



## The past in Selected Novels by Anne Tyler

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### Abstract

The study aspires to investigate Anne Tyler's concept of the past in four of her novels. It utilizes an analytic method to explore the role and value of the past in *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964), *Searching for Caleb* (1976), *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982) and *Saint Maybe* (1991). A discussion of Tyler's literary, cultural and Southern roots will aid to justify the recurrence of the past in her writings as it impacts the present and the future, upholds her themes of alienation, heredity and freedom/ commitment conflict within the context of the family. An analysis of the characters' diverse evaluation of the past- in the specified texts- is important to dramatize its significance in their lives and reinforce its role.

**Key words:** past, Alienation, family, Tyler.

Anne Tyler (1941- ) is an American novelist and short story writer whose fiction has been identified as 'something both unique and extraordinary in contemporary American Literature' (Yardley, 12). Tyler has attracted the attention of notable critics and reviewers like Reynold Price and John Updike who acclaimed her as a representative of a new generation of Southern authors who emerged during the fifties and the sixties. As winner of The National Book Critics Circle Award in 1985 and A Pulitzer Prize in 1989, she can be considered 'a prolific American novelist of excellence and promise' (196) as Updike wrote in *The New Yorker* (1982).

Tyler witnessed the post-world War age of anxiety. This specific period of American

history was marked by tremendous social, political and economic changes, namely the Civil Rights Movement, the rise of Communism, the use of the atomic bomb and the American participation in the Vietnam War (1957-1975). In the field of literary endeavor, the era produced realistic fiction to express the new alterations and the recourse to old historical and cultural roots out of a poignant sense of loss. The heavy weight of the past was therefore a pre-dominant theme in the post-war Southern Literature. Southern writers like Eudora Welty (1909-1964), Flannery O'Connor (1925-1961), Carson McCullers (1917-1976) and before them Edith Wharton (1862-1937) adopted William Faulkner's literary tradition. In keeping with his trend of creativity, they wrote tragic fiction to reveal the wavering between past errors and

present ugliness. Hence, they tried to justify the disintegration of the Old South and the prevalent mode of personal and social defeat.

Tyler wrote about the survival of the past into the present. Nevertheless, she opted for a narrower angle by limiting the past to the personal, domestic level. The family past in her writings dominates its members in the present and the future.

Tyler's novels *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964), *Searching for Caleb* (1976), *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982) and *Saint Maybe* (1991) help reveal her unique concept of the past starting from the beginning of her career in the sixties to the nineties. The past for her, as Peter B. High wrote in **An Outline of American Literature** (1986):

existed not merely for its own sake, but because it provided the metaphors through which the present could be described and understood. (16)

#### Tyler's individual treatment of the past

Tyler can be considered the antithesis of her contemporaries with her traditional approach and deep nostalgia for a faded, glorious or chivalric past. She particularizes her concern and limits it to the family to stress key themes- namely heredity, fate and alienation. In both *If Morning Ever Comes* and *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, the past appears in terms of the fathers' desertion of their families. Tyler uses the myth of the evil patriarch to reveal the protagonists' response to their fathers' sudden departure. Heredity appears physically in black eyes or red hair taken from the parents and psychologically as the characters' present is rooted in the wrongs of the past.

In *Searching for Caleb*, the past is represented by two dramatically opposed brothers- Daniel and Caleb. The former adopts the family restraint, while the latter leads a carefree life away from domestic obligations. The past involves the individual/ conformity conflict that extends to the ensuing generations

as a heritage they cannot avoid. In *Saint Maybe*, the past emerges in the form of guilt tightly associated with family relationships. The question of morality is involved: Ian, the main figures, is molested by the conscience which magnifies the clash between personal and social, moral conventions.

Characterization is Tyler's means of dramatizing the impact of the past. The characters can be divided mainly into two groups: Firstly, the escapists, namely people who are attached to the past out of revulsion against the present or their inability to go beyond old memories- whether good or bad. Old people usually belong to that set, secondly, the challengers, who are members of the succeeding generations that yearn to defy the present imperfections and fend for themselves in a better life. Both groups are generally representatives of simple, middle-class Americans, who seek for the truth either in the past or beyond the ties. The Grandmother, a typical old-fashioned woman, in *If Morning Ever Comes* pertains to the first group. She considers the past a refuge from the ugly present. As for the mother-victimized by the past- she could never overcome the shock caused by her husband's desertion of her decades ago. She never comments on the past or interferes in the affairs of her children. Pearl Tull in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* undergoes the same experience. She remains silent about her husband's sudden disappearance so as not to admit her failure as a wife. She turns into a vengeful mother, who misplaces her sorrow by ill-treating her children, seen by her as the living embodiment of disappointment.

Old folks in Tyler's fiction "are presented with compassion" (187) as stated by Elizabeth Evans in **American Women Writers** (1983). considerate people who epitomize the past. In *Searching for Caleb*, The Pecks are wealthy, odd people 'who kept to themselves and were suspicious of outsiders" (59). Most elderly Pecks are unmarried, divorced or childless. They prefer to live in isolation. Some other members

strongly reject this lifestyle. The oscillation between obedience and rebellion can be clarified with reference to the two old brothers: Daniel, the elder brother, and Caleb, the younger one. The Bedloe parents in *Saint Maybe* exemplify refugees in the past. They lose every connection with the present after their son's death and live on the good old memories.

Tyler's novels are often large in scope. They may include three or four generations that assist in tracing the potency of the past over them. The Hawkes children in *If Morning Ever Comes* forms a good example. The girls adopt their mother's emotional frigidity as a reaction to their father's absence. Unlike his lost sisters, Ben Joe is a dutiful brother, who yearns for attachment to his family- like the figure of Benjamin, Jacob's good son in the Bible. Ian in *Saint Maybe* is tormented by his past. His ascetic life in the Church of the Second Chance away from terrestrial pleasures reflects his constant endeavor to atone for his guilt against his brother. Yet, the past remains in the presence of Lucy's children whom he brings up. In both novels, women like Ben Joe's beloved and Ian's sister-in-law are catalytic agents who trigger off drastic alterations in men's lives in the past or the present.

#### **Tyler's technical and structural tools to reveal the significance of the past**

The four novels are circular in structure. They begin **en medias res** and end at the same starting point which helps to crystallize Tyler's concept of the inevitability of the past. Through flashbacks and memories, the past is gradually regained to influence the present and the future expectations. Such a compact time-scheme enables Tyler to juxtapose the past, present and future events.

The recollective-retrospective technique is utilized by Tyler to intensify the power of the past. She operates a flexible time-scheme that goes freely backwards and forwards. Such a special treatment of time or '*the continuous present style*' (High, 154) confirms the dogma

that '*yesterday and tomorrow are Is: Indivisible one*' (ibid, 155). The four novels are thus based upon a circular structure of escape ensued by return to adapt and adhere to the family bonds. Far from being a pessimistic novelist, Tyler endows her novels with dreams or a gleam of hope for a better life in the future.

The journey pattern is another significant motif in the novels. It is not physical but also spiritual to affirm Tyler's conviction that '*the true drama of life takes place within the soul*' (High, 202). Ben Joe's journey home in *If Morning Ever Comes* results in his growth represented by his departure with his beloved to start anew away from the past evil. In *Searching for Caleb*, Justine's journey with her grandfather to look for the hero stands for their emotional isolation in the present and quest for the past roots symbolized by Caleb, the long-lost brother. In *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Cody wants to '*ride trains forever*' (137) to be a successful businessman, but he has to stop for his family. Hence, physical wandering is an embodiment of the character's inner journey of growth to reconcile themselves and their families.

Imagery and symbolism are also used to highlight the impact of the past. Tyler resorts to symbolic titles to sum up the novels' gist. In both *If Morning Ever Comes* and *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, the title is paradoxical. The former suggests Ben Joe's hope for a future based not on his past and his doubt about that. The latter implies the existence of characters who long for home like Ezra and who are sick of it like Jenny and Cody. Their feelings are symbolically confirmed in their attitudes regarding food. In *Saint Maybe*, the title arouses a debate about Ian's own concept of morality. Whether his sin is erased by his austere life and self-inflicted torture, which may render him a saint is a question open for discussion. In *Searching for Caleb*, the title sums up the quest for the lost Caleb. Moreover, reference to trains and railroad stations adds strength to the journey motif. The train stands for self-quest and an

active outlet from the unresolved conflicts of the past or the present. The stations are too dim to intensify the emotional distance between the individual and his ugly surroundings.

Other symbols are functional likewise. Music is used as a therapy or a refuge from the horrors of the present, as in the case of the grandmother's song or in Ben Joe's guitar in *If Morning Ever Comes*. In *Searching for Caleb*, Caleb finds in music a mode of self-expression away from the family restrictions. Musical instruments like the pennywhistle, the violin, the piano and the graphophone are deployed to vivify the role of music as an outlet and a relief from harsh reality. Animal imagery is also used. Pets like cats and dogs appear in the novels as they symbolize the characters' confusion at their past and need for emotional warmth in the present. Besides, houses and furniture are key symbols in the novels. The action is usually limited to North Carolina or small towns in Baltimore to match Tyler's concern with domestic life. Old houses with their old photos, stair railings, dark-shaded windows surrounded by dead leaves, unmade beds and wavy or speckled mirrors help to preserve the past. Most of the time, the characters are stuck in stair railings or descend staircases, situations which indicate their stagnation in the present and latent desire to revive the good old days. In addition, the laundry is never done at home. The non-existence of dryers or washing machines negates the presence of any domestic felicity or desire for change.

### Conclusion

Tyler's vision of the past accordingly consolidates her interest in the individual/family contact and affects the characters' evaluation of their present and future. They waver between the past limitations and their aspirations to assert themselves after all. Despite her adherence to domestic life, Tyler manages via her focus on the family institution, use of plots based on common events of universal appeal, psychological analysis of well-drawn

figures and variant verbal and technical tools- to rise from regionalism to universality. There is much to be tackled in her work due to her identity as 'a southerner with interest in family, community, and the past: a modern woman fascinated with change and urban life; a writer with faith in man's ability to love and endure yet keenly aware of the difficulty of communication within the family' (53) as Paul Binding wrote in **A Literal Journey Through the American South**.

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