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Childhood-Affecting Life Development: A Study of the Attachment Theory in Patricia Highsmith's The Talented Mr. Ripley

A B S T R A C T

The study examines John Bowlby's The Attachment Theory in Patricia Highsmith's The Talented Mr. Ripley (1955). The Talented Mr. Ripley is the first novel in a series of five novels known as Ripley novels. The theory investigates the adverse effects When a youngster is deprived of a mother's care, moreover, Bowlby is particularly interested in the ways in which the child's personality changes over time due to the kind of bonds with his/her caregiver. A close link between a newborn and its caregiver is essential for a child's proper development, according to Bowlby. On the other hand, a distorted link between the newborn and his/her caregiver leads to neurosis. Psychologists are examining the character of Tom Ripley from Patricia Highsmith to discover the ways in which mental health is affected by his absence of an effective caretaker. The attachment theory offers a useful framework for figuring out how early life experiences influence a person's development.

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تأثير الطفولة على مراحل نمو الفرد المختلفة: دراسة لنظرية التعلق في رواية "الموهوب السيد ريبلي" للكاتبة باتريشيا هايسمث

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الخلاصة:

تتناول الدراسة نظرية التعلق لجون بولبي في رواية باتريشيا هايسميث الموهوب السيد ريبلي (1955) "الموهوب السيد ريبلي" هي الرواية الأولى في سلسلة من خمس روايات تعرف بأسم روايات ريبلي. تبحث النظرية في الآثار السلبية عندما يُحرم الطفل من رعاية الأم ، علاوة على ذلك ، يهتم بولبي بشكل خاص بالطرق التي تتأثر بها شخصية الطفل بمرور الوقت بسبب نوع الروابط مع مقدم الرعاية. يعتبر الارتباط الوثيق بين المولود الجديد ومقدم الرعاية أمرًا ضروريًا لنمو الطفل السليم ، وفقًا لبولبي. من ناحية أخرى ، يؤدي الارتباط المشوه بين الوليد ومقدم رعايته إلى الإصابة بالعُصاب. يقوم علماء

النفس بفحص شخصية توم ريبلي في رواية باتريشيا هايسميث لاكتشاف كيف تتأثر صحته العقلية بغيابه عن مقدم رعاية مؤثر. تقدم نظرية التعلق إطارًا مفيدًا لمعرفة كيفية تأثير تجارب الحياة المبكرة على نمو الفرد

الكلمات المفتاحية : التعلق ، علم النفس ، السلوك ، خبرات الطفولة

Introduction:

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth collaborated on the original Attachment Theory in the 1950s.According to Karen Hayslett-McCall and Thomas Bernard in *Attachment, masculinity and self-control* (2002), the origin of John Bowlby's theory the Attachment Theory can be traced in two papers which are: *The Influence of Early Environment in the Development of Neurosis and Neurotic Character* (1940) and *Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves: Their Characters and Home Life* (1944).

Bretherton (1992) asserts that Bowlby "revolutionized our thinking about a child's tie to the mother and its disruption through separation, deprivation, and bereavement." (p.759). Bowlby believes, Bretherton adds , that "actual family experiences were a much more important [than internal conflicts], if not the basic cause of emotional disturbance" (p.760)

However, according to Bretherton (1992), the conception of attachment figure as a "secure base from which an infant can explore the world" (p.759), is Ainsworth's contribution. In addition, she is credited with developing the notion of maternal sensitivity to newborn signals and the role that it plays in the formation of attachment patterns between infant and mother.

In *Implications of Attachment Theory for Developmental Psychopathology* (1999), Allan Sroufe et al. state that both normal and disordered development is evaluated in terms of the parent-infant bond, especially in the early stages of development. In *Attachment and Loss: Attachment* (1969) Bowlby states:

> … whereas almost all present-day psychoanalytical theory starts with a clinical syndrome or symptom—for example, stealing, or depression, or schizophrenia—and makes hypotheses about events and processes which are thought to have contributed to its development, the perspective adopted here starts with a class of event—loss of mother-figure in infancy or early childhood—and attempts thence to trace the psychological and psychopathological processes that commonly result. It starts in fact with the traumatic experience and works prospectively. (p.28)

Furthermore, in *Attachment and Loss: Separation, Anxiety and Anger* (1973), Bowlby maintains that the ability of the infants to cope with their world is derived from their feeling that they have a nurturing and protective parents or caregiver. Attachment in Bowlby's *A Secure Base* (1988) is defined as "any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived of as better able to cope with the world" (pp.26-27). When a child is a small infant, Bowlby (1973) believes that the link between the child and their primary caregiver is developed. In difficult situations,

these feelings of protection, whether physical or emotional, allow the infant to cope and provide a sense of security.

Hayslett-McCall and Bernard (2002) state: “Beginning in the 1940s, developmental psychologists [including Bowlby, Robertson, and Le Blanc] have documented that disruptions in early secure attachments to primary caregivers cause a variety of problems in later adolescent and adult life” (p.6). Children that are separated from their mothers, according to Bowlby (1973), experience considerable emotional distress because of the close bond that they share with their mothers. For some children, separation from their mothers causes them to cling to them and weep. Children who have had their parental attachments disrupted will grow up to be greedy, violent, and, most crucially, filled with delinquent tendencies if their bonds are not repaired, according to Bowlby (1973). Similarly, Sroufe et al. (2012) argues, for Bowlby, “poor or disturbed attachment is associated with risk for delinquency” (p.772).

In 1955, the American novelist Patricia Highsmith published her novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* which was followed by four subsequent novels centering on the same character, Tom Ripley. In *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Highsmith introduces the reader to her protagonist, who is more likely to be an anti-hero. Tom Ripley is a young man who is sent by a wealthy man called Herbert Greenleaf to Italy to convince his son returning home. Once he arrives to Italy, Tom Ripley establishes a strong relation with Mr. Greenleaf’s son Dickie. Ripley’s talent for evil deeds leads him to commit two murders, Dickies’ and Freddie Miles’, and he assumes Dickie’s identity . Ripley manages to escape retribution at the conclusion of the story.

The fact that his parents died when he was an infant clearly influences his personality development. Tom Ripley's neurotic nature is immediately apparent to the audience. The author, Patricia Highsmith (1985), writes: "Tom glanced behind him and saw the man coming out of the Green Cage, heading his way. Tom walked faster . There was no doubt that the man was after him" (p.1). Highsmith's writing makes it evident that her protagonist is an unsettled guy. When confronted with a scenario that calls for confidence, he comes out as terrified rather than confident. As a result, he feels threatened and hunted despite the lack of proof linking him to a crime.

Tom Ripley’s suspicions grow across the novel: “Mr. Greenleaf came into the room. His figure seemed to pulsate and grow larger and larger. Tom blinked his eyes, feeling a sudden terror of him, an impulse to attack him before he was attacked.” (p.22). Bowlby in *Attachment and Loss: Separation* (1973) describes the important role played by attachment by stating, when the need for security is unmet, the individual might view the world as “comfortless and unpredictable, and they respond either by shrinking from it or doing battle with it” (p.208).

John Bowlby in *Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves: Their Characters and Home Life* (1944), maintains that most of the delinquents which he encounters are affectionless. They do not have the ability to form connections with others intimately. The case is similar with Tom. When the readers come to learn about his intimate connections with others, they learn that the cycle of his acquaintance is very limited. As a result, he has a hard time making friends. Before departing for Italy, Tom had no one to share his plans with other than Cleo, about whom he knows very little about her personal life.

Disrupted connection between a child and a parent or caregiver may occur in one of three phases, according to Bowlby's theory of attachment. Hayslett-McCall and Bernard (2002) explain that the first stage is the protest. The second stage is despair while detachment is the term used by Bowlby to describe the third stage. During this period, the newborn begins to return to his or her usual activities, however this constitutes a significant stumbling block in the normal growth of the child who ,"appears to wall off and defend against attempts by people … to reestablish attachment relationships." (p.8). Tom's relation with Cleo is covered with suspicions: "Cleo always asked him up to her apartment, and there was somehow never any thought that he might ask her out to dinner or the theatre or do any of the ordinary things that a young man was expected to do with a girl." (Highsmith, 1955, p.26)

Deviant children, according to Bowlby (1944), were hindered in their development due of a sequence of events. Just a few of the possible causes of this deviation include childhood trauma and parental absence. Understanding Tom Ripley's current state of mind necessitates digging deep into his past. A child's absence from his or her mother may diminish the influence of mother figures and substitute moms. To Tom Ripley, on the other hand, things aren't quite what they appear to be. When he was a baby, his aunt Dottie took care of him after his parents were killed in a car accident.

Having a sense of belonging to a larger family has a positive effect on an individual's mental and emotional health. It's a very different story for Tom Ripley. I think it would be great to have some sort of mother figure in one's life. Having lost his parents, Tom's life has been thrown into a state of flux. To Aunt Dottie, Tom has always been a source of annoyance. She always makes fun of him and humiliates him: "Aunt Dottie insisted that his upbringing had cost her more than his father had left in insurance, and may be it had, but did she have to keep rubbing it in his face? Did any human body keep rubbing a thing like that in a child's face?" (Highsmith, 1955,p.33).

John Bowlby is concerned about how the traumatic situations would affect the lives of those who experience them. Tom Ripley recounts an incident that has stayed in his mind as he prepares to go for Europe:

> He thought suddenly of one summer day when he had been about twelve, when he had been on a cross-country trip with aunt Dottie and a woman friend of hers, and they had got stuck in a bumper-to-bumper traffic jam somewhere.It had been a hot summer day, and aunt Dottie had sent him out with the Thermos to get some ice water at a filling station, and suddenly the traffic had started moving. He remembered running between huge, inching cars, always about to touch the door of aunt Dottie's car and never being quite able to, because she had kept inching along as fast as she could go, not willing to wait for him a minute, and yelling, 'Come on, come on, slowpoke!' out the window all the time. When he had finally made it to the car and got in, with tears of frustration and anger running down his cheeks, she had said gaily to her friend, ' Sissy! He's a sissy from the ground up. Just like his father!' (Highsmith, 1955, p. 34)

Frank Elgar et al. (2003) asserts that antisocial behavior can be predicted by "Difficult parent-child relations and inadequate parent discipline—potential sequelae of insecure attachment" when they can be "developmental precursors to disruptive and antisocial

behaviour in adolescents" (p.36). Now and then, Tom remembers the vows which he made to run away from aunt Dottie during his early adolescence. Among the violent scenes which he has imagined is that aunt Dottie "trying to hold him in the house, and he hitting her with his fists, flinging her to the ground and throttling her, and finally tearing the big brooch off her dress and stabbing her a million times in the throat." (Highsmith, 1955, p.35)

Jeertjan Overbeek et al. (2005) argue, the attachment between the individual and their parents or caregivers is "one of the most powerful predictors of juvenile delinquency" (p.40). It's not just a source of comfort and safety; it's also a key factor in lowering stress and depression-related anxiety. Tom Ripley's rise to criminality is linked to his difficult childhood and the harsh treatment he suffers from his aunt Dottie.

He has been ignored and abandoned by Dickie Greenleaf, who has been spending a lot of time with his buddy Marge, with whom Tom believes Dickie to have an intimate relationship, before he executes the specific act of killing Dickie. When he learns that Dickie and Marge are alone in her apartment, Tom sat on the balcony "staring at the vague empty line of the horizon and thinking of nothing, feeling nothing except a faint, dreamlike lostness and aloneness … he was alone … he began to feel a tingling fear at the end of his spine, tingling over his buttocks" (Highsmith, 1955, p.74).

After the murder, a "new-born" Ripley tries to adapt to his new surroundings. In spite of his chilly and detached demeanor, he is able to operate in normal social circumstances. Although he grew up in a working-class family, his lack of cultural sophistication and impoverishment among his New York pals alienates him from his mostly wealthy, middle-class European colleagues. He feels cut off from the people of France, Italy, and Greece, and his connections with them suffer as a result:

> But he was lonely […] he had imagined himself acquiring a bright new circle of friends with whom he would start a new life with new attitudes, standards and habits that would be far better and clearer than those he had had all his life. Now he realized that it couldn't be. He would have to keep a distance from people, always. He might acquire the different standards and habits, but he could never acquire the circle of friends (Highsmith 1955, p. 159).

Tom Ripley may have changed his mind about killing Dickie Greenleaf if he had felt sorry for him before the crime. According to Althea Horner in *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Therapy* (1991), one of the most important outcomes of infants' attachment to their parents or caregivers is the experience of empathy. They develop self-restraint and empathy as a result of receiving sympathy from a parent or caregiver. When potential criminals look at others as humans rather than objects that can serve to fulfill their desires, they are less likely to harm them. Because Tom has not grown up properly, he does not think with the act of murder in sympathy. His aunt Dottie bears a great deal of responsibility for his emergence as a murderer. She does not nurture the principles of sympathy and affection inside him, instead, her cruelty just worsen the matter.

Conclusion:

This study examines the effect of Bowlby's Attachment theory on Tom Ripley in Patricia Highsmith's The Talented Mr. Ripley (1955). The quality of early interactions with caretakers has a significant impact on social ties, according to Bowlby. Tom's behavior has deteriorated dramatically because he no longer has a guardian .

It is clear from the story that Tom, the alleged assassin, has no concern for human life and no sense of guilt. An in-depth and critical reading of the novel is utilized to investigate this feature of its portrayal. To read this novel is to see the world fall apart in the most bizarre and horrible way possible. Highsmith brilliantly illustrates how Ripley, a self-professed psychopath, imposes his own rules on a cosmos that, with few exceptions, offers no resistance.

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