

# The Psychoanalytic Perspective of the Main Characters in the American TV Series *Friends*

ZHAO Mao-jin

National University of Defense and Technology, Changsha, Hunan, China

As a recognized classic of American TV series, “Friends” tells the complex story of friendship, love between six distinctive American young people. Different family backgrounds and childhood experiences presented in TV dramas take account for their difference in traits. Through the theoretical concept of psychoanalytic literature, this article attempts to reveal how the specific influence and manifestation of the family situation and parental behavior have on the character and behavior of the protagonist, as well as to further analyze how the trauma suffered in childhood functions in adult behavior. As adults, their behavior and habits are still constrained and influenced by their childhood experiences.

**Keywords:** psychoanalytical theory, childhood, family background, friends

## Introduction

*Friends*, a phenomenon both in and outside of the United States, has created its own history in the sitcom of television industry. Produced by NBC (National Broadcasting Company) since 1994, it has won a measure of fame for being an integral part of the memory of every audience who watched or has enjoyed then. As long as the opening song is on, listeners can't help singing along and even dancing to it, recalling some classical moments of the show. If the question for every admirer's opinion about what contributes to the recognized huge success is posed, it is no doubt that their answer would undoubtedly be the same, which points to distinct characteristics of all main characters. The storyline focuses on six young people from diverse backgrounds spending ten years of their life in New York city, living together or around. One complicated but romantic relationship between Ross Geller (played by David Schwimmer) and Rachel Green (by Jennifer Aniston), who were Monica Geller's (by Courtney Cox) older brother and best friend in youth, ran through the whole story. As for Monica herself, she ended up marrying her brother's college roommate Chandler Bing (by Matthew Perry). The third male character as Joey Tribbiani (by Matt LeBlanc), a somehow accomplished actor and Chandler's former roommate, had always been famous for being a playboy messing around with ladies. The last, Phoebe Buffay (Lisa Kudrow), a peculiar masseuse, seemed to have no direct relation with other members but actually a highlight for some audiences. Ordinary people are constantly amazed by how coherently and intriguingly the playwrights organized the plots. For a number of critics, they have put emphasis on mostly pragmatic elements, narrative angle, the feminism and its denotation of modernism ever since it was introduced to the world. Thus, this article would start

---

ZHAO Mao-jin, MA degree, undergraduate School, National University of Defense and Technology.

from how the childhood pain affects main characters' behaviors that they treat friends, boyfriends or girlfriends, families and the society, especially the impact of their family on their personality shaping in the light of psychoanalytic criticism.

### **Literature Review**

Psychoanalytic principles was established in the 1900s by Sigmund Freud who was a renowned Austrian psychiatrist and psycho pathologist. His published book *The interpretation of Dreams* signalized the birth of psychoanalytic criticism. It continued to develop in the following decades as Freud himself even made several amendments to part of his theories. Particularly, some points include sibling rivalry, inferiority complexes, defense mechanism that are in common use in daily life. Others, like the origins of the unconscious, the defenses, anxiety and core issues, along with dreams and dream symbols, are less known to the general public. As a crucial segment in psychoanalytic concept, childhood memories conceals deep down and have an imperceptible but enduring impact on one's personality moulding and humanity shaping, which could no longer suppressing but burst into emotional needs at a proper point (Zhao & Zhang, 2012, p. 106). However, this article tends to give a presentation of the images of six roles in terms of childhood trauma and family dynamics. According to Zhang & He (2007, p. 79), in certain social and cultural times, the childhood trauma an individual suffered and the economic situation of one's family could account for anything special of his family atmosphere and behaviors, while the latter two would also be interactively affected. More specifically, the childhood trauma would result from the family dynamics and some consequences of one's action. Moreover, the economic situation could be a cause of family dynamics and action. Therefore, family dynamics results in the childhood trauma, economic situation and action, the same with action.

### **Results**

The first character to be illustrated is Monica Geller. Throughout the 238 episodes in total, she maintained as paranoid and obsessed with cleanliness as she always was. Some people might find it difficult to get along with in the first place, even expressing sympathy for Chandler in that he would spend the rest of his life with her. But fortunately, all her friends got accustomed to it and successfully lived with it. They would make some complaint about how harsh she turned when they forgot to put a cup on the mat, and consider her as ridiculous that she volunteered to wash dirty cars just parking downstairs of whom she barely knew. By comparison, young girls of her age would only be busy with dressing themselves, making purchase, or dating guys like Rachel or Phoebe. She acted nothing like a regular young American girl who should be casual and sunny. Sometimes, she was all competitive, aiming at number one in all aspects. Then the question is raised: What leads to her grotesque behavior? As a matter of fact, she inherited all the seemingly merits from her birth mother Judy. Judy has shown out her preference for her elder son Ross bluntly ever since Monica was born. She constantly thought Ross was the best and Monica was inferior to him so that Judy became particular about every little detail about Monica. She judged Monica's hairstyle the moment they met. On Monica's grandmother's funeral, when she attempted to comfort her mother by hugging, Judy reminded Monica that she should start using night cream, which revealed how judgmental Judy was. All this pressure coming from Monica's mother from childhood had built her into a typical obsessive-compulsive woman. In other words, every piece of furniture at her home had to stay the way she

wanted and the same, and things must be organized well and in the way she favored, persisting the lifestyle when she grew up and lived away from her parents. Generally, the way Judy treated Monica could be regarded as the childhood trauma for Monica that made a great difference to her personality.

As for Ross Geller, it could be told a whole different story that he grew up with a silver spoon in mouth. He was entitled with “medical miracle”, raised in compassionate love from both his parents. In schools, he kept winning all kinds of medals and getting As in disciplines, exclusive of sports. He had studied all the way to doctoral degree, first working in a museum and then becoming a popular professor in New York University. Parents bragged about his achievements under all circumstances, recognizing him. Over time, he got used to be always right and uniquely excellent. It led to his abnormal reaction to his failure that he chose to lie to Rachel to keep his third unwilling marriage working. He couldn’t stand the fact that Phoebe didn’t believe in a Spherical Earth, hence ceaselessly aggressive persuasion. As long as Ross fell through, He immediately went crazy and acted agitated, not bearing any sense of failure. All these pointed to a concept in new psychoanalytic criticism that is striving for superiority. Ross had always been a better kid both at home and at schools, and his parents’ recognition offered him pride and confidence.

Another person from a well-off family would undoubtedly be Ross’ ex-wife, Rachel Green. Born in a middle-class family, whose father was a renowned doctor, Rachel had never once been worried about lack of money. A good looking and perfect figure, moreover the title of cheerleader guaranteed her popularity in schools. Just like that, Rachel had been a princess throughout her youth. Apparently, it is of no possibility that her childhood linked with family background and her own extraordinary appearance could evolve into trauma. In turn, all these contributed to her serious princess tendencies that people around her must indulge her every whim. Running away from the altar in the first episode of the first season was her first attempt to live independently. As a college graduate probably at the age of 25, she never did laundry before. What’s more, staying at Monica’s appartement for quite a long period, she still had no idea how to drop litter and even burst into tears when the appartement manager referred her to a spoiled kid. The affluent living conditions and delighted school experience left her with a carefree childhood. But when it was time to get into society, Rachel had struggled to make a living first as a waitress in the café

Next, who will be discussed is Joey Tribbiani, an American-Italian actor, just the opposite of Rachel. Joey was born in a traditional Italian family of seven sisters. His father, a plumber, led the whole family immigrating to America, and his mother a full-time housewife. It is clear that the financial circumstances for Joey should be difficult. That explained why Joey wasn’t well educated so that he would easily buy the seller’s story into buying one of an encyclopedia in 26 volumes. Why not the whole 26? Because he could only afford one. In Season seven episode eight, he truly believed that America has 56 states against common sense in the competition of listing all of the American states. While preparing for audition, he got confused at American’s opponents in World War I and World War II. As a result, he inevitably made himself a fool in the group. Plus, the famous line for Joey is that “Joey never shares food”, which could indicate that in childhood his family was fighting for enough food to feed 8 kids.

Phoebe Buffay had started to live on her own since her mother committed suicide in front of her at 15. Growing up in streets as an orphan, she gradually learned how to get along with all kinds of people, in turn, behaved like a mixture of different personalities. For sure, Phoebe’s whole childhood lived in trauma that she

couldn't get enough food or any place to stay at nights. Her mother's suicide could be described as a fixation in psychoanalytic literature that is caused by some kind of traumatic experience and hidden in one's model of personality development. Due to this fixation, Phoebe had zero tolerance for tragedy that any bad ending of artificial plays or movies could tear her heart apart. She broke up immediately with Gary as soon as she witnessed him shoot a bird, although they just move together. She plucked up the courage to learn how to ride a bike the moment she heard the bike would shed tears for no one rides it. What's more, she fed rats with special cookies in kitchen and even supported baby rats, ever considering them as some pest. All in all, this kind of fixation had an amazingly positive impact on her trait that she longed to save in the brutal society.

The most strange and complicated character in the play should be Chandler Bing. Unlike Gellers' affectionate family, Chandler was raised in a broken and absurd family to certain extent. It is believed that trauma results from disastrous events and could last profound effect on mental health, more possibly, psychiatric disorder. Freud attributed it to patient's fixed tendency with the moment trauma occurred that he failed to conquer the shock and live in a recurring moment (Yang, 2022, p. 34). The major trauma Chandler suffered from hit his innocence that his parents announced a divorce on the Thanksgiving table, one of the most important days of family reunion. More dramatically, his father came out of closet, referring their Philippine man-servant to be his homosexual partner. Regardless of little Chandler's feeling, he afterwards received a gender reassignment surgery and became a singer and dancer at a Las Vegas casino. What aggravated the situation was how the mother responded to the broken family. She never quitted being herself and an erotic novelist, publicizing her books by sharing her sexual secrets on TV. Knapp (2003) believes that living in a family of functional disorder, anxiety and fear usually forces members to create another self. And that's why one's inner feeling do not synchronizes with his performance. Indeed, what all happened had contributed to Chandler's pathetic childhood memory, which transformed him an outer optimist but inner pessimist. One of the most salient characteristics of his is mouthful jokes. By doing so, he not only masked an aching emptiness in his heart but also tried to get people to like him. It is shown that he would keep telling jokes whenever he felt uncomfortable. More likely, jokes became a cornerstone of his redemption. Without parent's intensive care in youth and their good example of a happy family, Chandler was trapped in constant fear of commitments that he was unable to maintain a long relationship. He went into panic, overhearing a wedding place booked by Monica. It was exaggerated that he escaped from Monica the day before wedding trying to get himself out of the mess. In conclusion, his parent's miserable marriage threw him under a lasting trauma. Fortunately, Chandler find Monica who was and would be there for the rest of life to cure his wounded soul.

### Discussion

Psychoanalytic theory holds that there is a direct causal relationship between the basic experiences, psychological conflicts and trauma of adults with mental illness, psychosomatic illness and even mental illness in adults. Therefore, it is undeniable that the family dynamics and childhood experience make a lot of to every character. Some might be positive, while the other is genuinely negative. Monica survived from her mother's control freak and become a well-organized, neat, caring host for all. She didn't mind being the giver, taking care of friends without a single complaint. Ross's assertive feature played an indispensable role in his academic achievements and personal principle. Rachel figured her way to live independently and have full responsibility

for her life so that she eventually got a place in the fashion industry and became a competent mother. Joey kept his innocence and led a carefree life. He also was generous to friends and glad to help when he made his fortune. Phoebe was kind and friendly, and never gave up her self. As a consequence, she finally came across her Mr. Right Mike. Marrying Monica was a turning point for Chandler that he actually never lost his longing for a happy family and would become a better husband and more responsible father than his dad did.

### References

- Knapp, J. V., & Womack, K. (2003). *Reading the family dance: Family systems therapy and literary study*. Delaware: University of Delaware Press.
- Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical theory today: a user-friendly guide*. New York: Routledge.
- 王潇潇. (2020). 二十一世纪国内精神分析理论发展与精神分析批评文学实践评述. *北方文学*, (18), 56-57.
- 杨深林. (2022). 个体成长中的创伤及修复——以精神分析批评评析青春励志电影《毕业之前说再见》. *湖北工程学院学报*, 42(01), 34-38.
- 张春英, 何江胜. (2007). 精神分析视角下的《最蓝的眼睛》解读. *南京航空航天大学学报(社会科学版)*, (03), 78-82+96.
- 赵树勤 & 张刘薇子. (2012). 童年创伤与自我救赎——毕淑敏小说《女心理师》的心理学解读. *创作与评论*, (06), 106-109.
- 张春英 & 何江胜. (2007). 精神分析视角下的《最蓝的眼睛》解读. *南京航空航天大学学报: 社会科学版*, 9(3), 6.
- 赵树勤. (2003). 当代女性文学与精神分析学. *湖南师范大学社会科学学报*, 32(3), 7.