

Abandonment Issue in the Main Character of Joan G. Robinson's *When Marnie Was There*Marita Inas Qonita¹✉, Prayudias Margawati²

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Abstract

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Family plays a critical role in shaping a child's psychological development. An ideal family consists of each member fulfilling their assigned role. The absence of stability and love that a family offers can lead to long-term effects on children, especially if it happens to an infant. Joan G. Robinson's *When Marnie Was there* explores the psychological struggles around children who experience separation from their primary caregiver and their inability to receive a secure environment. Therefore, this study aims to do an in-depth analysis on psychological problems of the main character who experience abandonment issue and what factors cause her to experience abandonment issue. This study uses qualitative methods by applying John Bowlby's attachment theory and Carl Jung's psychoanalytic theory, especially about insecure attachment. The novel shows how the abandonment issue was described and what factors cause it through the main character of the novel. The separation and instability that the main character experiences in her early childhood shapes how the main character perceives the world. It reflects Bowlby's attachment theory that psychological development of a person is shaped by what they experience in their infant phase, even if they can't remember what happened and also represents Jung's archetypes.

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INTRODUCTION

Family is a group of people who are related could be by consanguinity, by recognized birth or by affinity, for example by marriage. They could be united by the ties of

marriage, blood, or adoption, constituting as a single household and interacting with each other in their respective social positions, usually those of spouses, parents, children, and siblings.

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Ideally, a family should consist of the people each filling in their role in their respective social position. A family should be able to provide love, support, and stability for its members, building a sense of belonging and well being. Each member should be able to feel that they are being valued, respected, and understood, with open communication and shared values. An ideal family should be functional, able to function with open communication, respect, clear boundaries for each member, and a secure environment that will foster individual development and growth. It's about how they are working together as a unit, how they manage conflicts constructively, and how they are supporting each other's well being. There are no definite standards that could determine what an ideal family really is, but a successful family often shares traits like clear roles of each member, the time spent together between each other, strong communication, adaptability to stressors, appreciation and encouragement, and connections between its community.

When an ideal family could not be formed, it becomes dysfunctional. A dysfunctional family lacks the qualities that a functional family should have. Such families could be lacking in love, support, and stability, and potentially cause harms to its members. They might experience physical and emotional abuse, neglect, or have a member who is unwilling to fulfill their respective role as a member of a family. When a family member is unable to fulfill their role, it could be caused by an absence physically or emotionally, it can disrupt the balance in the family system. This could lead to its members facing the consequences of the disruptions.

As stated above, an ideal family should consist of a complete member each fulfilling their respective roles and they could be facing consequences if there are disruptions in their family systems. When a member is missing, the other will be forced to compensate for the empty role. It may also cause the other

member to have emotional strain which makes them feel resentment, guilt, insecurity or anxiety, long-term psychological effects, breakdown in relationship, and role-shifting or overcompensation. However, the absence of a family member usually isn't voluntary. There are many things that cause them to be absent as a family member, thus unable to fulfill their role, for example separation. Sometimes when this happens, parents have to be separated from their children due to many causes. It could be financial problems, conflicts in the place where they live, work obligations, etc. Children who are separated from their parents are thus put in the foster home. Foster homes are temporary living arrangements for children who are removed or separated from their family due to many circumstances, with the goal of reuniting them with their parents or finding them an adoptive family.

After World-War II in Britain, particularly from the late 1940 until the 1960s there were rises of foster homes as part of child welfare policy. This happened because Britain was facing many problems. They have to deal with thousands of orphaned and displaced children, widespread poverty and housing shortages, a desire to rebuild society with stronger welfare and child protection systems. This phenomenon was reflected in a novel by Joan G. Robinson with the title *When Marnie was There*.

In Joan G. Robinson's *When Marnie was There*, which takes place in North Norfolk England presumably around late 1950s or early 1960s, Anna becomes the representative of the children who are separated from their parents and then placed in foster homes, waiting to be reunited with their family or finding adoptive parents. Anna becomes the reflection of the life of the children post-war in Britain. Children in foster homes often face a range of emotional, psychological, social, and practical challenges, even if they are placed in a safe and well-meaning

environment because these problems usually stem from past trauma, instability, or the nature of the foster care system itself. Many children in foster care have experienced abuse, neglect, or abandonment which may cause them to suffer from anxiety and depression, Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem or self-blame, feeling unwanted or rejected which can lead to emotional shutdown or aggression, behavioral and development problems, identity and belonging struggles, attachment and trust issues. All these problems could be causing abandonment issues, which happens in Anna as the representative of the children who face similar problems. Anna has experienced separation since the early of her life which is closely related with the problems caused by post-war and living in foster homes until she found a loving adoptive family, and in result, she had to suffer long-term psychological effects, thus having abandonment issue.

The abandonment issue is closely related with attachment theory. Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby, explains the deep emotional bond that forms between a child and their primary caregiver. Bowlby argued that this bond is biologically rooted and essential for survival, and that early attachment experiences shape the individual's emotional, social, and cognitive development. Bowlby (1969) argued that the first few years of life represent a critical period during which the quality of these attachments has a profound impact on socio-emotional development. Central to his theory is the concept of the secure base, which enables a child to explore the environment confidently while knowing that a caregiver is available for support when needed (Bowlby, 1969). Another key component is the development of internal working models, mental representations formed from early attachment experiences, which influence one's self-concept, view of others, and expectations in future relationships (Bowlby,

1973). Bowlby also highlighted the negative consequences of disrupted attachments, particularly maternal deprivation, which he linked to emotional disorders such as anxiety, aggression, and "affection-less psychopathy" (Bowlby, 1980). Overall, attachment theory provides critical insights into how early relational experiences shape psychological well-being across the lifespan. In John Bowlby's attachment theory, insecure attachment develops when a child's early experiences with caregivers are marked by inconsistency, unresponsiveness, rejection, or neglect. These patterns disrupt the formation of a secure bond, which is essential for healthy emotional and social development.

Abandonment issue can also be interpreted using Carl Jung's psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concept of the Shadow, Anima, and individuation. Jung (1969) described Shadow as the part of the unconscious that holds the aspects of the self we reject or cannot accept, often formed from early emotional trauma. These unacknowledged emotional wounds often manifest in how we relate to others. Jung argues that we project unconscious contents, especially from the Shadow or Anima, onto external figures. And Jung's concept of individuation is the process by which the ego becomes integrated with the unconscious. Including the shadow. This process leads to wholeness and psychological maturity.

Previous researchers has examined *When Marnie Was There* from another perspective. They examined the movie that also focuses on the main character, Anna. The study aims to investigate the processes and stages involving grief through Tonkin's theory in the movie. The study analyzes how Anna deals with her grief in four stages, Numbing, Yearning, Disorganization, and Reorganization. (Buntoro, 2024).

Abandonment issue was also discussed in an article by another researcher using Leo

Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* novel. The study focuses on the main character's instability and fear of abandonment through a psychological lens using Susan Hoeksema's Concept of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). The goal of the study is to explain the symptoms of borderline personality disorder and the fear of abandonment in the main character. (Wenanda, 2022).

Another article talks about the concept of abandoned child and emotional neglect in a movie titled *Shoplifters* (2018). It aims to find how the *Florida Project* and *Shoplifters* project the child abandonment and emotional consequences the child goes through (Sashidaran, 2018).

These studies from previous researchers either focused on the same novel with different approaches or similar topics with different objects. The author of this study would like to provide a different approach on the novel *When Marnie Was There* and the theme of abandonment issue. The author aims to find the description of abandonment issue and the factors that cause abandonment issue in the main character of the novel *When Marnie Was There*.

METHODS

This study applies a qualitative method to achieve the objectives. According to Manen, qualitative research aims to grasp the meaning of something in human experience through the reflective interpretation of lived texts (Max van Manen, 1990). Additionally, Creswell suggests that qualitative method is used when a problem needs to be explored, when a complex, detailed understanding is required, or when the researcher seeks to understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (John W. Creswell, 2013). In this study, the author uses a qualitative method because it is the most appropriate method to use in understanding the behavior of individuals as

the object of the research thoroughly. According to Braun and Clarke, the researchers identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within data and interpret various aspects of the research topic (Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 2006).

In this study, the author is the instrument in gathering relevant data to support this topic. The primary data of this research are events, direct quotes, and the descriptions of characters derived from the novel *When Marnie Was There* by Joan G. Robinson. The secondary data of this research are obtained from journals, articles, books, and other credible sources. The collected data is then further analyzed using John Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Carl Jung's Psychoanalytic Theory.

The qualitative approach in this research is used to analyze how the lack of stability in early childhood that Anna as the main character experienced is depicted and the impact on Anna's psychological state in the long term. John Bowlby's attachment theory is used to critically analyze Anna's psychological development and behavior. The main focus of this research is to thoroughly analyze how the illustration of abandonment issue is described through the psychological state of Anna and what factors are causing her abandonment issue.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section addresses the abandonment issues faced by the protagonist in *When Marnie Was There*. Anna, the primary subject of this study, is examined for her psychological issues that have led to the development of abandonment issue. The disruption in her early infancy leads to the manifestation of many symptoms associated with abandonment issues in her adolescence. Anna experienced psychological issues such as loneliness, feelings of unworthiness, difficulties in trusting others, emotional

sensitivity, and anxiety, which hindered her capacity to cultivate meaningful relationships, even in a stable and secure environment. This illustrates the relevance of John Bowlby's attachment theory, particularly about the influence of early caregiver interactions on emotional development and behavior. This discussion will examine the portrayal of Anna's abandonment issues experienced by Anna as the main character and the factors that cause abandonment issue.

The Description of Abandonment Issue in the Main Character of Robinson's *When Marnie Was There*

Separation from a primary caregiver in early childhood significantly contributes to the development of abandonment issue. Consistent and responsive caregiving during infancy and early childhood is crucial for establishing healthy attachment ties. Prolonged or traumatizing separation in a child, such as due to parental divorce, death, imprisonment, or neglect, can interrupt connection formation and result in insecure or disorganized attachment styles. Bowlby's attachment theory suggests that early relationship experiences shape an individual's internal working models of themselves and others, and disruptions in these experiences may lead to persistent anxiety, fear of rejection, and challenges in trusting others (Bowlby, 1988). Children raised without a consistent parental figure may internalize emotions of inadequacy or anxiety that all interactions will ultimately result in abandonment. Zeanah and Gleason (2015) emphasize that early caregiver loss or neglect is significantly correlated with attachment disorders and subsequent emotional dysregulation, including increased sensitivity to perceived loss or separation. Consequently, these individuals may encounter difficulties in identity formation, emotional control, and establishing healthy, stable relationships in adulthood.

Anna demonstrates numerous behaviors linked to abandonment issue, such as social withdrawal, self-isolation, and a low self-image. Her conviction of being fundamentally distinct from other children is not solely a personality trait but possibly a psychological protective mechanism. Levy et al. (2011) assert that insecure attachment styles, specifically anxious and avoidant types, are significantly associated with concerns of abandonment. Individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment styles sometimes misinterpret situations as rejection, leading them to either cling to or entirely avoid connections. Anna inclines towards the latter, dismissing others defensively to avoid potential harm.

"Well, it's about Mr. and Mrs. Preston. I told you they're kind to me and they are, but I thought they took care of me and everything because they--well, because I was like their own child, but I found out a little while ago"--she lowered her voice almost to a whisper---"*they're paid to do it.*" (Robinson, 2002, p. 115)

The quote above illustrates Anna's struggle with trust in others. She distrusts her foster mother's kindness, indicating her belief that it is insincere. She views herself as undeserving of love, believing that others just desire her for their own benefit, thus revealing her profound insecurity. This fear arises from the absence of a maternal figure and the disruptions she experienced during her early infancy. This causes her to harbor skepticism towards others who express affection, believing their sentiments to be conditional and insincere. Anna believes that once they cease to get value from her, they will abandon her, since she perceives herself as worthless. Due of Anna's insecurity, she believes that others would not gain value from loving her unless they are compensated for their care. Nonetheless, despite her

insecurity, there were also indications of her desire for intimacy and unconditional love. Despite her foster parents' unconditional love, Anna's psychological state is skeptical, as she perceives their affection as transactional, believing it will cease if the government no longer compensates them. Anna's fundamental idea was deeply ingrained in the belief that she is unlovable, a significant indicator of abandonment trauma.

“But Anna was not interested. Not anymore. She knew perfectly well, though she could never have explained it to Mrs. Preston, that things like parties and best friends and going to tea with people were fine for everyone else, because everyone else was “inside”---inside some sort of invisible magic circle. But Anna herself was outside. And so these things had nothing to do with her.” (Robinson, 2002, p. 12)

In *When Marnie Was There*, Anna regarded herself as inherently excluded from love, belonging, and ordinary human connection. This internalized feeling of isolation signifies the psychological impact of early abandonment, according to John Bowlby's attachment theory, which characterizes it as an insecure or avoidant attachment style. After losing her parents in childhood and entering foster care, Anna grows up without a stable, emotionally responsive caregiver, a crucial factor for establishing secure attachment. Consequently, she internalizes a belief of her unworthiness of love and anticipates rejection from others, prompting her to emotionally withdraw and maintain distance from people. Her feelings of alienation are both social and existential, stemming from a deep fear of abandonment and a lack in confidence in forming a normal human relationships.

“I hate her. And I hate my mother. I hate them all. That’s the thing...”

Marnie looked at her with puzzled eyes. “But your mother couldn’t help being killed,” she said. Anna looked surly. “She left me before she was killed,” she said defensively, “to go away on a holiday.”

“And your granny couldn’t help dying,” said Marnie, still reasonable.

“She left me, too,” Anna insisted. She went away. And she promised to come back and she didn’t.” She gave a dry little sob, then said angrily, “I hate her for leaving me all alone and not staying to take care of me. It wasn’t fair of her to leave me---I’ll never forgive her. I hate her.” (Robinson, 2002, p. 114)

Anna expresses deep feelings of betrayal and lingering sorrow. Despite Marnie's logical justifications, which include death and unavoidable circumstances, Anna clings to the emotional belief that she was deliberately abandoned. The remark implies that Anna perceives loss not as a sad occurrence but as a personal rejection. Her grief transforms into rage, a typical protective mechanism in children experiencing abandonment. Her recurrent hateful remarks suggest an ambivalent emotional condition. She yearns for love and connection, yet shields herself with hatred as a defense mechanism. Anna's outburst exposes the fundamental trauma of abandonment. Her incapacity to establish strong bonds following recurrent losses renders her emotionally unstable, distrustful, and cautious about intimacy. Her statements reflect not authentic animosity, but rather a child's anguished reaction to emotional and physical abandonment.

“But how could Marnie have gone without a word?” (Robinson, 2002, p. 145)

This rhetorical inquiry expresses shock, betrayal, and confusion. Anna has emotional disorientation. For an individual with abandonment trauma, this directly taps into the core wounds. Marnie had emerged as a representation of stable attachment for Anna, an individual to whom she ultimately confided. Her appearance marks the symbolic arrival of the Anima, Jung's archetype representing the inner emotional world and often appearing as a mysterious feminine figure which functions as a psychological mirror and supposedly reparative attachment figure. However, her abrupt disappearance triggered Anna's trauma, reflecting past events with her mother and grandmother, who departed due to unavoidable reasons. The quote implies that Anna anticipates relationships to end unexpectedly. Due to her comfort in the perceived safety and intimacy provided by Marnie, Anna experienced not just shock. She experienced a sense of betrayal.

"Anna could never forgive her for that. And she would never trust anyone again.
The hurt inside her hardened. She pushed away the tray and lay down again." (Robinson, 2002, p. 145)

The quote above indicates that Anna underwent an emotional and psychological collapse. The pain and betrayal she experienced compelled her to establish a formidable emotional boundary for self-protection. Her reluctance to forgive serves as a protective mechanism to avert additional emotional harm, indicative of avoidant attachment behavior. Anna represses her emotional demands and creates distance to evade suffering. She rejects connection as a means of self-preservation.

"Then, turning her face to the wall, she closed her mind to everything."
(Robinson, 2002, p. 145)

This quote definitely illustrates Anna's emotional detachment, a characteristic of abandonment trauma. Long-term rejection or neglect results in emotional suppression, detachment, and depressive manifestations. To avoid the painful feeling of being unloved, Anna isolated herself from whatever she believed could impact her. It is a psychological defensive mechanism that resembles depression.

Anna's internal struggle, self-isolation, mistrust in others, and emotional detachment signal an avoidant attachment pattern, a form of insecure attachment where she doesn't think others are not dependable and closeness is dangerous. Anna makes a barrier between her and her foster parents, because she doesn't want them to be close and makes her depend on her foster parents. As the quotes that have been mentioned before, Anna mistrusts others' kindness and excludes herself from the world. Jung's concept of Shadow explains the internalization of this abandonment as part of Anna's unconscious psyche. Jung (1969) argues that the Shadow contains the rejected, painful aspects of the self, which manifest in distorted behavior and emotion. Anna's Shadow is filled with fear and resentment from being left by her family and never feeling truly "wanted." These feelings are then projected through all the quotes that have been mentioned before, showing Anna's abandonment issue.

"For goodness' sake!" Mrs. Lindsay exclaimed. "You're drenched! What have you been up to? Have you been outside in all this?"

"Yes," said Anna, and she laughed. "But I'm inside now!" (Robinson, 2002, p. 255)

Anna's conversation with Mrs. Lindsay above has dual meaning. First, it literally means how she was drenched because she was outside, but she's then inside the house.

However, the second meaning actually symbolizes Anna's individuation. The conversation signaled how Anna has already found her place of belonging and no longer feeling excluded, as she not only has accepted her foster family but also embraced a new, unified sense of self. Further demonstrating the fulfillment of Jungian individuation.

The novel explores abandonment issues through the protagonist, Anna, and aligns with Bowlby's attachment theory and Jung's psychoanalytic theory. Anna's experiences with abandonment trauma create an insecure attachment due to her inability to develop in a secure and safe environment and reflect Jung's archetypes. Anna's early upbringing lacked the essential safety and stability required for a child's development and reflects on Jung's Anima and Shadow.

The Factors that Cause Abandonment Issue in the Main Character of Robinson's *When Marnie Was There*

The abandonment issue faced by Anna, the protagonist of the novel *When Marnie Was There*, greatly influenced her personality, relationships, worldview, and mental health. According to Bowlby's internal working model, Anna develops a negative representation. From an early age, she develops an unconscious belief system that she is unlovable, unable to rely on others, and that everyone she loves will ultimately abandon her. This psychological issue arises from several factors throughout Anna's life from early childhood to her adolescence.

"My father went away---I don't know where---and my mother married someone else." Anna's voice was flat and monotonous. "And then they went away on vacation---and I was staying with my granny---and they got killed in a car accident."

"Well, then my granny died."
(Robinson, 2002, p. 113)

One aspect contributing to Anna's abandonment issues is the death of her family. The quote above indicates that Anna lost her entire family long ago, presumably during her childhood. She lost not just her parents but also her grandmother.

"I think Marnie thought of the baby as her second chance. She was determined to do a good job bringing her up."
"She never got over the shock of Esme and her husband being killed. She was very sick after that, and she died later the same year." (Robinson, 2002, p. 245)

This quote implies that the time frame between the deaths of Anna's mother and grandmother is very close, establishing Anna's basic trauma. She endured early separation from her family due to parental divorce and death. This foundation triggers her attachment insecurity. Although she may not remember it accurately, it continues to influence her evolving sense of safety and trust. Bowlby believes that infants require persistent and affectionate caretakers to build secure attachment. Anna exhibits a lack of safe attachment, resulting in feelings of anxiety, perplexity, and insecurity.

"I told you they're kind to me and they are, but I thought they took care of me and everything because they---well, because I was like their own child, but I found out a little while ago"---she lowered her voice almost to a whisper--
-"they're paid to do it." (Robinson, 2002, p. 115)

Additional variables contributing to Anna's abandonment issues include the

impact of foster care and emotional inconsistency. Despite her foster parents' kindness and good treatment, the aforementioned quotation suggests that Anna perceives their care as a matter of responsibility. The belief results in ambivalent attachment. She is unsure regarding the genuine love of her foster parents and lacks complete trust in the affection they provide. When a caregiver's affection appears uncertain, a child develops a belief that the individuals care solely out of obligation rather than genuine affection. This belief fuels Anna's skepticism and emotional detachment.

"She was standing with her back to Anna, pretending to look at some postcards in a rack and talking to her in a low voice. Again the other girl laughed, half-glancing over her shoulder at Anna." (Robinson, 2002, p. 52)

The quote above indicates that the girls of her age were laughing at her, aiming to ridicule her in front of others. She interprets it as rejection from others, intensifying her abandonment issues. This influences her thought processes and distorts her mentality, leading her to perceive neutral or ambiguous social interactions as rejection, even when people are not deliberately excluding her. This element contributes to Anna's abandonment issues, particularly self-isolation, and adversely impacts her self-esteem.

Bowlby claims that the relationships between infants and their caregivers influence the infants' psychological development, emotional control, and future interpersonal relationships. This theory resonates with Anna, who lacked the stability and security essential for a child's growth due to her prior separation from her primary caregiver.

CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that the novel portrays the protagonist's abandonment issues. This psychological condition arises from multiple situations encountered by the protagonist throughout her childhood. The protagonist loses her family in early childhood and eventually experiences instability due to the foster care system. The protagonist's abandonment issues are evident in her character, attitude, mindset, emotional condition, and behavior. It can be concluded that the novel demonstrates how abandonment issues originate from experiences in early life. Early separation from parents and lack of emotional security result in psychological issues, including mistrust, emotional detachment, and identity crises. Consequently, based on attachment theory, the protagonist's insecure attachment arises from unresolved psychological issues throughout her infancy. The issue of abandonment arises even in the lack during childhood memories, as the experiences are psychologically imprinted.

Additionally, we can also conclude that the main character reflects on Jung's archetypes, specifically Anima and Shadow. The main character's Anima comes in the form of Marnie which functions as a psychological mirror and reparative attachment figure.

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