

FAMILY EXPECTATIONS IN *ELEMENTAL* (2023) MOVIE

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Abstract

This paper studies family expectations toward their child in the *Elemental* (2023) movie. Ember as the child is the main character in the film. Her parents consist of Bernie as the father, and Cinder as the mother. The objective of the study is to analyze what are the family expectations toward Ember. The data collection method applied is library research method focused on the scenes, dialogues, and character interactions in the film. The data analysis method employed is descriptive analysis, which aims to identify key themes related to family expectations. A psychological literary approach is used to examine the mental and emotional experiences of the characters. The theory applied in this study include Bowen's Family Systems Theory, specifically the Family Projection Process stage. The findings show that there are three main family expectations passed down to Ember. First, Ember is expected to be able to continue the family business, which is the fire family shop, the Fireplace. Second, Ember is expected to preserve the family identity, like preserving fire family's Blue flame, and marrying only fire element people. Third, Ember is expected to be able to control her temper. Those three family expectations have been transferred to Ember through nurturing, training, and preserving family tradition.

Keywords: family expectation, family projection process, family business, family identity

INTRODUCTION

Family expectations often a significant role in shaping an individual's character, decisions, identity, and overall development. High expectations from parents can create complex psychological impacts, especially when children feel trapped between fulfilling family expectations or pursuing their own dreams. While many parents aim to provide the best for their children—offering support, privileges, and a secure future—these expectations can unintentionally create psychological pressure. In many cases, children feel torn between fulfilling their family's hopes and following their own dreams. Parents often continue to see their children as young and precious, unaware that those children are growing, searching for identity, and preparing to face the world on their own. Although parental intentions may be rooted in love and protection, they may overlook what the child truly wants or who they are becoming. When children choose paths that differ from what has been envisioned for them, conflicts may arise, the child may be seen as ungrateful or rebellious, even when they are simply trying to be true to themselves.

In fact, as parents, the focus should not only be on providing what they believe is best for the child's future. Being a parent also means being emotionally prepared for the child's development—by asking what the child truly wants, recognizing and appreciating their uniqueness, and supporting them even when they choose a different path. When children make different choices, parents should not immediately see it as a mistake, but instead try to understand their reasons and listen to their perspective. This issue reflected are clearly illustrated in the animated

movie *Elemental* (2023). The movie tells the story of Ember, a fire element born to immigrant parents who fled Fire Land due to ongoing disasters. and settled in Element City as the first fire elements. Growing up in an immigrant family that valued hard work, Ember faced strict rules, especially against interacting with other elements, as fire elements were seen as destructive.

Her father, Bernie, built a business called Fireplace and expected Ember to inherit it, placing heavy pressure on her. However, she longed to discover her own path. This inner conflict reflects how family expectations can hinder personal identity and dreams. Ember is portrayed as a determined and capable individual who diligently works in her family's shop. Her life changes when she meets Wade, a character from the water element, who introduces her to new perspectives and challenges her long held beliefs. Through her relationship with Wade, Ember begins to question the life path her family has set for her and starts exploring other possibilities.

Elemental (2023) was chosen as the primary data source not only because of its emotional storytelling, but also because its deep exploration of family dynamics, cultural expectations, and identity struggles in an accessible and emotionally compelling way. There are many animated movies that focus on adventure or fantasy, but *Elemental* (2023) deeply examines real-life psychological conflicts, making it a valuable source for literary psychological analysis.

While previous studies on *Elemental* (2023) have explored other themes such as Dhea Annisya (2024) examined audience reception of masculinity in Wade's character, while Aulia Mutiara Choryva (2023) analyzed the influence of Ember and Wade's romantic relationship on students' perceptions of healthy relationships. Other literary studies include Githa Dwi Yuan's (2024) analysis of racial representation and Rizky P. Haslindra's (2023) study on orientalism using Peirce's semiotic approach. Tasya F. Fala (2024) explored the moral values in *Elemental: Forces of Nature*, while Prita Fitria Devia (2024) analyzed deixis in the movie. Bunga Nur Hafidah (2024) focused on English-Indonesian subtitle translation.

Unlike previous studies that focus on other literary themes such as representation and translation, this research specifically examines what family expectations are projected toward Ember. It aims to provide new insights into the role of family expectations in shaping individual identity. While various studies have analyzed different themes in *Elemental*, none have explored the family expectations toward Ember. This study fills that gap by focusing on the fire family expectations toward Ember.

There have also been several previous studies that have analyzed character development in animated movies using a literary psychology approach. For example, Muhammad Ali Ghufron and Yosi Jayatri Sari examined the character Joe Gardner in *Soul* (2020) using Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Meanwhile, Tessa Helly Rondonuwu's research on *Barbie of Swan Lake* (2003) discussed characterization without applying a psychological approach.

Another study that closely aligns with this research is the analysis of character development in the anime *Violet Evergarden*, this study uses Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory to analyze how

the main characters experience emotional changes due to the challenges they face. In *Violet Evergarden*, the character Violet develops from an individual who struggles to understand emotions into someone more humanized through social interactions and life experiences.

The key difference between this research and previous studies lies in its focus on family expectations toward Ember. While prior studies emphasize the search for life's meaning (*Soul*), emotional journeys (*Violet Evergarden*), or characterization without a psychological approach (*Barbie of Swan Lake*), this research highlights how family pressures can hinder an individual from discovering their true identity. Therefore, this study contributes to literary psychology by integrating Bowen's theories and Erik Erikson's to analyze the impact of family expectations on character development in animated movies.

The impacts of parents' expectation on Ember's character development is also compelling because it highlights how family expectations, even when well-intentioned, can restrict a child's freedom to pursue their own aspirations. Additionally, the study provides insight into how such pressures are reflected in popular media, such as animated films, offering a relevant lens for discussions on mental health and family relationships.

To focus the research, the writer formulates the problem as follows: What are the family expectations toward Ember? The research is limited on Ember and her family, her father Bernie and her mother Cinder. Within psychological approach, the family expectation toward their only child is analyzed using Bowen's Family Systems theory. Bowen's Family Systems theory is used to understand how the parents and their expectations has created difficult times for their child.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

This study applies a psychological approach to literature, focusing on how characters thoughts, emotions, and behaviors through psychological theories. This approach is particularly useful in examining Ember's character in *Elemental* (2023), as her character is significantly shaped by family expectations and emotional conflicts. By analyzing Ember's character, this study seeks to highlight the psychological effects of family expectations on their child. To achieve this, the study utilizes Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory to analyze the family expectations on Ember's character in *Elemental* (2023).

Bowen's theory focuses on the ways in which family dynamics and interactions, particularly family expectations, influence the child's character. Through Bowen's lens, the family expectations can be traced in the way Ember internalizes and reacts to these pressures, all within the confines of her family environment. The theory emphasizes the importance of understanding how family interactions contribute to shaping the psychological foundation of an individual, which is crucial for comprehending the child's character.

LITERARY REVIEW

Psychological Approach in Literary Studies

Psychology is the scientific study of behavior and mental processes, aiming to understand how individuals think, feel, and act across various situations (Gerrig, 2018: 2). It examines emotional development, personality, behavior in social relationships, and interactions with the environment. The field of psychology encompasses several branches, including developmental psychology, social psychology, and clinical psychology, each contributing to a deeper understanding of human nature. The term “psychology” is derived from the Greek words psyche (soul or mind) and logos (study or discourse). As a discipline, psychology seeks to answer fundamental questions such as: Why do people behave the way they do? What motivates human actions? How do early life experiences shape personality and adult behavior? These questions are explored through theories and frameworks developed by psychologists over time.

Psychology is typically used in practical fields such as therapy, education, and health. However, it also plays a significant role in the field of literature. Psychology provides tools for understanding the inner workings of fictional characters, particularly how they think, react, and grow as the story progresses. This is where psychology and literature intersect — not to treat real people, but to better understand the imagined minds within a narrative. In literary studies, psychology can be used as a tool to interpret the inner lives and motivations of fictional characters. In this research, psychological concepts are not used in the clinical or experimental sense. Instead, they are applied to the analysis of fictional characters through a literary lens.

This approach is especially effective in analyzing character-driven narratives, where psychological growth and family influence play important roles, as seen in the movie *Elemental* (2023), where the plot centers on a character’s personal growth or transformation. In such stories, characters are not only affected by external events, but also by their internal psychological journeys, including identity struggles, family pressures, emotional trauma, and the desire for independence.

The psychological approach provides a meaningful way to examine the character of Ember. As a young teenager dealing between her family’s expectations and her own dreams, Ember undergoes emotional conflict and identity exploration. By applying psychological theories to her character, this study aims to better understand how family expectations affect her psychological development and personal decisions. The psychological approach thus becomes an effective lens to reveal deeper meanings in her character.

Family Expectation

Family expectation refers to the pressure placed on individuals to meet the goals and values set by their families, often prioritizing family obligations over personal desires (Santrock, 2011: 329). According to Santrock, these expectations can significantly shape an individual’s decision-making

and development, particularly during teenagers and young adults, when individuals are forming their identities and striving for independence.

Murray Bowen “Family Therapy in Clinical Practice” (2022)

Murray Bowen developed the family systems theory, which explains how family relationships shape an individual's emotional and psychological development in 1978. According to Bowen in Chaterine M. Rakow (2022), individual behavior cannot be fully understood without considering the family system in which a person function. Emotional struggles are often rooted not in the individual alone, but in complex relationships within the family.

Bowen proposed eight interrelated concepts in his theory. The first is Differentiation of Self, which refers to a person's ability to separate their own thoughts and feelings from those of others, maintaining individuality even under emotional pressure. Triangles describe the emotional dynamics that occur when tension between two people is diffused by involving a third person, which often complicates the relationship further. The Nuclear Family Emotional System highlights common patterns within core family units, such as marital conflict, dysfunction in one spouse, or emotional burden being placed on children. Family Projection Process explains how parents unconsciously transfer their emotional issues—such as anxiety or insecurity—onto their children, often shaping the child's behavior and emotional development. Multigenerational Transmission Process refers to how patterns of emotional functioning and beliefs are passed down through generations, reinforcing certain family traits or struggles. Emotional Cutoff occurs when individuals distance themselves emotionally or physically from their families in an effort to manage unresolved tensions, although this often leads to further emotional challenges. Sibling Position explores how birth order affects personality and relational roles within the family, based on recurring patterns. Lastly, the Societal Emotional Process extends these ideas to a larger scale, showing how societal pressures—such as economic hardship or cultural conflict—can influence family functioning and emotional stability.

In the context of Bowen's Family Systems Theory, one of the most relevant is Family Projection Process stage. Family Projection Process describes how parents unconsciously channel their unresolved emotional problems, anxieties, or emotional distress to one or more children. Instead of addressing their own internal issues, parents project these anxieties onto a child, making that child the primary focus of excessive concern and attention, whether positive or negative.

The child targeted by this projection is often the one most responsive to the parents' anxieties, or a child with specific characteristics that trigger the parents' concerns (for example, the weakest child, the most rebellious, or even the one with the most potential). The impact of Family Projection Process on the child is highly significant: the child may develop behavioral problems, emotional difficulties, or even physical health issues in response to the projected pressure. They

tend to feel responsible for their parents' happiness or emotional stability, often at the cost of their own self-identity development.

Bowen's theory is used to understand the emotional pressure Ember experiences within her family, especially through the concepts of Multigenerational Transmission Process and Family Projection Process. These concepts explain how Ember is shaped by her parents' expectations and how this affects her ability to become emotionally independent.

METHOD

There are two research methods applied in this study. They are: the method of collecting data and the method of analyzing data. The library research method gathers the data from various key scenes, dialogues, and character interactions that illustrated Ember's emotional struggles and familial relationships. Specific elements of the movie that highlighted the dynamics of family expectations were documented for in-depth examination. The primary source of this study was the movie itself, which served as the basis for understanding Ember's character evolution within the context of her family. To analyze the data, the method applied is descriptive analysis, which aims to describe the family expectations toward Ember and how the child responds toward those expectations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ember's Family Expectations

Many parents give everything to their children, sacrificing so much in the hope of securing the best possible future for them. This is certainly a good thing—even considered a responsibility of parents toward their children. However, with all that parents do, certain expectations often arise. These expectations, whether expressed directly or indirectly, can become a burden for the child—such as the pressure to obey, to follow what the parents want, even when it doesn't align with the child's own desires. This naturally leads to conflict, because a child cannot always agree with their parents. They will inevitably go through a stage where they need to grow, make their own choices, and find their own path.

Family expectations shape Ember's character, to explore the types of expectations her parents placed on her and how these affected her character, this study uses the Family Projection Process from Bowen's Family Systems Theory. The family expectations that appear in the film *Elemental* (2023) include the expectation that Ember must take over the family business, that she must carry the family identity as part of the Fire element, and that she must be able to control her temper.

Continuing the Family Business

The first family expectation is that Ember must manage and take over the family shop. Since she was a child, Ember has been involved in running the shop — serving customers, making deliveries,

cleaning and organizing the store. The following data supports the idea that Ember, from childhood to adulthood, was expected to manage and eventually take over the shop:

Data 1 Managing and Taking Over the Shop

Ember must manage and take over the shop was something Bernie passed down in her from a very young age. This moment marked the beginning of the pressure that came from inherited family expectations. The family had this shop which was named as “The Fireplace.” Since her childhood, Ember had been involved in taking care of this family shop. This can be seen in the scene below:



Figure 1. Bernie and little Ember were in front of the Fireplace. (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:05:36)

Based on that scene, Figure 1, the father Bernie was talking to her tiny little daughter Ember in front of the family shop. Her father, Bernie, had kept saying to Ember, “This shop is the dream of our family. Someday, it will be yours” (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:05:36–00:05:39). He put the message into Ember’s mind. Bernie really wanted to pass down to Ember. Ember had to take over the family business, the “Fireplace.”



Figure 2. Little Ember was listening to her father Bernie. (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:05:39)

For Bernie, the shop meant a lot. He had built the shop on his own through years of hard work and sacrifice. He repeatedly said to Ember, “Always putting shop first” (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:50:57). This statement reveal how he projects his own dreams onto Ember. From a young age, he trains her to help manage the store, as if it is naturally her responsibility. Bernie always accompanies Ember while managing the shop to help her feel more confident. Ember says, “Someday this shop will be mine,” and whenever she does something well while managing the

shop, she always asks her father, "Can the shop be mine now?" This shows that she truly believes the shop will belong to her one day, clearly indicating that her father's expectations have been successfully projected onto her.

The scene also highlights Bernie's role as a parent who prepares privileges—such as a well-established business—for Ember's future. Parents who have prepared privileges such as businesses and inheritances often carry the expectation that their children will continue what has been built—so that the business does not end. Family businesses and inherited assets are commonly passed down to the next generation. With this mindset, many parents focus on giving their children the best life possible, hoping that once they're gone, their children won't suffer. Naturally, in order for a business or legacy to grow, it must be continued. From this belief, a strong expectation forms: children must carry on the family business or inheritance. This perfectly illustrates the Family Projection Process from Bowen's theory, where the family unconsciously imposes their hopes, dreams, and unresolved emotional needs onto their children.

Data 2 Serving Customers

In addition to managing and taking over the shop, Ember is also expected to serve customers well. Bernie trains this habit in Ember and consistently accompanies her when dealing with customers. This can be seen in the scene below:



Figure 3. Little Ember helped her father to serve customers. (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:05:57)

This scene shows that from a very early age, Ember is used to the activities of serving the shop customers. In her daily activities, the young Ember had spent most of her time in the shop and served the customers.



Figure 4. Grown-up Ember helped her father to serve customers. (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:07:01)

Based on the pictures (Figure 3 and Figure 4), it is evident that from a childhood to adulthood, Ember had been consistently trained to interact with customers at the Fireplace—such as helping serve customers, making candy, and preparing hot nuts. Ember's lines like "Someday this shop will be mine" (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:05:58) and "I got it, Asfha" (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:06:16) show that she had been already familiar and comfortable handling many responsibilities in the shop.

Ember genuinely enjoyed managing the shop because, in her mind, helping out meant fulfilling Bernie's wishes—especially since the Fireplace was meant to be passed down to her. This also reflects how Bernie's expectations are projected onto Ember. As a result, she had grown up believing that doing her best, especially by serving customers well, would earn her father's trust and would make her a "good daughter." This is supported by the concept of the Pygmalion Effect, which explains how expectations from others—such as parents—can improve a child's performance and confidence, even if the child isn't fully aware of it (2). Ember's motivation to be better is shaped by the need to meet her family's expectations, rather than by her own personal desires.

Data 3 Making Deliveries

In addition to managing the shop and serving customers, Ember was also expected to make deliveries. The expectation of becoming the successor of the family business came with heavy responsibilities, including handling deliveries. This was part of Bernie's efforts to shape Ember into someone capable of taking over the shop. He introduced her to this task from early childhood. This can be seen in the scenes shown in the images below:



Figure 5. Bernie & little Ember made deliveries together. (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:06:07)

Ember had been involved in the shop delivery activities. Together with the father, the little Ember made deliveries around the town. She was happy and reluctant in performing her duties.



Figure 6. Grown-up Ember was making deliveries. (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:12:04)

When Ember had grown into a young adult, she did the deliveries on her own. This task became a regular part of her daily life and reflected how deeply she was involved in the family business. Bernie and Ember even frequently competed to see who could deliver faster. Delivery work, which might seem simple, actually showed how Bernie entrusted Ember with real responsibilities beyond just helping at the counter. This routine highlights how the expectation to take over the shop was not only expressed through words but also through daily actions. By consistently assigning her this task, Bernie was shaping Ember into someone who could manage every aspect of the business.

When children are involved in real and meaningful family activities, they not only learn practical skills but also develop a sense of belonging and confidence in their own abilities. Habits such as handling deliveries or organizing the shop—although they may seem simple—actually serve as a process of internalizing values like hard work and reliability. In this context, Ember's routine is not merely a daily task, but a process of character building that shapes her into a capable and dependable individual, ready to take on greater responsibilities.

Data 4 Cleaning and Organizing the Store

Every morning, Ember had to take care of the shop by cleaning and organizing it—such as arranging the merchandise and making sure the store looked neat. This role had been part of her routine since childhood. It shows that Ember's responsibilities were not limited to interacting with customers but also included taking care of the entire store. This can be seen in the scene below:



Figure 7. Ember was cleaning and organizing the shop. (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:14:28)

Based on the scene, as Ember had grown older, Bernie finally began to trust her with bigger responsibilities. One clear moment is when he allowed her to take charge of the *Red Dot Sale*, a significant and busy event in the store. Ember had taken full initiative—cleaning the store, organizing the merchandise, labeling the discounted items, and preparing everything early in the morning before the shop opened. This scene highlights how Ember's sense of responsibility had fully developed. The trust was placed in her, and her proactive attitude signal that she had grown into a reliable and capable individual, shaped by years of family expectations and hands-on experience in the shop.

This sense of responsibility shown by Ember is not something that appears instantly—it is the result of long-term parental influence and consistent family expectations. Research shows that when children are raised in an environment where responsibility is gradually given and modeled, they are more likely to internalize it as a core value.

According to a study by Grusec, Goodnow and Kuczinsky (2000), children are more likely to adopt values such as responsibility when parents consistently communicate expectations and involve children in meaningful family tasks, allowing them to feel competent and trusted. In Ember's case, her character was shaped by years of involvement in the shop under her parents' guidance. As a result, her sense of duty is no longer a task she performs—it becomes part of who she is.

Carrying Family Identity

The second family expectation placed on Ember is that she must carry the Family Identity as a fire element. Family identity is something deeply valued by families. It is a collective image of who the family is, encompassing values, traditions, culture, beliefs, expectations, and roles passed down from one generation to the next. The family identity that Ember is expected to uphold as a fire element includes protecting the Blue Flame, the sacred symbol of their fire power—even if it means sacrificing herself. Ember is also expected not to marry anyone outside of the fire element, not to associate closely with other elements, and never to leave Fire Town. In other words, Ember must preserve her identity as a fire element by strictly following everything embedded within the family identity.

This identity is seen as a legacy—something the family builds and protects over time. Parents naturally pass down this family identity to their children, creating an expectation that the child will protect the family's reputation and honor, often without needing to be told directly. Ember grows up carrying this identity not only as part of who she is, but also with a sense of gratitude and obligation toward her parents for the life and legacy they have entrusted to her.

Psychological research on Adultcentrism, Helicopter Parenting, and Autonomy in Developmental Psychology supports the idea that many parents believe they are always right simply because they have lived longer. This belief often leads them to assume they know what is

best for their children, while unconsciously limiting the child's autonomy. As a result, they may overlook the fact that children, when given space and freedom, are capable of making responsible choices and even surpassing the boundaries that the parents had envisioned for them.

Data 1 Protecting the Blue Flame

Bernie consistently teaches Ember about the importance of the Blue Flame for the fire element community. The Blue Flame is a symbol of enduring life, representing the continued survival and strength of fire elements. Without it, the fire people believe they would be nothing. Protecting the Blue Flame is seen as a sacred duty, one that must be upheld even at the cost of one's life. This can be clearly seen in the scenes shown in the images below: Based on the following scene, the Blue Flame is portrayed as a symbol of survival and continuity for the fire element community. It represents the family identity that has been passed down through generations. Protecting and preserving the Blue Flame is something Bernie has taught Ember since she was a child.



Figure 8. Ember and father were praying in front of the blue flame. (*Elemental*, 2023: (00:13:41)

Ember preserved the family faith in the blue flame. She often prayed in front of the blue flame. In a difficult situation, Ember protected the blue flame and put aside her safety. She stated that she would not go anywhere, even though the Fireplace had been surrounded by a dangerous flood that could take her life. Still, Ember insisted on staying to protect the Blue Flame. This shows that the parents' effort in teaching Ember the importance of the blue flame as the family identity was successful. Ember guarded the Blue Flame, even if it meant sacrificing her own life. This act of Ember choosing to stay in a life-threatening situation just to protect the Blue Flame demonstrates how deeply she internalized her family's expectations. According to Bowen's Family Projection Process, parents may unconsciously project their hopes, anxieties, or values onto their children, expecting them to fulfil roles that maintain the family legacy. In this case, Bernie passed on the symbolic value of the Blue Flame not just as a fire, but as the soul of the family's identity. Ember is not only expected to protect it but also to become its guardian, even if it means risking her own life. This emotional burden shows how family values, when imposed without considering the child's personal desire or safety, can lead to psychological conflict and emotional pressure.

Data 2 Marrying Fire Elements

The family identity that is taught to Ember is that she must marry someone from the fire element and is not allowed to be with someone from another element. This belief is part of the cultural heritage within the fire community. Her mother, Cinder, works as a love matchmaker, and beyond her job, she constantly reminds Ember to find a partner and marry within the fire element. This can be clearly seen in the scene below:



Figure 9. Ember's grandmother's was giving her last request. (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:11:01)

Based on the scene, Ember is expected to follow all the values of family identity passed down from previous generations, including when it comes to choosing a partner. In the film, Cinder says, "Your finding match was my mother's dying wish," referring to Ember's grandmother's last words (Figure 9) "Promise me one thing... marry Fire" (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:10:56 – 00:11:08). Cinder expects Ember to fulfil her grandmother's wish by marrying only someone from the fire element. Cinder subtly emphasizes that Ember must meet this expectation. This pressure is rooted in the family's long-standing belief that relationships or marriages with other elements are strictly forbidden. The family has never had any inter-element relationships in their history, making such unions socially and culturally unacceptable within their community. Parental influence plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' romantic relationship choices. In many cultures, parents not only guide but often control their children's choice of partner, as it reflects family honor and continuity. This dynamic is clearly reflected in Ember's situation.

Based on Bowen's theory, parents may unconsciously project their hopes and anxieties onto their children. One of the most common forms of this is trying to control their children's future—especially their romantic life—so that it remains aligned with family values and identity. Through the projection process, parents transmit their emotional issues to a child. If the parents have strong beliefs about relationships, they are likely to influence the child's choices to match the family's emotional blueprint. In a community like the fire element culture in *Elemental*, where family values are deeply embedded, choosing a partner is not seen as a personal decision but as a reflection of the entire family's legacy. Therefore, parental interference becomes normalized, even if it causes emotional pressure and inner conflict for the child.

Data 3 (Avoiding Other Elements)

In addition to the family identity of protecting the Blue Flame and marrying a fire element, Ember is also expected to follow another rule within that identity: avoiding other elements. This can be clearly seen in the scenes shown in the images below:



Figure 10. Ember avoided other elements. (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:06:32)

Bernie and Cinder experienced discrimination when they first arrive in Element City, which left them deeply wounded and traumatized. As a result, they became overprotective parents to Ember. Within the Element city community, they distanced themselves from other elements because they had always been viewed as destructive by others. This generational exclusion leads to a long-standing belief that fire elements must not associate with other elements—especially water. Bernie always reminded Ember to stay away from other elements. Because her parents were so protective and expected her to avoid other elements, Ember became very closed off whenever she met them. She felt obligated to follow the rules her parents had set. One clear example from the film is when Clod, an earth element, invited Ember on a date to Element City. Ember rejected him and said, “Don’t let my dad catch you out here again. Sorry, buddy, elements don’t mix.” (Figure 10). This clearly shows that Ember had been raised to strictly follow the family rules as a fire element. Smetana, in her article, explains that children of overprotective parents often grow up obeying strict family rules without questioning them, which can lead to difficulty in forming their own independent judgments. According to Bowen’s Family Projection Process, parents may project their unresolved emotional fears onto their children. This projection is not only explained by Bowen, but also supported by Siegel and Hartzell (2014), who argue that parents who have not made sense of their own early experiences are more likely to repeat those experiences unconsciously through their parenting. Instead of responding to the child based on the present moment, they react from a place of unresolved fear or trauma. Bernie and Cinder, having experienced rejection and discrimination, project their fear of danger onto Ember by setting strict rules—such as avoiding contact with other elements. As a result, Ember grew up obeying these rules unquestioningly, without fully understanding the reasoning behind them.

Data 4 Never Leaving Fire Town

The last aspect of family identity that Ember is expected to obey is never leaving Fire Town. Leaving would mean going against what Bernie and Cinder have always feared—that Ember might experience the same discrimination they once faced. This can be clearly seen in the image below:



Figure 11. Ember refused Clod's invitation to leave Fire Town. (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:11:46)

Based on the scene, Ember had conversation with Clod the earth element who invited her to Element city. Clod said, "You never leave this part of town," it serves as evidence that Ember truly follows all the rules set by her family. Ember replies, "That's because everything I need is right here. Plus, the city isn't made with Fire people in mind. Sorry, but it'd take an act of God to get me across that bridge." (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:11:46) This moment also shows how Ember had grown up completely within her comfort zone and repeatedly rejected the idea of going to Element City. She felt that stepping outside of this environment would mean disloyalty to her parents, rebellion, and rejection by the rest of Element City.

According to Bowen's Family Projection Process, which suggests that parents transmit their emotional fears and expectations onto their children. In Ember's case, Bernie and Cinder's traumatic past in Element City causes them to instil fear and distrust in their daughter toward the outside world. Children raised under such projections often absorb family values so deeply that stepping outside of them can feel like a personal betrayal—both to themselves and their families. As Siegel and Hartzell argue, parents with unprocessed emotional issues tend to project these onto their children, unconsciously shaping the child's worldview through fear-based expectations. This supports how Ember's parents, Bernie and Cinder, taught Ember a deep fear of the outside world as a result of their own negative experiences in Element City.

Being Able to Control Her Temper

The third expectation is that Bernie and Cinder expect Ember to be able to control her temper as a fire element. While fire elements are generally known for being hot-headed, in Ember's case, her family sees her as someone who struggles to manage her temper. Ember often loses control and has emotional outbursts. This becomes one of Bernie's main standards for deciding whether

Ember is ready to take over the family business. Ember tends to explode easily and often lets her emotions take over.

Data 1 Trying to Control Her Temper

Ember often lost her temper, especially when dealing with customers or when she felt pressured. Even though she keeps trying to stay calm, it's clearly not easy for her. This can be clearly seen in the scenes shown in the images below.



Figure 12. Ember could not control her temper. (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:07:32)

Bernie often reminded Ember to stay calm and control her temper, which tends to flare up unexpectedly. This reflects Bernie's expectation that Ember should learn to manage her emotions. In the scene, when Ember got into an argument with a customer about a promotion and lost her temper, Bernie quickly stepped in. He asked, "What just happened? Why you lose temper?" Ember, clearly got panicked and confused, replied, "I don't know. He was pushing, and pushing, and it just..." Bernie then calmly said, "Calm, calm. Sometimes customers can be tough. Just take breath... and make connection. When you can do that and not lose temper, then you will be ready to take over shop" (*Elemental*, 2023: 00:07:53 – 00:08:15). From Bernie's statement, it is clear that he expected Ember to control her temper in order to serve customers and eventually took over the family business. This expectation is consistent with the previous family expectations, yet Ember struggled to meet it. She did not fully understand the cause of her outbursts, and rather than addressing the root of the problem, Bernie and Cinder normalized it as simply part of being a fire element. Despite this, Bernie continues to place Ember in emotionally triggering situations, expecting her to change without proper emotional support. Ember's explosive temper becomes the starting point of the main conflict in *Elemental*. Her outburst causes a major problem—she accidentally damaged a pipe in the Fireplace, which led to a water leak flooding into the shop.

According to Morris et al. in "The Role of the Family Context in the Development of Emotion Regulation," children develop emotional self-regulation based on how their parent model, react to, and discuss emotions. When parents focus solely on outcomes such as not losing temper without helping the child process their feelings, it can result in emotional confusion, guilt, or suppression. Bowen's Family Projection Process explains that parents may project their unprocessed emotional anxieties onto the child. Bernie, for example, may expect Ember to control her temper not only for

the sake of the business but also to protect her from social rejection—something he may have experienced in the past. However, without understanding Ember's inner struggles, this projection becomes another layer of emotional pressure that further complicates Ember's identity and self-regulation.

CONCLUSION

To answer the problem statement, "What are the expectations of Ember's parents toward Ember?", the writer uses Bowen's theory, which emphasizes how Ember's parents, Bernie and Cinder, influence her character through their expectations. The writer identifies three main expectations placed on Ember:

First, Ember is expected to take over the family business. Because of this, she is trained from childhood to adulthood to manage the shop—serving customers, making deliveries, cleaning, and organizing the store—with the hope that she will become an even better business successor than Bernie. Second, Ember is expected to carry on the family identity, which includes values, traditions, culture, beliefs, expectations, and roles that preserve her identity as a Fire element. This includes guarding the Blue Flame, not marrying anyone from another element, avoiding other elements, and never leaving Fire Town. Third, Ember is expected to control her temper. She must be able to manage her emotional outbursts to become a stable Fire element and gain Bernie's trust to inherit the Fireplace.

The writer finds that it is clear these expectations were passed down directly from her parents. Often, parents are unaware that the expectations they impose become a heavy burden and a source of pressure for their children. They tend to focus on their own past experiences as the ideal model for their child's future. For example, Ember is expected to avoid other elements and not have relationships outside the Fire element—this limits her growth. She becomes too comfortable in her own bubble, which results in a narrow worldview, emotional immaturity, and a lack of confidence in social situations.

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