

Anguish In Anne Tyler's 'Dinner At The Homesick Restaurant'

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Abstract:

A family is made up of a diverse group of people who have similar interests and dislikes as well as bonds of friendship and jealousy. It preserves some of the most powerful and deep emotions that are either tying or breaking bonds. Despite contradictions, the family is unquestionably the social structure that people can depend on to provide them with understanding and unwavering support. While many writers of the mid-twentieth century emphasized the ideal of the traditional family, Anne Tyler questioned this ideal by focusing on a family in the novel, 'Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant' where the father gives up his job as the provider. The children grow up thinking poorly of their childhood, since the mother has to carry out the responsibilities given to both the mother and the father. However, the siblings' memories of the past are rooted in their failure to fulfill the ideals of the conventional family. Thus, the purpose of this research is to examine the dynamics of Tyler's dysfunctional family, concentrating on the psychological effects of living in a mother-headed household and the father's abrupt disappearance.

Keywords: Memory, Past & Family, Psychological, Dysfunctional.

Introduction:

Literature should not be seen simply as invention or fiction. It is a creative blend and interpretation of various fields, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, and culture. A true literary artist engages with the truths of human emotion and the realities of life within society, often portraying life with more accuracy and depth than historical records or statistics can provide. As long as society continues to offer the raw materials for fiction, whether openly or subtly, the family will always play a key role in the context.

American literature is defined as writing produced in the United States and its former colonies. America was once a collection of British colonies on the east coast of what is now the United States of America. As a result, its literary heritage is initially connected to the larger English literary culture. Early American literature was centered in the colonies of New England. Political publications by Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and Samuel Adam were published during the Revolutionary Era. With the creation of the United States Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson cemented his place in American history during the

post-war era. The earliest books in the country were published in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Born in 1941, Anne Tyler is regarded as one of the most significant contemporary American novelists and short-story writers. Her works are characterized by intimate descriptions of everyday life. Her portrayal of contemporary Southern life captured the attention of several readers, and one of her most well-known pieces, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), became a national best seller. Anne Tyler talks about the significance of growing up in "an experimental Quaker community in the wilderness" in *The Writer on Her Work*. She found the "kind of setting-apart situation" necessary for artistic separation in her later attempts "to fit into the outside world" and in her early experience of seclusion. Tyler's early loneliness and sense of alienation served as inspiration for her fiction's tone and subject, which included the topic of a person's relationship to the community—particularly that of one's own family and household—as well as the sardonic detachment that characterizes her work.

Tyler's earlier novels were not given much critical attention, being most often noted as indicators of the author's potential. It was not until novelist Gail Godwin reviewed *Celestial Navigation* (1974) and John Updike called readers' attention to *Searching for Caleb* (1976) that Tyler gained widespread acclaim. Critics praise Tyler for her wit and her ability to render detail. While some reviewers complain that her characters are implausible, even bizarre, others assert that she presents them with such compassion that their oddities become simply human. Many reviewers point out the connection between tragedy and comedy in Tyler's fiction, and praise her talent at dealing with both. However, some critics complain of the lack of a moral dimension in Tyler's novels: characters are not good or evil; they are just mistaken or confused. There is much debate over Tyler's relationship to the Southern literary tradition, but there are obvious influences in Tyler's fiction from Faulkner, O'Connor, and Welty. Reviewers point out that Tyler, like Faulkner and O'Connor, emphasizes the importance of personal history. Critics often compare Tyler to Welty in the way she writes about everyday people and their lives, instead of just chronicling major events. However, Tyler's novels do not contain the Gothic overtones typical of her Southern predecessors.

The family is the core of human society, and Anne Tyler is fascinated by the conflicts that arise between a character and their family, as well as the interactions that shape these relationships. Each family member affects the others, influencing their development in unique ways. The restrictive nature of the family often leads her characters to dream of escaping, hoping to find freedom in the outside world. However, in her novels, there is usually a pattern of escape and return. Her characters may leave home, but they often find themselves coming back in the end.

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1982, set in Baltimore, Maryland, and is a compelling story about the connections within the Tull family. One of the novel's distinctive features is how the three children—Cody, Ezra, and Jenny interpret family-wide situations through their perspectives and responses. By including a father who leaves

the family, Beck, Anne Tyler challenges the idea of the perfect home in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. As a result, Pearl, the mother, is forced to raise the Tull children alone while working a full-time job, preventing the rest of the family from modeling such an ideal structure. We get the glimpses into both the present, when the siblings are adults, and the past, where the siblings are children. Because of this arrangement, the children's disparate recollections and fixation on the past highlight memory limitations.

In *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), Anne Tyler explores the advantages of ambiguous family boundaries, though sometimes in unsettling ways. Her characters constantly shift between distancing themselves and drawing closer, repeatedly letting go and pulling back. Tyler's protagonists, though devoid of intense sorrow, deeply long for solace and connection. She suggests that children from broken homes may have a better chance of forming healthy relationships and attachments than those raised in institutions.

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Pearl's memories not only help the reader understand how her life experiences have shaped and contributed to her development, but they also demonstrate the connections between the deeds and lives of the characters. After twenty years of marriage, her husband deserts her, leaving her a lonely and desperate orphan. Generally the term "homesick" refers to missing home, but in Anne Tyler's novel *Dinner at the Home sick Restaurant*, it also refers to being tired of the rules and constraints at home and being psychologically crippled as a result of traumatic experiences brought on by questionable parental role models. Pearl bravely battles to care for her family as a single parent. She frequently imposes her values

and morals harshly, but she never compromises on them. The story looks at people's virtues and shortcomings as well as how siblings might have similar experiences but interpret them in different ways. Some people turn their homes into hellholes that they should avoid, but family ties keep them close enough to support one another.

Aggressiveness of Cody

An aggressive and driven individual, Cody has negative memories of his upbringing and makes an effort to stay away from the family in his adult life. Characterized as enthusiastic but complacent, Ezra looks back on his early years with nostalgia and aspires to replicate the ideal family in his adult life. As a single mother raising her daughter, Jenny regrets some of her choices and plans to improve as a parent once she gets married and has more time to co-parent while working. Pearl regrets her time as a mother as she gets older since there are a lot of uncomfortable parenting choices that she would have made differently if she had had more time to raise her kids.

Even if each character has a unique perspective on the past, Cody and the other brothers in particular give their history a great deal of attention and let it have a significant impact on their current lives. David Lowenthal says, "The past is everywhere." Like ourselves and our thoughts, there are features all around us that have somewhat identifiable antecedents (xv). The Tull brothers view the past as a burden on who they are as adults, in addition to being a method of escape for Cody or ideality for Ezra, with elements like prior conversations, things, and locations evoking particular recollections. Because each sibling has a different memory of the past, the novel highlights the unreliability of memory by focusing on a different family member in each chapter.

Tyler presents Cody as a confused hetero normative male, focusing a lot of attention on his unwillingness to accept Pearl's imperfections. Because he can't replicate the standards needed to create the ideal home, Cody reacts badly to his upbringing. Nonetheless, his incapacity to eclipse Ezra is one of the main problems with his background. Throughout his early years, he tries in vain to win Pearl over, since "Ezra was Pearl's

favorite, her pet." (Tyler, 37) Everyone in the family was aware of it.

Tyler's use of flashbacks demonstrates how Pearl's real world is very different from her imagination; the moments when the kids turn on each other, when she scares them with her angry outbursts, and when Beck's desertion adds to the stress on everyone are all evidence that Pearl's memories are not always accurate. When she discovers that her children no longer require her in the same way, she feels empty and depleted because her identity is based entirely on her roles as a wife and mother.

Characters in Tyler's books battle to strike a balance between their sense of self and their familial identities. Many of her fiction works center on her representation of the American family, with particular attention paid to the decay of family structure and the traditional domestic ideals. Her fiction is frequently linked to the writings of John Updike.

According to Norton, their writing "focuses on the household, the quotidian, and the requirements of the inner circle" and "centers on family." all at once [he] had the feeling that the ground had rushed away from beneath his feet. Why, that perky young girl was this old woman! This blind old woman sitting next to him! She had once been a whole different person, had a whole different life separate from his ... (p.264)

Her most palpable narrative virtues are by and large traditional ones: memorable characters, seductive plots, imaginative and hawk-eyed descriptions. Tyler is adept with the simile, acute as a psychologist, and quite good at the meditative pause in dramatization, although the reflections usually come as ruminations of a character rather than as autonomous philosophical sorties like George Eliot's.

The Perseus-Medusa image is appropriate for Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant in an even more special way. This book dwells on two problems: people's existence in time and the profound ambivalence of human beings about identifications with others. People suffer from their separateness and are specially drawn to merging with strangers who are exotic to them;

yet, no sooner have they done so than they feel the petrification begin to set in and they fantasize evasion, abandonment and wandering.

Themes of Nostalgia and Home:

The concept of alienation depends on a firm conceptual boundary between the strange and the familiar, inside and outside; Tyler's narrative disposition of characters transgresses this boundary without eradicating it. The outsiders take over some of the usual functions of family, but their ultimate difference from family is their most significant trait. Such characters are signs of permanent human strangeness, but Tyler's work presents this strangeness as the very resource by which to prevent alienation. Throughout her life an alienated woman, Pearl Tull, on her deathbed, reflects on the foolishness of holding herself inviolate from disruption.

Pearl's recollections in the novel mirror the ambivalence of feeling that comes with the birth of children and follows a mother even unto death. They suggest emotions common to many women as they grapple with maternal roles and struggle to give their children earnest measures of love and acceptance. However, Pearl's recollections represent just one perspective, a singular look at a fragmented and troubled family.

In *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Tyler examines many facts of family relationships, particularly as they evolve between mother and child, fester between siblings, and extend into the world beyond. In life, as in Tyler's novel, the family is the base from which the individual moves into society and acquires a sense of community. The community serves in turn as an enlarged version of the family, a larger arena for each person to act out the same conflicts, struggles, hopes, and dreams as he did in his family of origin. However troubled and strained relationships may be, family and community represent "home," and, for better or worse, the individual must come to terms with this. In Tyler's novel these things are no less true. Depicting the dynamics of the Tull family with a shrewd and keen insight, Tyler carefully explores its members' connections to the past, to the community, and with each other.

Absence of Father

Being a single parent causes a lot of stress, which is reflected in most of Pearl's depressing and violent acts against her children in the novel. Cody, who stands in for "the father absent boy," is raised in a "mother-headed family" where his mother's lack of affection and understanding for him sets the stage for an unhappy and disorderly adult existence. The effects are debilitating when Beck and Pearl abuse their children as parents. Despite her love for Cody, Ezra, and Jenny, Pearl Tull treats them unfairly. Her anger, ferocity, and lack of emotional warmth are experienced differently and have varied effects on each child. Jenny starts to feel scared and anxious, and Ezra starts to be wary of any emotional outburst; second, her overt favoritism of Ezra, whom Cody can never measure up to a cruel and envious person.

Tormented by the Past Memories:

The most conflicted family member, Cody Tull, has a different viewpoint. He appears to share his mother's object-aversion to the family meal ritual, as well as an object-aversion to its presentness. The most damaged child following Beck's exit and the one Pearl feels most like herself, Cody always tries to undermine his brother Ezra's standing and status in the family in an effort to win his mother's love and respect. Ezra and Cody are in constant rivalry for Cody's affection, which is demonstrated by Ezra's aggressive animosity toward Cody through a slew of vicious childhood practical jokes.

Several things contribute to Cody's fears and drive for success: his identification with the Tull family, his need for attention from his mother, and his resentment of his father. After Beck leaves, Cody makes every effort to establish himself as the head of the household. He goes to considerable lengths to hide all of Ezra's treasures, destroy the friendship between Ezra and his friend Josiah, and remove all of the wooden slats from Ezra's bed. He feels he can move on with his life after proving his point that he is the dominant masculine figure and rules. Cody, though, is unable to shake the intense need to establish his superiority.

Pearl suffers throughout the book because she feels obligated to protect all of the kids, especially Ezra, who she calls "so sweet and clumsy it could

break your heart" (4), from the possible unpredictability of the outside world. Pearl probably wants to shield Ezra from the hurt of failure as she sees that he is willing to take life as it comes to him without complaining.

She fears stem from a series of unfortunate experiences that life has to offer. After Pearl's parents pass away when she was a young child, she moves in with her uncle Seward, who promises to pay for her college education. According to Pearl, Seward "feared having to support her forever: a millstone, an orphaned spinster niece tying up his spare bedroom" (6), which is where the idea for this proposition originated. Because she feels "that going to college would be an admission of defeat," she declines the offer (6). She meets Beck Tull just as everyone seems to be giving up on her, which causes her self-esteem to rapidly decline.

Pearl's hesitation to inform her kids about Beck's leaving from her want to keep the role that has been so deeply embedded in her personality, in addition to her wish to protect them. Pearl worries that if she tells the kids, they won't listen to her and she would become hollow and aimless. She can't bear to think about losing her pride and imagines herself crying in front of her kids every time she attempts to tell them the truth. Pearl realizes that her pride is the only thing that is stable in her life as a result of the instability she has experienced in the past, and it starts to play a significant role in her decision-making.

Everyone finally gathers around the dinner table for one final chaotic supper after Pearl's death. It dawns on them, particularly on Beck and Cody, that "forgiveness is possible only after understanding" (Spector, 1997, p. 323). Ever more poignant are the echoes of Ezra's vision of fusing the past and present: "All we have is each other. "Nobody else has the same pat that we do, so we must stick together" (Tyler, 1983, p. 338).

Jenny finds closure in the book's final and most important family function when she gets to face the original source of her insecurities. She gives more attention to her own children and brothers than she does to the man who abandoned them so many years ago when she has the chance to talk

with her father at the dinner held after Pearl's funeral.

Struggle for Survival:

The climax of the novel is when Pearl dies. At the time of her death, Jenny is thrice married. She shows no traces of her old disturbed self. She is completely in control of her life now. Though she too suffered the brunt of a troubled childhood and unwittingly abuses her daughter Becky, she consciously transforms herself when she realizes the unfairness of her actions. Ezra manages to bear up in spite of some of the unfair incidents in his life. Running the restaurant provides him with a sense of purpose and belonging, even if it's not quite the home he dreams of. In the hustle of managing the establishment, he temporarily masks the emptiness he feels inside.

Ironically, at the novel's conclusion, Pearl and Beck both play a crucial role in aiding Cody's recovery from the years of upheaval. Prior to Pearl's passing, she gives Ezra instructions to invite Beck to her funeral. Beck is truly astonished at how well his children have come up in life and give credit to Pearl for it. Like a puzzle that has its pieces finally in place, Cody is able to gather valuable information from his father regarding the reasons for his desertion. Beck admits to Cody that he worries about not being a good enough husband and father to Pearl. Beck admits his own flaws: "No matter how hard I tried, seemed like everything I did get muddled, Spoiled, Turned into an accident" (312).

Beck genuinely praises Pearl for facing life head on and for looking after the family even without his assistance. He accepts his weakness and feels ashamed for shying away at a time when he should have stood by the family. He confesses to Cody: "What it was, I guess: it was the grayness; grayness of things; half-right-and-half-wrongness of things. Everything tangled, mingled, not perfect any more. I couldn't take that. Your mother could, but not me. Yes sir, I have to hand it to your mother" (313). Cody is instantly changed by Beck's revelation, and his whole view of his early years shifts in an instant. As the truth comes to light, Cody is able to let go of all resentment. He has a new perspective of his mother and the others in

his family and all old memories take on a softer happier hue.

In the end, when the family accepts the past and place and becomes comfortable with the gathering moment of presence, the past, present, and future ultimately transcend space in what Mary J. Elkins (1990) refers to as a "devaluation of chronology" (p. 78). It appears as though Pearl had Beck's funeral invitation prearranged. This angle point of view makes the memory, "the suffering" become the Pearl.

Anne Tyler examines the benefits of fuzzy family boundaries in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), albeit occasionally in unpleasant ways. Her characters are always letting go and pushing back, continually stepping away and coming closer. Despite not experiencing significant sadness, Tyler's characters want intensely for comfort and companionship. Compared to children reared in institutions, she contends that children from broken households may have a higher chance of developing healthy relationships and attachments.

CONCLUSION:

The scope of the study encompasses a rich exploration of family dynamics, particularly the complexities of love and conflict within the Tull family. It delves into themes of nostalgia and memory, illustrating how past experiences shape the characters' identities and influence their relationships. The novel highlights the tension between isolation and connection, emphasizing the struggles of communication and understanding among family members.

Anne Tyler conveys the theme of anguish through the complex dynamics of the Tull family. By shifting perspectives among family members, she reveals their internal conflicts and feelings of alienation, particularly focusing on Pearl's disappointments and how they affect her relationships with her children.

Communication barriers further exacerbate their anguish, as misunderstandings and unspoken grievances lead to isolation. The restaurant itself symbolizes both connection and disconnection, serving as a gathering place that highlights their fractured relationships. Through moments of conflict and the potential for resolution

In *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Anne Tyler masterfully weaves a narrative that delves into the intricacies of familial bonds, illustrating how love and conflict coexist within the framework of a family. The paper emphasizes the importance of understanding and forgiveness, suggesting that despite the challenges of communication and connection, the desire for belonging remains a fundamental aspect of the human experience.

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