
Multifaceted Representations of Love in Nicholas Sparks's *The Notebook*: A Theoretical Exploration

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Abstract: Nicholas Sparks's novel, *The Notebook*, offers a profound narrative that transcends conventional romantic fiction by embedding complex psychological, emotional, and sociocultural dimensions of love. This paper presents a comprehensive exploration of the central relationship between Noah Calhoun and Allie Nelson through the lens of eleven established theories of love, including Attachment Theory, Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, and Chapman's Five Love Languages. Drawing on extensive textual evidence, the study meticulously illustrates how the love depicted in *The Notebook* evolves from passionate infatuation to enduring companionate love, and ultimately to a state of unconditional, selfless devotion. By applying a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, enriched with contemporary psychological research, this paper argues that the novel not only engages readers on an emotional level but also serves as a compelling literary case study for understanding the multifaceted nature and developmental trajectory of human love. The analysis positions the narrative as a rich text for examining how love is conceptualized, expressed, sustained, and ultimately tested by time, memory, and societal pressures, thereby highlighting its significance in the broader context of romantic literature and the psychology of interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: The Notebook, theories of love, attachment theory, triangular theory of love, romantic literature, love psychology, literary analysis, interpersonal relationships

1. Introduction

Nicholas Sparks's *The Notebook* (1996) has achieved iconic status in contemporary popular literature, captivating a global readership with its poignant portrayal of an enduring and seemingly unbreakable love. The narrative, which chronicles the decades spanning romance of Noah Calhoun and Allie Nelson, examines a love that is resilient, transformative, and profoundly multidimensional. While often categorized as sentimental fiction, a deeper analysis reveals a narrative rich in psychological and emotional underpinnings, making it a fertile ground for rigorous academic inquiry. This paper seeks to move beyond a surface-level reading to explore how a diverse array of psychological and sociological theories of love operate within the narrative framework. By doing so, it offers critical insights into the nature, evolution, and resilience of the bond between Noah and Allie.

The central thesis of this paper is that *The Notebook* can be interpreted as a literary case study that vividly illustrates the dynamic interplay of various theoretical constructs of love. The analysis will demonstrate how the protagonists' relationship progresses through distinct stages that align with established models, from the initial spark of passionate attraction to the deep, abiding connection of consummate love. This study employs a multi-theoretical lens, drawing from foundational frameworks such as John Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Robert Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, and John Alan Lee's Colour Wheel Theory, among others.

Furthermore, this paper will integrate contemporary research to contextualize these theories, demonstrating their continued relevance and application. For instance, recent scholarship extends Attachment Theory to clinical settings and even human-AI interactions, highlighting its core principles of security and emotional regulation (sciencedirect.com); (link.springer.com). Similarly, Sternberg's model remains a vital tool for analyzing relationship satisfaction in modern contexts (ebSCO.com). By applying these robust frameworks, this analysis aims to position *The Notebook* not merely as a work of romantic fiction, but as a nuanced literary exploration of human affection, attachment, and emotional development that offers valuable insights for both literary studies and the psychology of interpersonal relationships.

2. Theoretical Framework

To conduct a comprehensive analysis of the love between Noah and Allie, this study employs a diverse range of eleven well-established theories from psychology and sociology. Each theory provides a unique lens through which to deconstruct and understand the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dynamics that define their relationship across different life stages.

The selected theories are:

1. Attachment Theory (Bowlby): Focuses on the innate need for a secure emotional base and how early bonding patterns influence adult relationships.
2. Triangular Theory of Love (Sternberg): Defines love through the interplay of three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment.
3. Colour Wheel Theory of Love (Lee): Classifies love into primary styles (Eros, Ludus, Storge) and secondary styles (Mania, Pragma, Agape).
4. Passionate and Companionate Love Theory (Hatfield): Distinguishes between the intense, physiological arousal of early-stage love and the deep, affectionate attachment of long-term relationships.
5. Filter Theory of Love (Kerckhoff & Davis): Proposes that relationship development proceeds through a series of filters, such as social attributes and value similarity.
6. Reward Theory of Attraction: Suggests that we are attracted to those whose presence is emotionally and psychologically rewarding.
7. Rubin's Scale of Liking and Love: Differentiates between the affection and respect of "liking" and the deeper needs of "loving," which include attachment, caring, and intimacy.
8. Vulnerability and Care Theory of Love: Emphasizes that deep connection is fostered through mutual vulnerability and the provision of compassionate care.
9. Social Exchange Theory: Views relationships as a process of negotiation, weighing perceived costs and benefits.
10. Evolutionary Theory of Love: Interprets love and partner selection through the lens of reproductive fitness and long-term survival strategies.
11. The Five Love Languages (Chapman): A popular framework that categorizes expressions of love into five distinct types: words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time, and physical touch. This multi-theoretical approach allows for a layered and holistic understanding, revealing how different facets of love are foregrounded at various points in Noah and Allie's journey.

3. Analysis: Deconstructing Love in *The Notebook*

3.1 Attachment Theory: Emotional Security

Across Time John Bowlby's Attachment Theory, which posits that humans have an innate need to form strong emotional bonds with caregivers, provides a powerful framework for understanding the core of Noah and Allie's connection (verywellmind.com). The theory's central theme is that a responsive and available caregiver creates a "secure base" from which an individual can explore the world, and this pattern profoundly influences adult romantic relationships (icsw.edu). Noah and Allie's relationship exemplifies a secure attachment, characterized by profound trust, emotional availability, and unwavering commitment.

From the outset, Noah establishes himself as a secure base for Allie. His love is not conditional but is presented as the defining, stabilizing force in his life. This is articulated in his iconic opening reflection: "I am nothing special; of this I am sure. I am a common man with common thoughts, and I've led a common life... but I've loved another with all my heart and soul, and to me, this has always been enough" (Sparks, 1996, pp. 1–2). This statement underscores an unwavering emotional commitment that persists even through a fourteen-year separation.

The most potent illustration of secure attachment manifests in the novel's present-day timeline, as Noah cares for Allie, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. His constant presence, patience, and dedication represent the highest form of a secure attachment figure. Contemporary research highlights that such attachment dynamics are crucial in healthcare, influencing trust and a patient's sense of safety (sciendo.com). Noah's care provides Allie with comfort and ontological security even when her cognitive functions fail. When a nurse suggests his efforts are futile, Noah responds: "I'm here because this is where I'm supposed to be... Both you and I are enjoying ourselves. Don't dismiss my time with you—it's not wasted. It's what I want" (Sparks, 1996, p. 7). This demonstrates that the attachment bond provides reciprocal emotional fulfillment, existing independently of memory or recognition, thereby affirming Bowlby's concept of attachment as a lifelong, regulating force.

3.2 Colour Wheel Theory: A Spectrum of Eros, Storge, and Agape

John Alan Lee's Colour Wheel Theory (1973) offers a taxonomy of love styles, providing a vocabulary to describe the shifting dynamics of Noah and Allie's relationship. Their love story is not monolithic but rather a blend of at least three primary and secondary styles: Eros (passionate, romantic love), Storge (deep friendship, companionate love), and Agape (selfless, unconditional love).

Their journey begins with Eros, the classic romantic love characterized by intense physical and emotional attraction. Their first summer together is a whirlwind of discovery and passion. Noah's declaration in a letter captures this perfectly: "You are the answer to every prayer I've offered. You are a song, a dream, a whisper... I love you, Allie, more than you can ever imagine" (Sparks, 1996, pp. 114–115). This style is immediate, powerful, and all-consuming, typical of youthful romance. Following their reunion years later, their love evolves to incorporate Storge, a love rooted in deep friendship, shared history, and emotional intimacy. This is evident when Noah reads to the older Allie. Even without her memories, a new bond forms: "He had enjoyed talking to Allie... Noah got up and refilled the teapot... he had fallen in love again... with a new Allie, not just her memory" (Sparks, 1996, pp. 62–63). This form of love is less about fiery passion and more about quiet companionship and a deep, abiding affection.

Finally, the relationship culminates in Agape, or selfless, altruistic love. Noah's devotion during Allie's illness is the ultimate expression of Agape. He dedicates his life to her well-being without any expectation of reciprocation. His actions—restoring her dream house, reading to her daily, and remaining by her side—are acts of pure, unconditional care. He finds meaning in this service, stating, "I sit here and we talk... What could be better than what I am doing now?... I like being with you" (Sparks, 1996, pp. 158–159). This progression from Eros to Storge and finally to Agape illustrates that their love is not static but matures into a profound, all-encompassing bond.

3.3 Triangular Theory of Love: From Passion to Consummate

Love Robert Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love is one of the most influential models in psychology, positing that love is composed of three interconnected components: Passion (the motivational drives of romance and physical attraction), Intimacy (feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness), and Commitment (the decision to love and maintain that love) (southuniversity.edu). The combination of these elements results in different types of love, with Consummate Love—a balance of all three—representing the ideal.

Noah and Allie's relationship provides a textbook example of the journey toward consummate love. * Passion and Intimacy (Romantic Love): Their initial summer romance is defined by intense passion and rapidly developing intimacy. They experience the breathless excitement and physical desire characteristic of the passion component. As Allie recalls, "She brought her hand to his face and touched his cheek... they kissed... years of separation dissolve into passion" (Sparks, 1996, p. 111). This is coupled with a deep sense of connection and understanding (intimacy), as they share their dreams and vulnerabilities. Commitment and Intimacy (Companionate Love): After their reunion, while passion is rekindled, the relationship deepens into a companionate form, where intimacy and commitment are dominant. This is seen in their shared life together before Allie's illness and is the foundation of their bond in old age. Commitment: The commitment component is the anchor of their relationship.

Noah's decision to write to Allie every day for a year after their separation, and his ultimate dedication to her care, are powerful testaments to his unwavering commitment. He tells her, "I love you deeply, and I hope you know that... You are the greatest thing that has ever happened to me" (Sparks, 1996, pp. 168–169). Consummate Love: The narrative suggests that Noah and Allie achieve consummate love, a state that is difficult to maintain. Even as Allie's illness erodes the explicit expression of intimacy and passion, the foundation built over a lifetime allows moments of it to resurface. The "miracle" of her temporary recognition is a fleeting return to this ideal state, sustained by Noah's enduring commitment. The theory's relevance persists, with modern studies confirming that these three components are key predictors of relationship satisfaction, even in challenging circumstances like long distance relationships (ebSCO.com).

3.4 Passionate and Companionate Love: The Evolution of Emotion

Elaine Hatfield's theory distinguishing between passionate and companionate love further illuminates the developmental arc of Noah and Allie's bond. Passionate love is an intense, often overwhelming state of longing for union with another, marked by high arousal and emotional volatility. Companionate love, in contrast, is a steadier, more affectionate love based on deep friendship, mutual trust, and shared lives (verywellmind.com).

Their initial relationship is a clear depiction of passionate love. Noah's thought upon first seeing Allie—"He knew before he'd taken his next breath that she was the one he could spend the rest of his life looking for but never find again" (Sparks, 1996, p. 10) captures the instantaneous, all-or-nothing quality of this stage. Their summer is filled with intense emotions, from ecstatic joy to the profound pain of their separation.

Over time, this fire transforms into the warm, steady glow of companionate love. This is the love that sustains them through decades of marriage and into their final years. The quiet moments Noah describes in the nursing home are the essence of this stage: "We sit quietly for a while, enjoying something beautiful together... she offers a gentle smile, the kind you share with a child, not a lover" (Sparks, 1996, pp. 142–143). This evolution does not signify a lesser love but a different, more durable form. It demonstrates that for love to be enduring, the initial passion must evolve into a deep, companionate attachment.

3.5 Filter Theory: Overcoming the Barrier of Social Class

Filter Theory suggests that individuals select partners by passing them through a series of "filters" of decreasing breadth, starting with broad social characteristics and moving toward individual values and needs (en.wikipedia.org). The most significant filter in *The Notebook* is social class. Allie comes from a wealthy, high-society family, while Noah is a working-class laborer.

Allie's parents, particularly her mother, apply this filter rigidly, deeming Noah an unsuitable match for their daughter. Her mother's interception of Noah's letters is a direct attempt to enforce this social barrier. She tells Allie, "She never understood how much you meant to me... she probably thought the best way to protect me was to hide the letters you sent" (Sparks, 1996, pp. 52–53). For years, this filter succeeds in keeping them apart.

However, the novel's central conflict revolves around Allie's ultimate rejection of this societal filter in favor of a deeper one: psychological and emotional compatibility. Her engagement to the wealthy and socially appropriate Lon Hammond represents a life that aligns with her family's expectations. Yet, her reunion with Noah forces her to recognize that he passes a more critical filter—the fulfillment of her emotional needs.

Her choice of Noah is a powerful statement that true compatibility transcends social constructs. She tells him, "They tell me how special you are... it makes me feel like the luckiest woman alive" (Sparks, 1996, p. 182), affirming that his intrinsic qualities are more valuable than Lon's social standing.

3.6 Reward Theory of Attraction: The Power of Emotional Reciprocity

The Reward Theory of Attraction posits that we are drawn to people who provide us with positive reinforcement or rewards. These rewards can be tangible (like status or gifts) but are often intangible, such as emotional validation, companionship, and joy. A relationship is likely to endure if the mutual rewards outweigh the costs.

In *The Notebook*, the rewards are almost entirely emotional. For Noah, Allie's presence is the ultimate reward, bringing vibrancy and meaning to his life. His persistence in writing to her for years, despite the lack of response, is driven by the anticipated reward of her return. He tells her, "Dozens of letters. I wrote you for two years without receiving a single reply" (Sparks, 1996, p. 52). The act of writing itself was likely a self-reinforcing behavior, keeping the emotional connection alive for him. For Allie, the discovery of these letters is a profound emotional reward. They validate her feelings and confirm that their love was real and reciprocated. Their reunion is filled with moments of mutual reinforcement, as they reminisce and reconnect: "'Do you remember walking home after the festival?' 'Yes'" (Sparks, 1996, pp. 104–105). This shared history and the joy of its recollection act as powerful rewards that strengthen their rekindled bond and ultimately sway her decision.

3.7 Rubin's Scale: The Transition from Liking to Loving

Zick Rubin's (1970) work was pioneering in its attempt to empirically measure the distinction between "liking" and "loving." According to Rubin, liking is based on affection and respect, feelings one might have for a friend. Loving, however, involves a deeper triad of needs: attachment (a need for the other's presence and support), caring (a deep concern for the other's well-being), and intimacy (a desire for close, confidential communication).

Allie's initial relationship with Noah begins with elements of liking. She is drawn to his adventurous spirit and enjoys his company: "They spent their days doing things that were completely new to her" (Sparks, 1996, p. 11). However, her feelings quickly deepen into loving. The pain of their separation and her lingering thoughts of him for years afterward indicate a powerful attachment. She confesses to her mother, "I guess I still look for the kind of love we had that summer" (Sparks, 1996, p. 55). This statement reveals that her feelings for Noah have become the benchmark against which all other relationships are measured, a clear sign of the deep attachment component of love. Her eventual choice of Noah over Lon confirms this transition from a fond memory (liking) to an essential, life-defining connection (loving).

3.8 Vulnerability and Care: The Foundation of Emotional Openness

Theories centered on vulnerability and care propose that true intimacy is built on the willingness to be emotionally open and the reciprocal act of providing compassionate, non-judgmental care. Love flourishes in an environment where individuals feel safe enough to reveal their authentic selves, including their fears and insecurities.

This dynamic is central to Noah and Allie's reunion. Allie arrives at Noah's restored house in a state of confusion and emotional turmoil, torn between her commitment to Lon and her unresolved feelings for Noah. She is vulnerable when she admits her internal conflict, particularly her fear that something is missing in her relationship with Lon: "But there's always going to be something missing in our relationship" (Sparks, 1996, p. 54). Noah's response is not to pressure her but to listen with empathy, creating a safe space for her honesty.

This cycle of vulnerability and care is magnified in their old age. Allie is in a state of ultimate vulnerability due to her Alzheimer's, and Noah provides constant, unwavering care. His empathy is profound, as he tells her, "I know you can't remember who you are, but I can, and I find that when I look at you, it makes me feel good" (Sparks, 1996, p. 162). This illustrates that love, in its most mature form, is a continuous practice of protecting and cherishing another's vulnerability.

3.9 Social Exchange Theory: Choosing Emotional Fulfillment Over Material Wealth

Social Exchange Theory frames interpersonal relationships in economic terms, suggesting that individuals seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs. A relationship is judged as successful if the perceived rewards are greater than the costs. Allie's central dilemma can be analyzed through this lens, as she must weigh the costs and benefits of a life with Lon versus a life with Noah. Life with Lon: The benefits are clear and socially sanctioned: financial security, social status, and parental approval. The costs are emotional: a lack of deep passion and the feeling that something essential is missing. Life with Noah: The benefits are purely emotional and psychological: passionate love, deep understanding, and a sense of being her true self. The costs are significant: social disapproval, financial uncertainty, and abandoning a "sensible" future. Allie's parents clearly favor the exchange with Lon, seeing Noah as a high cost, low-reward choice: "They would never approve if their daughter became serious with someone like him" (Sparks, 1996, p. 21).

Allie's ultimate choice of Noah represents a profound rejection of a purely material or social cost-benefit analysis. She prioritizes emotional rewards over all else, concluding that a life without the deep connection she shares with Noah would be too costly in terms of personal happiness. Her final words to him in *The Notebook* affirm this choice: "You are my best friend as well as my lover... You have something inside you... kindness... that's what I see when I look at you now" (Sparks, 1996, pp. 182–183). She chooses a different kind of wealth—emotional fulfillment.

3.10 Evolutionary Theory: A Partner for Long-Term Stability

From an evolutionary psychology perspective, love can be seen as a mechanism that evolved to facilitate long-term pair-bonding, which is advantageous for raising offspring and ensuring mutual survival. This theory suggests that partner selection is influenced by cues that signal genetic fitness, resource provision, and, crucially, long term commitment and parental investment.

While Allie's parents focus on Lon's capacity for resource provision (wealth), Allie's choice of Noah can be interpreted as an intuitive selection based on cues of high parental investment and long-term emotional stability. Noah's unwavering devotion, his nurturing qualities, and his profound commitment are all indicators of a reliable long-term partner. His promise, "I love you, Allie... I always have, and I always will" (Sparks, 1996, pp. 114–115), signals a level of commitment that is evolutionarily desirable for ensuring the stability needed to raise a family.

The older Noah's reflection on their life reinforces this: "Every time I read to her... she would fall in love with me again... That's the most wonderful feeling in the world" (Sparks, 1996, Prologue). This cyclical reaffirmation of their bond, even in the face of cognitive decline, speaks to the powerful, adaptive nature of a love built on deep, enduring commitment, which is a cornerstone of evolutionary theories of love.

3.11 The Five Love Languages: A Multidimensional Expression of Affection

Gary Chapman's (1995) concept of the Five Love Languages, while more of a popular psychology framework than a rigorously tested scientific theory, provides a useful vocabulary for analyzing the expression of love. Chapman posits that people primarily give and receive love in five ways. The relationship between Noah and Allie is a rich tapestry woven with all five. Words of Affirmation: This is Noah's primary language. His heartfelt letters are the most powerful example: "You are a song, a dream, a whisper... I love you" (Sparks, 1996, pp. 114–115). His daily reading of their story is a continuous act of verbal affirmation.

Acts of Service: Noah's care for Allie during her illness is the ultimate act of service. He dedicates his life to her comfort and well-being, stating his purpose is to "begin to read the notebook aloud... in the hope that the miracle... will again prevail" (Sparks, 1996, p. 4).

Receiving Gifts: The most significant gift in the novel is the restored house. Noah fulfills a promise he made to Allie in their youth, physically building the dream home she once described. Her reaction validates the power of this gift: "You did a wonderful job restoring it. It looks perfect, just like I knew it would" (Sparks, 1996, p. 36).

Quality Time: Their first summer is defined by quality time, as they spend hours talking, walking, and sharing their dreams (Sparks, 1996, pp. 10–11). In their old age, the simple act of sitting together and reading constitutes the most meaningful quality time.

Physical Touch: From the passionate kisses of their youth- "She brought her hand to his face... their years of separation dissolve into passion" (Sparks, 1996, p. 111)—to the gentle, comforting touches in their final years, physical affection is a constant thread in their story.

The presence of all five languages demonstrates the comprehensive and multidimensional way in which Noah and Allie express their affection, contributing to the perceived strength and completeness of their bond.

4. Conclusion

Nicholas Sparks's *The Notebook* is far more than a simple story of romance; it is a complex and multidimensional narrative that serves as a powerful literary illustration of numerous psychological and sociological theories of love. This analysis has demonstrated that the relationship between Noah Calhoun and Allie Nelson aligns remarkably well with a range of established theoretical frameworks, from the foundational principles of Attachment Theory to the component-based structure of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love. The progression of their bond—from the passionate, Eros-driven love of their youth to the deeply committed, Agape-infused love of their final years—showcases the dynamic and evolutionary nature of human affection.

By applying a multi-theoretical lens, this paper reveals that the novel's enduring appeal lies not only in its emotional resonance but also in its intuitive accuracy in portraying the psychological realities of a long-term relationship. The narrative effectively dramatizes key concepts such as the formation of a secure attachment, the negotiation of social filters, the calculation of emotional rewards, and the ultimate triumph of consummate love. The characters' journey through passion, intimacy, and commitment, and their multifaceted expression of affection through all five "love languages," provides a rich text for exploring how love is conceptualized, expressed, and sustained against formidable odds.

Ultimately, *The Notebook* succeeds as a compelling exploration of human connection because it reminds us that true, lasting love is not an idealized, static state of perfection. Instead, it is a lived, evolving experience marked by vulnerability, care, sacrifice, and profound emotional resilience. The novel's alignment with such a wide array of theoretical models positions it as a significant cultural artifact for both literary scholars and students of human psychology, offering timeless insights into the most powerful of human emotions.

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