code, contextual evidence, and higher-order synthesis, the research also demonstrates that psychoanalytic film analysis can be conducted in an evidence-sensitive manner. The strength of interpretation depends not on the number of mechanisms discovered, but on the clarity of criteria, traceability to scenes, and willingness to reject theoretically tempting readings when alternative explanations are stronger.

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