

## Escapism in the Comic Book *Requiem of the Rose King* by Aya Kanno

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### ABSTRACT

This research discusses the escapism of the second main character in Aya Kanno's comic series *Requiem of the Rose King*. This research aims to find the factors behind the second main character's experiences he had and the defense mechanism that makes him create a way to escape from reality by analysing his characterisation. The data is taken from the historical-dark fantasy comic series *Requiem of the Rose King* by Aya Kanno which ran internationally from 2015 and is still ongoing. Researcher using descriptive qualitative method for analysing the data with psychoanalytical approach by Freudian theory about ego defense mechanism. Escapism as avoidance behaviour, suggesting that only the negative aspects of the phenomenon being measured. A defense mechanism is the emergence of resistance to internal stress, a progression of unconscious ego activities. This research shows several factors, such as the adultery of the second main character's mother, the throne, and the rape that caused him to experience trauma and the escapism he did is the outcome of his defense mechanisms. The researcher also found seven defense mechanisms that suit the characterisation of the second main character, such as denial, repression, projection, fantasy, sublimation, rationalisation, and regression.

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### INTRODUCTION

Comic is a medium used to express ideas with images, often combined with text or other visual information. It typically takes the form of a sequence of panels of images. Comics are an arrangement of pictures and words that aims to value the reader. Comics always use the drawing space and layout. So the images formed a story, which is outlined in forms and signs. Comics are also included in literary works, also known as illustrated literature (Bonnet, 1998: 7). According to Babic (2014) in her book *Comics as History, Comics as Literature*; In 1985, comic books finally got their own full-length discussion within the academic literature in Will Eisner's *Comics as Sequential Art*. Eisner's work looked at comics as art and literary forms with sequential expression. He marked comics as literary forms because their stories bear a strong resemblance to those of literature.

In this research, the researcher uses the comic series *Requiem of the Rose King* as the object. This comic series is written and illustrated by Aya Kanno. Internationally, the series is licensed for an English-language release in North America by Viz Media under the company's Shojo Beat imprint. Aya Kanno herself is one of the Japanese comic artists who use her real name in her work instead of her pen name like some comic artists out there. She debuted in 2001 with her first fantasy-action comic series entitled *Soul Rescue*. She is best known for her work entitled *Otomen*, a romantic-comedy comic series which published in 2009-2014, and has been one of the best-selling in New York Times in America. *Requiem of the Rose King*, the historical-dark

fantasy comic series and the latest work of Aya Kanno, has become popular nowadays since it is based on the Shakespearean plays and is being licensed by Viz Media for the English version of this series.

The story was loosely based on Shakespearean play Henry VI, part 3 and Richard III, the series presents an intersex version of Richard III during the tumultuous Wars of the Roses period in English history. The conflict started with Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York who sent a protest against King Henry VI. The son of York, little Richard, has got influenced by his father to be his next successor in leading England, as a king. After his father's death, Richard pursues the throne that is represented by the "light" to fulfil his deceased father, Duke of York's dream. To reach his goal, he should fight against Lancaster and take over Henry VI's position as a king at that time. Richard never met Henry VI in person in his life even though he is the son of the Duke of York. One day, when he was little, he met a man that shares the same name with the King, Henry, in the woods when he tried to escape from incarceration during Wars of Roses. Henry hides his true identity when he meets Richard for the first time, and introduces himself as a shepherd. Henry tells Richard that being a king is not as happy as being a shepherd. Richard, who has a different view from him, tells otherwise because his father ever said to him that there is paradise lying in the king's crown. Henry hides his identity for no reason but to escape from the reality that puts him under a lot of pressure due to experiences he had. The amount of Richard and Henry dynamic in this comic series makes them become the main characters. As the author writes on her Twitter, Henry and Richard are two sides of the same coin. They never walk on the same side, but they are one.

Nensia (2018) stated every person in daily life faces stress, depression or unpleasant situations in life. These psychological symptoms lead a person to seek an outlet to get rid of or release pain, stress, and depression. This circumstance is called escapism. Igorevna (2015) defines escapism as an avoiding behaviour and proposes to measure only negative aspects of the phenomenon. This escapism is a form of ego defense mechanism as Anna Freud defines in her book *The Ego and Mechanism of Defence* (1966) the defense mechanism is the occurrence of a resistance of internal stress, an advance of unconscious ego activity.

Since the background of this story takes place in the English medieval period, people back then thought that someone who had mental disorders is evidence of demonic powers and is a form of sin, as stated by Hurlock (2019), early 20th-century studies of medieval psychology by men such as Edwin Boring and Gregory Zilboorg underscored the argument that people with mental illness in the Middle Ages were viewed as possessed and were "tortured" and "punished" as a form of "treatment". Arguments have been made in several later works. All of this implies that there is little or no understanding of the causes or effects of mental illness, and that insanity is an overt and highly intuitive sight. This object material is chosen because the researcher finds this work has a lot of interesting things to be analysed related to mental state, and Henry is chosen to be the one chosen because his complexity in personality and psychology–mental state, make the researcher want to know the cause behind it. The researcher also wants to know about the type of his defense mechanisms that provide him a way to get acquainted with escapism by using Freudian theory.

## METHOD

The researcher used the descriptive qualitative method with a psychoanalytical approach by Anna Freud. Seixas, Smith, and Mitton (2018) stated that qualitative description represents the category of methodologies with the lowest level of reasoning among qualitative methods, one that allows "the reading of lines, as opposed to reading into, between, over or beyond the lines.". The researcher used this method to find and describe escapism as a defense mechanism and the type of it, and also the factors of the second main character trauma in the Aya Kanno's comic series, Requiem of the Rose King.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Freud's structural theory of the mind divides the human mind into three entities: internal drive (id), ego, and superego. According to Freudian theory, defense mechanisms involve a distortion of reality that one-self uses to protect themselves from anxiety arising from particular unwanted thoughts or feelings so that they are better able to cope with a situation. Psychoanalytic investigation of the problems of defense has developed in the following way: beginning with the conflicts between the id and the ego institutions (as exemplified in hysteria, obsessional neurosis, etc.), it passed on to the struggle between the ego and the superego (in melancholia) and then proceeded to the study of the conflicts between the ego and the outside world (cf. the infantile animal phobia discussed in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*) (Anna F, 1966: 69). There are examples of defense mechanisms, such as denial, repression, projection, fantasy, sublimation, rationalisation, and regression.

There are several factors that caused the second main character, Henry, trauma and this makes some impact on his characterisation. The description of the factors and Henry's characterisation can be seen in the quotation.

### Characterisation and Factors

Henry VI was a King of England, he is known as a weak king who disliked war and devoted himself to Christ. His weakness was also described by Margaret, his wife, on the battlefield during Wars of the Roses in volume 2 chapter 6.

#### Excerpt 1

"Timid, cowardly, shameless King. I should never have become your wife." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 2 chapter 6)



**Figure 1** Margaret refers Henry as timid, coward, and shameless king on the battlefield

The dialogue represents Henry's characterisation as a weak person. His weakness and religious-self are the examples of the impact that was caused by his trauma and the way to cope with his illness.

#### Excerpt 2

"Stop there, Margaret. I have no desire to dye this great land with the blood of our brethren. If you have the power and enormous army of the king...you should be able to cause our opponent to retreat without shedding blood."

"It seems you have recovered from your illness."

"Everything is...as God wishes it." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 1 chapter 2)



**Figure 2** Henry begs to Margaret to stop the war

The dialogue describes Henry as a king that doesn't love war. He also has an illness that Margaret mentioned and Henry just replies to her hopelessly, letting God decide. It is all emphasised by the underlined words.

### Excerpt 3

"Our Father who art in heaven. Deliver us from evil... For Thine is the Kingdom, the power...and the glory, forever and ever. Amen." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 1 chapter 4)



**Figure 3** Henry was praying for their army during the war

The panel above explains Henry as a devout Christian also can be seen where he was in the chapel during Wars of Roses, praying for his army who fights in the battlefield, before he gets arrested by Warwick.

#### Excerpt 4

"Fool. The king is an extremely devout Christian." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 1 chapter 3)



**Figure 4** Henry ran away in the middle of the banquet

More evidence to support the data about Henry as a devout Christian can be seen the guardians respond to Henry who ran away in the middle of the banquet to celebrate their winning towards York due his anxiety arising.

There are some factors that caused his trauma. First is because of the throne.

#### Excerpt 5

"Your Majesty. You must not rely on your mother forever. You must take on the burden of your illustrious father who left us too young. Listen closely to what we tell you...and comport yourself magnificently, as a king should. His Majesty King Henry the Sixth. Long may he live!" (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 1 chapter 3)



**Figure 5** Flashback when little Henry get crowned

The huge responsibility to take care of England becomes the cause of his trauma. The big expectation that everyone put onto him as he was crowned when he was a little made him experience a lot of pressure.

#### Excerpt 6

"I'm not the king... I'm free..." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 2 chapter 8)



**Figure 6** Henry realise he is no longer a king

This panel is evidence that the throne is one of the factors that caused his trauma. It can be noticed when Edward IV takes over the monarchy means he is no longer a King. He smiles happily realising that.

Another factor that caused Henry trauma is when Henry was a little, he saw the adultery of his mother and an unknown man right in front of his eyes.

#### Excerpt 7

"My mother's faithlessness and betrayal. It shadowed me...endlessly. Almost like a curse."

"And so...you fear them? Women...are demons?"

"No... It is not women I fear. What I fear is...desire. To love... Desire...is a sin."  
(Requiem of the Rose King, volume 5 chapter 20)



**Figure 7** Henry tells Richard about his fear

This panel shows how traumatic that event was for him as he considered it like a curse to him when he tells Richard about his fear about his mother's faithlessness and betrayal towards his late father. In the end, it made him think that desire to love someone is a form of a sin.

### Escapism as Defense Mechanism

These factors caused Henry's trauma to lead him to get acquainted with escapism. The researcher found seven defense mechanisms as explained above that Henry uses.

#### 1. Denial

Denial is a direct refusal to admit or acknowledge that something has happened or is happening. The efforts of the infantile ego to avoid unpleasure by directly resisting external impressions belong to the sphere of normal psychology (Anna F, 1966: 71).

#### Excerpt 8

"It's not my fault...! I had no choice...I had no choice...!" (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 2 chapter 6)



**Figure 8** Henry's denial about the York's army death

Henry often uses his denial defense mechanism to avoid the reality he sees in front of his nose. The bitter reality he experienced makes his anxiety arise since it is triggering his trauma. In that panel, Henry, who is against war, is forced to see the death of the York's army in the battlefield by Margaret. Henry, who indirectly takes a part of this war, breaks down to curse himself. His mental state is unstable and his denial defense mechanism is shown by saying that that was not his fault.

#### **Excerpt 9**

"Ah...! I can't...!"

"Are you all right...?"

"I- I'm sorry... Lightning...I'm not good with lightning..." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 3 chapter 10)





**Figure 9** Henry lies to Richard about his fear of lighting

That day, in the cottage, when Richard and Henry spend their night by dinner and sharing stories. There was lightning blitz across the window, makes Henry reminded of that night where he gets raped by his own wife, Margaret of Anjou. There Henry's expression changed, terrified, but in the second after he changes his expression again toward Richard as if that's not a big deal as he is in denial about the unwanted event that has just appeared inside his mind.

## 2. Repression

Repression is the withdrawal from the consciousness of a threatening idea, event, or desire by repressing it into the unconscious part of the mind. In repression the objectionable idea is thrust back into the id. (Anna F, 1966: 122).

### Excerpt 10

"Have you calmed yourself? It's because you've hardly eaten these past few days."  
"No. That's not it. Sometimes... I get like that. When...women touch me..." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 5, chapter 20)



**Figure 10** Henry tells Richard about the reason why he got like that

His trauma because of the rape Margaret did towards him and the adultery of his mom and an unknown man

become unacceptable behaviour and traumatic events for Henry. His defense mechanism makes him bury those memories to avoid his anxiety rising. In volume 1 chapter 3, shown when Henry is on the dinner table, attending the banquet which has many female dancers there. Seeing them perform in revealing clothes made his anxiety arise and he decided to quit the banquet and went to the chapel. In volume 5 chapter 20, when Henry follows Richard to the pond, they get approached by a bunch of women who are about to bath there. One of them started to touch Henry and that action triggered Henry's anxiety. His face turned pale and he was about to throw up. Then he grabs Richard's wrist to run away from there as he tries to not recall those memories.

### 3. Projection

Projection is a form of defense in which unwanted feelings are displaced onto another person, where they then appear as a threat from the external world. A common form of projection occurs when an individual, threatened by his own angry feelings, accuses another of harbouring hostile thoughts. In projection it is displaced into the outside world. Another point in which projection resembles repression is that it is not associated with any particular anxiety situation but may be motivated equally by objective anxiety, superego anxiety, and instinctual anxiety. (Anna F, 1966: 122).

#### Excerpt 11

"I dream about my mother abandoning me. Still in the end...always...God will save us." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 1 chapter 2)



**Figure 11** Henry tells that his mother abandoned him

Henry told Richard about his nightmare when they met again in the woods. He says that his mother abandoned him as a reaction as he projected his hatred towards his mother.

#### Excerpt 12

"I have...nightmares. My mother...was a demon." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 5 chapter 20)



**Figure 12** Henry calls her mother is a demon

He projected his hatred towards his mother and thoughts that his mother hates him as well by calling her by demon because of the unpleasant event he saw of his mother's adultery that left him trauma.

#### 4. Fantasy

Fantasy is when the ego loses its power to overcome significant amounts of objective dissatisfaction. Fantasy avoids problems by imagining them as distant or detached from reality. (Anna F, 1966: 92).

#### Excerpt 13

"Once you count out the time, then you divide it up. First, what to go after the flock. How many days until the ewes are pregnant. How many weeks until they give birth ... What a delightful life! A shepherd is far happier than a king." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 1 chapter 2)



**Figure 13** Henry tells Richard that a shepherd is far happier than a king

The thoughts of being a normal person, without a crown, and living his life as a shepherd is Henry's fantasy to cope with his anxiety because of the trauma he has. He talks a lot about things a shepherd does.

**Excerpt 14**

"I want to be with you. I want to go to that forest again, the two of us. And then I want to pick fruit and tend sheep...and simply pass each day in time with the church bells. Quiet, peaceful days..." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 2 chapter 5)



**Figure 14** Henry imagines living peacefully with Richard

That panel explains Henry's fantasy about living alone with Richard because from imagining that, his mind becomes more peaceful like the peacefulness he imagined inside his head.

**5. Sublimation**

Sublimation, i.e., the displacement of the instinctual aim in conformity with higher social values, presupposes the acceptance or at least the knowledge of such values, that is to say, presupposes the existence of the superego. (Anna F, 1966: 52). Sublimation is similar to displacement, but takes place when we manage to displace our unacceptable emotions into behaviours which are constructive and socially acceptable, rather than destructive activities.

**Excerpt 15**

"All the shepherds do this."

"You're...a shepherd?"

"Me...? I am!" (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 1 chapter 2)



**Figure 15** Henry meets Richard in the woods and claims himself as a shepherd

Henry was always met by Richard in the woods and he always introduced himself as a shepherd, common villager, and a traveller. He never addresses himself as a king because for him, being a shepherd is far happier than a king, like what he said in that panel. The suppression he gets since he is crowned since he was little created sublimation as a defense mechanism.

#### Excerpt 16

"Travelling like this...talking freely with citizens...going where the winds take me... Never had it in the palace or on the battlefield. This happiness..." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 3 chapter 9)



**Figure 16** Henry being a traveller

Since the palace gives him pressure, when he is no longer a king, Henry travels by himself to find Richard in volume 3 chapter 9. He pretended to be a traveller this time and had a conversation with other villagers. His action is a form of sublimation since he can reduce his stress and feel happy, doesn't like it when he is in the palace.

## 6. Rationalisation

Rationalisation is a cognitive distortion of "facts" to reduce the threat of events and make its appearance less threatening. (Anna F, 1966: 32).

### Excerpt 17

"So many times I have dreamed of them. Those eyes... This hair... These lips... This heat... I've never had thoughts like this before... More than anyone else his presence has saved me. He is my cherished friend. And yet at some point I found him. I found him...beautiful. These thoughts rule me. They make it hard to breathe ... Stop! Stay Away! Stay away from me... Demon!" (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 7 chapter 30)



**Figure 17** Henry realising about the desire he had on Richard

When Henry was arrested in the Tower of London, he nearly lost himself due to his mental illness in the panel, until Richard gets asked to kill him. Richard goes to the tower and wears a dress to show his true identity as an intersex, showing his feminine side in front of Henry for the last time before he kills him. Richard wishes to be loved by Henry, yet Henry whose trauma leads by lust and desire, deep inside he also wants Richard. Henry gets aroused and kisses Richard until his rationalisation defense mechanism makes a refusal and blames Richard by calling him demon, just like he calls his mother so.

### 7. Regression

Regression is a reversal, or reversion to an earlier stage of the mental structure that has reached, and is as old as the instinct itself in response to stressful situations. (Anna F, 1966: 63).

#### Excerpt 18

"We are in a race against time! Stop dawdling and advance on York's army!"

"I don't want to...I don't want to fight anymore..." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 1 chapter 3)



**Figure 18** Margaret asked Henry to declare a war, but Henry refused it

In some situations, the inner-child of Henry comes up as he acts like a kid whenever he is with Richard. Due to his status as a King of England since he was a little, this describes that he loses his childhood as well. Henry's regression defense mechanism also appears once he argues with his wife, Margaret, about war. It can be seen in that panel that Henry curled up hugging his feet when Margaret talks to him in a rising tone.

### Excerpt 19

"What happened? Are you ill...?"

"It appears I fell asleep while waiting for you." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 3 chapter 10)



**Figure 19** Richard found Henry fell asleep

Henry's regression often makes his personality get softened and pure like a kid. There is a scene when he hugs Richard, asking him to be his friend just like a kid making friends with kids their age. He also becomes silly around Richard as it is shown in that panel when Richard finds Henry fall asleep on the ground.



### Excerpt 20

"He didn't have to tie this many. Is he a child..." (Requiem of the Rose King, volume 5 chapter 20)



**Figure 20** Richard look at the smarks Henry made

Richard himself also calls Henry's behaviour like a child when Henry tells him that he finds a pound and he already marked the way to help Richard get there in that panel.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, the researcher found that in the comic book Requiem of the Rose King by Aya Kanno, the second main character, Henry, experiences trauma caused by the throne, the adultery of his mother, and also the rape that his wife, Magaret, did to him. These factors create his characterisation becoming a weak king and known as a devout Christian who doesn't love war. It also makes him unconsciously build ego defense mechanisms to protect him from the unwanted feeling and unpleasant events that bother him. His ego defense mechanisms provide him a way to escape or get away from bitter reality, problems, and unpleasant situations. The researcher found seven defense mechanisms that Henry used to get acquainted with escapism in his circumstances, such as denial, repression, projection, fantasy, sublimation, rationalisation, and regression. Henry often uses regression, fantasy, and sublimation in this matter.

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