

The Role of the Father in Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe*: An Overview

Merna Thaer Alias,

m.thaer21@gmail.com

Asst. Prof. Isra Hashim Taher, Ph.D.,

isra742003@yahoo.com

**Department of English, College of Arts, Baghdad
University**

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Abstract

The role of the father has always been that of the breadwinner of the family in most of the American novels. Little was mentioned about his involvement in his familial duties and his relationship with his children. This created a gap between the father and his children and turned him into a far-fetched person for them. Anne Tyler(1941-), a southern female writer presents a new image of fathers. She highlights the role of the father within the family and gives an insight to the way fathers think. This paper deals with Tyler's novel *Saint Maybe* (1991), exploring the character of Ian Bedloe, an unmarried person whose mistake leads him to lose his only brother, Danny. He suffers for his mistake and tries to make up for it by taking care of his brother's children offering a new image of fatherhood.

Keywords: Fatherhood, saint, family, children, breadwinner.

The Role of the Father in Anne Tyler's Saint Maybe: An Overview

During the 1990s a great shift occurred to fathers' role in the American family. They were no more seen as merely breadwinners, but their role expanded and they got to be more involved in their children's life. Feminists have been demanding that fathers should participate more in the domestic life. They believe that by doing so, they will be closer to their children and be more aware of their responsibilities (Lupton and Barclay 54). The old values of the American family were challenged during the 1990s and the nuclear family became more diverse. The number of single parent families increased and this led many to believe that the American ideal family was disappearing (Brubaker 3).

Written in 1991, *Saint Maybe* tackles the story of Ian Bedloe, a young man who is considered to be the golden child of his family. His older brother Danny is his role model and Ian always looks up to him rather than his father. Throughout his teenage years and up until he becomes an adult, Ian considers Danny his guiding figure in life. He depends on him and aspires to be as successful as he is (Parini). He considers him "his dearest relative, who trusted everyone and believed whatever you told him"(Tyler 38).

As a southern female writer, Tyler excels in showing how men, just like women, are the cornerstone of the family. Her novels are known to be domestic and in such an environment readers would expect the focus to be on females, however, she shifts the focus to men. Her ability to make men the protagonist of domestic novel is what won her great importance in the world of southern fiction (Inge 7). She confirms that "Southerners of all kinds talk to each other in an extremely person-centered way" (qtd. in Binding). Hence the fiction written about them usually revolves around "individual people more than events," which is the reason why she always focuses on characters' evolution rather than events. In the novel, Tyler focuses on man's will to be good, which in Ian's case is driven by his feeling of guilt (Binding). She believes that family is the place where persons can build their identity as it helps them to understand the world around them. "Her worldview may be reliably, even comfortably, old fashioned but it is still perfectly capable of processing new information" (Markovits).

The novel depicts a realistic image of the American family. The characters do not live in fantasy, where everything is perfect, even if it looks so from the outside. When looked upon closely the families in the novel go through what an ordinary family goes through (Kumari 275). Everything that Ian does have one aim, which is to make his brother proud of him. However, when Danny meets Lucy things take a huge turn on the life of the Bedloes. She is a divorced woman, who has two children, Agatha and Thomas, from her previous marriage, which is the first shocking news to the Bedloes. The Bedloes are also surprised at Danny's and Lucy's sudden decision to get married, though not knowing each other for a long time, which shocks them especially Ian. The family is known for having a perfect image with their traditional role of a breadwinner presented by the father, Doug, and a house wife, Bee (Parini).

A connection between the individual man and his family is presented by showing Ian's relationship with his family: "They were never just the Bedloes, but the Bedloe family, Waverly Street's version of the ideal, apple-pie household" (Tyler 10). An emphasis on their ideal life is made by Tyler when describing their life saying that: "They believed that every part of their lives was absolutely wonderful. It wasn't just an act, either. They really did believe it" (14). The arrival of Lucy, a divorcee, is a shock for this perfect family. Her presence means that a change will happen and they are not ready to welcome it (Parini).

Tyler has been labeled by many critics as "America's Jane Austen" for the amount of resemblance the two authors have. Much can be seen in Austen's *Persuasion* (1817) and Tyler's *Saint Maybe* (1991). Despite the years gap and the fact that the authors come from two different countries, but each one of them tackles almost the exact same issues in their works. In the aforementioned novels both authors tackle romance, but none of them exaggerate in presenting it. "Since Jane Austen is writing romantic comedy, her undercutting is done subtly, but it is there" (Koppel).

In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot was captivated by the naval officer Frederick Wentworth's good looking and personality and they fell in love shortly after. They got engaged, but shortly after Elliot decided to break off the engagement, as she was persuaded that their marriage would not work due to Wentworth's lack of wealth. After several years Wentworth came back rich and met Elliot again and decided to get married. In *Saint Maybe*, Danny Bedloe falls in love with Lucy Dean at first sight, even though she is divorced and has two children. They get married shortly after, but he realizes that she is anything but what he had imagined her to be. Mislead by his younger brother, Ian, Danny starts to doubt his wife and commits suicide, and she follows his path shortly after (Koppel).

Driven by jealousy Ian starts to think that Lucy is cheating on his brother after she delivers a third child, Daphne, whom she claims is Danny's. Ian does not believe her, because he is blinded by jealousy. He does not like the idea that Lucy is the center of Danny's life, a place that was previously taken by him. His ego refuses the idea that he is being replaced by another person. As the perfect child of his family, he believes that Lucy is a threat to him (Parini).

In Tyler's works a reader would notice that she presents an issue at the beginning of the novel and leaves it unsolved. As the story continues the situation remains a mystery up until a point where the other characters' issues clash. The issue becomes the changing point where it affects all the characters and has to be settled. Ian's decision of dropping off his college and focusing on raising the children is because he wants to amend his mistake. He does his best in order to make up for the loss of his brother and provide the children with everything that they need. When Rita, a woman he meets at church and develops feelings for, visits the Bedloes, she also tries to tidy up the mess in the house and helps Ian. "They do these things because family life is messy and most of what you learn from it as a child is conflict-modeling" (Markovits).

The story is told from a third person perspective, in order to give much space to the characters to voice their thoughts. The narration shifts from one character to another, however, it all revolves around Ian's life and the changes that he goes through. He finds himself chained by a mistake that leads him to face new challenges he has never encountered before in his life. Ian looks perfect from the outside, but deep down he is fighting and facing many hardships. For many people his life might seem an ordinary one, but his personal struggles are what define him as an individual (Kumari 274). Tyler approves of Austen's romance in her works, but she emphasizes the importance of having a decent knowledge about a person before deciding to start a life with him. "Anne Tyler makes clear that the match was brought about by timing, circumstances, and congenial personalities and principles, not by a Romantic Destiny" (Koppel).

Austen and Tyler draw the attention of their readers to look closely at these characters and to sympathize with them as they can be related to any human being around them. Both have proved that the claims made by critics about their limitation of subject matter to be wrong, because everyone can relate to their stories. Humor and irony are present in *Persuasion* and *Saint Maybe* in many scenes as the authors never fail in shedding light on some hilarious scenes. Like in *Persuasion* when Mary Musgrove, Anne's youngest sister, describes her sickness and in *Saint Maybe* when Daphne claims that God visited her in her dream and said that a stranger is going to steal her uncle Ian, referring to Rita. An example of some of the ironical scenes in *Persuasion* can be noted in Wentworth's pride about his accomplishments, failing to realize that it was merely a stroke of luck. In *Saint Maybe* Ian is called "the golden child" of the family however this golden child causes "the death of his brother and his wife when he mistakes his own impatience and adolescent sexual jealousy for a desire for truth and justice" (Koppel).

One of Ian's worst falls is that he is so full of himself, thinking that keeping the perfect image would keep him away from sinning. It is his arrogance that led him to believe that he can control others' life and has a say in what they do. He is shocked to know that his knowledge is not as perfect as he thought it to be, because to err is human. As the spoiled child of the family he believes himself to be on top of everyone else. Fed on the praises he got from his family, his ego increased until he started to think that he was flawless. He filled his brother's mind with wrong images about his wife to the point of accusing her of cheating on him. This was why he started to hate himself after Danny's suicide. This can be described as "an attempt to direct self-hate outward, against life, fate, institutions, or people. In the latter the hate remains directed against the self but is perceived or experienced as coming from the outside" (Paris 69).

Ian considers Lucy as a foreigner and this feeling ultimately makes him ruin their relationship. Later on he realizes that people must accept change and just because someone is different from his family that does not mean he or she is going to ruin their familial ties. Daphne confirms this by stating people learn from mistakes and it is what keeps them continue living (Caesar 75). James Baldwin (1924-1987) an American novelist, confirms the ideology of accepting change as he states that the American literature is famous for its "sense of life's possibilities." However, writers are afraid of what he calls "the myth of America," which is incarnated in everything that is foreign, and in order to break it, they must accept the change (qtd. in Caesar 77). "Baldwin hoped for a rejuvenation of American literature through a blending of American optimism and vitality with a European sense of limits; Tyler seems to have found this balance in her own way." Her employment of the other in her works has proved that "we need this other... to make us more nearly whole" (78).

Ian's life turns upside down and he realizes that by overlooking others' sufferings he becomes the antagonist of his life story and he finds himself lost. The exploding voice of the car, which Danny committed suicide by crashing it to a brick wall, serves as the alarm that awakens him from his fantasies. It becomes a reminder of the cruel reality that he is going to face, "because once he moved from then time would start rolling forward again, and he already knew that nothing in his life would ever be the same" (Tyler 53).

After receiving the news of Danny's death the family is shocked, and Lucy falls in to grief. She starts taking sleeping pills and overdoses one day result in her death too. Ian starts to blame himself for the death of his brother and Lucy especially that, the three children are left without parents now. As the time goes by he starts to reflect deeply on his previous actions. He realizes that he needs to depend on God and not mingle in the life of others, because by doing so he ruined the life of his brother (Parini).

In her previous novels Tyler did not consider religious characters to be of great importance, but in *Saint Maybe* and as the title suggests, they hold an important role. After Ian's encounter with Reverend Emmett, the pastor of the Church of the Second Chance, he realizes that he finds his guidance. He serves as the father figure for Ian and leads him to the right path after he lost his aim with Danny's suicide. With Ian's repentance and his new life that is dedicated to serve others rather than being selfish, he becomes like a saint for them (Kumari 274). Tyler's aim is to shed light on how men can take roles in the house that are supposed to be only for women. She breaks the notion of gender roles, as Mary Robertson explains that she "never uses gender stereotypes; men can be nurturing as well as women, and women can exhibit patriarchal attitudes" (qtd. in Durham 132).

As a way of making up for his mistake Ian takes it upon himself to raise the children. He leaves his college life behind, and dedicates his whole life to raise the three children. He falls into unusual measures of redemption, especially after he comes across a church called the Church of the Second Chance. Even his love life seems to vanish after the accident. He believes that by isolating himself from all the earthly temptations he would be able to raise the children properly and won't be distracted by anything else (Parini).

Four religious themes are evident in the novel, which are sin, guilt, atonement, and redemption. *Saint Maybe* is Tyler's first novel where she deals with religion in a serious way reflected in the struggles of her characters especially Ian. Daphne gives him the name of "Saint Maybe," which is the title of the novel. The reason why she chooses this name for him is because of the way he treats her. For Ian she is a living part of Danny, because she is his only biological child. In addition to Daphne, he considers the other two children as his own two and treats them with equal love. He takes it upon himself to raise them and consider them his children, and because of this the children seem to be close to him and consider him a guardian for them. He does not disappoint the children or others, when he proves himself to be a saint-like person at the end (Gandolfo 138).

Ian grows a self-loath tendency towards himself, which "is essentially the rage which the idealized self feels toward the actual self for not being what it should be" (Paris 69). It is a "central inner conflict" that occurs between the true identity of a person and his pride. Accepting one's true identity means that he or she should accept a life where things are uncertain, unlike one's pride where perfection is obligatory, and that's why a conflict is born. Honey thinks that the proud self is "the person who has centered his life for a long time of dreams of glory and may never be able fully to free himself from his idealized image" (qtd. in Paris 69) which is exactly what Ian has been fighting.

The Bedloes' image of the world might be another reason why Ian always thought that "things would turn out fine... Hadn't they always?"(Tyler 11). They embody the ideal American family where everything is set to be perfect and full of life. With such family Ian does not care much about others' feelings, embodying the narcissistic behavior of Americans who believed themselves to be on top of everyone else. As a teenager he always used to believe "that someday, somehow, he was going to end up famous"(11), embodying the long sought American Dream. This was one of the early mistakes that he made in his life as a young boy, which led him to overlook the pain of his family members as he considered them as a minor necessity that stands in his way of success (Paris).

When he comes across the Church of the Second Chance, and as its name suggests Ian is offered a second opportunity in life. The beliefs of the religious group help in guiding him to the right path. These people believe strongly in the idea that one is forgiven by God only when he does good deeds. By doing these deeds they will be able to show God their strong will for redemption and ask for His forgiveness for their past sins (Parini).

Three father figures can be distinguished in the novel: first is Danny, who is looked up to by Ian. He follows his steps and dreams of being as perfect as him. The second figure is Reverend Emmett, who serves as the father figure for Ian after Danny's death. The last figure is Ian himself, who decides to look after Danny's children, when he starts feeling guilty for the death of his brother (Gandolfo 274-275).

Ian's loss of Danny as a father's figure made him turn to God as he started to feel insecure about himself. He believed that his new religious life would be a relief for him from being responsible for the death of Danny. In God, he found his shelter, restored his faith as well as found his safe haven. Danny was Ian's strength and with him he could feel like he could achieve anything. Now that he is gone, Ian cannot figure out his life. The loss of the source of strength causes people to lose their confidence in themselves, "this lapse of self-

confidence may not be universal with the death of a father, but it does seem to be fairly common" (Novakovich).

Reverent Emmett serves as the father figure for Ian and leads him to the right path after he lost his aim with Danny's suicide. He helps Ian overcome his guilt over his dead brother and asks him to become the pastor of the church as he notes how Ian starts to help many people. However, Ian declines the offer and decides to focus on his own family (Kumari 274). He explains that he cannot be a person guiding others giving them answers to their questions, when he feels confused himself. He also still feels guilty for his mistake with Danny and how his assumptions of his wife are wrong, so he "eschews any role that will lead him to similar dogmatic assertions "(Gandolfo 139). He realizes that he must repent to be forgiven, so his aim becomes to seek forgiveness over his mistakes. The children at first were seen as no more than a burden to him, but later he realizes that they are the reason for his strength. He has his monologue thinking "You could never call it a penance, to have to take care of these three. They were all that gave his life color, and energy, and ... well, life" (Tyler 215).

During Lucy's Funeral, Ian had an epiphany. He realized that with the death of both parents, the children were left alone, so he vowed to himself to take care of them, because "when you have a father, you know how to become a father" (Navakovich), as if Danny taught Ian how to be a perfect father figure for the children through his treatment of his young brother. Ian passed the love that he received from Danny to his nephews and niece. With the children around him he restored his safety and could feel alive again. He got his strength from God at church, and he carried this love to the children at home (Caesar 73-74).

Ian's role as a "female caregiver" isn't presented directly in the novel, but rather developed. Tyler presented him at the beginning of the novel with a masculine image that is typical of men. She made a cause and an effect, as the novel develops it focuses on Ian's view of Danny's children and his view about females as well (Durham 146). Ian seems to respect females and their roles in the family as it is explained in a paragraph:

Women were the ones who held the reins, it emerged. Women were up close to things. Men stood off at one remove and were forced to accept women's reading of whatever happened. Probably this was what Ian's father had been trying to tell him in that talk they had a few years ago, but Ian hadn't fully understood it at the time (Tyler 32)

Ian's sacrifice of his old life in order to take care of the children highlights his role as a father. His new identity as a domestic character starts to be more obvious now that he is leaving his old life behind him, especially things that emphasize his masculinity (Durham 147).

This development is confirmed through the change that is described in a line saying "He saw that he was beginning from the scratch, from the very ground level, as low as he could get. It was a satisfaction, really" (Tyler 136).

He adapts himself to his new role and does not complain about it. He does not feel uncomfortable doing tasks that are usually done by females. In fact he goes as far as planning things and making sure that everything is prepared and he never thinks low of himself by doing these tasks (Durham 148). The closer a father is to his teenage children, the better they'll function in life and will have "fewer behavior problems and higher academic success" (Lamb 226). When he gets closer to his children and takes care of their daily needs he becomes familiar with their way of thinking and this can affect his ideology. Such fathers would be more welcoming to the changes and they would adapt to changes faster than other fathers as they are willing to accept the new ideas (Tan 33).

Other men in the family including Danny and their father have a different view about females and the domestic life in general. Danny does not approve of a wife who works outside the house and prefers to have her at home all the time, in order to take care of the children and do her domestic duties. Doug also holds quite similar view and prefers to keep his masculine presence dominant in his daily life, one that includes not taking part in the domestic duties that are supposed to be only done by females. He is of no help to Ian and does not know how to be of use. This shows that Ian lived in an environment or a time "when the sight of man holding a baby was considered humorous" (Tyler 101).

Doug seemed to escape from his duty, whenever the opportunity was given and this led Ian to be irritated about the way his father acted. Perhaps one of the reasons why his father acted this way is because of the fact that Ian took everything upon himself and made sure that things went exactly the way he wanted them to be; perfect (Durham 148). It is confirmed when Doug expresses his thoughts "He felt as if Ian was the grown up and he the child. It had been years, maybe all the years of his adulthood, since he had realized so thankfully on someone else's knowledge of what to do" (Tyler 178). He adds: "it was a pity so much rested on Ian, but Ian was young. He had the energy "(179).

Ian falls into dilemma again when he starts to question his own life and dreams as he contemplates saying "I'm wasting the only life I have! I have one single life in this universe and I'm not using it!"(220). He is struggling with his life choices, but the importance of his role in the family is shown when Agatha says that he is the person who brings them all together (Durham 149).

Towards the end of the novel, Tyler gives Ian his freedom and gives him more space to live his masculine part again by presenting Rita, his wife, as he explores new meaning of family with his new family (Durham 151). Ian now is a father of his own family and he feels the joy of it as he contemplates the close birth of his own baby:

Last week he had signed the papers for Rita's hospital stay. She'd be in just overnight, if everything went as it should. On the first day he was liable for one dependent and on the second for two. Two? Then he realized: the baby. One person checks in; two check out. It seemed like sleight of hand. (Tyler 334)

Tyler voices her thoughts about the importance of fathers in the family when Ian says towards the end of the novel: "People change other people's life every day of the year. There was no call to make such a fuss about it" (Tyler 344).

Conclusion

The image of the father has undergone many changes throughout the years, especially during the twentieth century. In the previous centuries, the father used to be considered as an embodiment of the patriarchal authority, a dominant power that must be obeyed by the family members. However, the new century offers a new image, one where the father is no more a fearsome figure. He is a caring and a loving father, who enjoys spending time with his children.

Ian challenges the old norms of fatherhood and presents new ones. He used to believe that he was the perfect son in the family and he took pride in his brother's support for him, making him think that he was unbreakable. However, when things take an unexpected turn everything changes for him. His ideal world falls apart and instead of fulfilling his own goals and falling into false confidence, he begins a new journey where he becomes a father figure to his nephews.

This new journey offers Ian new opportunities and helps him grow. He turns from being an irresponsible person to a father whose main aim is to take care of his children and make sure that they grow in a healthy family environment. In his character, Tyler presents a new aspect of fatherhood, where the father abandons his authorial positions that separates him from his children and comes down to be closer to them.

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دور الاب في رواية ان تايلور "السائح العرضي"

الباحثة ميرنا نائر الياس، قسم اللغة الانكليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة بغداد

m.thaer21@gmail.com

ا.م.د. اسراء هاشم طاهر، قسم اللغة الانكليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة بغداد

isra742003@yahoo.com

المستخلص:

لطالما تم اعتبار دور الاب في العائلة كمعيل ولم يتم ذكر الكثير عن واجباته المنزلية تجاه افراد عائلته حيث ولد هذا الشيء فجوة بين الاب وابناءه. تقدم تايلر (١٩٤١-)، وهي روائية من الجنوب صورة جديدة عن شخصية الاب كما تسلط الضوء على دور الاب في عائلته.

يتناول هذا البحث رواية تايلر، القديس ربما (١٩٩١) التي تتقصى شخصية ايان بيدلو وهو رجل غير متزوج يقوده خطأه الى فقدان اخيه داني. يعاني من هذا الفقدان كثيرا لذلك يحاول ان يصلح ما ارتكبه بأن يعتني بأولاد اخيه المتوفي مقدما صورة جديدة عن الابوة.