

Gru's Emotional Development in *Despicable Me* (2010) Film through Attachment Theory

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"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

1 John 4:18 (NIV)

ABSTRACT

This paper reads that arc through Bowlby's attachment theory, which argues that children need a consistent, responsive caregiver to feel safe and regulate their emotions. Three questions guide the reading: how the bond between Gru and the girls changes over the movie, whether that change matches the stages Bowlby's theory predicts, and how lighting, camera work, and the girls' interactions with Gru carry that change visually. The method is close reading of scenes, dialogue, and shots, with attention to lighting, body language, framing, and color as markers of attachment. The movie is the primary text; the attachment literature provides the frame for interpreting it, rather than a separate body of evidence. The findings show: **1)** Gru changes the most, and the movie shows this rather than stating it. He starts cold and self-interested and ends up providing the girls with steady care and affection, a shift visible in how he talks to them and what he does for them, not just in what the plot tells us. **2)** The relationship follows something like the stages attachment theory lays out. It begins as exploitation, the girls useful to Gru's scheme, and turns into something closer to a secure bond once he starts responding to what they actually need. **3)** The look of the movie changes along with the relationship. Scenes before the turn are cold and dim. The bedtime-story scene, where the turn happens, is lit in warm purple, and the softer light matches the softer relationship on screen. This study shows that attachment, usually examined through clinical case histories or real caregiver relationships, can also be traced in movies through camera work, lighting, and color. *Despicable Me* demonstrates that visual technique can carry a psychological arc on its own, not just support the plot.

Keywords: *Bowlby, Attachment, Cinematography, Despicable Me, Emotional Development*

INTRODUCTION

Whether it is a movie or a storybook will have a huge impact on our daily lives and help us realize what reality is like in our own lives (Eagleton, 2008). The movie *Despicable Me* is also considered literature because it can influence children's growth in terms of their attitudes and how

they interact with others. Literature has become an inseparable part of our lives as it helps us understand human condition and gain a deeper understanding of our own lives and the challenges. .

The movie *Despicable Me* is a children themed movie as Gru transformed from a selfish and careless villain to a loving parent that makes it relatable and also helps them understand the moral lessons conveyed in the *Despicable Me* movie, as well as the values embodied in the characters (Charlotte Huck, 1987). It also shows the period when Gru became a villain, his ambition for success sometimes requires sacrificing happiness to achieve true success. The movie tells us that personal satisfaction is more desirable than happiness. In the movie, it is found that Margo, Agnes, and Edith are happier with Gru than they were at the orphanage; they also have more friends where Gru lives for example, they also socialize with the many Minions and with Gru, who cares deeply for them unlike at the orphanage, where they had few friends and no one cared about them.

According to Bowlby (1988), the *attachment* connects to many thousands of children in the orphanage who did not have a family and would feel depression and loneliness, that is why they have caregivers. They support the children and make them have a real feeling of having a parent in their own lives. Also it affects their emotional or feeling more stable towards themselves. According to UNICEF (2021) research many of the children feel unwell when they live without their parents will affect them to a bad social development and emotional towards others. Bowlby (1969) argued that it is extremely important for children to have caregivers or parents because this can shape their behavior; it can also help them understand what emotional bonds mean to them, and this can have an impact on their future. At the same time, the strong emotional bonds that Gru forms with Agnes, Margo, and Edith through which he demonstrates affection are extremely important for children.

Despicable Me was released on July 9, 2010, by Illumination and Universal Pictures, directed by Pierre Coffin and Chris Renaud and written by Cinco Paul and Ken Daurio. Rated PG, the animated heist comedy grossed \$543.6 million worldwide and ranked as the ninth highest-grossing movie of 2010. It was nominated for Best Animated Feature at the Golden Globes, BAFTA Awards, and Annie Awards, and won Favorite Animated Movie at the 2011 Kids' Choice Awards. It also launched a franchise, beginning with *Despicable Me 2* in 2013 and continuing across four further movies

Despicable Me follows Gru, a supervillain whose pride takes a hit when an unknown rival steals the Great Pyramid of Giza. He responds by enlisting his colleague Dr. Nefario and his Minions in a plan to steal the moon. Financing the scheme requires backing from Mr. Perkins, president of the Bank of Evil, who agrees only if Gru first obtains a shrink ray capable of shrinking the moon itself. Gru steals the device from a research facility in Southeast Asia, but Vector, the rival behind the

pyramid theft, ambushes him and takes it. After repeated failed attempts to get inside Vector's fortress, Gru spots three orphaned girls, Margo, Edith, and Agnes, who are allowed in to sell cookies. He adopts them under the pretense of being a dentist and plans to use them to distract Vector while he retrieves the shrink ray. Family, growth, kindness, and the conflict between good and evil run through the movie.

The theory that is used in this analysis is attachment theory, which is a psychological approach made by Bowlby. He introduced this theory in his book *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1 — Attachment*, (1969). Bowlby's main idea was to understand how emotional bonds between children and their guardian affect a child's development, behaviour and sense of security. The book shows that children naturally seek closeness to someone who could provide care and also protection. This main idea is shown in his statement that "*Attachment behaviour is any form of behaviour that results in a person maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual.*" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194). Therefore, this theory aligns with the movie *Despicable Me* because it shows how emotional bonds can grow between a guardian and children. In the movie Margo, Edith and Agnes are orphans who wanted love and support. At first Gru adopts them only for his plans which is saying that he will "*Steal the moon*" so there is no real emotional connection. But then, overtime he begins to start caring for them and the girls slowly trust him and see him as a father figure. This movie shows how attachment can develop through care, attention and emotional support. Based on Bowlby's theory, this kind of relationship helps children feel more secure and supported, which was seen in the growing bond between Gru and the girls.

Previous research by Dhiba and Juwita (2024) has examined emotional bonds and family relationships using Bowlby's theory from *Attachment and loss* (1969). In animated movies. In their study of "*Maleficent*" (2014), the researchers applied attachment theory to understand the emotional depth of evil, focusing on emotional bonds, affection, and revenge. Their study explains how a person's emotional experiences and affection can influence a character's behavior and personality development and mainly discusses how betrayal, trauma, and emotional pain shape *Maleficent's* personality and relationships.

Both studies explain that emotional experiences significantly influence a character's relationships and behavior. However, previous studies have analyzed trauma, revenge, neglect, and unhealthy relationships, they did not specifically discuss the development of secure attachment through caregiving, emotional responsiveness and even parental affection between caregivers and orphanage children. Meanwhile, Dhiba and Juwita (2024) focuses more on emotional conflict and revenge in *Maleficent's* character development. But this research focuses more on the positive

emotional transformation of Gru from an emotionally avoidant villain into a caring father figure, developed through interactions between characters and deliberate changes in cinematography as depicted in *Despicable Me*.

The emotional relationship between Gru and his adopted children has also not yet been explored in "Maleficent" (2014) research made by Dhiba and Juwita (2024). In terms of its role in the development of secure attachment and positive emotional growth. Therefore, this study aims to analyze Gru's psychological changes and the development of the emotional bond between Gru and his adopted children, by observing visual transitions and characters behaviors through the lens of Bowlby's attachment theory, in order to understand how Gru transforms into a caring father figure who provides a safe place for the girls.

Attachment theory is used to explain how emotional bonds between children and their caregivers influence behaviour, trust, and emotional development (Bowlby, 1969). The theory was developed by Bowlby and focuses on the importance of early relationships in shaping a child's emotional and social development. The key concept in this theory is attachment, because it relates to the emotional connection a child forms with a caregiver. According to Bowlby, "*attachment behaviour is any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual*" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194). This means children naturally seek closeness to someone who can protect and support them. Bowlby also explains that "*the propensity to make strong emotional bonds to particular individuals is a basic component of human nature*" (Bowlby, 1988, p. 3). This shows that emotional attachment is an important part of human development because children need safety, comfort, and reassurance from caregiving figures, especially during moments of fear, stress, or uncertainty.

The theory also explains important concepts such as secure attachment and insecure attachment. Secure attachment happens when children feel loved, safe, and emotionally supported, while insecure attachment may happen when children do not receive enough attention or care. According to Cassidy and Shaver, "*secure attachment is associated with emotional availability*" (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016, p. 25). This means children are more likely to feel confident and emotionally stable when caregivers respond to their needs with care and affection. Another important concept is proximity seeking, which refers to a child's desire to stay physically or emotionally close to a caregiver. Children with secure attachment are usually more confident because they trust that their caregiver will support them when needed, while insecure attachment may lead to emotional distance and difficulty trusting others.

Another concept related to attachment theory is the secure base, which was further developed by Mary Ainsworth. A secure base refers to a caregiver who provides children with safety and emotional support so they feel confident exploring the world around them. “*securely attached children used the caregiver as a secure base from which to explore the environment*” (Ainsworth, 1978, p. 22). This concept shows how emotional support from caregivers can strongly influence children’s emotional and social growth. Therefore, attachment theory explains how relationships between caregivers and children can shape emotional stability, trust, confidence, and future social relationships.

This movie shows that through consistent effort and a genuine emotional bond, a relationship between a carer and a child that was initially exploitative can transform into a strong bond, heal the psychological trauma caused by the loss of a parent, and redefine the meaning of success as family stability rather than personal ambition. By analyzing this movie through Bowlby’s attachment theory (1969), it explains how the transition from a cold, self-centered interaction to a peaceful family reflects the process of psychological healing in real life following the experience of being left in an orphanage.

At first, Gru, who was still traumatized from his childhood and the girls experienced an insecure attachment. However, through acts of care, and providing protection allowing them to find comfort within their relationship, then they eventually managed to break the cycle of isolation. This cinematic development directly connects with real world research presented by Bowlby. It emphasizes that children who lose the structure of a family typically face severe and adverse emotional and psychological vulnerability, yet can experience profound and positive emotional and psychological stabilization when provided with dedicated and responsive caregivers. This goes beyond the simple narrative of typical children’s animated movies about good versus evil, by asserting that true human fulfillment and the satisfaction of personal desires cannot be found in recognition or material gain, but rather in the enduring bonds of a secure family structure.

In the movie *Despicable Me*, Bowlby’s attachment theory is depicted through a combination of development and interactions between characters and deliberate changes in cinematography. By observing the visual transitions and the characters’ behaviors, the movie captures Gru’s psychological evolution from an emotionally avoidant and isolated villain into a caring father figure who provides a safe place for the girls. Based on the above issues, the paper examines how Gru develops from an emotionally detached person into a father figure in *Despicable Me* through attachment; How attachment theory is represented through Gru’s relationship with the girls in

Despicable Me; How the cinematography and character interactions in *Despicable Me* show the development of attachment between Gru and the girls.

Binary Opposition

Secure Attachment	Insecure Attachment
Gru starts to care about the girls. He protects them, spends more time with them and even shows his love. Because of this, the girls started to feel safe and slowly trust Gru as a father figure. <i>“Secure attachment is associated with confidence in the availability of the caregiver”</i> (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016, p. 5).	At first, Gru wanted to use the girls for his plan which is to steal the moon and does not really care about them. And since he mostly cares about his plan he does not show any love or attention to the girls, and because of that the girls feel unsure and not fully trust Gru. This proves insecure attachment, where there are no strong bonds between each other. <i>“Attachment behaviour characterizes human beings from the cradle to the grave”</i> (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991, p. 333).

METHOD

This analysis used attachment theory by Bowlby to analyze the emotional relationship between Gru and the girls in *Despicable Me*. It is mostly focused on concepts such as attachment behaviour, secure attachment, emotional responsiveness, proximity seeking, and secure base to understand how Gru changed from a detached villain into a caring father figure. This method was very suitable because it helped answer the research questions about how attachment theory was shown through Gru’s relationship with the girls and how his emotional development changed throughout the movie.

This study used thematic analysis and close reading to find important scenes, dialogues, actions, and cinematography in the movie. The search was searched by watching the movie several times to understand the storyline and identify the scenes that are related to attachment behaviour and emotional bonding. After that, the scenes were selected, collected into themes, and analyzed using attachment theory. The analysis focused on lighting, body language, camera angles, coloring, and emotional interactions between the characters to explain the development of attachment. The data were collected only from the movie and supported by journals related to attachment theory and emotional relationships.

DISCUSSION

The movie started by introducing Gru as a cold and emotionally detached character. The scene around 4:01, shows a kid crying because his ice cream fell and Gru briefly comforts him by giving him a balloon that he created, over time he instantly popped the balloon, and that is what turned the caring moment into an emotional distress. The bright daylight atmosphere is normally created for a cheerful mood, yet Gru's actions made the scene feel uncomfortable. The closeup shot



of the child crying really shows vulnerability, while Gru remains very calm and unaffected. His dark clothing also visually separates him from the playful environments, showing his cold and avoidant personality. This scene suits Bowlby's quote that is, *"Attachment behavior is any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual."* (Bowlby, 1969).

Bowlby explains that attachment behaviour happens when someone seeks for closeness to a person or care giver that could provide comfort and safety. However, in this scene Gru destroys the emotional connection by popping the balloon, rejecting the child's need for reassurance.

In the scene around 28:37, Miss Hattie introduces Gru to the girls by saying, *"Girls, I want you to meet Mr. Gru."* The girls were standing beside each other as they're still dependent on each other and distant towards Gru as there was no attachment yet. The wide camera shots show that there is an emotional distance between Gru and the girls. The lighting inside the orphanage feels flat and lacks warmth. Muted colours make the environment feel dull. *"For an infant, attachment is to be regarded as a tie to another individual."* (Ainsworth, 1978).



In this scene at 31:22, Gru has adopted the three girls; Margo, Agnes, and Edith and they are introduced to their new home. Gru does not really care for them and only sees them as a tool to get what he wants. This shows that Gru is struggling with a secure relationship because he lacks attachment *"Early experiences with caregivers*

shape expectations about relationships throughout life." (Bowlby, 1969). In this scene Gru is walking

past the girls and the Camera Angel is slightly Tilted and this makes the feeling of this scene seems off as it disrupts balance, Gru is put a further distance then the Girl which can mean that he is distancing himself from them, as well as Gru being put in a darker shade compared to the Girls

In this scene at the 44:24, it is seen that Margo, Agnes, and Edith are selling cookies to Vector, where Vector allows the girls to go inside and the scene shows that the Girls are fine with going in a strangers house, "*a secure base from which a child can explore the world.*" (Bowlby, 1969). This is seen from the girls' willingness to enter a stranger's house and new environment, their confidence shows that they feel secure to explore new places and situations. This scene uses bright colours which make it feel peaceful compared to the other scenes, as well as looking like a futuristic house that makes it feel like he's rich compared to the other houses.



In the scene around 52:38, Agnes happily says, "*It's so fluffy!*" she becomes happy and feels safe around him, not only that, Gru also becomes very calm and happy. Therefore, when a caregiver responds to their children, it creates a very strong emotional bond. Also, when Agnes is sad because she didn't get a prize, Gru comforts her by getting her what she wants. After that, Gru has empathy for his children, which transforms him from someone who once intended to do evil into a parent who prioritizes his children. Gru also feels that the children's happiness is more important than his work. When the children are happy, the background transforms into bright clouds and colorful rides, creating a cheerful and joyful atmosphere." *around the availability and responsiveness of attachment figures.*" (Cassidy & Phillip R. Shaver, 2016). This answers one of the research questions "How does Gru develop from an emotionally detached person into a father figure in *Despicable Me* through attachment?". Because it is shown that Gru is developing from an emotionally detached person into a caring father figure through emotional attachment, so the scene increases their emotional bond.

In the scene at 1:34:04, where Gru is reading a book to the girls, he makes them feel calm and safe around him, which creates a very strong emotional bond



with the caregivers or Gru. Also, even though Gru originally wanted to carry out his mission to steal, he actually finds himself wanting to be a parent who is always by his children's side. Also, while Gru is reading a storybook, he unconsciously experiences something he's never felt before: a sense of calm around his children and a feeling of comfort in their presence. "*The provision of comfort is central to attachment.*" (Bowlby, 1969). This answers one of the research questions "How is attachment theory represented through Gru's relationship with the girls in *Despicable Me*?" Because Gru changed his mind about his mission and became a parent to his children, a strong bond formed between them, and Gru also developed empathy for them.



In this scene at 1:15:45, it is shown that he missed the girls' recital and made the girls disappointed and lost the development. The cinematography perfectly mirrors Gru's internal emotional trauma. Bright sunlight streaming in from a certain angle floods the vast, empty gymnasium, casting light on the slightly dim lighting, which is not very bright, and the rows of empty chairs make the room feel empty and quiet, which reflects how Gru felt neglected by his mother when he was a child. According to Bowlby's theory (1969) our childhood experiences with our parents can shape an "*internal working model*", a kind of foundational mindset that helps evaluate whether it is safe in this world and whether it is truly worthy of love. That is why Gru was always neglected by his mother, and his mindset became indifferent and withdrawn (an avoidant attachment style).

As an adult, Gru felt he was unworthy of love. But when his three children entered his life, Gru's mindset shifted, giving him a new purpose as a father. Later, in that empty auditorium, Gru paused for a moment because the scene served as a visual reflection of his past trauma standing alone amidst empty seats, which brought back the fears from his childhood.

In this scene at 1:16:26, Gru was in panic because the girl's got kidnapped by Vector. His actions show how much their bond grows. Then, when he knocked on Vector's door, a large TV screen appeared and showed Gru the girl's, and Vector threatened Gru by saying, "*Give me the moon, and I'll return your children,*"



because Gru had grown to love his adopted children dearly. Gru immediately handed over the moon which shows that he is emotionally attached "*Threats of separation activate attachment behavior.*" (Bowlby, 1969). But Vector lied and did not return the girl's. Gru's arrival to exchange the moon for

his children already indicates that his identity has changed and his ambition to be a villain has been displaced by his love for his adopted children.

In this scene at 1:20:56, Gru tries catching Margo while saying “*Margo I will catch you, and I will never let you go again*”. Although Margo felt betrayed and scared, “*Caregiving systems activate when the child is endangered.*” (Bowlby , 1969). Margo is in danger then Gru reacts



instantly and gives protection to her. This moment shows Gru is fully shifting into a secure caregiver role by prioritizing their safety over everything else. The lighting is intense, making the scene feel dangerous, abnormal, intense and urgent. The camera uses wide shots for the fall and close up to show danger and

relief when Gru finally catches her.

One of the last important scenes showing attachment development in around 1:24:05. In this scene, the cinematography clearly shows Gru's emotional change. At the beginning of the movie, Gru was shown with dark lighting and cold colors, making him seem lonely and very emotionally distant to others. However, in this final scene, which is the bedtime story, the lighting changes into a soft purple and warmer tone that creates a very calm and peaceful atmosphere. This raises a question, “*How do cinematography and character interactions in Despicable Me show the development of attachment between Gru and the girls?*”.



Gru bends down close to margo and softly says, “*I love you, too*” while margo hugged him, showing that he truly cares for them and fully accepts his role as their father figure. The close distance between Gru and the girls also shows trust, comfort, and emotional connection. This scene really connects to attachment theory because secure attachment grows when a caregiver becomes emotionally available and supportive. state that “*Secure attachment is associated with emotional availability*” (Cassidy and Shaver, 2016). This quote relates to Gru because throughout the movie he changes from being a cold and selfish into a loving and caring father figure to the girls. The soft lighting, calm atmosphere, and gentle character interactions all help show the development of a strong attachment bond and a happy family relationship between Gru and the girls.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this analysis, Despicable me shows us the importance of attachment, emotional support, and personal connection shown by the relationship of Gru and the Girls. Using the attachment theory by Bowlby, It shows how connections between caregivers and children can influence behavior, trust, and emotions. At first Gru was distant towards the girls and only focused on his ambitious goals, but his growing relationship with the girls made him more caring, responsible and loving. This movie explores how attachment theory plays a big role in someone's life and how it can help someone like Gru, a selfish villain that turns into a caring father figure, while the Girls also build more trust and personal connection with him, slowly turning an avoidant attachment into a secure one.

This psychological analysis is shown through intentional changes in cinematography, we see this from the early scenes, where the scene feels cold and isolated, as it slowly transitions into warm and intimate shots. Overall, this movie demonstrates that emotional bonds can change someone and that it plays a big role in their life . This analysis may help provide a better understanding of how attachment theory is represented through cinematography and character interactions in animated movies. Future analysis may also explore more other psychological theories or compare attachment development in different movies. This study may be used as a reference in analyzing psychological themes in movies. Future analysts are encouraged to examine different characters, movie genres, or cultural backgrounds to gain a deeper understanding of emotional development and human relationships through cinematography and storytelling.

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