



# Father-son Attachment and Familial Dynamics: A Psychoanalytic Study of Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park*

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**Abstract:** This study examines the application of Attachment Theory to Bret Easton Ellis' novel *Lunar Park* (2005). It studies how early emotional connections in infancy with parental figures shape the protagonist's emotional development, relational patterns, and sense of self. Using John Bowlby's theoretical framework, which argues that early caregiver relationships form the foundation of later interpersonal relationship patterns, this study argues that Ellis is the product of emotionally distant parents, especially of his domineering father. The failure in emotional availability leaves psychological effects on his persona. Ellis fictionalises himself as Bret Easton Ellis, whose dominating and critical father generates a sense of inadequacy in him. This unhealthy paternal bond manifests in Ellis' adult life as detachment, mistrust and emotional instability. These traits later impair his marriage and his relationship with his son. The novel thus reveals how inadequate paternal attachment perpetuates cycles of emotional malfunction across generations. By reading these texts through the lens of Attachment Theory, this study reveals that the protagonist's emotional alienation is psychological prints formed within early familial settings. Ellis depicts the long-lasting consequences of insecure attachment that later affect his relationships in adulthood.

**Key Words:** Attachment Theory, Lunar Park, Bret, Familial Dynamics, Insecure Attachments

## Introduction

Parent-child relationship and its influence have been widely considered both in literature and psychology. Beginning from Freud's interpretation to the current understanding in psychology, it has gained widespread attention among psychologists and intellectuals. John Bowlby also acts as one of the influential figures, who mostly emphasised the profound impacts of the child with parental figures and their impacts on the child's development of personality and later his interpersonal relationships. Bowlby's interest grew in the 1950s when he studied cases of children in orphanages who were deprived of parental figures in early infancy. He proposed that children's experiences with their parental figures develop "internal working models" which later become blueprints for the child's emotional growth and relationships with others. He proposed that children who experience relationship instability in their early years tend to show its influence, which persists throughout the rest of their lives (Bowlby, 1973). It was also further studied by Mary Ainsworth, whose study further advanced Bowlby's theory in a new direction. Ainsworth proposed the attachment styles that children develop in their infancy through the interaction of parental figures. Secure attachment is characterised by emotional stability, trust in one's relationships and a positive reflection on one's own self.

On the other hand, children with insecure attachment patterns reflect in their personality with lower self-esteem, a lack of trust in the availability of the attachment figure. It leads to patterns of avoidance towards relationships as a defence mechanism, avoiding emotional connection to prevent separation, which leads to anxiety and emotional breakdown for them. Bowlby's work connects psychoanalysis and empirical psychology; he believed that the roots of psychological disturbance lie not in repressed emotions of the child, as Freud argued, but in the early emotional disruptions with the parental figure. Bowlby proposed empirical evidence gained from clinical studies of children and adults. In this context, Bowlby's theory can be helpful in analysing characters by tracing their emotional detachment, internal conflicts and unstable relationships to their childhood experiences with their caregivers. Through the perspective

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of attachment theory, the characters' self-worth, intimacy and destabilised interpersonal connections reveal a broader understanding and approach to anxiety, parenting and repressed emotional pain. Contemporary fiction reflects an increasing number of works concerning emotional numbness, upset relationships with romantic partners and with parental figures. The current works resonate with our cultural shift in working hours, decreasing the time spent with children. All of these concerns reflect Bowlby's argument that children who were emotionally neglected reflect the same traits in their personality in their adulthood, making the cycle continuous and perplexing through generations.

Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park* (2005) depicts a story which, through the attachment theory, provides a broader understanding of adult weakened relationships and his anxious personality. The narrator's continuous drug abuse and alcohol consumption following his disrupted emotional connection with his girlfriend, his wife, and his own children, highlights Bowlby's claim that through an avoidant attachment pattern as a defence mechanism, people deal with early rejection and inconsistent parental availability. Ellis's continuous fear of intimacy, be it with his girlfriend or his wife, suggests his insecure attachment pattern. To cope with this fear, Ellis succumbs to substance abuse. The narrator's persistent effort to connect with his wife and children comes from the cyclical nature of the attachment pattern. Ellis shows emotional detachment towards his wife and son. The emotional detachment that he consistently exhibits comes unconsciously from his earlier experiences with his parental figures, especially his father.

*Lunar Park* (2005) not only depicts the influence of early relationships on the characters but also shows how the disruption pattern creates one's perception of reality, suggesting Bowlby's core concept that internal working models once built persist throughout the rest of one's life. Ellis's idea of connecting the real and supernatural can be understood as the repressed emotions coming into consciousness, which intrude on his life, affecting his relations and his perception of his own self. Thus, the application of attachment theory gives a profound understanding of the character's psyche, which this paper attempts to find out.

## Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative approach to study and analyse John Bowlby's concept as a lens to gain a deeper understanding of the characters. A qualitative approach helps understand individual and group ideas as part and parcel of human social life. Mainly, it focuses on analysing descriptive data in the shape of words and stories and thematic interpretation to understand human behaviour in connection with these. This study focuses on a descriptive approach to delve deeper into narrative analysis. Thematic analysis is focused on the characters who struggle with their interpersonal relations and emotional instability. The thematic analysis is focused on the characters' actions, dialogues and behaviour that emerge from their interpersonal relationship patterns.

## Attachment Theory as Theoretical Framework

Before attachment theory was proposed, Freudian interpretations were mainly the subject of parent-child relationships. Focusing on unconscious desires, repression and the Oedipal complex, to interpretations that were mainly concerned with personal interpretations without clinical evidence. Attachment Theory, which started developing in the early 1950s, suggested a more emphatic view of the child-parent relationship. Bowlby bases his theory completely on the relation between infant and caregiver, rejecting any idea that indicates instinctual drive. He mainly focused on early, effective caregiving provided to the child, believing that it was the root of the personality of the child as an adult. Every family forms a distinctive relational pattern shaped by multiple influences, including cultural context, economic conditions, individual personalities, ways of communication, attachment tendencies, and significant life experiences (Segrin et al., 2013). In his *Attachment and Loss* (1973), Bowlby proposed that early inconsistent or lack of emotional or physical care can hinder the child's ability later in life to form secure emotional bonds, which are associated with trust and the formation of healthy relationships, having a positive view of one's own self. For him, this early negligence leads to an insecure attachment model associated with anxious and avoidance behaviour towards interpersonal relations.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory focuses on humans' behaviour, which is shaped by individuals as a result of emotional attachment towards them. He also suggests that these emotions include anxiety, psychological distress, and anger, which are followed by separation. He is of the view that a child feels relaxed, cheerful and happy in the company of his



mother. However, when he loses his mother or feels her absence, he becomes distressed, protests her absence and strives to gain contact with her. A study by Simpson and Rholes (2020) suggests that Bowlby's Attachment Theory corroborates Darwin's notion of survival in the ancestral environment: "attachment system was genetically wired into our species through directional selection. At its core, the attachment system is designed to detect and respond to potential threats when they arise" (p.224). The theory further argues that a child in his second or third year craves his mother's presence, but this longevity is less evident during the later years of the child. In spite of that, the child develops an impression of the loss of his mother during the later years and in adolescence. This is especially seen when he is in danger or facing trouble. Bowlby argues that many types of psychological distress are the result of the detachment of the mother from a child, which shapes the child's behaviour in his later years in life. "Thus, what is happening in these early years is that the pattern of communication that a child adopts towards his mother comes to match the pattern of communication that she has been adopting towards him" (Bowlby, 1991, pp. 294 – 295). Ease of communication should therefore lie at the heart of the development and maintenance of patterns of attachment. This theory focuses on the relationships that are formed between infants and their caregivers. According to this theory, the father acts equally for the child's emotional development; therefore, any caregiver who acts as the primary and secondary source of emotional support affects the child's psyche in terms of his personality and interpersonal relations.

Scholars have considered Attachment Theory to interpret and understand character psychology who deal with interpersonal relations, familial early disrupted attachment with parents. Works such as McNierney (2016) show how early parental attachment develops traits for the child's personality and becomes the ground for him to see himself and the world. By focusing attachment bonds on emotional development rather than instinctual drives, attachment-based reading on characters reveals a better and profound understanding that emotional instability is also altered by a lack of empathy and inconsistent caregiving experiences with caregivers. Here, literature serves as a reflection of emotional negligence on characters' behaviour throughout their life.

Ellis's *Lunar Park* has caught widespread attention globally through its mixture of real and supernatural elements, containing a horror fictional autobiography. Critics have seen its elements as self-reflexive and its commentary on modern American culture. However, besides these interpretations, there lies a wide interpretation for it also deals with personal failure, interpersonal, and familial dynamics, which have caught less attention so far. Through Attachment Theory, one can gain a better and profound understanding of the characters' personal conflicts and their metaphoric representation of unconscious repressed emotions. Attachment Theory is imperative in understanding Ellis's disrupted attachment bonds with his wife, his son and his self-destructive habits, including substance abuse and a highly negative approach to his own self. These types of narratives often serve as grounds for Bowlby's argument that attachment patterns once developed persist throughout the rest of one's life, and it is also passed from one generation to the next.

## Discussion and Analysis

Nielsen (2011) describes *Lunar Park* as an "overdetermined autofiction," compelling readers to interpret the text simultaneously as both fiction and reality. Ellis fictionalises himself in his novel with his lost identity and self-destructive actions. Nielsen (2011) argues that this classification allows critics to merge the identities of author and narrator, which is an approach that, under ordinary circumstances, would require extensive justification and evidence. Young (1993) asserts that it is through fiction that we come to know reality better. For him, it must be cherished and considered.

Mumme (2013) is of the view that Ellis's constraining figure of father is the major factor for deterioration for him. He believes the reason this lost identity is the figure of his father, who operates as a controlling and restrictive figure within Ellis's body of work. This repeated character symbolises authority, power, and emotional distance, shaping the lives of other characters through control and fear. Across Ellis's novels, the paternal presence often represents the source of psychological conflict. In *Lunar Park*, this suppressing image of the father reaches its most extreme form, becoming fundamental to both the narrative and the protagonist's inner dilemmas.

It is seen that *Lunar Park* revolves around complex relationships between parents and children. Bret Easton Ellis, who is the protagonist of the novel, is in his autobiographical fiction. He exhibits problems with relationships, first with

his girlfriend Jayne, who later becomes his wife. Ellis also shows a disturbed attachment pattern towards his children, especially to his son. According to Brennan and Shaver (1998), the attachment bond emerges from the infant's early interactions and experiences with the primary caregiver during the initial years of life. Ellis acknowledges that he has fallen in love with Jayne, his girlfriend, but fears that his relationship might be ending. He says, "Though Jayne had fallen in love with me and wanted to get married, I was simply too preoccupied with myself and felt the relationship, if it kept running its course, would be doomed by summer" (Ellis, 2005, p. 16). Mikulincer and Horesh (1999) proposed that individuals with different attachment styles tend to think, experience emotions, and behave in distinct ways within their relationships. These anxious attachment patterns tend to persist in Ellis's adulthood with his girlfriend, later his wife and then with his children too. It is also seen in the novel that Ellis divorces his wife after some years of struggle with their relationship. Ellis acknowledges his troubled relationship with his father, who was authoritative when Ellis was a child, and this had a great impact on how he developed as an adult. Ellis asserts, "My father had always been a problem—careless, abusive, alcoholic, vain, angry, paranoid—and even after my parents divorced when I was a teenager (my mother's demand) his power and control continued to loom over the family" (Ellis, 2005, p. 10). This line reflects the narrator's disorganized attachment he had with his father. The continuation of "power" even after the divorce of their parents for the character posits the constructed internal working model which still persists through his life. Bowlby claims that whatever expectations are built in those years tend to persist throughout life.

In the first three months of marriage, he tends to start having problems in his marriage. He goes for couples counselling, Jay, a friend of his, exclaims, "You're in couples counselling...After three months of marriage?" (Ellis, 2005, p. 59). The statement reflects a profound failure of emotional security and attachment patterns with the most intimate adult bond. This suggests Ellis's anxious attachment style, which he developed in his early years. The marriage is a relationship that Ellis forms with his wife. But if he had trouble in his early years, he will exhibit the same trait in his later years, which he is showing in his marriage. The intimacy that is lacking in the marriage is the product of the transition from childhood to adulthood that Bret experiences. The intimate connection with a mother or a substitute that could provide a child a secure base was not available in Ellis's case. This becomes the reason he feels it is difficult for himself to have a secure and healthy marital bond.

Ellis's emotional connection with Jayne is from the beginning an anxious one; he feels a sense of separation even in their marital relationship. Ellis exclaims that the only thing that has stopped that marriage from breaking up is that his wife loved him, acknowledging that, from his perspective, the marriage is already broken. He narrates, "According to Jayne, the 'most amazingly sad aspect' of our marriage was that she still loved me" (Ellis, 2005, p. 117). This underscores that Ellis has anxiety towards breaking the relations. He witnessed the divorce of his parents in his teen years. If such things are seen as a child in early years, these will also influence the relationships in later life. Bowlby (1973) claims that if a child feels a threat of separation or actual separation, it will influence their attachment style as an adult. This will further affect his relations with his romantic partner, his parents, and even with his own children. He asserts that children will then exhibit "difficulties of every degree in making and maintaining close affectional bonds, whether with parent figure, with members of the opposite sex, or with own children" (Bowlby, 1973, p. 14). Bret's intimacy with his wife also becomes strained, and in an episode, he exclaims not to know the reason why he feels a sense of detachment towards his wife, which highlights the pattern, mainly an unconscious behaviour.

As mentioned earlier, the cyclical nature of relationship patterns tends to pass from parents to their children. Ellis claims, "We learned from our father's behaviour that the world lacked coherence and that within this chaos people were doomed to failure, and these realisations clouded our every ambition" (Ellis, 2005, p. 10); for Ellis, his father was the measure of all things. He built the perception of the world and self through his father's connection with him, building his "internal working models. Internal working models are defined by attachment theory as the inhibition of the perception of the world and one's own self through the experiences with parental figures. These models are the reason for how the child sees the world and himself around it. "My father had blackened my perception of the world, and his sneering, sarcastic attitude toward everything had latched on to me" (Ellis, 2005, p. 10). It is evident from the following lines that the characters' lives had been profoundly influenced by their father. These are also shown in the protagonist's attachment style with his children.

As the theory suggests, the previous attachment figure will shape a child's pattern of attachment and emotional growth, which will later become the child's reality as an adult. The protagonist's son, Robby, has also developed an avoidant attachment pattern that he received from his father. Ellis sees him distanced towards him, though he tries to be in a close emotional bond with him, but his son does not see it. His son has developed the same attachment that the protagonist has developed due to his connection with him: "how well a parent copes with stress is indicative of how well a child will deal with it" (Ellis, 2005, p. 219). According to Fearon and Roisman (2017), children show anxiety when they are worried or frightened by a threat and seek support from an attachment figure. Children are emotionally vulnerable and desire to be near someone whom they can trust and have confidence in their availability. However, if in these situations parents are not there, the child feels a sense of insecurity. Ellis's son also develops the same "internal working models" that he developed; therefore, in an episode, he says, "I was now my father. Robby was now me. I saw my own features mirrored in his—my world was mirrored there" (Ellis, 2005, p. 233). These lines reflect the fear that whatever working models the protagonist has developed are seen in his own son.

His son develops avoidant attachment pattern towards his father. In an episode when Ellis wants to engage in a conversation with him, his son is seen emotionally detached. He does not want his father nearby him. "I was so disarmed by his smile that I almost backed out of the room. I started to smile back but then realized: he was putting on a performance" (Ellis, 2005, p. 233). This suggests that the protagonist's son has a strained relationship with his father. Attachment is built through building safe bonds with being available to a child's emotional and physical need. In another episode Ellis' son Robby closes the door behind him and refuses to talk to him. Ellis does not ask him multiple times due to his fear of emotional detachment and rejection from his own son. He feels a sense of avoidant pattern from his own son whenever he tried to be near him and this might emotionally be difficult for him, "I didn't ask again because I couldn't bear what his reaction might be" (Ellis, 2005, p. 211). This line reflects signs of avoidant attachment. The fact that this is not incidental that the protagonist says that he fears that his reaction might be avoided, is the reason that the action by his child may have been repeated early. Avoidant attachment style is a repeated cycle, continuously ignoring close attachment or emotional connection to the attachment figure. As a child Robby has been neglected emotionally by his father, now he tends to show these traits in his own personality.

## Conclusion

When examined through Bowlby's Attachment Theory, *Lunar Park* comes as a profound study of how early relational patterns with caregivers shape the adult psyche. Ellis' *Lunar Park* reveal the lasting psychological influence of early attachment experiences on human relationships, perception and emotional development. Through this perspective of attachment theory, the novel exposes how early interactions with caregivers form internal working models that shape how individuals perceive love, security, and self-worth throughout life. Ellis' detachment, narcissism, and self-destructive habits come from an avoidant found in his father's coldness and hostility. His adult personality reflects emotional disconnection and addiction, which is a defense mechanism against the vulnerability he associates with love. The novel's atmosphere shows the unresolved attachment conflict he carried with him. Bret unconsciously repeats the past with his own son, Robby, portraying the intergenerational cycle of emotional neglect.

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