

The Study of the Restrained Experience in the Family Living Room Space from the Perspective of Women's Affect-Virginia Woolf's *The Years*

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Abstract

The novel *The Years* is Virginia Woolf's penultimate work and the last complete novel she finished before her death. Although written in 1937, the story is set against the backdrop of the mid-Victorian era, reflecting the social context of that time. Spanning from the 1880s to the mid-1930s, the novel covers over fifty years of history, chronicling the lives of three generations of the Pargiter family. It employs a traditional narrative style rather than Woolf's usual stream-of-consciousness technique to depict the growth of female characters. Previous research on *The Years* has largely focused on feminist perspectives, historical viewpoints, and coming-of-age themes, with minimal attention given to the emotional experiences of the female characters within the text. This paper aims to explore the restrained affects of Eleanor, the eldest daughter of the Pargiter family, to uncover the main causes behind these affects and how she reconciles with herself.

Keywords

The Years, Eleanor, Restrained Affects

1. Introduction

As social animals, people find different relationships with each other and create different groups. The important role conducive to the survival and development of a group is the mother, or the female role. *The Years* is one of Woolf's works written using a more traditional narrative style, describing nearly fifty years of the Pargiter family's life in chronological order. However, it also incorporates stream-of-consciousness techniques to highlight the personal growth journeys of each member of the Pargiter family, making it a work of profound significance. Eleanor,

as the eldest child in the Pargiter family, takes on the responsibility of caring for the household. Her diligence and willingness to sacrifice earn her universal praise, yet the text rarely addresses her personal needs. She is depicted as a machine that functions solely to serve others. Research on *The Years* is limited, and the following discusses studies related to this text.

1.1. Literature Review

Some researchers believe that Virginia Woolf deleted the topics of society, politics and gender in the text to highlight the growth of women (Fromm, 1986); some researchers highlight the importance of anti-Jewish arguments against the oppression of patriarchy (Linett, 2002); and under the oppression of patriarchy, free love and identity complement each other (Hanson, 1997); in free love, women are given the right to speak (Bradshaw, 2002). *The Years* redefines the relationship between time and space through Jill Deluz's "dream" view, that is, the present moment is the exiled space, and the dream is the ideal space (Marie, 2015). Talk to yourself through spending time in dreams and achieve self-affirmation in the real space (Lucey, 1991). However, women is different from men, they may fall into subjective assumptions and make wrong choices when thinking about problems, which requires women to accept the influence of the male thinking way when they are independent (Moore, 1977). So having a circle and learning new knowledge from it is a basic ability for a woman.

1.2. Research Background

In ancient times, the nomadic tribe can be persisted because in the tribe, the relationship between mother and son enhanced the social connection among the people. A nomadic tribe is composed of mothers, sons, perhaps the male friends of the sons, and females from other communities. Females leave their birthplace during adolescence, and enter a new community, then find their role in this new community to stabilize the development of a new community (Turner, 2009). The development of the community also depends on whether people's emotional bond to the community is firm, and it needs to contact and communicate with people to improve the personality. The knowledge learned by meeting different people in different environments will gradually affect a person's emotional expression. Australian poet, critic and short story writer Judith Wright (1915-2000) once said that feeling or emotion is a common language worthy of respect. They can truly express your deepest self (Sanchez, 2018). As a part of human biology, emotion has already had the ability to construct society and culture before people's conscious cognition. However, if independent individuals want to find their own position in the community and continue to maintain emotional sustenance in the community, they need the intervention of the mother. In a mid-Victorian British society, women were left idle at home as an emotional appendage and depended on men. Moreover, because of the influence of the industrial revolution, the society and the family are divided into two spaces that cannot be integrated. Women are separated from the society, unable to contact with the outside world, and can only try

to show their own value in the family. Mother and children are the closest relationship, but in Woolf's novel, the relationship between people is very fragile, there is no special fixed group relationship, especially in *The Years*, due to the lack of mother role, the text between the characters is no particularly solid relationship, and such lack will lead to under the family space of the children's emotional can't get very good development.

1.3. Results

Filial piety is linked to parental love. People, as children, experience the love of parents in the family environment, and then derive their own affects. Whether a person has compassion and love depends on whether the parents have taught their children well. The absence of the parents will cause strong emotional unrest among the children, which leads to their emotional loss and change. Children love their parents unconditionally and habitually rely on their parents when they are not personally able to survive, but the lack of parental love can lead to emotional changes in adulthood. Some of the children will continue to choose to rely on their parents, while others will choose to stay away from the family. Compared with the son, the daughter is more filial. This is not denying the son's filial piety, but the son always has to experience in the society, and the daughter has more time to spend with her parents. How did Eleanor's restrained affects emerge in *The Years*?

2. Reason of Eleanor's Restrained Affects Formation

The Pargiter have seven children, Eleanor, Morris, Milly, Millie, Delia, Martin, Edward, and Rose. The seven children have different personalities, the eldest daughter Eleanor is rigorous and dignified, the eldest son Morris is responsible, Millie is patient, Delia is capricious, Martin is idle, Edward is serious and responsible, and Rose is innocent. The transformation of the population growth model in the 18th century affected the traditional family structure, and the parents thus assumed more family responsibilities (Brunig & Levinger, 2016). Because their mother is seriously ill in bed, the Pargiter family has no bond between the family members, and because the father is serious and angry, the family atmosphere is always suffocating.

The father's conceit caused even greater trouble in the family. When people discipline animals, they will not regard the animal as a conscious individual, but think that the animal is their thing, so every word and action should act according to their own will. Colonel Pargiter has a mistress living in Westminster Street, a crowded and messy street compared to the area where the rich lived. Colonel Pargiter doesn't like the place, but there is the place where he could show his fragile side to her and even care about her dog's health, but when he returns to the Abercorn Street house he begins to show his power and disciplines his children. "He looked round, misty but shrewd, and he could be kind, but now he looked rough and lovely" (Woolf, 1937). Accusing Rose of being a "little sloppy", casually interrupted Milly, focusing on his arrogant son and thinking his daughters as tool to waste money. When Colonel Pargiter come home, the family atmosphere is

always tense, but he is the head of the family, and the whole family has to rely on him, so the children are afraid to complain. Even though Millie and Delia try to run their family members as the mother roles, they're still not good enough. One reason is because they are young, and the other reason is that they instinctively fear their father. But a family can not be without a buffer contradiction carrier, so the eldest daughter Eleanor has to assume this role.

“It’s her Grove day”: This sentence has appeared at least three times since Eleanor appears in the text, especially the sad mood when she returns to home. Grove is located in Canning area of London, poverty last until the 19th century, but Eleanor still like to go to this poor area, dealing with the poor, on the one hand suggests that Eleanor is not a selfish woman, on the other hand it shows that she really learned a lot from the poor. She yearns for a free space, but the burden of life has to be borne by her. She is keeping the order of the family, and the family members depend on her. “Thank goodness, there’s Eleanor she thought, looking up—the soother, the maker-up of quarrels, the buffer between her and the intensities and strifes of family life.” (*The Years*, 14) When Eleanor is not at home, her younger brothers and sisters always feel suffocated with their father, and as a family mediator, her father would put away his aggressive language and behavior when she’s back. Eleanor, returning home from the avenue, barely looks at the living-room. “Her glance fixed itself rather absentmindedly upon the farther room. The trees were coming out in the back garden; there were little leaves-little ear-shaped leaves on the bushes. The sun was shining, fitfully; it was going in and it was going out, lighting up now this, now-” (*The Years*, 16) The bright scenery in the distance is in sharp contrast to the living room, and Eleanor’s inner yearning is in the conflict with the reality. When the spring breeze shines into the living room, the space is more spacious, but this spacious living room space has imprisoned her, and she wants to escape. “Here they are cooped up, day after day... That was why she had said, “The poor enjoy themselves more than we do.” It had struck her coming back into that drawing-room, with all the furniture and the flowers and the hospital nurses... Again she stopped herself.” (*The Years*, 32) When she looks into the living room, she finds that the chairs are numerous and dilapidated. The poor financial situation of her family forces her to give up her personal ideals and becomes more sensible.

The reason for her restrained affects was not only from her father, but also her mother, who is seriously ill in bed. The refraction of sunlight by Mrs. Pargiter’s bed could make the room look brighter. Clean and tidy decoration implies that this is a hostess that could arrange the family space properly, and the fresh bell orchid can show her yearning for live. But the torture of the disease makes all these vibrant decorations appear false and powerless.

Her face was pouched and heavy; the skin was stained with brown patches; the hair which had been red was now white, save that there were queer yellow patches in it, as if some locks had been dipped in the yolk of an egg. Bare of all rings save her wedding ring, her fingers alone seemed to indicate that she

had entered the private world of illness. But she did not look as if she were dying; she looked as if she might go on existing in this borderland between life and death for ever. (*The Years*, 21)

From Delia's description of her mother, Mrs. Pargiter, though seriously ill, is still trying to live. When she is awake, she always tells her daughters the details of her family affairs, hoping that they can run the family better, such as the birthday of an uncle in the Pargiter family, daily expenses, emotional care of family members, etc. She is terminally ill, but she still shows a relaxed, gentle and considerate mother image. From the patient's point of view, a serious illness had cost her life. For a person who is about to lose her life, her affects should be fear and despair, and even vent these negative affects to her family, but she does not have those irritable words and behaviors. But also suffocated the family atmosphere.

The last likely idea when referring to "power control" is the mother's control of the child. When a mother gets along with the child, the first thing that appears in her mind is the gentle image and intimate emotional attachment of the mother. It is difficult to make people think that these positive emotional expressions should be related to power. But when a person—an individual—is not completely divorced from the love of his mother, he is still in control. But this control is not the control of absolute power like father, but in the eyes of the mother, the child is a pet and should be treated like this (Tuan, 1984). When a child is not treated as a human, there is a sense of imbalance, somehow an individual but still to be controlled. For Mrs. Pargiter's care and entrust, they will not be proud of the mother's praise, but feel ashamed to face the seriously ill mother in the bed, the winner even think that the mother as the hostess is incompetent, so they become angry. This kind of righteous and self-sacrificing love is not what the children want.

"She longed for her to die. There she was—soft, decayed but everlasting, lying in the cleft of the pillows, an obstacle, a prevention, an impediment to all life. She tried to whip up some feeling of affection, of pity." (*The Years*, 22) It is her gentleness that makes children extremely complicated about her. On the one hand, she wants her to die, because she is no longer able to contribute to the family, but still tells the family. In a group, if a woman loses her value, her status will be questioned, and her instructions can no longer control the family, nor can the children in the family live in harmony. They will feel that the mother is both incompetent and troubled. On the other hand, she felt guilty about this idea, because she was still their mother.

Blood relationship is the strongest emotional connection, and the intensity of emotion decreases as the relationship weakens (Hume, 2017). In nature, the mother and the child are the most intimate. Father, as a breadwinner, does not have much time with the child, so it is very important to establish a position in the child's heart. Colonel Pargiter needed to let his children remember what he did to his family, so he kept the children in his own hands through words, and he did not allow anything beyond his scope. Her mother was bedridden because of a serious illness. In addition to recuperate at home, there was nothing more for her

to worry about. However, as a mother, she instinctively chose to sacrifice herself for her family and children. Mrs. Pargiter knew that she could not pay more for the family, so she had to face it gently as the children came to her bed. The father's stern appearance contrasts with the mother's gentle image, making the children unconsciously choose to rely on the non-threatening side. People instinctively imitate the object of their worship, so the Pargiter girls try to learn from their mother, and the boys either choose to escape responsibility or become very controlling like their fathers. However, under the lack of parental love, it is extremely difficult to maintain the emotional connection.

The image of their parents formed an indelible and eternal memory in the minds of several children. While they struggled to accept their own destinies, they also resisted the influence of their parents. However, Eleanor couldn't be as care-free as they were. Children define themselves based on the importance placed on them by their father. Because Eleanor was deeply loved by her father, not only did she feel capable of taking on the role of the operator of the house, but her other siblings also believed in her. As the family members aged, the family space became more divided and specialized: they each had their own place at the dining table and their own rooms in the house (Tuan, 1982). But Eleanor did not have her own space. From the description of the personal spaces of the other children in the text, we learn that Martin had his own study room, and Rose had a nursery. However, Eleanor's space only existed in front of "mother's writing desk", and she had almost no time to be alone.

"It'll be my table now, she thought, looking at the silver candlestick, the miniature of her grandfather, the tradesmen's books—one had a gilt cow stamped on it—and the spotted walrus with a brush in its back that Martin had given his mother on her last birthday." (*The Years*, 34-35)

The mother's writing desk was placed in the living room: the "silver candlestick" was an item used by the upper class, highlighting the Pagiter family's social status; the "miniature of her grandfather" was a symbol of a distinguished family, as they were accustomed to displaying the portraits of those who contributed to the family in the living room, thus emphasizing that the Pagiter were an old and prestigious family. "The tradesmen's books" indicated that Mrs. Pagiter not only managed household affairs but also helped her husband handle the family business. These items showcased Mrs. Pagiter's outstanding personal abilities, suggesting that beyond her role as a housewife, she might have been an ambitious woman. Now, Eleanor, who has inherited her mother's duties, needs to excel even more than her mother to prove her personal capabilities. However, because Eleanor took over these responsibilities too early, she had no time to focus on herself. Her value in the family lies in her ability to handle various issues as effortlessly as her mother did and to strive to maintain family relationships.

In the interactions within the living room, everyone longed to be treated equally and to have the freedom to express themselves. When a person's self-expectations

are met, they experience happiness. However, when unfair treatment occurs, it creates rifts among family members. Yet, due to the presence of an authority figure (Colonel Pagiter), they don't even have the right to express their dissatisfaction, which further deteriorates the relationships among family members. When conflicts arising from different personalities among siblings cannot be resolved, Eleanor's presence becomes crucial. She often tries to ease the tension by alternative means, such as sending Rose and Martin, who were in conflict, out together. Her intention was to alleviate their disagreements, but because of a failed interaction, Rose ended up being harassed by a lecherous man. The suppression of negative affects creates underlying tension in interactions, and when these suppressed affects intensify or erupt in a different form, the interaction is disrupted. Typically, the person who disrupts the interaction feels ashamed and guilty for violating the expected norms of how they should feel and act (Turner, 2009). When Eleanor experiences feelings of guilt, her sense of restraint becomes even more entrenched, making it impossible for her to live freely. "one came back here, and there was Mama ill; Papa grumpy; and Delia and Milly quarrelling about a party... But she checked herself. She ought to try to say something to amuse her sister." (*The Years*, 31) She is acutely sensitive to the emotional changes of her family members and eases the tension between them through comforting actions. The rules of avoiding verbal communication can take countless subtly different forms (Gordon, 2000). She devoted herself tirelessly to the Pagiter family, neglecting her own needs, and this long-term self-sacrifice resulted in a deep sense of restraint.

Generally speaking, affects experienced before adulthood may change with environmental shifts and as one grows older; people do not always view the world and handle matters with the same affects. As the Pagiter children grew up, they each developed their own strengths, but due to a lack of parental attention and the influence of their environment during childhood, they now exhibit certain personality flaws. The saying "nobody's perfect" is used to describe how no one can be flawless and affects cannot always remain stable. In their growth environment, people choose ways that best support their survival. A person with a happy childhood doesn't hide their affects; they even believe that everything around them is good, and that bad people and things can be redeemed. However, a child who didn't have a happy childhood grows up to hide their affects as much as possible. Rather than openly displaying their affects and feeling vulnerable in front of others, they carefully observe others, guessing from their behavior whether the situation is favorable to them. If it is favorable, they proceed cautiously; if not, they choose to retreat. This aligns with the psychological principle that the education provided by one's family of origin impacts a child's entire life, and this influence is subtle and cannot be easily prevented. When examining the conversations of the Pagiter family members, one can observe that most of their discussions are unrelated to the self. On the one hand, this is because the father's conversations with the children are centered around his own affects, neglecting the children's needs; on the other hand, interactions with the mother are limited to topics concerning the maintenance of family order. When parents fail to meet their children's

expectations, the children choose to avoid discussing their feelings. Simply, the rules for avoiding verbal communication can take countless subtly different forms (Gordon, 2000). When family members asked Eleanor about her experiences on the Grove Day, she only mentioned that the lives of those she visited were quite good. This might imply longing or perhaps envy, but no one cared about her feelings. Over time, she lost the desire to express herself. The other Pargiter children were the same; when their desire to express themselves was forcibly suppressed, they lost the ability to properly convey their affects. This failure to attach affects properly was evident when the Pargiter children felt relieved after their mother's death and remained indifferent after their father's passing.

In 1891, Colonel Pagiter did not find them a new mother. Morris successfully became a lawyer; Edward became a teacher at Oxford; Millie was married; and 33-year-old Eleanor remained the "housekeeper" of the Pargiter family. "Eleanor was sitting at her writing-table with her pen in her hand." (*The Years*, 91) The writing desk is still exclusively Eleanor's. She hasn't discarded the items that belonged to her mother, which suggests Eleanor's lingering affection for her. In the midst of her busy family duties, she also has the right to participate in the committee, where the men show her great respect. From the way she confidently speaks at the meetings, it is clear that Eleanor has grown quickly, though she remains unmarried.

3. The Reason of Eleanor's Restrained Affects Lasting

Why is there no description of the living room space, yet Eleanor's restrained affects is placed within it? As we become familiar with things in a city, make friends, or even just get to know the streets and buildings, our initial dislike for the city gradually diminishes until it eventually transforms into the opposite affects (Turner, 2009). No matter how stressful life in the old house was at first, Eleanor would still often take the time to visit, reminiscing about her childhood. This is because she lived in this place for so long that it formed an emotional attachment. Eleanor's sense of restraint originates from this, primarily manifesting in how she selflessly devoted her love and value, even though she wasn't yet the housekeeper of the house. Even if she left this home, the impact of this space would remain with her throughout her life.

On her way to attend Morris's trial, Eleanor read a letter from Martin, which told the story of a man named Renton who was on an adventure in the jungle.

"I had lost my way; and the sun was sinking," she read.

"The sun was sinking... Eleanor repeated, glancing ahead of her down Oxford Street. The sun shone on dresses in a window..."

"They died away!" said Eleanor aloud.

The cab stopped. For a moment Eleanor sat still. She saw nothing but stunted little trees, and her brother looking at the sun rising over the jungle. (*The Years*, 107-108)

From the previous text, we can see Eleanor's busy life: preparing gifts for her niece, attending committee meetings, attending her brother Morris's court sessions,

reading letters from her brother Martin, and more. These activities are only part of her daily routine, but she never misses any important event involving her family members. Even when reading a letter, she puts great thought into it. The phrase “the sun was sinking” appears four times in the letter, and three of those times, Eleanor shows concern for Martin. The one time “they died away” makes her think of the Oxford Street. In the 18th century, the Oxford Street was an important transportation hub, with bustling streets and a wide array of goods, highlighting its significance. In Eleanor’s eyes, Oxford Street is like the jungle mentioned in Martin’s letter—just a dense forest. However, the trees are not growing well, all appearing malnourished, with dark colors, emphasizing Eleanor’s worry about the downsides of rapid social development. But that is a discussion for another time. The most important point here is that Eleanor sees herself as the protagonist adventuring in the jungle. From the phrase “vanishing without a trace” in the previous text, we can infer that she is becoming aware that something deeply important to her is fading away. However, her life is filled with so many tasks that she has no time to reflect on it.

“She walked slowly along towards Trafalgar Square, holding the paper in her hand. Suddenly the whole scene froze into immobility. A man was joined to a pillar; a lion was joined to a man; they seemed stilled, connected, as if they would never move again.” (*The Years*, 113) Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891), was a leader of Irish nationalism in the late 19th century, leader of the Home Rule movement, and a member of the British Parliament. The death of the freedom-advocating Parnell made her realize that something was gradually fading away. There are many such examples in the text, where, in moments when she had free time to be with herself, family matters would suddenly arise and push aside her thoughts about herself. Even when she was alone, she couldn’t truly focus on her own needs.

Children’s physiological and psychological responses are instinctive, and their emotional expressions are the most direct. Through straightforward language and actions like crying or laughing out loudly, they allow others to immediately perceive their affects. However, as they grow up, their ways of expressing affects become more subtle. Adults no longer express their affects directly; they might even display anger when they are happy or laugh heartily when they are sad. These behaviors have become common among adults, but to children, they seem very strange. According to Susan Langer, this is because the subjective affects of adults align with the affects required by the objective world. However, this alignment is not inevitable, as personal affects and the rationality of the objective world are inherently opposed (Lange, 1986).

4. The Reason of Eleanor’s Restrained Affects Stubbornness

Why has Eleanor always experienced a sense of restraint? In the context of British social history, William Perkins wrote a book about the family in 1590, in which he mentioned that husbands have the right to control their wives, and parents have the right to control and discipline their children (Briggs, 2015). In such a

conformist family environment, men gradually grow up to dominate others, such as fathers and husbands, while women can only be dominated as mothers, wives and daughters. They are not involved in the political life of the country (Rich, 2016). During the reign of Edward VII (1901-1910), many of the restrictions of the Victorian era were lifted. As people's understanding of society deepened, they developed a greater sense of guilt towards it and tried to contribute in some way. This was also true for women. Despite societal obstacles preventing them from joining men's work, they still yearned to contribute to society. Some women, under immense pressure, joined social work, but classic films and literature often show that their success was still reliant on men's understanding and support. Other women, lacking male support, had no choice but to take on responsibilities within the home. They made efforts to participate in all possible tasks beyond work. Before engaging with society, women in the domestic sphere often exhibited self-centered emotional expressions, focusing on how "I" can achieve and searching deep within for their true selves. This is an example where individuals, after being negatively influenced, strive to heal childhood wounds, become gentle and strong, and still find the capacity to help heal others.

Eleanor, the protagonist of this text, is a special case. Influenced by familial ties, Eleanor strives to adhere to filial piety, respecting her father and prioritizing her family. Before she had fully developed her own personality, she worked hard to assume the role of her mother and ease family conflicts. She focused more on the family, neglecting her own personal growth. As her younger siblings grew up, despite their imperfections, they tried to improve under Eleanor's influence. However, Eleanor remained in a state of self-sacrifice, failing to recognize that she, too, was a child who needed guidance while shouldering family responsibilities. This led Eleanor to always be meticulous and observant, fearing that she might upset someone and thus developing a habit of being overly cautious. In daily life, she could not tolerate even minor mistakes and remained emotionally restrained, unable to express her feelings correctly. Her sense of responsibility towards the family made Eleanor suppress her own affects. She clearly realizes that she is insecure and insignificant, but she also knows that after such a childhood, she should not pass on her negative emotional experiences to others. Therefore, when facing others, she always presents herself as a "benevolent" person, understanding and guiding them. Her outward compassion can lead others to demand too much from her, causing them to forget that Eleanor also needs care and support.

In Peggy's eyes, Eleanor is not only a strange old person, but also a "beautiful prophet". Peggy worships Eleanor, and believes that Eleanor powers people through words (Gordon, 2000). "How things had changed; one thing seemed good to one generation, another to another. She liked getting Eleanor to talk about her past; it seemed to her so peaceful and so safe." (*The Years*, 326) However, from Eleanor's narrative, she finds her memories to be chaotic and disordered. Peggy does not understand why Eleanor is like this; to her, it might simply seem that her aunt is old and therefore not clear-headed. Eleanor's tendency to look around while describing past events is because her conversations in daily life are constantly

interrupted:

“We can’t tell a lie to save our souls,” he said abruptly.

What makes him say that? Eleanor wondered.

“When I was with them in Italy-” she said aloud.

“I mean-” Eleanor added, but she could not say what she meant with Crosby in the room fidgeting about. (*The Years*, 151-152)

“Yes,” she said. “There was a story-” But here the electric bell rang sharply. She stopped. (*The Years*, 153)

As a woman, Eleanor often finds it difficult to find the appropriate language for her feelings or state of mind and struggles to express her personal needs correctly. The deep-seated habit of suppressing or overshadowing affects was common among the Victorian middle class, particularly affecting women (Gordon, 2000). When she had dinner with her family, the Luftwaffe bombed London and interrupted their interesting conversation, she was eager to continue the conversation, but ultimately no one could remember what she was talking about. “She felt as if some dull bore had interrupted an interesting conversation. The colours began to fade. She had been looking at the red chair. It lost its radiance as she looked at it, as if a light had gone out.” (*The Years*, 288) The text highlights the fact that Eleanor is often overlooked. Her conversations are interrupted, and her subtle expressions are consistently ignored. These small needs have never been addressed, much like how, in her youth, her moments of solitude were always disrupted by the trivialities of life. She had to devote all her time to each family member, leaving no space to consider herself, which also suggests that her personal emotional needs were never met. Some researchers suggest that Eleanor may embody two conflicting modes of human existence as described by Heidegger: one is the inauthentic daily existence that conforms to “public opinion”, and the other is the authentic, poetic mode of existence (Xu & Lu, 2012).

A section in “The Book of the City of Ladies” talks about “women’s prudence”. “Prudence” means prudent, sensible and shrewd, and its affects are excessive restraint of self-behavior language, showing its own value in an unnatural form. This performance is considered to be different from male prudence, whether women like men have prudent mind, Christina said, “Women’s minds are as meticulous as men’s. The Goddess of Reason presented her with many examples of women’s wisdom, arguing that beyond natural talent, effort and dedication can also enable women to attain the same level of intelligence as men” (Pizan, 2002). When Eleanor prematurely took on the responsibilities of a housewife, it is highly likely that she passively accepted this shift in her role as a “little mother”. “I’ve heard all this, I’ve done all this so often, she was thinking. She glanced round the table. People’s faces even seemed to repeat themselves... I know what he’s going to say, I know what she’s going to say.” (*The Years*, 175) She took pride in her role as the “housekeeper”, but when she experienced the rights that come with motherhood, she began to seek ways to resist the constraints imposed by men. She no longer wanted to be simply a female figure who served men, a role that typically includes being

an object for male desire and a tireless slave for the household. This situation often occurs with older sisters, who bear heavy responsibilities from a very young age. Knowing the immense negative impact that household responsibilities can have, Eleanor, no matter how perfectly she performed in her father's home, would never choose such a life. However, Eleanor's entire life was dedicated to the Pargiter family; apart from refusing to marry, she remained fundamentally a woman controlled by patriarchy, unable to truly achieve personal freedom.

"Restraint is destined to be punished by mediocrity" (Beauvoir, 2010): In 1991, when Eleanor was 53, Colonel Pargiter passed away, and she was finally able to leave the family home. However, before she left, all the other children of the Pargiter family had long since started new lives, while she remained stuck in place. During a family gathering, she suddenly realized that she could no longer engage in their conversations. Even though she had traveled the world, her thoughts never aligned with her personal expression. They were all at loggerheads. Eleanor listened. She became more and more irritated. "All it comes to is: I'm right and you're wrong, she thought. This bickering merely wasted time. If we could only get at something, something deeper, deeper, she thought." (*The Years*, 177-178) By this time, Eleanor's affects had already become fixed, with little room for change. The sense of restraint she developed from a young age influenced her throughout her life, and she was unable to escape it even in her old age. "I remember Abercorn Terrace," said Maggie. She paused. "There was a long room; and a tree at the end; and a picture over the fireplace, of a girl with red hair?" (*The Years*, 166) The portrait of their mother in the living room frequently appears in conversations, symbolizing the family's lingering attachment to the past. The first time is when Delia stares at the portrait, praying for their mother's death; the second is when Martin returns home and, together with Rose and Eleanor, they discuss whether there is a small blue flower in the portrait. The third time is when Maggie asks Rose if such a portrait exists. The fourth time is when Delia suddenly mentions it again, prompting Eleanor to clean the portrait herself and keep it close. Unlike others who merely reminisce during conversations, Eleanor prefers to possess old objects from the past to help her recall those memories. She is eager to reclaim lost time, as a motherly woman might insist that she can still bear a child: she deeply desires to create life anew (Beauvoir, 2010). Eleanor, who is never unmarried, suddenly falls in love because she meets a young man named Nicholas.

"She recognised a feeling which she had never felt. But he's twenty years younger than I am, she thought, and married to my cousin. For a moment she resented the passage of time and the accidents of life which had swept her away from all that, she said to herself." (*The Years*, 299) Eleanor likes Nicholas primarily because he can express what she inwardly feels. His thoughts and actions are what she longs for. In her eyes, Nicholas is a complete individual, while she sees herself as a fragmented character. Her admiration for him turns into love, which, at its core, is her love for the version of herself she wishes to be. She longs to dance as lightly as she did in her youth, but this happiness is not genuine; it is merely an attempt to momentarily make up for her inner regrets.

The body's awareness of consciousness is an emotional state. Emotion has a priority in the state of consciousness. Both cognition and will refer to the external world, but emotion has its own unique subjectivity (Baldwin, 2018). At the final gathering, when the younger generation surrounded her, asking her to talk about her life, she found herself at a loss for words. Where should she begin? Should she talk about a life without marriage or children, without a home of her own, or those unspoken dreams? Eleanor suddenly realized: "My life's been other people's lives, Eleanor thought—my father's; Morris's; my friends' lives; Nicholas's..." (*The Years*, 367) She had lived her entire life for others, never once living for herself. The cause of Eleanor's restrained affects was not solely due to her parents; it might have also come from or within her. If parents fail to meet expectations, a child can choose to demand from them. If parents do not provide attention, the child may choose to shut down or vent. Because Eleanor was neglected, she chose to shut down her own needs, even closing off any chance of self-rescue. The final gathering also highlights the importance of living in the moment and cherishing the present. When Eleanor sat and chatted with her family members, a sense of emotional community emerged from their conversations. They drew energy from each other's words to seek harmony and maintain inner strength. This shifting psychological tendency was born from the close-knit, mutually stimulating group atmosphere. The collective emotional bonding and release provided the members with a psychological balance to counter the historical challenges they faced (Wu, 2022). "What I mean is, we've changed in ourselves," Eleanor was saying. "We're happier—we're freer..." (*The Years*, 386) Eleanor conveys the idea that in this world, simply being able to live happily is already a rare blessing. War, disease, and aging have taken away loved ones time and time again, but as long as there are still people around to accompany each other, that companionship should be cherished. When everyone discussed marriage, her insight provided a moment of clarity: "Why must one get married?" Eleanor often shares unique perspectives during significant moments, which reflects her reserved nature and the careful, objective approach she takes to addressing issues. Her words bring a sense of relief to the other family members. After temporarily setting aside the past, joy and freedom suddenly return.

By revisiting the stories of her youth and reminiscing about past family life, Eleanor attempts to rekindle the emotional experiences she once had. However, now that she is old, many of the things she once fantasized about reliving are no longer possible. "How terrible old age was, she thought; shearing off all one's faculties, one by one, but leaving something alive in the centre... It was better to die, like Eugenie and Digby, in the prime of life with all ones faculties about one." (*The Years*, 153-154) She begins to see herself as useless, attributing this sense of inadequacy to the experiences of her youth. Unable to find true inner peace, she resorts to complaining to ease her loneliness. However, these complaints only reinforce others' perception of her as an elderly woman, dismissing her grievances and failing to truly understand her pain. The events she experiences at this stage of her life are merely expressions of negative freedom—she reached a point where she can no longer progress, and thus, she must resign herself to fate. Ultimately, her

affects remain constrained and restrained.

5. Conclusion

Eleanor cannot truly achieve her freedom. She longs for another life in another world, not in a dream or by seeing the lives of others. But “She felt as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice with her hair blown back; she was about to grasp something that just evaded her. There must be another life, here and now, she repeated.” (*The Years*, 427-428) In Eleanor’s eyes, the younger generation still has the chance to gradually achieve their dreams, full of energy and potential, while she herself has grown old. Eleanor has spent her life burning herself out, using what little love she had left to care for others. Yet, for many reasons, she never truly loved herself. Her selflessness mirrors the Confucian concept of “Ren Ai” (benevolence or humaneness), which not only emphasizes loving others but also extends to all living things. According to Confucianism, love begins with one’s parents, siblings, and family, and then extends to the nation, and even to nature itself. In the domestic sphere, Eleanor embodies this benevolence, yet, because “one who saves others cannot save oneself”, she fails to recognize her own problems. Consequently, she faces everything and everyone around her with a sense of restrained emotion. This is not only a personal tragedy but also a reflection of the era she lived in. Although she finally achieves self-awareness, by then she is too old to pursue her dreams.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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