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Anne Tyler's Real Heroes in Her Selected Novels

Abstract

Anne Tyler is a Southern American novelist and short story writer. The subject she deals with is loneliness, separation and isolation in family relationships caused by estrangement, frustration or a death in the family. The works of Anne Tyler explore how isolation and loneliness transform women characters into enduring, strong, self reliant and competent individuals. The defeat of the South by the North in the American civil War made the women characters long for understanding and sympathy.

After isolation, the women characters re-emerge with greater power and wisdom. Reconciliation to the situation seems to be an important aspect of Tyler's approach to life. Most of the women in her novels did not have happy marriages, but they choose to stay and endure them, becoming in the end strong and invincible. They give support and sustenance to others in spite of their own distressed life. Anne Tyler has a special admiration for the heroic women who endure and provide privacy to others around them producing some warmth.

Key Words: Loneliness, Separation, Isolation, Invincible, Reconciliation.

Anne Tyler's Real Heroes

Introduction

Anne Tyler is a contemporary Southern American novelist with twelve novels and more than fifty short stories to her credit. The subjects she deals with are loneliness, separation and isolation in family relationships caused by estrangement, frustration or a death in the family. The present study makes an attempt to explore the effect and consequences of isolation on women characters and how loneliness transforms them into enduring, invincible, self-reliant and competent women.

Anne Tyler moulds and shapes her women characters when they are lodged in isolation. She confesses this in an essay published in 1970: "because I want more than one life," Tyler comments, "It seems to me often that I'm sort of looking from window at something at a great distance and wondering where it is. But I'm not willing to actually go into it." The aspect of loneliness or isolation in her woman characters is due to the influence of Southern writers, especially Eudora Welty, Flanner O' Corner and Katherine Anne Porter. Paul binding identifies loneliness as the Southern experience.²

The defeat of the smaller, poorer, traditionalist agricultural South by the larger, richer and more forward-looking commercial North in the American Civil war alienated the Southerners. The defeat in fact, intensified their sense of separateness. Anne Tyler depicts this Southern trauma in her woman characters longing for understanding and sympathy in the family situation. This typical Southern theme is given full expression in her four novels. The Tin Can Tree, The Earthly Possessions, The Accidental Tourist, and Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant.

Isolation in Anne Tyler's novels is a state of hibernation, a voluntary y withdrawal from the fret and fever of life, after the characters re-emerge with great power and wisdom. Each of the four novels depicts a different kind of isolation. For instance, the women

characters in the novel, *The Tin Can Tree* suffer emotional isolation when Janie Rose Pike, a ten year old only daughter of pikes dies in a tractor accident. The mother, Lonpike, is in deep grief and neglects the family which has already been shattered by shock. Joan Pike, the niece of Lon Pike, takes up the responsibility of giving sustenance to others despite her own distressed lonely life since childhood. In order to bring about harmony into the pikes' disintegrated family, Joan goes to the extent of sacrificing her own love for James, who too is not in a position to marry Joan, since he has to sacrifice his own love for her, being obligated to his agoraphobic brother. They remain unmarried, but they see to it that their mutual affection helps prevent the isolation of others. Joan Pike endures her isolation and endeavors to bring about harmony in the lives of others.

Turning to the accidental Tourist we notice that Macon leads an isolated life while his girl friend, Muriel Pritchett, gives him a new lease of life and sustenance in spite of her own loneliness and distress. Macon's wife, Sarah, leaves him abruptly shattering their twenty years of married life after the death of their only son, Ethan. Macon is not able to cope with the sudden estrangement and isolation. Ethan's death and the pain caused by Sarah's desertion have turned him into a hopeless wreck "Wandering, drugged." Macon is alone with Helen, the cat, and Edward, the dog that belongs to Ethan. With the failure of his marriage, Macon's little "systems" multiply. When he breaks his leg falling over laundry basket, he is forced into a deeper isolation and his situation worsens with no one to take care of him. "Only Macon sat alone. He kept very erect and disqualified, but inside, he knew, he was crumbling..... Today he only stood hanging his head, waiting for someone to help him."³

Lame and lonely, Macon goes back to the household of his childhood where the whole family lives in isolation. He is forced to take the help of Muriel, the dog trainer, because of the renewed violence and ferociousness of his dog, Edward, Muriel, a specialist in the treatment of "dogs those bits" and who lives alone with her pathetic sickly young son by a

broken marriage in her rundown house in Singleton Street, comes to Macon's rescue. She persuades him to face life with fortitude and courage. She tells him that this world is full of trials and tribulations and life is a challenge. She sets herself as an example in this troubled world. She inspires him with these words: "I'm scarred too. We're all scarred, you are not the only one"⁴ even though Muriel's husband leaves her with a sickly infant son, the ever resourceful Muriel does not lose heart, but wage the struggle. She ruminates: "I've to be inventive. It's been scraping and scrounges, nail, and knuckle, even since Norman [husband] left me."⁶ Muriel, a fighter all her days, fights her way into Macon's heart:

Then he knew, what mattered was the pattern of her life, that although he did not love her, he loved the surprise of her, and also the surprise of himself when he was with her. In the foreign country that was Singleton Street, he was an entirely different person. This person had never been suspected of narrowness, never been accused of chilliness: In fact, was mocked for his soft heart. And was anything but orderly.⁶

Macon has been given the gift of life by Muriel. He has been transformed into a "Merry tolerant person."⁸ Macon accepts the solace Muriel offers to him. He moves to Singleton Street, where Muriel resides. "He was beginning to feel easier here: Singleton Street unnerved him with its poverty and its ugliness, but it no longer seemed so dangerous."⁹

The transformation of Macon from an isolated life to a new adventurous life is due to Muriel Pritchett. The indomitable woman teaches him how to face the world. Though Macon's wife, Sarah, stays with him for twenty years, he never ventures to come out of his 'shell.' He chooses to lead an adventurous new life with Muriel rather than be a dried up kernel of a man with his wife Sarah.

The endurance of Anne Tyler's woman is shown in greater light in the character of Charlotte Emory, the protagonist in The Earthly Possessions. Charlotte narrates her fugitive life with her kidnapper Jake Simms. As the only child of her estranged parents, she grew up

lonely in a dark, closed house, where meals were stained and silent. Her life is a kind of “long foot-march.”⁹ Her life is full of disappointments and frustrations. Her stay at college is shortened to one afternoon owing to her father’s ill-health. Her marriage to Saul Emory, because of his decision to stay in Clarion, her home town, has led to more enclosures and disappointments. Not only has Saul himself filled the house with his mother’s furniture and other possessions, but his brothers have also returned to Clarion to stay in the Emory household. The house is full of various boarders like sinners from the mourner’s bench and destitute. It is these people as well as her husband that Charlotte has been trying to escape from, Charlotte ventures to Clarion Savings Bank to withdraw cash for her trip, but is taken as a hostage by Jake Simms, a jail escape, to get his girl friend freed from the home for unwed mothers. Anne Tyler seems to be making her characters show their courage and competence in situations over which they have little or no control.

Even Jake acknowledges her strength and ability. Amos, brother of Saul Emory, admires her fortitude: Now, I see everyone grabbing for pieces of you, and still you’re never diminished.... You sail through this house like a moon; you’re strong enough for all of them”.¹⁰ After her long suffering and lonely life, she returns to her husband and to a life of commitments, because the earthly possessions she wants to leave at home follow her. Reconciliation is a strong trait in Charlotte and other woman characters of Anne Tyler.

The next novel, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is about the Tull’s family, abandoned by the father, Beck Tull, and cut off by circumstances. The mother, Pearl Tull, raises her two sons, Cody Ezra and daughter Jenney aged just fourteen, eleven and nine years on her own. Pearl Tull wages a heroic struggle to raise her three children “The entire house rests on her shoulders, but she knows that she is competent,”¹¹

The children turn out fine. Cody becomes a successful business salesman: Jenny a pediatrician and Ezra, runs a restaurant. Her triumph lies in her successful transition. She admits this in the following passage:

Beck (husband) would not have known them and they perhaps, would not have known Beck. Didn't that show how little importance a father has/ the invisible man? The absent presence. Pearl felt a twinge of angry joy. Apparently she had carried this off... made the transition so smoothly that not a single person guessed. It was the greatest triumph of her life.

Pearl waits about thirty years for the return of her wandering husband, and yet survives and succeeds without her husband. She lives a greater part of her life without her husband who pays a fitting tribute to her at her funeral: "She did it; Pearl did it. I knew she would manage."¹³

Reconciliation to the situation seems to be an important aspect of Tyler's approach to life. Most of the women in her fiction have not had happy marriages, but they choose to stay and endure them, becoming in the end invincible women. They give support and sustenance to others in spite of their own distressed lives. Anne Tyler has special admiration for these heroic women: "The real heroes to me in my books are first, the ones who manage to endure and, second, the ones who somehow are able to grant other people the privacy of the space around them and yet still produce some warmth."²¹

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