
The Father Figure in Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist*

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Abstract

The father figure has been a dominant theme in the works of the American southern novelist Anne Tyler (1941-). She explores the psyche of male characters and tries to shed light on the struggles that the postmodern men go through in their daily life. She utilizes the chaos that occurs in their life to highlight their development. Family plays a major role that helps the father to understand the world around him. *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) tells the story of Macon Leary, a father who loses his only son and falls into grief. He loses his aim in life until he meets a woman called Muriel, who changes many things about him.

Keywords: family, postmodernism, male characters, father, self-discovery.

The Accidental Tourist: An Overview

The Accidental Tourist (1985) is one of Tyler's significant works. It has won her many prizes including the National Book Critic Circle Award for fiction in 1985 (Bail 11). It also got nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and was turned into a movie (119). Frank Shelton describes her fiction saying that it "constantly, almost obsessively, deals with the vexing relationship between distance and sympathy" (Shelton 852). One of the most dominant themes in Tyler's novels is family. The language used in this novel is a simple one, which helps readers to understand the situations better. The prose is far away from complexity and the plot moves in a convenient flow with much irony (Al-Shalbi 85-86).

The novel traces the story of Macon Leary, a man in his mid-forties, and his wife Sarah, who is asking for divorce after the tragic loss of their child, Ethan. Macon is trying to cope up with the loss of his only child as well as trying to adapt to life after his wife's departure (Bail 119). The irony used the most is situational, focusing on how the life of Macon is an irony, especially his job as a writer of travel guide books for businessmen. He writes books to guide people during their travel, especially businessmen. However, it seems that travelling a lot exhausts him and he wants nothing more than to settle in his home (Al-Shalbi 86). The changes that occur to Tyler's male

characters are usually made through the women they meet in their life. These women alter their view about life by showing them what they have been missing, because these men are "slump around like tired tourists — friendly, likable, but not all that engaged" (*The New York Times*).

Macon embodies the dilemma of postmodernism era as he is unable to keep up with the changes that are happening in his life. His wife Sarah plays a major role in his life as he takes his comforts in her and considers her a person he can consult when troubled. While Macon has an "obsessive, superior, intellectual style," she seems to be more-easy going and sentimental (Bail 120). Before getting their divorce, she confronts him about his troubled self: "You just go on your same old way like before. Your little routines and rituals, depressing habits, day after day. No comfort at all. Shouldn't I need comfort too? Macon asked. You're not the only one, Sarah. I don't know why you feel it's your loss alone" (Tyler 3). With the departure of the person on whom he depended on most of his life, Macon is left alone and unable to adapt to this emptiness in his life easily. She embodies the old values of the South because she serves as the old routines and orders that Macon leans on to continue living his dull life. This can be linked to *The Wasteland* (1922) by T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), where he "bemoaned Western culture's shattering, mournfully suggesting that the shards were better than nothing" (O'Brien 3).

The Accidental Tourist is like a mirror of the world. It is not an ordinary one where situations are reflected directly in it, but it rather shows how this world is built. The way the characters behave is an arbitrary one, according to the postmodernist fiction. Tyler shows how one's actions affect the entire family. She has a unique style of introducing her thoughts through utilizing the disarray in the family to show characters' development. Some of them get affected deeply by the challenges they face leading them to undergo a whole change in their personality. Tyler utilizes these traumatic events to highlight Macon's development and to give him another purpose in his life (Al-Shalbi 84).

The story is narrated from a third person's point of view providing the reader with more insight into the psyche of each character. However, the main focus is on Macon. The plot in general is linear and has only few flashbacks to support the story. There is not much complexity at the beginning of the story and within the end of chapter One, Sarah is already leaving Macon, making him the main focus of the story. As the story moves on the reader is given a deeper insight on how Macon views life (Bail 120).

Unlike the spiritual realm of Plato, the postmodernists believe that reality is not clear and they cannot reflect upon it, and because of that

the text cannot hold meaning or coherence (Al-Shalbi 84). Macon is a postmodernist character, because his life has no significance. He is a man who lost his son and wife and this makes him lose his role as a father and husband. As a result, he tries to give some meaning to his life by making his own routine, believing that it will give him an aim to continue living. He believes that by having his life organized he will be in control of things and will know how to manage them (85).

Like Faulkner's early works, especially *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) where he highlights in it the decline of the Old South, Macon is considered an incarnation of the Old South, by maintaining the old values, which are mainly: obtaining a family, and a job. Similar to Faulkner's character in the novel, Stupen, Macon had fulfilled the image of the Old South. However, with the death of his child and his divorce, Macon seems to have lost all the old values. Metaphorically speaking, the Old South does not exist anymore and Macon has to adapt to the New South, which can be presented by the appearance of Muriel, a single mother and a dog trainer, in his life. She embodies the new values with her outgoing personality that runs contrast to Macon's personality (Easterbrook 68-69).

Macon imposes a sense of a patriarchal authority, when he does not let his son go to a summer camp. He believes that letting his son within the boundaries of the family will keep him safe. His authorial role is described by Jacques Lacan as "the power symbol, who enforces these cultural rules and ensures we follow them" (qtd in Bressler 135). Unfortunately, after he approves of his son's request, Ethan is murdered. His death proves that things in life do not go as they are planned and tragedy might take place in the most unexpected moments, because it was "one of those deaths that made no sense" and "he was "not even supposed to be there" (Tyler 15).

Being alone without his wife or Ethan, Macon resolves to a certain way of living that alienates him from the outside world and provides him with the basic necessities he needs to survive. Later on, he moves back to live with his siblings. Losing his son affects him deeply and he starts to believe that things are getting out of control (McMurty).

He tries to maintain order in his life by organizing everything "travelling through the rooms and setting up new systems, developing ridiculously complicated methods to persuadably simplify the washing of dishes and changing of sheets" (Tyler 45). He changes everything in his house according to what he finds fitting the most for him, so that he won't be reminded of his son or wife. He "ties the clothes bag to Ethan's old skateboard and he drops a drawstring bag down the laundry chute" (43).

More is shown about his love of isolation and domesticity, when he breaks his leg and does not want anyone to write on his cast.

Instead, he cleans it with shoe polish and at some point, he wishes that the cast would cover him entirely, so that he would stay isolated from the outside world (Bail 122).

He enjoys practicing his authority in his writings by "organizing a disorganized country" (Tyler 10). The businessmen he writes his books for are "people forced to travel on business" and their biggest "concern was how to pretend they had never left home" (9-10). They resemble Macon in his wish of staying in his own shell and remain at home most of the time, so they resort to his books to feel that they never left their homes. "The logo on the cover of these travel guides ... is a winged armchair; ... [believing] that all travel is involuntary, and they attempt to spare these involuntary travelers the shock of the unfamiliar" as much as can be achieved (McMurty).

Macon reflects on his life. He feels that he is aimless in his life after the death of his son. The choices that he takes in his life so far are not to benefit him personally, but rather to please others. He is torn between satisfying society's demand and his personal ones. He will either be how people expect him to be or just simply be himself (Carson 306).

Barbara Harrel Carson (1943-), American critic, believes that the protagonists of Tyler, especially the "white southern" ones try to break away from all the restrictions that life imposes on them. They establish their own principles and modify their way of living to suit them the best, instead of trying to understand the world around them. In order to replace the old traditions and break free from them, these protagonists must learn how to adapt to changes presented by the new people that they meet. One of the most essential things for Tyler's characters to evolve and mature is the ability to communicate with others. Their exposure to life and people who are different from them helps in their own growth. Carson believes that "connection to others remain crucial for the continued growth of Tyler's characters, their understanding of present-day realities, and their ability to project meaningful futures for themselves" (qtd. in Kissel 79). As a result of this exposure, the old South is no more present and there is a new South offering more exposure to the world and much experience. Macon decides to abandon all the old values, presented in Sarah, and decides to embrace the new change that is Muriel, a change that helps him to grow. Sarah was preventing Macon from changing and he has been:

Locked inside the standoff self he'd assumed when he and she met. He was frozen there... no matter how he tried to change his manner, Sarah continued to deal with him as if he were someone unnaturally cool-headed, someone more even in temperament than she but perhaps not quite as feelings (Tyler 48)

Macon puts too much thought into things that it turns to be an OCD. When Muriel, a single mother he meets after his divorce enters his life, he finds her actions odd. He is struggling to satisfy his "demanding id and legislating superego." Muriel's attempt to mend him is an incarnation of "a parody of psychoanalysis" (Petry 115). His actions can be an embodiment of Tyler's religious background. Although little is known about her Quaker background, but the influence of the religious group is evident in the novel, especially with Macon and the idea of isolation. Starting with how his family members establish roles of their own in order that the outsiders won't be familiar with. Keywords like "Inner Light," and "clearness," are all references to the Quakers (Burris).

The Learys consist of three brothers and one sister: Porter, Charles, Macon and Rose. Two of the siblings have faced a failed marriage in their life just like Macon. They suffer from "geographic dyslexia" (a term used to describe people who suffer from short memory loss), and have a problem dealing with directions. Macon attributes this to their travelling as young children and the fact that they never settled in a place for a long time (Bail 122). The cabinets in the kitchen are arranged alphabetically and as a result they have food next to poison, like "allspice is sorted next to ant poison" (120). In addition to that, they play a game, Vaccination, in which they establish their own rules in it, so that no outsider would figure it out, not even their exes. Tyler creates characters that live a dull life and they do not have a reason to replace it with another "but the nature of life sometimes forces us into changing, whether we want it or not" (Petry 124). The Learys' way of living is based on having the upper hand on every situation. Just like Macon, they try to control their daily life to avoid any unnecessary situations. By doing so, the family members put themselves in a constant danger (215).

Tyler excels in blending humor and tragedy in her works and she is described by many critics as an embodiment of a true Southern writer. She utilizes humor in order to highlight the broken bonds among her characters (Bennet 73). The Learys always try to dodge any possible communication with other people, like when they do not want to talk on the phone. They do not talk much and during dinner time they use "clucking" to communicate "By suppertime, a cluck was part of the family language. Charles chucked over Rose's pork chops. Porter chucked when Macon dealt him a good hand of card" (Tyler 95). Hence, her protagonists fail to approach people and create relationships with them. They reduce any possibility at making relationships with people, which highlights their sense of isolation even as family members. Petry compares this to the works of the American novelist Carson McCullers (1917- 1967), like for example

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (1940), which deals with the story of a deaf man called John Singer, who is living in isolation and trying to break free from it. She states "that we must learn to 'connect' with one another, that love is one of the few defenses we have against a world that seems antagonistic towards a strong sense of both selfhood and freedom" (qtd. in Bennet 59).

Freud believes that when people become humorous or start saying words that do not fit the context of conversations, they are usually mentioning something that should not be said or stating things indirectly (Bennet 59) also, they can hire words to serve their hidden intentions (63). Joseph C. Voelker affirms this as he explains that in reading the dialogues in Tyler's works, one may find incomplete sentences or ideas that seem absurd, but when looked from a general point of view the image becomes clear and the inadequacy becomes a means to carry on feelings as "individual words may seem unimportant, but when viewed from a literary distance, they mean much more" (qtd. in Bennet 68).

The Learys, especially Macon, embody the old South that does not welcome the change, and would rather live the traditional way. It is shown through their conversations when they express their annoyance towards the loss of the English language. During a conversation, Sarah states that she is seeing a physician, Macon replies with "Why not just call him a doctor" (Tyler 125). He does not make efforts to get close to people and would rather modify things to fit his personal preference. "Macon is afforded the opportunity to exchange feelings and insights with another character, yet he refuses such possibilities by focusing on words" (Bennet 72).

Tyler's writing style tends to make the readers sympathize with the characters, which leads the critics to call her "a tolerant writer." Her religious background as a Quaker is shown in her tolerance, because Quakers declare that "as equally beloved children of God, all human beings are brothers and sisters,... no matter how great [the] difference of experience, of culture, of age, of understanding is" (Burriss).

Family is given much value in Tyler's works. Despite being unhappy most of the time, however it is the only unit where one can realize his own identity. Sigmund Freud notes that the motivation behind most of our behavior is psychological, which we have little control of (Guerin 154), and that's why Macon always finds himself "overcome by the lost feeling that always plagued him" (Tyler 137).

Macon's journey with self-discovery starts after meeting Muriel and going through two epiphanies. The first epiphany occurs when he gets a dream about his grandfather and the second one is when he compares his family to a portrait that they have. In the dream he sees his grandfather, who questions whether they will leave the house or

stay in it and never escape its rituals. According to Freud, the dreams are the unconscious parts of the human psyche "that the unconscious will express its suppressed wishes and desires" (Bressler 129). Macon's dream of his grandfather incarnates his own wish of escaping his family's strict rituals. The portrait's epiphany is similar to the dream, when he compares his family's rituals of keeping order to the ones in the portrait. He begins to wonder if they ever changed their arrangements or kept it the same all those years. He comments saying "Was there any real change?" he adds that he "felt a jolt of something very close to panic. Here he still was! The same as ever!" (Tyler 74). His unconscious side is urging him to change his way of living and look for his own identity. His wish for individuality is present mostly through his unconscious side, because it "redirects and reshapes the concealed wishes into acceptable social activities, presenting them in the form of images or symbols in our dreams" (Bressler 129).

The Quakers believe that finding a new light is a way of discovering life, and this is how Macon starts discovering life through Muriel's new light in his life. She provides him with insight into the world as if offering him a window to the outside world. During his journey towards self-discovery, he starts to understand people, after he was closed in his own shell, and finds out that all humans have a tendency towards kindness. The Quakers believe that there is goodness inside every human being (Burriss). Macon wonders about it in a question directed towards Sarah saying: "How must human beings do try. How they try to be as responsible and kind as they can manage..." (Tyler 338).

Macon is given a new chance to rediscover life with Muriel. He has a new woman and a son, whom he can treat as his own son. Tyler challenges the old norms by presenting new ones. Muriel is the opposite of Macon. She is friendly with people all the time and she make friendship with strangers. In her first encounter with Macon, she starts to talk to him as if they knew each other, which leads him to open himself more and realizes that communication is the key of survival (Petry 244). She is "a wacky and garrulous dog trainer [who] upends Macon's sedentary life and forces him to question his perceptions of love" (Sweeney and Dzaman).

Muriel's aim is to show that even with the loss of a biological son a man can be a father to a step-son. Her name is driven from a Celtic word Muirgel, which means "muir, the sea + geal, bright" (*CollinsDictionary*), as if implying her role in Macon's life as the bright star that guides him through darkness. Tyler suggests that even with the loss of the old values of the South, the change that the new South offers is not as bad as it is believed to be," the challenge for such writers is to push the boundaries of literary and linguistic convention

far enough to reflect the writer's aesthetic and political vision ..." (O'Brien 5).

One of the main reasons for Tyler to choose Baltimore as the setting of the novel is because she believes "that urban environments are more enriching than suburban ones" (Kissel 95). Such environments enhance the characters' development and help them discover themselves by learning how to embrace the changes that take place. Carson "believes that Anne Tyler deconstructs not only the myth of the white American family romance but the dominant myth of white American literature" (qtd. in Kissel 95).

Because Macon is too focused on his personal life, he tends to overlook the struggles of others believing that he is the center of everything. He becomes indifferent to Muriel's feelings as she states "Macon? Are you really doing this? Do you mean to tell me you can just use a person up and then move on? You think I'm some kind of...bottle of something you don't have any further need for?" (Tyler 284).

Muriel never shows her pain or speaks about it, although it is reflected in her behaviour. She tends to cling to people and gets friendly with them, because she does not want to feel alone. Being a single mother is difficult for her, but she fights to make her son, Alexander, have better opportunities in life, unlike Macon, who escapes his problems all the time and does not like to be confronted about them. Muriel on the other side keeps fighting to prevent her pain from overcoming her. When Macon starts to get closer to Muriel, he realizes that a change must happen in his life. At first, he is shocked as to how a person like Muriel exists, a person, who is the opposite of him. He feels that she is too foreign and he cannot cope up with her personality. Her presence affects him as it changes him into a better person and this shows "how the lives of others alter our own [and that] life leaves no one unscarred, that to live is to accept one's scars and make the best of them- and to accept as well the scars that other people bear" (Petry 121-122).

Macon wants to explore the outside world, but he is afraid of the outcome. He does not want things to turn against him, but Quakers believe that humans, up to some point, are their own choice makers. Achieving this must come after what they call "clearness." It means that one must clear his mind from perplexity, so that he can choose properly, which will also lead to achieving "spiritual clearness." Macon attains an epiphany when he realizes the right thing to do. His journey in life might have started as an accident, but it ends up with an aim. By discovering his "Inner Light," he is able to obtain "clearness," and realizes the right things to be achieved in life with the help of Muriel (Burris).

Being in a class lower than Macon, Muriel encounters many difficulties that he does not know of or understand, because of his lavish life. She depends on herself and occupies fifty different jobs to provide for her living. Macon finds himself drawn to her rather than Sarah, because she is a strong independent woman, who can manage her own life as well as providing for the living of her son. Muriel is the exact opposite of Sarah as she bears the role of father and mother, in her life (Kissel 80). Macon lives a systematic life that he tries to avoid in its things that are "unfamiliar," because "he believes that if left to himself he can block it or at least neutralize it"(McMurty).

Muriel's words "I can do anything" (Tyler 88) show that she is determined on having her own liberty and living her life the way she wants it, and this makes Macon attached to her (Carson 306). She acts as "an agent able to put matters into perspective for [Macon] while articulating truths that should have been self-evident" (Petry 221-222).

With Muriel, Macon finds himself exploring the outside world. He is no more afraid of interfering with others and becomes more open-minded. While being on the airplane together, she draws his attention to the roofs that they are flying above. In travelling one can learn about himself, "because travelling is a journey that does two jobs of which self-discovery is one, and fleeing the restrictions confining freedom is another" (Al-Shalbi 86).

Despite all Muriel's good influence on him, Macon finds himself going back to Sarah the moment she confronts him about her wish to go back and live in their house again. At a certain point he forgets about Muriel and he goes back to his old way of living life, one that is not very promising with Sarah. He is back to his old self again, but when he travels to Paris realization hits him. Now that he is outside his own environment mingling with others, he knows that Muriel has changed his view about the world. Her influence on him is more dominant than Sarah's influence, because now he is a changed person. He concludes that with Muriel he is happier than he ever was, but he is too blind to realize it and chooses to stay in his locked world (McMurty).

Macon's acceptance of Muriel entering his life is a reflection of him accepting the new values and the changing face of the South, embodied by modernization. Again, Macon, resembles a Faulknerian character Anse Burden in *As I Lay Dying* (1930), offering "a father who is able to leave the values of the Old South behind and adapt to the rising New South, ..., Anse Burden who comes out on top at the end of the novel with his new wife ..." (Easterbook 72). His new life with Muriel brings him light. He finds that he is being introduced to new possibilities, despite the accidents that took place. Macon finally opens his eyes to reality and decides to take this journey. Epiphanies

"seem to come unpredictably, by accidents and to have little to do with process or progress, to be timeless, disconnected from daily order." (Gilbert 273)

Macon is granted his happy end only when he decides to leave his family and start a new life with Muriel and her son. He is able to change with her, as he ventures through a journey of self-discovery. Despite choosing Muriel over Sarah, Tyler makes "semi-finality" in her work. He is free from all the restrictions of family he begins his own journey in life, where he will live up to his own expectations and not those of others (Norton 43).

Conclusion

Tyler's choice of male characters in her works is to embody the dilemma that the postmodern man goes through. She explores the father figure and his struggles in finding his individuality outside his family. In Macon's character, she embodies the dilemma that the postmodern father goes through and challenges him to find a different kind of purpose for himself. After losing his son and wife, he discovers that his only identity, being a father and a husband, is no more there. He is torn between falling into misery and distancing himself from others and trying to leave his old life behind and discovering the world.

Macon represents two concepts of fatherhood the old and the new. The old one is where the father gets to practice his authority over his family members leading him to eventually lose them and the new one presents an opportunity to embrace the change. This change helps him rediscover himself and find new aspects about life. The loss of his family leads him to lock himself in his own shell and not let anyone in. He becomes afraid of the unknown up until he meets Muriel. She helps him understand the world outside his shell and embrace the change. He realizes that family can be a place where one can find security and a place where he escapes from in order to experience growth. Leaving the old principles behind and embracing the new ones is what helps him to accept the unpredictability of life.

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شخصية الاب في رواية ان تايلور "السائح العرضي"

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المستخلص

يعتبر موضوع شخصية الاب من المواضيع المهيمنة في اعمال الروائية الامريكية الجنوبية آن تايلر (١٩٤١-) حيث تستكشف من خلالها عقلية الشخصيات الذكورية وتسلط الضوء على الصعاب التي يمر بها رجال عصر ما بعد الحداثة في حياتهم اليومية. تستخدم الفوضى التي تحدث في حياتهم على تطورهم وتلعب العائلة دورا مهما في مساعدة الاب على فهم العالم من حوله.

تروي السائح العرضي (١٩٨٥) قصة ماكون ليراي وهو رجل قد أصبح حزينا بعد وفاة ابنه وفقد هدفه في الحياة الى ان يلتقي بامرأة تدعى موريل التي تغير العديد من الاشياء فيه.