

Analysis of Mrs. Ramsay's Emotions and Behaviors in to the Lighthouse based on Adult Attachment Theory

Jiajie Weng

School of Foreign Languages, Henan University, Kaifeng, China

1197719857@qq.com

Abstract. Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness novel *To the Lighthouse* portrays the complex and contradictory character of Mrs. Ramsay through extensive psychological descriptions and unique artistic techniques. Based on the adult attachment theory in psychology, this paper analyzes her complex emotional and behavioral expressions and explores the existence of two types of attachment: explicit and implicit. Meanwhile, through the theory, this paper attempts to analyze Mrs. Ramsay's character from a psychological perspective as accurately and comprehensively as possible so as to appreciate the unique intention of the author in shaping this character.

Keywords: Adult Attachment Theory; *To the Lighthouse*; Mrs. Ramsay; Virginia Woolf.

1. Introduction

To the Lighthouse is one of the masterpieces of Virginia Woolf, a British female writer who is famous for her stream-of-consciousness novels. Taking "to the lighthouse" as a clue, this novel tells the story of Mr. Ramsay's family and their friends, including Mr. Tansley, Mr. Bankes, and the artist Lily, who spent their vacation in a seaside villa with the lighthouse as their destination. Mrs. Ramsay promised her youngest son James to take him to visit the lighthouse on the rocky island by boat, but the bad weather prevented them from doing so. [1] With time elapsing, things had changed. After the First World War, Mrs. Ramsay passed away. Mr. Ramsay revisited the villa with his children and guests, and the novel ended with James finally reaching the lighthouse. The novel is divided into three parts, including "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse." Through extensive psychological descriptions from a third-person perspective and the significant contrast in Mrs. Ramsay's emotional attitudes towards other characters, the novel portrays the complex and contradictory character of Mrs. Ramsay. After researching, it is found that the adult attachment theory in psychology could be a powerful tool to uncover the complexity of Mrs. Ramsay's emotions and behaviors. Therefore, this paper will attempt to analyze and interpret Mrs. Ramsay's seemingly conflicting emotional and behavioral expressions from a new perspective based on the adult attachment theory in psychology.

2. Adult Attachment Theory

British psychiatrist John Bowlby first proposed the attachment theory of the relationship between infants and their mothers, which was later validated by his student Mary Ainsworth through the Strange Situation Test. By 1987, personality and social psychologists had expanded the theoretical research to the adult stage and found that adults also form attachment relationships with intimate objects such as family, friends, and partners, similar to the early mother-infant relationship. According to the theory, there are three common types of adult attachment styles: secure, anxious, and avoidant. Secure individuals have stable self-esteem and trust, and are able to establish healthy and stable interpersonal relationships. When conflicts arise, they can actively resolve problems to maintain balance in the relationship. They feel comfortable relying on others and are also willing to be relied upon by others. Anxious individuals usually have weaker self-esteem and are prone to feeling depressed and undervalued. [2] They tend to be overly cautious and dependent on others' approval in attachment relationships. Avoidant individuals tend to be distant and independent in intimate relationships, preferring to keep their distance. These three attachment styles do not

necessarily exist in individuals in a “one or another” way, but rather in a mixed way, with one or more types coexisting.

Furthermore, attachment patterns are formed in early years **but can change with the environment. This aspect allows the theory to become a way of analyzing complex mixed attachment personality types.** Applying the adult attachment theory to analyze the complex circular characters in the novel can provide a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the contradictory nature of Mrs. Ramsay's kind, capable, and dependable image presented to others, and her strong desire for approval and over-dependence on others in her inner world. Combining this with the historical background of the oppression of women in the novel's era, **readers can understand the inevitability of her mixed attachment type.** Mrs. Ramsay exhibits both secure and anxious attachment behaviors, which reflects the contradictory nature of her character. However, the secure and anxious attachment styles are unified in her, and exist in different forms of explicit and implicit expressions.

3. Mrs. Ramsay's Explicit Attachment Style

In the novel, Mrs. Ramsay is portrayed as almost perfect in the eyes of others. She is kind, virtuous, beautiful, and charming, providing her family and guests with a continuous source of confidence and sympathy. Others unconsciously rely on her, and she also embraces this desire for reliance. Therefore, from the perspective of others, Mrs. Ramsay's outward appearance is closer to that of a secure attachment personality.

Mrs. Ramsay meticulously raised her eight children, cared for and encouraged her husband, and tirelessly satisfied his emotional needs for sympathy. Mr. Ramsay was a philosophy professor who delved deep into the field of metaphysics, engaging with it all day long. When he became worried and doubtful about the value of his research, Mrs. Ramsay would often discuss it with him in the late hours of the night, or simply stay by his side in silence. This ability to provide long-term emotional comfort to others is a significant manifestation of Mrs. Ramsay's secure attachment style. In addition to comforting and encouraging him, Mr. Ramsay also occasionally needed sympathy and validation of his vanity, which Mrs. Ramsay was never tired of providing. Therefore, after Mrs. Ramsay's sudden death, Woolf, through the perspective of the character Lily, portrays Mr. Ramsay's melancholy and sadness, which also becomes the reason for his insistence on taking two children to the lighthouse in the third part of the novel. The lighthouse symbolizes Mrs. Ramsay, who, during her lifetime, often realizes that "the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her," so going to the lighthouse also carries the meaning of pilgrimage and remembrance of Mrs. Ramsay.

Mrs. Ramsay was not only considerate and affectionate towards her husband, but also attentive to her guests and friends. She was skilled at coordinating relationships between people, and worked hard to create a warm atmosphere of harmonious and friendly relations between guests and hosts, causing others to rely on her involuntarily. At the dinner party in the Ramsay household, Mrs. Ramsay presided over the event, observing and discerning the mood and behavior of each guest. She keenly captured any discordant factors between guests and skillfully resolved them. When she noticed that Mr. Bankes was somewhat reticent throughout the dinner, making the atmosphere a bit awkward, she took the initiative to strike up a conversation, allowing Mr. Bankes to be integrated into the dinner party. When she noticed that Lily was somewhat displeased with Mr. Tansley, and even caused Mr. Tansley to say some impolite words that disrupted the atmosphere, she signaled with her eyes, causing Lily to change her attitude and give Mr. Tansley a way out. This harmonious and friendly dinner party later became a cherished memory for the guests and friends, who never forgot it even after Mrs. Ramsay's passing.

4. Mrs. Ramsay's Implicit Attachment Style

Underneath her secure exterior, Mrs. Ramsay harbored an implicit anxious attachment style, which was mainly a product of the social and cultural oppression of women at the time. Her anxious attachment style was mainly manifested in her inner motivations for caring for her guests, her behavior towards her husband, and her strong pursuit of a sense of order and regulation. Only Lily perceived her implicit attachment style, and compared Mrs. Ramsay's inner self to "a twisted finger on a crumpled glove". This "twisted" behavior was mainly manifested in three aspects.

Mrs. Ramsay's excessive emotional dependence on her husband and her behavior of actively belittling herself while elevating her husband. Mrs. Ramsay always paid excessive attention to her husband. In her world, her husband was always the first priority, and as a wife, she took pride in being obedient to her husband, to the extent that her subconscious emotions would fluctuate accordingly. In one detail mentioned in the novel, when the conversation between Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Tansley was interrupted, Mrs. Ramsay's emotions suddenly fluctuated from mental tension to emotional exhaustion. It was not until Mr. Ramsay's mechanical chanting appeared that she returned to normal and felt relieved and at ease. [3] From this, it can be seen that Mrs. Ramsay was excessively dependent on Mr. Ramsay emotionally, which is a typical manifestation of an anxious attachment style. Secondly, she always regarded her husband's order as the order, habitually approving of her husband. If Mr. Ramsay thought that Mr. Tansley was a "genius," she would also think that he must be exceptionally wise and show him utmost respect; if Mr. Ramsay walked over while she was putting her son to sleep, she would unconsciously distract herself and focus on whether her husband's emotional needs were being met. In addition, during the time that the Ramsays spent together, whenever Mr. Ramsay was present, Mrs. Ramsay would make herself appear lowly and actively belittle herself. "She did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband...that of the two he was infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in comparison with what he gave, negligible." [4] This behavior of actively belittling herself essentially stemmed from her inner insecurity as a woman, and only by being obedient to her husband, relying on him, and playing the role of a good wife and mother, could she feel safe.

Mrs. Ramsay's conflicting emotions towards her friends and guests are evident in her attitude towards Mr. Tansley, a talented but impoverished young man. While she initially sympathizes with and respects him, when he is verbally attacked by Mr. Ramsay, she becomes "cool, amused, and even faintly malicious," and considers "that was of little account to her." [5] This emotional inconsistency is not only due to her habitual acceptance of Mr. Tansley's talent, which her husband had praised, but also because her sympathy and respect for him were not based on an appreciation of his talent, but rather on "an attitude towards herself" and "something trustful, childlike, reverential." This reveals Mrs. Ramsay's strong desire for admiration and recognition from others, to the point where she even pretended "indeed to be friendly" to Mr. Michael, seeking his admiration and respect for her charm. Thus, Mrs. Ramsay's sense of self-worth is built upon the recognition of others, using their gaze to reflect and evaluate her own charm and beauty. This is a typical manifestation of an anxious personality, which, due to a lack of security, seeks excessive affirmation from others.

Mrs. Ramsay's strong pursuit of a regularized sense of order in life is evident, on the one hand, in her demanding requirements for creating a harmonious atmosphere and maintaining a sense of order in managing household affairs and coordinating relationships with guests. On the other hand, she insists that other female guests, such as the painter Lily, must marry and follow the same conventional and orderly path as she has. She insists that "she must, Minta must, they all must marry...An unmarried woman has missed the best of life." She persuades them to follow the same path of a conventional and happy family life. Mrs. Ramsay not only applies these almost harsh, standardized and conservative life beliefs to her own life, but also tries to impose them on others, which reflects the need for an anxious attachment personality to balance their inner sense of insecurity and instability with external order.

5. Conclusion

In the second part of the novel, "Time Passes," Mrs. Ramsay's death is depicted in a casual and understated manner by Woolf, while the following two parts of the novel portray the remembrance and commemoration of her spiritual radiance by her family and friends in different ways. Lily completes a painting that she had left unfinished for years, while Mr. Ramsay and the children make a pilgrimage to the lighthouse. This aftermath and ending reflect Woolf's unique intention. In creating this character based on her own mother, Woolf not only expresses her strong emotions of admiration and remembrance for her deceased mother, but also takes a clear stance on advocating women's liberation. The lighthouse symbolizes Mrs. Ramsay, and its steady and continuous light provides people with strength that lasts even after the passage of time. This signifies that Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual radiance and charm will be preserved, while her traditional and conventional views on marriage and relationships will fade away with the passage of time. Woolf explicitly praises Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual radiance, which is the charm of her external attachment personality that will endure, while implicitly criticizing her conservative views on marriage and relationships, which are the thoughts of her internal attachment personality that will eventually disappear. Through this ending, Woolf invites readers to explore the hidden internal attachment personality behind Mrs. Ramsay's seemingly perfect external attachment personality, and to fully and accurately understand the author's stance and intention in creating this character by combining both types of attachment.

References

- [1] Woolf Virginia, translated by Qu Shijing. *To the Lighthouse*. Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2011, p.1.
- [2] Li Tonggui, Kato Kazuo. Measurement of Adult Attachment: Chinese version of the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR). *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, 2006, Vol. 38(3), pp. 399-406.
- [3] Woolf Virginia, translated by Qu Shijing. *To the Lighthouse*. Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2011, p.17.
- [4] Woolf Virginia, translated by Qu Shijing. *To the Lighthouse*. Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2011, p.46.
- [5] Woolf Virginia, translated by Qu Shijing. *To the Lighthouse*. Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2011, p.17.
- [6] Li Tonggui, Kato Kazuo. Measurement of Adult Attachment: Chinese version of the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR). *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, 2006, Vol. 38(3), pp. 399-406.
- [7] Woolf Virginia, translated by Qu Shijing. *To the Lighthouse*. Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2011.