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Motherhood, trauma, and attachment

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Motherhood, trauma, and attachment: A psychoanalytic analysis of Julie's narrative in *A Mouthful of Air*

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Abstract. This study examines how the film *A Mouthful of Air*, directed by Amy Koppelman, represents the psychological distress of Julie, a mother and children's book author. It analyzes how the film represents Julie's imaginative world as a defense against childhood trauma and how her childhood attachment experiences shape her character and stories. This study uses qualitative close reading. The researcher selected 12 scenes that show Julie's creative work, her family relationships, and her conversations with the psychiatrist. The scenes form six themes. The analysis draws on Freud's concepts of defense mechanism and sublimation, Bowlby's attachment theory, and Winnicott's concept of the transitional object. The analysis shows that Julie's stories, including Pinky Tinkerbink, function as sublimation that does not fully relieve her distress. The film presents her father's contradictory behavior and her mother's silence as an unresolved attachment pattern, which appears in Julie's fear of rejection and her ambivalence toward her children. Julie's second book can be read as a transitional object that she leaves for her family. This study does not diagnose Julie or make clinical claims. It contributes a literary reading of the psychological dimensions represented in the film.

Keywords: *A Mouthful of Air*; attachment theory; defense mechanism; psychological trauma; transitional object

Abstrak. *Penelitian ini mengkaji cara film A Mouthful of Air, yang disutradarai Amy Koppelman, merepresentasikan tekanan psikologis Julie, seorang ibu sekaligus penulis buku anak. Penelitian ini menganalisis cara film merepresentasikan dunia imajinatif Julie sebagai pertahanan terhadap trauma masa kecil dan cara pengalaman kelekatan masa kecilnya membentuk karakter dan ceritanya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pembacaan cermat (*close reading*) kualitatif. Peneliti memilih 12 adegan yang menampilkan karya kreatif Julie, hubungan keluarganya, dan percakapannya dengan psikiater. Adegan tersebut membentuk enam tema. Analisis memakai konsep mekanisme pertahanan dan sublimasi dari Freud, teori kelekatan Bowlby, serta konsep objek transisional dari Winnicott. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa cerita Julie, termasuk tokoh Pinky Tinkerbink, berfungsi sebagai sublimasi yang tidak sepenuhnya meredakan tekanannya. Film menampilkan perilaku ayah yang kontradiktif dan sikap diam ibu sebagai pola kelekatan yang belum terselesaikan. Pola ini tampak pada rasa takut Julie akan penolakan dan ambivalensinya terhadap anak-anaknya. Buku kedua Julie dapat dibaca sebagai objek transisional yang ia tinggalkan untuk keluarganya. Penelitian ini tidak mendiagnosis Julie dan tidak membuat klaim klinis. Penelitian ini menyumbangkan pembacaan sastra atas dimensi psikologis yang direpresentasikan dalam film.*

Kata kunci: *A Mouthful of Air; teori keterikatan; mekanisme pertahanan; trauma psikologis; objek transisional*

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INTRODUCTION

The film *A Mouthful of Air* (2021) directed by Amy Koppelman, is adapted from her own novel, and presents a powerful portrayal of a mother's inner psychological life. The main character, Julie Davis, is at the center of this portrayal (Koppelman, 2021). For literary studies, this film is valuable because it combines visual elements, symbolism, and psychological depth. These elements demonstrate the connection between childhood trauma, attachment, and creative expression. In literary studies, scholars approach film as a narrative text. They analyze films with interpretive frameworks similar to those used for literature (Mukodas & Miranti, 2026). Psychoanalytic criticism also examines trauma and family dynamics in contemporary cinema (Köten, 2025). This film therefore invites an analysis of its characters, structure, and psychological representation through modern literary theory.

This story centers on Julie Davis, a children's book author and illustrator who lives in New York with her husband, Ethan, and their baby. The story begins with a failed suicide attempt, then follows Julie's struggle to be a good mother while hiding the anxiety and intrusive thoughts that continue to weigh on her. Her second pregnancy intensifies these fears and pushes her to confront old wounds related to her relationship with her father. Throughout the film, she channels these feelings into the character of "Pinky Tinkerbink", a figure in the fairy tale she writes, using her imagination as a space to express the things she is unable to convey directly to those closest to her. The film ends with Julie's death, which shift attention to her family.

On the surface, Julie appears to be a gentle and quiet children's book author. However, behind Julie's calm appearance, she carries emotional pain that has never fully healed, and much of it seems to come from her childhood experiences. Throughout the film (Koppelman, 2021), she is shown struggling with anxiety, fears about being a mother, and fragmented traumatic memories. Zacharek (2021) reads the film as a portrait of postpartum depression (PPD). PPD may involve sadness, loss of pleasure, sleep problems, trouble concentrating, guilt, and anxiety (Walker, 2024). It is a frequent complication of childbirth, and it can harm both mothers and their children (Fish-Williamson & Hahn-Holbrook, 2023). It can also weaken the bond between mother and child (Harasawa et al., 2025). A meta-analysis of 412 studies from 46 countries estimated its global prevalence at 19.18% (Fish-Williamson & Hahn-Holbrook, 2023). This article does not diagnose Julie. It analyzes how the film represents her inner conflict through silence, distance, and dialogue. It reads that conflict as an echo of her childhood trauma and attachment experiences. Maternal ambivalence is often hard to acknowledge under patriarchal ideas of mother love (Takševa, 2017). A literary approach can show how a film represents this tension.

The film does more than depict Julie's psychological state. It also builds an imaginative world from the stories she creates. These stories appear in soft pastel colors, yet fear, loss, and longing for safety emerge from beneath them. Freud (1908, as cited in Zittoun, 2019) argued that creative writing continues the play of childhood. Studies of film and literary characters apply a form of sublimation, an ego defense that redirects anxiety and distrust into constructive acts, to read how characters respond to trauma and anxiety (Dauddie Presdyasmara et al., 2022; Setyo & Nugroho, 2024). In Julie's case, her stories become a place where she can express desires, fears, and childhood trauma that she cannot step directly. Winnicott's (1971/1989) concept of transitional space extends this reading. It describes a psychic area between inner reality and the external world, where a person manages anxiety that feels too painful to face directly. Later scholarship applies the concept to literary writing and trauma (Cârstea, 2023). In this light, "Pinky Tinkerbink" works as a transitional object in Julie's adulthood. It also represents a symbolic part of Julie that helps her process trauma and gives her a sense of safety that she does not find in her everyday life.

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Julie's early relationships with her parents shaped the attachment patterns she carries into adulthood. Bowlby (1958) argued that attachment rests on instinctual responses, such as clinging and following, that bind a child and a caregiver. These patterns influence how a person manages emotions and builds relationships later in life (Warfa et al., 2014). The film shows this through a father whose affection and coldness alternate and a mother who stays silent. Research also links insecure adult attachment to a higher risk of PPD (Mahdavishahri & Gutierrez, 2024). The film suggests this link through Julie's anxiety about her newborn and her fear that her daughter will not like her. Attachment theorists themselves have long discussed the value of film for their work (Branigan, 2013), so reading attachment through a film is a natural extension of the theory.

The film also tells its story through fragmented memories and flashbacks. This advice prompts Julie to return to childhood experiences that she has not resolved. Freud's concepts of repetition and deferred action help explain this pattern (Freud, 1908, as cited in Zittoun, 2019). Instead of moving on, Julie keeps revisiting and reshaping the same experiences in her imaginative world. In this analysis, memory is not only a background to help psychology state. It becomes an active force that shapes the plot, symbols, and characters in the children's stories she writes. This pattern ties back to the article's focus on motherhood and memory.

PPD has been studied extensively in clinical psychology and public health (Fish-Williamson & Hahn-Holbrook, 2023; Walker, 2024). Film studies have also examined how short animated films represent depression through metaphor (Forceville & Paling, 2021), and how contemporary Italian films portray maternal ambivalence, PPD, and the myth of the self-sacrificing mother (Tarnopolsky, 2012). Psychoanalytic readings of film characters exist as well (Setyo & Nugroho, 2024). Yet few studies have examined *A Mouthful of Air* in literary studies through psychoanalytic and attachment approaches. In particular, little research asks how the children's stories in the film function as defense mechanisms. Little research asks how these stories reflect the protagonist's attachment history, or how the narrative construction of a "safe world" relates to her unconscious conflicts. To address this gap, this study analyzes the film through Freud's concept of defense mechanisms and Bowlby's attachment theory. It uses Winnicott's concept of transitional space as a complementary framework. Two research questions guide this article:

1. How does *A Mouthful of Air* represent Julie's imaginative world as a defense mechanism against her childhood trauma?
2. How does the film represent the influence of Julie's childhood attachment experiences on the character and narratives in her children's stories?

These questions open up space to examine not only the psychological dimensions of the characters but also how film, as a narrative text, constructs meaning around trauma, creativity, and maternal roles. Mothers with PPD often struggle to balance caregiving with their own emotional well-being. They may experience sleep problems and guilt (Walker, 2024), as well as weaker bonding with their child (Harasawa et al., 2025). Such feelings are often hard to acknowledge under ideals of the good mothers (Takševa, 2017). Julie's case shows this tension. Even while she struggles emotionally, she continues to care for her children. This study contributes to English literary studies by combining the psychoanalytic and attachment theories with film narrative analyses. It examines how trauma and maternal mental health are represented on screen without diagnosing the character.

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METHOD

This study analyzes the film *A Mouthful of Air* (Koppelman, 2021). The film adapts Koppelman's novel of the same title. The study does not compare the two works. It treats the film as a work in its own right (Hutcheon, 2006). Three reasons support this choice. First, both research questions ask how the film represents Julie's imaginative world and her childhood attachment. Dialogue, framing, and the shift to illustration at the end provide the evidence. Second, the film shows Julie from the outside. Viewers must infer her inner experience from dialogue, expression, and visual composition. This position suits an analysis that rests on observable evidence. Third, the film shifts attention to the people around Julie. It shows how her death affects her family and what follows. This focus supports the analysis of attachment relationships. The study uses a qualitative design with close reading as the analytical method. Melo (2024) pairs psychoanalysis theory with textual analysis, because psychoanalysis offers a theoretical framework but no step-by-step procedure (p. 36). This study follows the same logic. Psychoanalytic and attachment theories supply the concepts. Close reading supplies procedure. *Mise-en-scène* supplies the visual evidence. The study uses this combination, not Melos's framework, which targets romantic relationships.

The primary data come from the film *A Mouthful of Air* (Koppelman, 2021). They include the official subtitles, dialogue transcripts, and visual observation. The researcher selected 12 scenes after repeated viewing of the full film. Three criteria guided the selection. First, the scene shows Julie with a figure central to her story: her husband (Ethan), her parents, her psychiatrist, her children (Teddy and Rachel), or her own stories. Second, the scene shows how Julie copes with distress or how her childhood attachment appears. Third, the scene offers analyzable evidence, such as dialogue, a flashback, or a visual shift. The scenes form six themes. The themes come from the relationships and story elements that recur in the film: Julie herself, Ethan (her husband), Julie's parents, the psychiatrist Teddy and Rachel (her babies), and the "Pinky Tinkerbink" stories (her children's stories).

Table 1 Framework Used for Each Research Question

Research Question	Theoretical Lens	Key Concepts	Data
RQ1: Imaginative world as defense mechanism	Freud's psychoanalytic theory	Defense mechanism, sublimation, repetition compulsion, deferred action	Themes 1, 2, and 6
RQ2: Childhood attachment and Julie's narratives	Bowlby's attachment theory	Attachment to a protective figure	Themes 3, 4, 5, and 6
RQ1 and RQ2 (linking lens)	Winnicott's concepts	False self, holding environment, transitional object	Themes 2 and 6

Three theories guide the interpretation. Freud's psychoanalytic theory is the main framework for the first research question (RQ1). It supplies the concepts of defense mechanisms, sublimation, repetition compulsion, and deferred action (Freud, 1908, and cited in Zittoun, 2019). Bowlby's attachment theory is the main framework for the second research question (RQ2). It supplies the concept of attachment to a protective figure (Bowlby, 1988, as cited in Warfa et al., 2014). Winnicott's (1960/1965, 1971/1989, 1960/2018) concepts of the transitional object, false self, and holding environment connect the two frameworks. They link Julie's defenses to her relationships and to the stories she writes. The study reads the film's fragmented flashbacks through Freud's concepts, not through a separate trauma theory. *Mise-en-scène* is a tool for describing visual evidence such as setting, lightning, and color (Radhika & Purnama, 2025). It is not a separate theory. Table 1 links

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each research question to its theoretical lens, key concepts, and data. The study reads the film as a cultural artifact and does not diagnose (Kamei, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discusses them through three theoretical lenses: Freud's psychoanalysis, Bowlby's attachment theory, and Winnicott's concept of the transitional object. The analysis offers an interpretive reading of the film's scenes, dialogue, and visual choices. It does not offer a clinical account of Julie. Six themes organize the section. Each theme follows the same pattern: what the film shows, a reading through theory, a comparison with earlier studies, and a short statement of how it answers the research questions. The first research question asks how *A Mouthful of Air* represents Julie's imaginative world as a defense against her childhood trauma. Themes one and two mainly address it, by examining her inner conflict and the limits of Ethan's support. The second research question asks how the film represents the influence of Julie's childhood attachment experiences on her character and on the narratives in her children's stories. Themes three, four, and five mainly address it, through her childhood flashbacks, her account in the psychiatrist's room, and her fear for her children. Theme six addresses both questions through the "Pinky Tinkerbink" stories. The section closes with a synthesis and a statement of the study's contribution to literary and film studies.

Julie's Character as a Reflection of the Psychological Conflicts

The film introduces Julie as a cheerful mother and a children's book author. Her stories speak to children who are lonely and afraid. In one story, a girl who plays alone climbs a castle tower and puts a pinky ring into a large clock, and a rainbow spreads over the world. In her new story, "Pinky Tinkerbink Locks Her Courage", a magic pinkie ring helps every child unlocked their fear. Julie shows this cheerful side both in her work and in her daily role as mother. Freud (1908, as cited in Zittoun, 2019) describes the creative writer as someone who builds an imaginary world, invests it with emotion, and keeps it apart from reality, as a child does at play. Freud (1908, as cited in Zittoun 2019, p.340) adds the desires that cannot be expressed directly may be repressed, disguised, or sublimated. Through this lens, Julie's stories can be understood as a way to turn her own fear into creative work for others. Setyo and Nugroho (2024) examined sublimation among several defense mechanisms in the film *No Longer Human* (2019) and linked them to a character's responses to trauma and guilt. This study follows sublimation through one activity, writing for children, and ties it to Julie's role as a mother.

The film also shows that cheerful image covers a deeper distress. In an early scene, Julie looks terrified when she is near Teddy. She fears that she will struggle more as he grows, and doubts that she can become a good mother. In another scene, she strokes Teddy's head and cheek with one hand and holds her own head with the other. The two gestures happen at the same time (Figure 1). This contrast can be read as maternal ambivalence: tenderness toward her son, coupled with distress she has not yet resolved (Takševa, 2017). This ambivalence appears in everyday scenes of care, not in rejection of the child.

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Figure 1 Julie Near Her Baby, Teddy

She feels anxiety, emotional distance, and a fear that continues to hold her every time she is near her baby. Julie keeps these two sides apart. In an early scene, she watches Teddy play in front of the television while a children's cartoon, *Sesame Street* (Moss, 1984), plays with a song about visiting the moon. Teddy stays absorbed in the cartoon. The film then holds a close-up of Julie's face, sad, and sobbing. The scene can be read as a contrast between Teddy's safe, playful world, and the distress Julie carries at a distance from him. The song's message about missing the people and places one loves can also be read as running beside her tears, which fits the ambivalence in the previous scene. This contrast fits a wider pattern in films about motherhood (Priyadharshini & Karthiga, 2025). Kamila and Sulistyani (2026) found that *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You* (2025) makes maternal exhaustion and guilt visible and challenges the image of the calm, capable mother, yet does not fully reject the expectation of constant maternal responsibility. Julie's case differs in what the film links to the gap. It points to her early attachment experiences, which theme three discusses.

Taken together, these scenes mainly address RQ1, which asks how the film represents Julie's imaginative world as a defense against her childhood trauma. The film shows Julie managing fear and ambivalence in two ways: her cheerful role and her writing for children. Both ways can be read as sublimation, and the film shows her distress remaining beneath them. The scenes also address RQ2, because theme three traces the source of this conflict to her early attachment experiences.

Ethan as a Holding Environment (Between Support and the Limits of Tolerance)

The film shows Ethan trying to open space where Julie can stop pretending. In the psychiatrist's room, he urges her to tell the doctor what happened in the park. Julie says he is exaggerating. Ethan says, "She couldn't pretend, and I know she is not okay" (Figure 2). Before the park, Julie had not shared her struggles with anyone, including Ethan, and there she lost control of herself, shocked, and weak. Winnicott's (1960/2018) concept of the false self describes an outward, compliant layer that protects a vulnerable inner self. Julie's cheerful role in theme one, and her insistence that she is fine, can be read as such a layer. And Ethan's insistence can be read as a refusal to accept it. He wants her to open up so that he can help and receive the care she needs. His stance extends Winnicott's (1965) concept of holding, which he also applied to the analytic setting, because Ethan offers a setting where she does not need to pretend. Shabrang and Razh (2019) read holding and the false self in *Maugham's Of Human Bondage* (1915) and link the protagonist's destructive relationships to a lack of holding in childhood. This study differs by reading the false self in an adult mother in a film and by placing the holding environment in her marriage.

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Figure 2 Ethan Questions Julie's Pretending

The film also shows where this holding reaches a limit. At the hospital after Rachel's birth, Ethan asks whether Julie has taken her antidepressants. Julie asks to stop for six weeks so that she can breastfeed Rachel. Julie's mother tells her, "There is nothing wrong with the bottle". Even after this reassurance, Julie's request can be read as a wish to keep the image of the good mother. Ethan answers, "I am not going down this road with you again" (Figure 3). The word "again" suggests that the two have had this conflict before. He then says that the issue concerns both Teddy and Rachel. This suggests that Ethan refuses to repeat this pattern. This study reads the scene as holding that stays patient but reaches a limit when the care of dependents is at stake. The film does not present Ethan as unsupportive. It shows his support reaching a limit.



Figure 3 Ethan's Limit After Rachel's Birth

This theme mainly addresses RQ1. The film represents Julie's outward cheerfulness as a protective layer that Ethan can name but cannot remove, and it shows his support reaching a limit. It also supports RQ2, because theme three shows an earlier environment that did not hold her.

Julie's Childhood Traces (Contradictory and Unresolved Attachments)

Julie's childhood flashbacks show a father who is both close and threatening. At bedtime, he sings her a lullaby. When young Julie asks to make a wish that he will always love her, he answers coldly that she does not need to waste her wish on that, and that he loves her forever. His words can be read as affection, but his manner can be read as a withdrawal. Shortly after, he grows angry that she keeps making the same wish. He grips her chin, pins her against a wall, and asks, "Is there a reason that you did that?" (Figure 4). When she runs screaming to the stairs, he follows and shouts, "Look at me! You think that hurt?". She nearly falls, he seems to reach toward her, and the scene cuts away. Bowlby (1988, as cited in Warfa et al., 2014, p.2) proposes that a child forms internal working models, which are expectations about whether caregivers will respond. Saleem and Abbas (2025, p. 328) read

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inconsistent and rejecting caregiving in a novel Elif Shafak's novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006) as leading the characters to see themselves as unworthy of love and care. Julie's flashbacks can be read in the same way. This study differs because it reads a film, follows one character, and does not classify her attachment type.



Figure 4 Young Julie, Her Father, and Her Silent Mother

The film also shows Julie's mother as present but silent. Years later, she invites Julie's father back by asking for his help to paint Rachel's room. She then asks Julie to accept him, saying "He is the only father you got", and Julie answers "Yeah" (Figure 5). These scenes can be read as a mother who puts family peace before her daughter's reluctance. Through Bowlby's (1988, as cited in Warfa et al., 2014, p.2)concept of the secure base, they can be understood as limited protection in childhood and again in adulthood. Saleem and Abbas (2025) link a parent's emotional withdrawal and a lack of parental protection to insecure attachment in the child. Another reading is also possible: she may act from a wish to repair the family, not from indifference. The film does not explain her motive. In both readings, the film gives Julie little room to respond.



Figure 5 Julie's Mother Asks Her to Accept Her Father

The reconciliation scene leaves this story unresolved. At the reunion, Julie's father apologizes to her, saying "Oh God, I'm so sorry, flower" (Figure 6). Her father gives no explanation of what he apologized for, and Julie stays silent. Through Bowlby's (1988, as cited in Warfa et al., 2014, p.2) concept of internal working models, her silence can be read as a continuation of her childhood position, where her father decides when closeness happens and she has little chance to answer. It can also be read as hesitation, not agreement. The film does not show Julie accepting or rejecting the apology. Contradictory caregiving in the past and an unresolved reunion in the present suggest that attachment stays open in adulthood. The flashbacks that carry this history look blurry and unstable, which can be read as a memory that Julie cannot recall or tell coherently. The same history fits her fear of failng as a mother in theme one.

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Figure 6 Julie's Father Seeks Reconciliation

This theme mainly addresses RQ2: the film links Julie's fear and vigilance to caregiving that was both close and threatening, and it shows this history unresolved in her adult family. It also gives a source for the defenses described in themes one and two, which support RQ1.

The Psychiatrist's Room (Confession of Trauma and Fear of the Truth)

The film shows Julie speaking about her past after the psychiatrist asks, "Is this the first time you've tried to take your life?" (Figure 7). Julie says that her world has felt black and white since first grade, that her memories of that time are hazy, and that her father also had a mental illness. She describes herself as "spoiled", too weak, and believes that another woman could take care for Teddy better than she can. Freud (1908, as cited in Zittoun, 2019, p. 342) observed that adults hide their private fantasies from others, while people who suffer tell them to the doctor from whom they expect a cure. The psychiatrist's room can be read in the same way, as the place where Julie says what she has not said to Ethan or others. The film places her account of her childhood and her belief about herself as a mother in the same scene. This can be read as a link between her early experiences, which theme three discusses, and her belief that she is not a capable mother. The film does not state a single cause, and the account is Julie's own, so it remains partial.

The psychiatrist responds with a story about himself. He tells her that he still cannot eat a certain candy that everybody once called "spider eggs", although he knows this is false and has seen his daughter eat it without harm. The story can be read in two ways. It tells Julie that knowing the truth about herself, that she is a capable mother, may not remove her fear. It also shows the doctor as subject to the same pattern. Setyo and Nugroho (2024) examine defense mechanisms in a film character's responses to trauma and guilt. This study differs by reading a therapy scene in which the psychiatrist's own story can work as an interpretation offered to the patient.



Figure 7 Julie's in the Psychiatrist's Room

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This theme mainly addresses RQ2. Julie's own account places her childhood beside her belief that she cannot be a good mother. It also supports RQ1, since the doctor's story suggests that fear can persist despite knowledge.

Fear and Love in Julie's Ambivalence toward Teddy and Rachel

The film shows Julie's fear for Teddy in the apartment she is about to leave. Before the move, she invites Teddy to say goodbye to the rooms. She holds him in the empty space and says, "Every time I'm alone, I'm afraid something bad is gonna happen to Teddy" (Figure 8). Her words can be read as care for her son and as the fear described in theme one. Takševa (2017) argues that maternal love can include ambivalence, and that acknowledging it honors the mother's own subjectivity. In this reading, Julie's fear and her love are not separate. The fear shows how much she cares about Teddy, and it also shows the strain of that care. This can be read together with theme four, where Julie says another woman could care for Teddy better than she can. The film does not state a single cause.

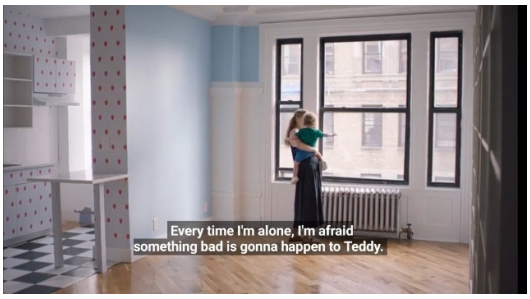


Figure 8 Julie Holding Teddy in the Empty Apartement

Julie's fear extends to Rachel in the park scene. Julie first asks that their baby's gender be kept secret, then presses Ethan to reveal it. Ethan tells her that their second child is a girl. Julie answers, "I can't have a daughter. What if she doesn't like me?" (Figure 9). This line can be read as a fear of rejection by her own child. It also fits the wish in theme three, where young Julie keeps asking her father to love her always. Read together, the two scenes can be understood as the same concern about being loved, seen first from the daughter's position and now from the mother's.



Figure 9 Julie's Reaction to Having a Daughter

The psychiatrist's room scene shows how Julie handles her fear. Julie treats her reaction in the park as something normal during pregnancy. She also says that Ethan will pull away and stop loving her once he sees her "dark side". This can be read as a defensive response, in which Julie dismisses her

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own fear and places the possibility of rejection in Ethan. The film does not support this expectation. Ethan stays caring toward her. The expectation can therefore be read as coming from Julie's fear, not from his behavior. Theme three shows the same expectation in her relationship with her father.

This theme mainly addresses RQ2. The film shows Julie's fear for Teddy and Rachel as both care and ambivalence, and it links her concern about being loved by her child to her own childhood wish for her father's love. It also supports RQ1, because her response in the psychiatrist's office can be read as a defense against that fear.

Pinky Saves the Stars (Narrative as Shadow and Transitional Object)

Julie tells the story of "Pinky Tinkerbink" to Ethan during a night picnic. A star monster has taken all the stars in the sky, so Pinky cannot make a wish on anything. She tries to put the stars back by throwing a light bulb, a diamond, and lemons into the sky, but each one falls. Without stars, the story says, there is no place for hope, and the world turns dark. Freud (1908, as cited in Zittoun, 2019) describes a fantasy as the fulfillment of a wish that links past, present, and future. In this view, the story can be read as a narrative about an ungrantable wish, paralleling Julie's own struggle. This adds to theme one, where her stories turn fear into creative work for children. Here, the same stories also show the limits of that work.

Julie's departure is depicted in a scene where she lie alone in the garden while staring at the sky, and does not show her death directly. After a time jump, Ethan gives Rachel, now as an adult, the book that Julie left for her. As Rachel reads with her father, they find that the book is dedicated to Ethan, Teddy, and Rachel on the page after the title (Figure 10). The film then cuts to a flashback of Julie singing a lullaby to baby Rachel. Julie says that stars are sometimes hidden by clouds, the sun, or the moon, but the stars still exist, and Julie's love for Rachel is the same. The same words appear in the book. The two clip scenes depict how Julie's fairy tale book, "*Pinky Tinkerbink: Saves the Stars*," keeps her love present for her family.

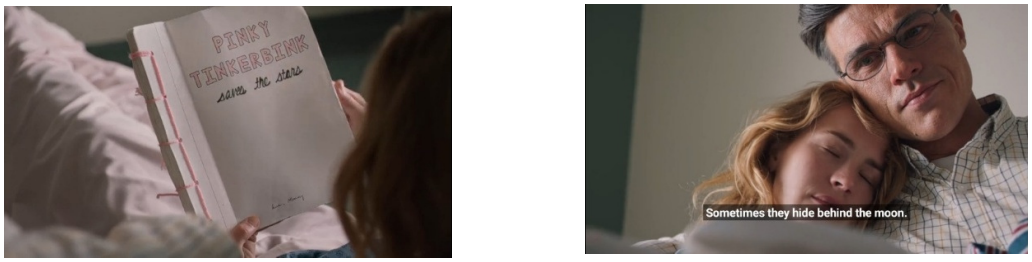


Figure 10 Ethan and Rachel Reading Julie's Book

The film then shifts to hand-drawn animation: a field of pink flowers, followed by Ethan, Teddy, and baby Rachel standing before a coffin covered with similar flowers (Figure 11). Julie's family stand without her, which underscores her physical absence. Because the image follows Julie's words about presence, it can be read as presence and absence shown side by side. The shift to a visual language close to children's books can also be read as a way to show loss without showing the event itself.

Zittoun (2019) notes that Winnicott extended transitional phenomena from the infant's first possession to play and cultural creation. Shabrang and Razh (2019) apply Winnicott's concepts,

1 Karisma, M.D. and Ernawati, A. (2026). Motherhood, trauma, and attachment: A psychoanalytic analysis of Julie's narrative in *A Mouthful of Air*. *E-Structural (English Studies on Translation, Culture, Literature, and Linguistics)*. 9 (02), 163–177.

including play, to a novel. This study extends this idea: the book Julie leaves can be read as an object that keeps her words present for her children after her death. Nofia et al (2025) read everyday objects in an animated short film, such as a shirt and a ball, as vessels of memory that keep a lost child's presence in the parents' world. This study differs in two ways: the object is a book that carries Julie's own words, and it is read through Winnicott's transitional phenomena, not Barthes's semiotics.

The story Julie tells Ethan at the night picnic first describes Pinky's failed attempts to bring back the stars. In a later flashback, Ethan asks whether Pinky finally defeated the monster and returned the stars to the sky, so that children everywhere can wish again. Julie answers with a smile. Ethan says it is a pretty good ending, and when he asks what Pinky wished on, Julie answers, "All she ever wanted was this". This ending differs from the earlier failed attempts. Through the link between creative writing and childhood play (Freud, 1908, as cited in Zittoun, 2019), it can be read as a hopeful resolution within the story. The film's closing animation then shows a small girl who blows a dandelion, its seeds spread across the sky like white stars, and she can see the stars again. The girl has the same key-shaped pinky as Pinky, so she can be read as Pinky. She can also be read as a child like Rachel, left behind: she is sad when the seeds fall, then finds comfort in stars that form a heart. The film does not say which reading is correct. This overlap can be read through Winnicott's (1971/1989) transitional space, where the line between the story and the child who receives it stays open. Both readings can be set against theme three, where the caregiving Julie received was uncertain.



Figure 11 Ethan, Teddy, and Rachel in Front of a Flower Covered Coffin

This theme addresses both research questions. For RQ1, Julie's stories can be read as a defense that comforts the children who read them but does not resolve her own fear or childhood trauma. For RQ2, the book links her early experiences of fear and uncertain love to a message she leaves for her children.

CONCLUSION

This study asked how *A Mouthful of Air* (Koppelman, 2021) represents Julie's imaginative world as a defense mechanism against her childhood trauma. It also asked how the film represents the influence of her childhood attachment experiences on the characters and narratives in her children's stories.

The first finding is that Julie's imaginative world, and "Pinky Tinkerbink" in particular, works as a defense that Freud's concept of sublimation helps explain. It gives form to her childhood experience, her trauma, and her struggle as a mother. The film also shows the limits of this defense. Julie's distress still appears in her relationships, in her fear for her children, and in the fragmented flashbacks. The

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second finding concerns attachment. Bowlby's concepts help read the father's contradictory behavior and the mother's silence as an unresolved attachment pattern. The film shows this pattern in Julie's fear of rejection and her ambivalence toward Teddy and Rachel. It also shapes her stories: the book links her early fear and uncertain love to a message she leaves for her children. Winnicott's concepts connect both findings. Ethan can be read as a holding environment with limits, and the book Julie leaves can be read as a transitional object.

This study offers a literary reading of how one film represents maternal psychological distress. Its original contribution is to read Julie's own children's stories as part of that representation, through defense, attachment, and transitional concepts together. In this film, creative work shows how defense and attachment interact in one character. The film also suggests that Winnicott's transitional concept can extend to a written text left for others. These implications come from one film and need testing in other texts.

The study rests on textual and theoretical interpretation of selected scenes. For this reason, the findings describe how the film represents distress. They do not diagnose Julie or make clinical claims. Future studies can compare the film with Koppelman's novel and apply the same framework to other films or novels about maternal distress. They can also examine film techniques, such as the blurred flashbacks and the animated ending, and use reception studies to test whether viewers read these scenes in the same way.

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