TESIS DOCTORAL

2015

ANNE TYLER'S COMPASS

A STUDY OF GENDER AND HUMOR IN THE NOVELS OF ANNE TYLER

Mª Elena Casado Carro

Licenciada en Filología Inglesa

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Before starting this dissertation I did not have a family of my own but as I was reading Tyler's novels some of the things she was narrating also happened to me: I met a boy, I got married, we had a baby, and we moved houses. That is why I feel so identified with what Tyler depicts in her stories. Although reading and analyzing her work has been as if I were exploring my own self, it has been a long process to which I have devoted a lot of time, time that I could not spend with my family. For this reason, I would like to thank my husband for his patience and his effort all these years. My son, although he does not understand it yet, is also a little person I would like to mention, since he is discovering the world with books in very much the same way I did. I would also like to thank my parents and my brother, who have helped me even when the project was only an idea. All of them have dedicated time to listen to my concerns and have been a great support, without which I would not have been able to continue with the dissertation.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED

diss.	dissertation
et al.	and others
i.e.	that is
n.pag.	no pagination
qtd.	quoted
rev.	review, reviewed by
sic	thus in the source
OUP	Oxford University Press
U	University
UMI	University Microfilms International
UP	University Press

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I mean you're given all these lessons for the unimportant things--piano-playing, typing. You're given years and years of lessons in how to balance equations, which Lord knows you will never have to do in normal life. But how about parenthood? Or marriage, either, come to think of it. Before you can drive a car you need a state-approved course of instruction, but driving a car is nothing, nothing, compared to living day in and day out with a husband and raising up a new human being.

Anne Tyler ~ *Breathing Lessons*

When I first came across one of Tyler's books I was amazed at her capacity for creating characters that we can identify in each one of the members of our own families or friends. I thought: "I know somebody like him!" or "I know her!" What is more, their thoughts, their concerns and moments of joy are very similar to what we can experience in real life so I had a "that-happened-to-me" feeling. For this reason, I was immediately hooked on her style and her stories, all of which have helped me understand my own family and friends better. That is why I completely agree with Alejandro Gándara's words when he describes the author as somebody who is not interested in the extraordinary or the unique but she confines herself instead to find treasures in those scenes that are right in front of us (elmundo.es, n.pag.).

It is not easy to classify Anne Tyler, given that she is a prolific writer who is not very well-known by the public, especially outside of the United States. Although her novels have been translated into different languages, among them Spanish, she does not appear much in the Spanish press apart from a handful reviews and interviews. Her books, however, can be found in the Spanish bookstores in English and in Spanish. For instance, her last published book, *A Spool of Blue Thread*, was present in Spanish general bookstores after being published in February 2015 together with other modern and not so recent titles such as *The Amateur Marriage*, *The Beginner's Goodbye*, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* or *The Accidental Tourist*.

If Tyler's novels are sold in general bookstores in Spain it means that there is a public for her. However, the lack of critical materials about her work is surprising taking into account her production and the awards she has received. In the only dissertation published up to date in Spain entitled *Perfil Mítico del Héroe en la narrativa de Anne Tyler* (1994), Rafael López Berho already criticized the scarcity of scholarly works together with the difficulty of finding her novels translated in Spanish.

According to him, in 1994 there were only 6 novels translated into Spanish and none of her short stories had been translated (11). Among the first translated novels he mentions *The Accidental Tourist*, whose acclaimed movie he considers as the reason for the publication of several of her novels in our country (11). Actually, López Berho criticized the publishing of her novels as something that did not follow any chronological order or any literary criteria, suggesting that it was only a marketing strategy (11). Nowadays the situation has improved since 1994 due to the publication of most of her novels in Spanish. Nevertheless, I still have not found the Spanish version for the following titles: *The Tin Can Tree*, *The Clock Winder*, *Celestial Navigation*, and *Earthly Possessions*.[1] Moreover, none of her short stories has been translated into Spanish yet, something that could be explained by the absence of a compilation in English.

Thus, this dissertation aims at contributing to the development of scholarly works in our country which continue the path opened by López Berho in his dissertation. At the same time, with this dissertation we modernize and update the existent resources about the writer since most of the specialized academic research dates back from the 1990s. In fact, I believe that Anne Tyler could be more popular if the production of scholarly works were more ample and modern. David Trueba in his essay entitled "Miniatura" describes how Anne Tyler, the same as Alice Munro and Annie Proulx, has been gaining followers thanks to innocent characters which could be summarized by their daily gestures (elpais.com, n.pag.). What is more, she is grouped with Munro, Updike and other contemporary American authors whose work has been analyzed by

[1] It is not surprising that *The Tin Can Tree* has not been translated into Spanish given that the author has even considered its elimination. Nevertheless, *Celestial Navigation* is one of the best novels that the author has written, especially valued by critics for its literary technique and its characterization.

numerous scholars and whose novels are fully advertised in Spanish bookstores and literary magazines.

I have chosen the title "Anne Tyler's Compass: A Study of Gender and Humor in Anne Tyler's Novels" as a way to imitate one of the titles of her most recent novels, *Noah's Compass*. The title brings to the forefront a sailing idea which connects it to her earlier book *Celestial Navigation*. Both books as well as the rest of her fiction invite the reader to follow a new direction in literature. In addition, they illustrate how Anne Tyler is a postmodern author who follows her own pace, something that sets her apart from traditional feminist ideas. Her narrative compass is marked by her characters' experiences and, as she has stated, her stories do not reflect her own life because she wants to have "more than one" (qtd. in Petry, *Critical Essays* 46). What is more, in her article "Because I Want More Than One Life" she suggests that she feels limited by her role as mother and wife and that is why she has chosen to let her characters wander on their own instead of imposing them barriers. The symbol of the compass makes us feel closer to the author, whose life sails between the North and the South, the comedy and the tragedy, the feminine and the masculine, and where we can always find half-way points where gender issues and stereotypes are not clearly defined.

Although Tyler is not fully considered a feminist, it is important for this study to explore the characteristics that make her so unique also in the feminist field. Paulina Palmer has criticized the failure "of critics to engage seriously with fiction by contemporary women writers" (3), something that she classifies as a "scandal" because "it results in the neglect of a significant area of female creativity" (Palmer 3). The field of Women's Studies has developed considerably, especially in academic research, since Palmer published her book *Contemporary Women's Fiction. Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (1989). Yet, there is still a long way to go in the promotion of female

literature. Even though the presence of female books is more common on the shelves of bookstores and libraries than some decades ago, male works have still a leading role among critics, publishers and readers. According to VIDA, an organization whose objective is to increase critical attention to contemporary women's writing, there are not enough studies on women's fiction compared to male literature. Thus, they have launched yearly counts in order to analyze how many reviews about women's books are published in the most relevant Western newspapers and magazines. In addition, according to Paulina Palmer, another important factor for the study of female fiction is the fact that "the topic is a contentious issue" (4). Given the lack of unanimous studies and conclusions, it is true that it is sometimes difficult to analyze the subject without contradicting one or other feminist vision.

In order to carry out the dissertation I have used different sources to document my work. First, I have used materials related to general feminist matters so that I could classify Tyler according to the different feminist waves. The most relevant texts that have helped me understand the feminist scope are *Sexual/Textual Politics* by Toril Moi (1988), the book by Elaine Showalter *The New Feminist Criticism* (1986) and the anthology by Mary Eagleton entitled *Feminist Literary Theory* (3r ed. 2011). Among the third-wave theorists, I have especially come closer to the work by Judith Butler in her groundbreaking thesis, now a classic, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* (1990). Other relevant materials that deal with female humor, especially the books by Barbara Bennett or Regina Barreca, have been crucial to examine the feminist criticism from the perspective of the use of humor as a strategy to confront the traditional standards.

Apart from general texts that have served as a background for the dissertation, I have used more specific sources related to Tyler's work. Among these materials it is

important to mention the monographic books dedicated to her work being the most relevant the ones written by Alice Hall Petry, one of the scholars who has devoted more pages to the author with *Understanding Anne Tyler* (1990) and *Critical Essays on Anne Tyler* (1992). Other interesting books based on Tyler's work are those published by Elizabeth Evans, Dale Salwak, Joseph Voelker, and Paul Bail. Nevertheless, those critical materials were all published in the late 1980s and 1990s, the period in which Tyler became more popular. Afterwards, there has not been any published monographic volume, something which comes as a surprise because the writer has continued writing since then.

As a third source for the dissertation, I have used numerous articles about Tyler's work which have seen the light in different publications like the *Southern Literary Journal* or books related to women's literature such as *Southern Women Writers* (1990) by Tonette Bond Inge, *Women Writers of the Contemporary South* (1984) by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, and *Ladies Laughing* (1993) by Barbara Levy. As it happened with the aforementioned monographic works, most of them were written at the end of the 20th century and only some of them have been published after 2000. Thus, it has been necessary to use book reviews and interviews of the author in order to analyze the novels she has written from 2000 onwards. Even though it is true that she uses the same topics in most of her novels, her perspective has evolved. Therefore, it is unexpected not to find critical materials for her last stories.

I have organized the dissertation taking into account the major issues surrounding Tyler's fiction. Given that she is not a well-known writer in Spain I have first included a background section containing information related to her life and all the works she has written. In addition, I have explored her southernness, since it is not very clear for the scholars if she is a real southern writer or not, for her novels are almost all set in

Baltimore, a city whose southernness has been questioned. As I will illustrate, for me she is a Southern writer because of the topics she uses and the way she writes, following the tradition of other southern writers with whom she has been compared such as Eudora Welty or Carson McCullers. Likewise, her use of humor and the way she approaches gender issues show a more modern South where the tone and the characters have evolved.

It was easy to consider the topics for discussion as a way to divide the chapters of the present dissertation. Her obsession with family and the problems underlying marriage as well as her use of the humor and the eccentric are her most praised characteristics. Certainly, I have used these ideas as the basis for the sections but I have also developed other important notion related to the author, specifically, her feminist approach to everyday situations, which is a key point that I will explore in each of the different sections. While recognizing that her writing is not overtly feminist, we need to delve into her plots, her characters and her language in order to obtain a relevant conclusion. As a way to understand better her feminist vision, I have also included a section where I will analyze the most relevant ideas concerning feminism which can be connected with Tyler's vision of the female in literature.

That is exactly why the aim of this dissertation is to analyze daily topics present in Tyler's narrative such as family and marriage using a gender-based perspective. I will analyze how Anne Tyler approaches men and women, femininity and masculinity, through different narrative and linguistic strategies which give the author a unique style that includes eccentric characters and humorous scenes. Tyler's style is so distinctive that she is able to address traditional topics in an unconventional way. As we will see she does not follow the premises of the gynocentric feminist school which considered that literature should exclusively focus on women-centered experiences. She includes

men in her novels as a way to portray the tensions that arise in everyday situations between men and women and how, following a feminist postmodern vision, gender stereotypes can be transformed. Actually, in one of her reviews, she clearly states that she does not believe in stories where "men and women have absolutely no hope of any genuine connection with each other, where they have never once experienced a disinterested, kindly affection for each other"(Tyler, "The Ladies and The Tiger" 34).

Throughout the twentieth century, feminist literary criticism has shown that female literature has been subject to the standards established by a patriarchal society in Western history. Women's literature in English was reconsidered and studied by the critical approaches derived from the feminist waves, especially in the 1970s and 1980s with the the Anglo-American feminist criticism, part of second-wave feminism. This feminist approach to literature, whose major exponents were Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert or Susan Gubar, devotes its analysis to female fictional characters as well as the women writers, something that Showalter labelled as gynocriticism, which considered that women's literature had to focus on revealing the truths of women's lives within women-centered narratives. For them, women's experience was crucial to understand the development of a women's literary tradition. In the dissertation I will examine how Tyler's approach does not follow gynocriticism because she does not expel men from her stories but she includes them as a way to represent a reality in which the reader can confront stereotypes.

In order to depict the role of women in society and as a way to question the traditional role given to the women, Tyler uses male protagonists that face situations typically associated with the feminine. This role-reversal and the continuous transgressions between the feminine and the masculine make relevant to this

dissertation the reference of postmodern feminist theories of the third wave, among them Judith Butler's gender performativity theory.

As I have mentioned, there is not a comprehensive study of Tyler's work. Consequently, I have used elements from all her novels in the present dissertation, giving predominance to her later novels to illustrate my points as they have not been fully examined before. For the purpose of providing the reader with an easy analysis of Tyler's novels, I have shortened the longest titles. Hence, *Dinner in the Homesick Restaurant* will be referred to as *Dinner*, *Back When We Were Grownups* will be brought up as *Grownups*, and *A Spool of Blue Thread* will be mentioned as *Spool*. Furthermore, when it comes to citing her novels, I have designed a list of abbreviations so that the reading is smoother (see Annex I at the end of this dissertation to find the complete list of novels, their abbreviations as well as the bibliographical references for each title).

The objectives of this thesis focus on reflecting on gender issues present in Anne Tyler's novels by means of analyzing the family and marital relationships, motherhood and fatherhood as well as other domestic issues. Similarly, I will analyze how she constructs eccentric characters as part of her humorous techniques to mock at the traditional structures and to question the role of men and women in society. As I will demonstrate, Tyler's fiction presents a balance between the male and the female in order to show different visions concerning daily issues related to family and marriage. She uses both men and women as the protagonists of her stories so that we get different points of view, something that contrasts with the aforementioned gynocritic approach. The use of humor as a narrative strategy allows the author to delve into gender issues in a subtle way and, at the same time, to question the standards of society. Nevertheless,

she does not create a comedy or a satire, but a mix of tragic and comic elements in order to laugh at patriarchal values.

With this dissertation I would like to contribute to create a wider academic scope in Spain about Anne Tyler and further develop the analysis of her literature through a critical feminist perspective. Maybe her compass will shed some light on gender issues and women's literature that will inspire other writers to continue the path she has already started.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL AND CRITICAL BACKGROUND: ANALYZING TYLER'S COMPASS ON GENDER AND LITERARY STYLE

Once upon a time

there was a Little House

way out in the country.

She was a pretty Little House

and she was strong and well built.

Virginia Lee Burton ~ *The Little House*

Before I analyze some of the major topics in Tyler's narrative, it is worth starting this dissertation contextualizing the author. As I have already mentioned, Tyler is rather unknown for the Spanish readers so it is necessary to provide some information on her life and complete work. Although she always claims that what we see in her novels is nothing but pure imagination, there are some ideas in her work that are based on her life. In fact, her job as a writer shared with her duties as wife and mother is something that has influenced her perspective. In addition, some events in her life have marked her narrative, especially her Quaker background, her studies in Russian literature, the birth of her daughters and the death of her husband. Consequently, it would be difficult to understand Tyler without considering some biographical details.

Next, I will provide further information on her Southernness. Although she was not born in a Southern state, her literary style and the topics she uses as well as some of her settings are typically Southern. In addition, apart from being a novelist, she has also written short stories, which follow the purest Southern tradition due to the selection of topics and the characterization.

To finish with this introductory section I will offer support for what is perhaps my most controversial claim in this dissertation, that Anne Tyler writer's writing can be considered feminist from a critical point of view. While recognizing that she does not follow the most radical feminist views, her stories portray women that are empowered despite the traditional life that they seem to have. Hence, I will study the most relevant topics in her fiction, namely, marriage, family and parenthood following the critical literay feminist studies on gender representation without forgetting her humorous strategies as a way to illustrate her particular feminist view of the world.

2.1. BIOGRAPHICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTUALIZATION

Anne Tyler is not a very well-known writer by the public and the critic if we compare her to other female writers of the same period such as Alice Walker or Rita Mae Brown even though she won the Pulitzer Prize. Having said that, Tyler is considered by scholars like Nick Hornby as a "different" author:

> Anne Tyler is an example of that rare phenomenon, the writer who combines genuine popular success… with real critical acclaim… This is both gratifying and understandable: her novels are engrossing, moving, enchanting and very funny, and each book contains a memorable cast of characters, drawn with enormous affection and wisdom. (53)

Similarly, Alice Hall Petry opens her book *Understanding Anne Tyler* with the following lines: "Anne Tyler is something of an anomaly in contemporary American literature. Though she has been publishing well-received novels for a quarter of a century, Tyler has been largely overlooked by the scholarly community" (1).

Another point of view about Tyler is David Levithan's poem, "Anne Tyler Rules," which is a good summary of Tyler's qualities. For him "the greatest magic comes from how the characters make it through the day," (470) one of Tyler's strengths. Likewise, Joseph C. Voelker believes that Tyler's characters live in "an accidental world, in which the fault for life's cataclysmic events is finally unascribable, and the duty of human beings is not possible within their confinement" (11). All these quotations highlight Tyler's virtues and her value as a contemporary writer, something that the scholarly community recognizes.

In spite of the existence of numerous reviews of Tyler's work, there are not many critical books about Anne Tyler, hence, the analysis of her work is mainly superficial. Monographic titles such as Voelker's *Art and the Accidental in Anne Tyler* (1989),

Robert W. Croft's *An Anne Tyler Companion* (1995) and Paul Bail's *Anne Tyler, A Critical Companion* (1998), offer a more descriptive approach, focusing on summarizing her novels and commenting on the main aspects. Only a handful of articles and some books such as *Anne Tyler As Novelist* (1994) by Dale Salwak or *Critical Essays on Anne Tyler* (1992) by Alice Hall Petry study Tyler's work from different perspectives. Furthermore, the studies concerning Tyler's work have mostly been published in the 1980s and 1990s provoking a lack of critical material (except reviews) about her later books from 2000 on. According to Gibson, "critical appreciation of Tyler's work may have grown slowly because her novels are neither stereotypically Southern nor the stories of upwardly mobile suburbanites" (47). Charlotte Templin, however, in her article "Tyler's Literary Reputation" gives a detailed outlook of the number of books written about her and she reckons that she has been subject of many reviews by famous reviewers such as John Updike or Benjamin DeMott, not to mention the numerous reviews appeared on the pages of well-known publications such as the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Washington Post Book World*, and *Newsweek*.

Elizabeth Evans in her monographic book about the writer notes that "Tyler's novels are popular and they are appealing and they are readable" (150). Why, then, has she been so frequently disregarded in anthologies or critical studies? The scarcity of critical works for a writer who has written almost twenty novels and some short stories as well as being awarded the Pulitzer Prize may be due to several factors. The first one may be her reserved character and her reluctance to give interviews or appear in public events. In fact, most of the interviews that she has given up-to date have been conducted by e-mail. She usually explains that she does not want to be disturbed from the process of creation and writing and, at the same time, she does not want her readers to interpret

her books in terms on her biographical experiences. That is why she has not given in-person interviews during most of her career as a writer:

> I have learned that when I talk about writing, I stop doing any writing for some time afterward. (I always say there must be some sort of Writing Elf who retreats in a sulk the instant he's exposed.) An e-mail interview like this one is slightly less disruptive because at least I'm in control of when it takes place and how long it lasts, so that it doesn't impinge quite so much. (Interview with Carol Memmott, n.pag.)

Interviews and public appearances are one of the ways that the writers use to make themselves known by the general public and, as a result, they foster the attention of scholars. But Anne Tyler is not interested in popularity or general acclaim and she has always led a discreet life.

According to Templin another factor that could have influenced the assessment of scholars is the fact that Tyler "has not pioneered in techniques of experimental fiction… along with her rosy vision" (196). In her opinion, Tyler's use of comedy as well as her sweet vision of life affect the way critics value her work. On the one hand, as it will be explained later on when exploring the use of humor in Tyler's novels, it is true that comedy has always been underestimated by the critics. On the other hand, Templin labels the fiction of Anne Tyler as "rosy," sentimental and lacking an analysis of human problems. As we will see in subsequent sections of this dissertation, Templin's conclusion is short-sighted and does not take into account the underlying meanings and situations which Tyler uses in her novels to give them a deeper understanding. In addition, Tyler herself explains why her characters are usually labelled as "good" or "sweet": "I just want to be with nice people, which sounds very milk and cookies, I know" (interview with Lisa Allardice n.pag.).

Another reason for this absence of awareness is the fact that she deals with apparently irrelevant topics related to family matters, which may not seem very appealing for the social, political of feminist critics. Mary Robertson explains that her use of traditional narrative elements such as "memorable characters, seductive plots, imaginative and hawk-eyed descriptions" (119) does not help to consider her as a modern writer either. Nevertheless, as we shall see in the following sections of this dissertation, Tyler does use different modern techniques that make her narrative more complex than what it may seem in a quick reading.

John Updike mentions in his article "Loosened Roots" the strengths and weaknesses of Tyler's narrative. According to him, among her assets are her "firm tone," her "smoothly spun plots," her imagination to create characters, her depiction of "everyday life" and her lack of "intellectual or political condescension" (88). Her unique flaw, however, is "a tendency to leave the reader just where she found him" (88). As we will see when talking about humor in Tyler's work, the tone she uses shows a great mastery of language in order to create funny and grotesque situations. Regarding her plots, they are elaborate because, as she has pointed out in some interviews, she lets her characters work out their own lives. Her descriptions of characters have been compared to that of Dickens by reviewers such as Robert Towers or Wallace Stegner. Maybe it is because she always focuses on something remarkable in order to create grotesque characters that act accordingly. The description of Mrs. Glynn in *A Patchwork Planet* is a good example of it:

> She was no bigger than a minute – a tiny, cute gnat of a woman with a wizened face and eyes so pouchy they seemed goggled. She wore a navy polka-dot dress that hung nearly to her ankles, although on someone else it would have been normal length, and loose, thick beige stockings and enormous Nikes. Over her forearm she carried a Yorkshire terrier, nearly folded like a waiter's napkin." (91)

Whereas Updike considers her depiction of ordinary life and her lack of political or feminist topics as strengths, other critics such as Charlotte Templin see them as drawbacks. For Templin it is important that literature collaborates in the "critique of society" and she believes that Tyler's novels are not apolitical, instead they share "the politics of the American majority" (194). However, Pamela Schaeffer considers that "we do find social history. We bump up against… ourselves, our families, our neighbors, our friends. It's as if she had been there all along, growing up and growing older with us, spying on our intimacies" (25). According to Tyler in an interview conducted by mail with Laurie L. Brown, having grown in a Quaker community "set [her] far enough outside the regular world so that [she has] been able to view things from a certain distance" (qtd. in *Women Writers of the Contemporary South* 11). Maybe that is the reason why for her the everyday life is of paramount importance in her fiction and why her attention to the smallest details is so profuse.

Tyler's representation of ordinary life is another negative point for Templin because she is not able to include the "darker side of human experience" (190). Tyler explains in an interview that she does not like confrontation: "Puede que sea una forma de resistencia, no me gusta demasiada sangre o excitación. Otra respuesta es que siento que a la larga, particularmente en las familias, estas cosas acaban quedando sordas después de un tiempo" (Interview with Andrea Aguilar n.pag.). [2] Templin also points out that in Tyler's novels "there is neither terror nor rapture because there is no sex" (191). This conclusion is not always true, since in more modern novels which have not been sufficiently explored by the critics, such as *A Patchwork Planet*, there is an

[2] "Maybe it is a way of resistance; I do not like too much blood or thrilling experiences. In the long run I feel that these things do not matter, especially within the family" (my translation).

account of some sexual scenes. The first one describes how his protagonist's sexual relationship with a girl called Sophia is starting:

> After supper, we moved to the living room. We settled on her sofa, surrounded by dried flower arrangements and frilled glass candy dishes, and started kissing… I stroked her creamy skin and I cupped her lush, heavy breasts in the circle-stitched cotton bra that I could feel through the silk of her blouse.
> …
> I told Sophia she should come to my place. She turned pink; she knew what I was asking. She said, "Well, maybe soon. Give me a little more time." (122)

On the same book we find the description of another sexual encounter between Barnaby, the main character, and his working colleague Martine:

> I was talking down into the top of her head, into her hair. It smelled of sweat. This got me interested, for some reason. Maybe she could tell, because she turned her face up, and next thing I knew, we were kissing
> …
> "You want to?" she asked me.
> …
> And yet at the same time I was reaching for her once more, as if my body had decided to go ahead without me.
> …
> The instant we had reached the third floor… we were hugging again and kissing and stumbling toward her bed.
> …
> "Martine," I said… "I'm sorry to say I don't have, ah, anything with me," but she said, "Never mind; I do," and she rolled away from me to rummage through her overall pockets. (185-186)

While recognizing that this is one of the few complete sexual scenes that we can find in her fiction, we will see other examples and their meaning when talking about marriage. Nevertheless, Tyler explains in an interview why this type of sexual scenes is not very common in her narrative: "I would never be in bed with my characters… I try to show them respect" (interview with Lisa Allardice n.pag.). Voelker also notes the tendency of Tyler's characters to be "decent" (16), but it does not mean that they always act well. For example, there is Pearl Tull in *Dinner*, who used to insult her children when they were little, or Barnaby in *A Patchwork Planet* who had a rather disruptive behavior when he was a kid.

Regarding Tyler's weaknesses, Updike mentions that it is due to her use of active heroines who fail to change their lives as they would like to: "women admirably active in the details of living yet alarmingly passive in the large curve of their lives – riders on male-generated events, who nevertheless give those events a certain blessing, a certain feasibility" ("Leaving Home" 124). In the section devoted to Tyler and feminism we will discuss in more detail this point. While recognizing that some of her female characters do not evolve as much as we could expect from the events narrated, their passivity is another tool that Tyler uses to illustrate the patriarchal ideas that underlie in their actions.

Other scholars such as Brooke Allen mention that Tyler's novels focus largely on white middle class characters leaving aside the poor or the African-American. For it is true that most of her characters belong to the white upper and middle classes, she also depicts people with money problems, especially in her later novels. For instance, in *A Patchwork Planet* the main character, Barnaby, lives in a small apartment because he cannot afford something bigger despite his belonging to a wealthy family. When he mentions that his daughter may spend some days with him, his mother Margot rejects the idea quickly:

> "Stay in that basement room of yours?" Mom asked.
> "Well, yes."
> "I hardly think so, Barnaby. Maybe here, instead."
> "There's nothing wrong with my place!"
> Mum just pursed her lips and poured me a cup of coffee. (*PP* 77)

In addition, his mother is always pinching on him for his way of life and his lack of ambition to have a wealthier life. She represents what Barnaby hates, a person that has improved her condition due to her marriage to a well-off man. In Tyler's words, "class is very much a factor in America, even though it's not supposed to be" (interview with BookBrowse.com n.pag). As we will see most of her female characters live with a

husband they no longer stand because they cannot live on their own and the few women who succeed to lead independent lives barely survive due to economic problems (e.g. Mary in *Celestial Navigation*, Muriel in *The Accidental Tourist*, Delia in *Ladder of Years*).

Regarding her depiction of African-Americans and other ethnic communities in her novels, she has sometimes been criticized for excluding them from her work. Although it is true that she gives them minor roles, the writer has evolved in her depiction of race. According to Anna Shanon Elfenbein, the first novels had black characters marked by "alienation, resentment, contempt, anger or aggression" (63) such as Sullie in *Searching for Caleb*. These characters, the same as Mr. Ottis in *Breathing Lessons*, resembled more to the depiction of blacks in the Southern American tradition. Yet, most of the scholars who mention this lack of commitment with race issues, do not review her recent novels, which show more commitment with ethnicity as a step beyond the traditional depictions. As Elfenbenin points out, "the predominant racial theme is the proposition that equality and harmony between the races are not only desirable but achievable" (64). For instance, in *Digging to America* she deals with two families who adopt a Korean girl and it is seen as "a profound examination of immigration and assimilation and what it means to be American" (Lawson n.pag). In fact, Tyler herself points out that with Maryam, the widowed Iranian mother, she "especially wanted to show American readers what very hard work immigrating is, and how much fortitude it requires" (interview with the State Department n.pag.). We can find another example of ethnicity in the Davitches of *Grownups*, since one of Rebecca's sons-in-law, Hakim, comes from an Arab country and fathers Abdul with one of Rebecca's daughters of this white middle-class family. On top of that, this same daughter already has an African-American child from her previous marriage to an African-American man. These

contemporary examples illustrate a new trend in Southern fiction where not only African-Americans but also other ethnic minorities appear in Tyler's fiction.

Having seen what scholars consider as Tyler's virtues and her defects, we now turn to analyze her influences. If we want to explore the inspirations of Anne Tyler we can mention some well-known American authors. Anne Tyler has been compared to Eudora Welty because of her use of humor in dramatic situations the way Southern American writers have done before her. Moreover, while she read Welty's short stories, especially "The Wide Net" when she was fourteen, she "realized that the kind of people [she] saw all around [her] could be fit subjects for literature" (interview with BookBrowse.com n.pag.) because they were "small-town, ordinary" (interview with Barnes & Noble n.pag.). In fact, both writers have shown their lasting friendship, especially with Tyler's article "A Visit with Eudora Welty," where she describes Welty's literary career. According to Elizabeth Evans, the influences of Welty over Tyler are clear because the former has given the later "the example of humor, of *place*, of eccentric characters who baffle and charm, of dialogue that sharply defines a character, of lyric description" (*Anne Tyler* 11). Furthermore, both use the family as the center of their plots, "their occupations, their failed dreams, their risks, their compromises, and their view of life" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 12). Apart from that, regarding the relevant historical facts that have affected the twentieth century, they do not include political issues or historical conflicts as the center of their narrative. Furthermore, despite being female writers writing in a feminist era, sex is not treated explicitly as other novelists of the period do but they show their concern with gender in a more subtle way.

Apart from Tyler's indebtedness to Welty, for Petry there is another Southern writer that has a clear influence over Tyler: Carson McCullers. According to her, "both

write of characters who seem not quite to fit in their family circles, who yearn to run away, and who… forge painfully a kind of compromise perspective that enables them to endure in a not-always-pleasant world" (*Understanding Anne Tyler* 12). Voelker also sees similarities with Flannery O'Connor's "handling of violence and the grotesque" in her stories (10). For Petry, however, this parallelism is not very accurate since Tyler avoids violence and "the very few acts of violence…either occur offstage before the opening of the novel or are passed over quickly" (*Understanding Anne Tyler* 12). Although it is true that violent acts occur as accidents and they are not very detailed, in Tyler's more recent novels such as *The Beginner's Goodbye* she describes how a tree fell on Aaron's house causing the death of his wife.[3] In addition, there is a detailed description of Dorothy's face when the firemen found her dying body:

> Her face was the same moon shape, round-cheeked and smooth, eyes closed, but she was filthy dirty. And the mound f her bosom was more of a … cave. But that was understandable! She was lying on her back! You know how a woman's breasts go flat when she's lying on her…
> "At least there's no blood," I told Jim. "I don't see a bit of blood."(*BG* 40)

These passages describe how vividly Tyler recreates the grotesque and how she combines it with touches of black humor. Another good example of it appears in her latest novel in her account of the death of one of the main characters, Abby, while she is walking the dog around her neighborhood. [4]

Similarly, López Berho considers that O'Connor's narrative is far from Tyler's vision because the former focuses in religious issues whereas Tyler only tiptoes through

[3] Actually, Tyler reproduces the scene with a variety of sounds to create tension: "Creak! An even louder one. Or not a creak after all, but a crash, because the creak lasted too long and then it swelled into a slam! With smaller slams following it, and stray tinkles and crackles and thumps. (*BG* 33)

[4] The reader experiences Abby's death with her last uttered word and the long silence at the end:

> "Clarence!" she shriecked, but he paid no attention, so she tore after him into the street, while something she couldn't quite place – something huge and sleek and metallic that she hadn't been expecting – came speeding toward her.
> "Oh!" she thought. "Why, this must be –"
> And then no more. (*SBT* 169)

it with her eccentric preachers. Furthermore, while O'Connor's settings are mainly rural, as we have seen, Tyler only uses the Southern countryside in her three first novels.

There is another American Southern author that is usually mentioned as an influence for Tyler: William Faulkner. Voelker sees influences of Faulkner in Tyler's first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*, because of its Southernness and the way she treats the influence of the past in the lives of her characters. Likewise, Elkins considers that there are some parallelisms between Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* regarding the characterization and the themes. Yet, for Petry this association is not at all possible since Tyler "does not seem to have a high opinion of what little Faulkner she has read" (*Understanding Anne Tyler* 13). In Tyler's own words, "his whole approach to writing… was completely wrong for me. If it were possible to write like him, I wouldn't" (qtd. in Petry, *Understanding Anne Tyler* 14). Following Petry's thesis, López Berho does not concede any similarity. For him the most relevant difference lies in how Faulkner includes the race issue as a very important aspect of his narrative while Tyler does not pay much attention to it (48-50).

Voelker points out that another influence in her novels is Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic vision, especially in her descriptions of decaying houses resembling Poe's house of Usher. Nevertheless, Tyler's use of old houses may be due to their resemblance to *The Little House*, by Virginia Lee Burton, a book that she reckons to have read a lot of times when she was a child. It tells the story of a house which sees the change from the agrarian world to the urban world although she does not like it. The house where Tyler families live is usually an important place for the story and it is usually an element that Tyler uses as "the realization of the losses that the passage of time can bring" (Tyler, "Why I Still Treasure" n.pag.). As Bail suggests, Tyler uses "an ancestral house as the

center of the family's identity… The familial house signifies permanence through continuity" (15-16). For example, in *If Morning Ever Comes*, when Ben Joe arrives to his hometown and he takes a look at his home he describes it as looking "half-deserted" because the garden was wild and it was "in need of a little touch-up with a paint brush." Furthermore, he labels it as being the "ugliest house in town" (33) because of the stained-glass windows, the turret and the weather vane, all of which made it look like a haunted house. With this negative depiction of the Hawkes' house, Tyler wants to highlight the idea of a family which has not changed much despite the passage of time. Other examples of familial houses can be found in *Celestial Navigation*, *The Accidental Tourist*, *A Patchwork Planet*, *Grownups* and *Spool*, where the building has a strong connection to the lives of the protagonists.

Tyler's early life has also influenced the way she narrates, especially because despite being born in Minneapolis in 1941, she grew up in a Quaker commune in the mountains of North Carolina where her family had moved in 1948. According to her, living in such an isolated community was also a crucial point that influenced her perception of things:

> I think the fact that I had a fairly isolated childhood influenced me considerably. I was raised in a sort of commune arrangement, without many other children; I learned to be alone and to entertain myself by imagining, and when I left the commune… I looked at the regular world from an unusually distant vantage point. (qtd. in Evans, "Early Years" 3)

Being her father a chemist and her mother a social worker, she was very much influenced by their civil rights and pacifists ideals. She was the eldest child with three brothers and they were educated by their parents at home although they also attended a rural school in the mountain. She did not have access to many scholarly books but she did read a lot of fairy tales, which she did not usually like because she considered them so fantastic.

Despite her dislike for fairy tales, Tyler admits that imagination and daydreaming are two important factors that foster creativity both in children and writers. In fact, she herself "made up stories in the dark" (Tyler, "Still Just Writing" 13) when she was a child because it was the only way for her to let her imagination flow once she ran out of books to read.

Although her parents were both religious, in an interview with *The Guardian* in 2013 she states: "I started thinking very seriously about God and I thought I just can't do it, so that was sort of that" (n.pag.). This is the reason why religious issues are not very common in her writing, although in novels such as *Saint Maybe* religion is treated from both the humorous and the more transcendental points of view.

In spite of the lack of books in the commune when she was a child, she attended Duke University (North Carolina) and graduated when she was 19. Although she would have preferred attending Swarthmore College (Pennsylvania), she finally liked Duke because it had Professor Reynolds Price who, as Tyler puts it, "turned out to be the only person… who could actually teach writing" (Tyler, "Still Just Writing" 14). In fact, it was him who encouraged her to continue writing and thanks to that her first short stories were published in Duke University literary publication called *Archive*.

After finishing her degree at Duke, she worked as a bibliographer there. Later, she worked for a short period as a librarian in McGill University (Canada). Then, she did Russian Studies in New York at Columbia University because she wanted to study something different and disruptive in a time when Russia was a hot topic in the American society. Actually, her knowledge of the Russian classics like Chekhov is also an inspiration in her narrative given that they "have provided important elements for her, both in techniques and in character types" (Evans, "Early Years" 13). Tyler herself also reckons that her majoring in Russian studies made her learn a "lot of the really

obvious techniques and craftsmanship" (qtd. in Petry, *Critical Essays* 38), which she has later used in her novels. Although Russian literature is characterized by its dramatic tension, something which is not so present in Tyler's works, she has used the Russian style of drama to combine it with the comic touch that is so typical in her work. It is what Susan Elizabeth Sweeny has called "intimate violence" given that "every one of her novels crystallizes around a moment of strife or loss that precipitates the rest of the action" ("Intimate Violence" 79). As we have already examined, in the early pages of *The Beginner's Goodbye* Aaron's wife, Dorothy, dies when a tree crashes over their house. Losing his wife, dramatic as it may be, makes Aaron develop and reflect upon his past life in order to begin again. But Dorothy is not the only character who dies accidentally in Tyler's novels, there are other examples such as Janie Rose Pike in a tractor accident in *The Tin Can Tree*, Danny Bedloe's and Joe Davitch's car accidents in *Saint Maybe* and *Grownups* respectively. These deaths are all accidental and they all bring some changes in other characters' lives. Thus, the death of a member of a family is seen as the inflection point for some of its members. According to Sweeny, it is this "intimate violence" what makes the characters evolve throughout the course of the stories. Petry also sees influences of the Russian writers, especially Chekhov, in Tyler's eccentric characters and her "use (or misuse) of language – skewed dialogue, non sequiturs, illogical trains of thought" (*Understanding Anne Tyler* 10), something that can be exemplified with characters such as Jeremy or Morgan.

Once Tyler finished her education, she started her writing career, which she has never interrupted since then. She published her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*, in 1964. This first work shows her concern for the family issues, which she would use as a recurrent topic in most of her novels. *If Morning Ever Comes* narrates six days in the life of Ben Joe Hawkes, a young law student. He decides to come back to stay with his

family when he learns that one of his six sisters has returned home with her daughter after leaving her husband. Nevertheless, once he is in Sandhill, his hometown, he feels an outsider in his own family and he is not able to understand nor his sisters, nor his mother, nor his grandmother. His only tie is Shelley, an old girlfriend who has also come back to Sandhill now that her parents and sister had died in an accident. Although Ben Joe does not love her any more, he feels attracted to her because, unlike his sisters, mother and grandmother, Shelley listens to him and, "above all, she is dependent on him and hopeful of his attention" (Nesanovich 19).

In her second novel, *The Tin Can Tree* (1965), she analyses how the death of one of the children in the Pikes family affects the lives of the rest of its members and the Southern community where they live. Once more, she explores family ties and how a mother is so torn by the death of a daughter that is not able to continue her daily life and tend her son, Simon, who is forced to run away as a form of demanding attention. This story is probably the most Southern, since it is set in a rural area far from the urban setting of Baltimore that Tyler will use in her novels from the fourth onwards.

Her familiar duties could have been the reason for a period of five years in which she did not produce any novel. Those years where hectic in her private life, since she married an Iranian psychologist called Taghi Modarressi in 1963 and had two daughters, Tezh and Mitra. In 1967, she settled in Baltimore, where most of her novels are set.

A small town is also the setting for *A Slipping-Down Life* (1970). In this novel, however, Tyler focuses her attention on a teenage relationship that does not have a happy ending. With numerous references to the pop culture, the protagonist, Evie Decker, is so madly in love with singer Drumsticks Casey that she carves his name on her forehead forever. Despite her devotion, his lack of feelings towards her and his

insecurities, make their marriage a failure. This story explores the lack of identity and self-confidence, given that Drum is not able to succeed in his musical career and has married Evie because he feels superior to her in every sense. Nevertheless, it is her who has matured throughout the story and at the end she is strong enough to leave Drum in order to be independent and take care of their child. [5]

The aforementioned three novels belong to the period that Voelker has labeled as "North Carolina novels" since they clearly treat Southern topics in typically Southern scenarios. Two novels that she did not publish but she wrote between her first and third published novels were *Winter Birds*, *Winter Apples* and *Pantaleo*. She decided to discard them because she did not consider them to be as good as the others. These first novels are not Tyler's favorite, in fact when she refers to *If Morning Ever Comes* and *The Tin Can Tree* she recommends not to read them at all: "Don't read that book. Stop. *The Tin Can Tree* and *If Morning Ever Comes* should be burned…They were formless and wandering and should never have been published." (Lamb 64). She even wishes that she could eliminate them: "Just wipe them out. I didn't know what I was doing. I was just finding my way" (Anne Tyler, interview with Lisa Allardice n.pag.).

According to Voelker, with *The Clock Winder* (1972) the "middle period" of novels starts. It is the first novel whose setting is Baltimore. Despite this city is always appearing in her novels, it is not because she liked it at the beginning. In an interview given to El País in 2013, she remembers that she felt lonely and isolated in a city that was industrial and with a high class society very much apart from the rest of the city. That is why she started writing novels set in Baltimore with *The Clock Winder* (1972). In it the author focuses on the family topic once more with the Emersons. Elizabeth

[5] Although this novel is one of the least famous stories written by the writer, it has got a film version. Dir. Toni Kalem. Perf. Lili Taylor and Guy Pearce. Lions Gate Entertainment 1999. DVD.

meets this family in a period of time when her life lacks an aim. Through the pages of this story Tyler analyses how the sense of belonging to a family can change Elizabeth's life completely.

This sense of kinship is also part of Tyler's two following novels: *Celestial Navigation* (1974) and *Searching for Caleb* (1975). The former deals with Jeremy, an agoraphobic artist in his late thirties who is afraid of change. After his mother's death, Jeremy falls in love with Mary Tell, who will try to lead a normal family life with their children until she realizes that Jeremy is unable to accept change. The latter book is a story of exploration, since Caleb is the lost brother that Daniel wants to find in order to understand why he left.

Caleb's flight is not the only one in Tyler's novels, since other characters also escape from their families such as Charlotte in *Earthly Possessions* (1977). It is perhaps one of Tyler's most adventurous novels and that may be the cause of its release as a film. [6] This time the writer uses Charlotte, who is completely fed up with her role as a mother, wife and daughter. For this reason, she is planning to run away from her family when, suddenly, she is kidnapped by a young man called Jake. Although the situation is not pleasant for Charlotte, her being a hostage with a stranger is similar to her being a hostage of her family.

Charlotte's search for identity is similar to the one Morgan has to face in *Morgan's Passing* (1980). It tells the story of Morgan, a man that is able to hide his own self from his wife and children until he falls in love with a younger woman called Emily. This novel has been sharply criticized by most critics because of the

[6] Dir. James Lapine. Perf. Susan Sarandon and Stephen Dorff. Rastar 1999. TV.

eccentricities of Morgan, the main character, and because it lacks "an exploration that would make the characters more familiar" (Hoffman 97).

The 1980s could be considered as her explosion as a well-known writer by critics and public, since most of her success came with the three works that she published in this decade. Therefore, I will label her work in this period as the "success novels." This period includes *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, *The Accidental Tourist*, and *Breathing Lessons*.

Although *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982) was "the hardest novel to write" (Tyler, interview with Margo Rabb n.pag.), she affirms in another interview that it is still her favorite one because "it comes closest to the concept [she] had when [she] started writing it" (interview with BookBrowse.com n.pag.). The quality of the novel was recognized when she was awarded the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1983. The novel tells the story of the Tulls, a family broken by the flight of the father. It starts with the mother, Pearl, on her deathbed delving back on her life and that of her children. The story is also told from the point of view of her three children, Cody, Ezra and Jenny. Its success lies in the combination of different voices to tell a story and how Tyler is able to use humor to reflect about the human condition and broken ties. In addition to receiving the award, that same year she became part of the American Academy of Arts and Letters of which she had been a member ever since and which she has mentioned to be "the single honor [she is] proudest of" (interview with Joseph Massucci n.pag.).

The Accidental Tourist (1985) was another achievement and it was made into an Oscar winning film starred by Geena Davis and William Hurt. [7] With this novel she was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1986. It narrates how Macon, a

[7] Dir. Lawrence Kasdan. Perf. William Hurt, Kathleen Turner, and Geena Davis. Warner Bros 1988. DVD.

travel book writer, has to come to terms with the separation from his wife and how he meets a different woman, Muriel, who will bring a fresh air to his life. The success of the novel lies in these two characters because they are what we could call eccentric, a relevant term in Tyler's fiction which we will analyze in another section of this dissertation.

With *The Accidental Tourist* Anne Tyler was a firm candidate to the Pulitzer Prize but she had to wait for it until 1989 with *Breathing Lessons* (1988). Also a best-selling novel, Tyler focuses her attention in one day in the life of Maggie and Ira Moran, a middle-age married couple that have to attend a funeral of one of their best friends. It is not only a spatial journey out of Baltimore, but also a trip to the past and an analysis of their married life which ends with a sweet feeling. Most of the critics agree that this novel is not as good as the previous two, which had been finalists for the Pulitzer. The fact that she received the Pulitzer with it is a way of recognizing her work up to that date.

In the 1990s Tyler wrote three more novels, which forged her place as one of the most relevant writers in contemporary American literature: *Saint Maybe* (1991), *Ladder of Years* (1995) and *A Patchwork Planet* (1998). I will label this period as the "mature novels," given that Tyler starts exploring more transcendental issues such as religion without leaving aside domestic life. Furthermore, her characters seem to have more insight thoughts and they reflect about their own lives because they want to change them. This period comprises *Saint Maybe*, *Ladder of Years* and *A Patchwork Planet*.

Saint Maybe explores the sense of guilt that Ian Bedloe has for provoking his brother's and his sister-in-law's deaths. For this reason, he will try to redeem himself by taking care of his brother's three step children, whose father he will try to trace down in the course of the novel. Although at first Ian tries to escape from his feeling of guilt, he

finally assumes his responsibility and becomes a different and more religious person. Unlike most of Tyler's novels, in this work the theme of religion is very important to sustain Ian's soul.

Escape from the routine is what Delia Grinstead needs in *Ladder of Years*. She is a middle-age woman, fed up with her role of good mother and wife. For this reason, she decides to abandon her family while they are on holidays in order to find a new life that gives sense to her existence. However, she learns that her family is falling apart and she decides to return to restore the broken relationships. Eventually, Delia discovers that her family really needs her and that is what makes her see her life with a different perspective.

In *A Patchwork Planet* Tyler uses again a male hero called Barnaby Gaitlin, who has just divorced and his life is in despair. He is seen as the black sheep of the family because when he was a teenager he committed some robberies and his family had to pay a lot of money for it. Barnaby's self-esteem is very low when he meets Sophia, a woman that will change his life for the better although she also distrusts him. Paul Bail sees influences of J.D. Salinger in this work because of the way the main character speaks, "with his dislike of phoniness and his penchant for outdated slang expressions (like "Geez!"), Barnaby sounds like a middle-aged version of Holden Caulfield" (189). This use of slang and informal language is something quite unusual in Tyler's work.

A Patchwork Planet is dedicated to Tyler's husband, who died of lymphoma in 1997. Her husband's death was to be added to her own breast cancer, which was discovered at the end of the 1990s. Yet, her career as a writer did not stop and she continued writing more novels as she recovered from her illness. In 1998 she started a relationship with baker and chef Mark Furstenberg, but they split some years later

because, as she has mentioned in some interviews, she could not adjust to having a partner again and she preferred focusing her attention on writing.

Published in 2001, *Back When We Were Grownups* was written as a memory to her husband, since the main character is also a middle-age widow. It became such a literary success that in 2004 it was adapted into a movie for the TV. [8] With this novel Tyler starts a new period in her narrative which I will call "later novels." Most of these novels have not been explored by critics and scholars and there are only some reviews of them. Nevertheless, in this period she continues dealing with families from a more modern point of view, since she starts including concerns for history and ethnicity as well as the supernatural. Apart from *Grownups*, this period contains the following novels: The *Amateur Marriage*, *Digging to America*, *Noah's Compass*, *The Beginner's Goodbye*, and *A Spool of Blue Thread.*

The Second World War is the initial setting for the relationship between Pauline and Michael in The *Amateur Marriage* (2004). The novel is an account of their married life and how the disappearance of one of their children affects their marriage little by little. *Digging to America* (2006), however, focuses in motherhood in a modern world where families can adopt children from another county in order to fulfill their desires as parents. In this later novel, many critics have seen an influence of her Iranian family after the death of her husband, since one of the families is Iranian and there are many references to the Iranian culture in it.

Noah's Compass (2010) and *The Beginner's Goodbye* (2012) both have a male narrator whose wife has died. This situation is related to how Tyler felt about her own husband's death: "When it happens you think this is unbearable, and it is unbearable.

[8] Dir. Ron Underwood. Perf. Blythe Danner, Faye Dunaway, and Peter Fonda. Columbia Broadcasting System, 2004. TV.

But of course everybody bears it" (interview with Lisa Allardice, n.pag.). Despite admitting that she kept wondering where her husband could have been gone when he died, she does not consider that her fiction is based on her life because, as she states, "[i]t would be very boring for me to have to live my life over again, I just want to live somebody else's" (interview with Lisa Allardice, n.pag.).

In *Noah's Compass* she depicts Liam, a widower and divorced sixty-year old man who has just retired. When moving to his new apartment he is attacked by an intruder but he cannot remember what happened. This transitory lack of memory will become an obsession to him, who will try to remember what happened along the novel. In this process he meets Eunice, with whom he starts to think of a new life until he discovers that she is married. Liam rejects the possibility of a new love on the basis that she is a married woman, hence, rejecting the possibility of a second chance for her as well.

This second chance is accepted by Aaron in the *Beginner's Goodbye*. Although he has to cope with his wife's death at the beginning of the novel, she will grant him a new opportunity in love by coming back from the dead to reflect on how Aaron's eccentric character has damaged their marriage so that he is able to find love again.

The title of this last novel sounds as if it were the beginning of the end of Tyler's writing career but in February 2015 she published *A Spool of Blue Thread*. Before publishing it she had stated in several interviews that her idea was to write a novel that will end when she died. But instead of having an unfinished novel, she planned a saga narrated from the present to the past, so that whenever she died the story would look as if it were finished:

> I'm going to write a book that's a sprawling family saga that goes on and on and on. And the question that occurred to me was, well, if I die and - it won't really be finished, and that's going to be awkward. So you know, how am I going to handle this? And then I thought, well, I'll write it going backwards through generations. Not forwards, because then you wouldn't get to the end necessarily. But

> backwards, nobody would ever know whether you had reached the end you planned or not. So that's my plan, just be in the middle of a book forever. (Interview with Lynn Neary, n.pag.)

She thought that this book would be published posthumously but she has finished it in less than three years from *The Beginner's Goodbye*. Eventually, the novel was not what she had planned at the beginning because she did reach an end. Yet, it is true that *Spool* narrates the lives of three different generations of Whitshanks but instead of writing it always backwards she presents past events intermingled with modern times. The novel gives a deeper insight of the family from their modest origins in the Great Depression to their flourishing as an upper class family during the following decades. Not only that, the writer analyses the secrets, the tensions and the moments that have shaped their destiny.

Now that she talks about her books in a more open way than in the past, it seems that *Spool* has become her favorite novel:

> *Spool* has supplanted *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* as her favourite novel because while the latter featured a fundamentally unhappy family, her latest novel features a functioning, happy one. Still, both are emblematic of Tyler's domestic focus. "I start every book thinking, 'This one will be different' and it's not," Tyler says. "I have my limitations. I am fascinated by how families work, endurance, how do we get through life?" (Interview with Tim Teeman n.pag.)

Nevertheless, the critics seem to qualify the novel as one of her minor works on account of its predictability because it "recycles virtually every theme and major plot point she has used in the past and does so in the most perfunctory manner imaginable" (Kakutani n.pag). Consequently, her latest novel has been labelled as being a "cliché territory" (Sinkler n.pag).

Her last published novels seem to be the beginning of her life as a public writer, since she has given some in-person interviews from 2012 on to promote her latest books. When she is asked about this change of attitude, her answer is very direct: "Oh

well, why not? I'm 70 years old; I haven't actually had a face-to-face interview in 35 years. I might as well try it, and if I don't like it, I won't do it again" (interview with Mike Doherty n.pag.).

Although this dissertation is going to analyze some aspects of Tyler's novels in depth, it is also worth mentioning her skills as a short-story writer and reviewer. It is difficult to calculate how many stories Tyler has written. According to Evans in her monographic book entitled *Anne Tyler*, there are fifty short stories in print but she may have written more. The problem with the number of stories is that they saw the light in various publications such as *The New Yorker*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Redbook*, *McCall's*, *Harper's*, and *The Archive* but they have not been collected in a single volume. [9] "Laura" was her first story (published in 1959) and the last one up to date is "ReRun" (published in 1988). As Evans mentions, her short stories are important to her work since they "focus on situations and character types the author has not chosen to treat extensively in her novels" (*Anne Tyler* 21). Although she has been criticized for lacking Afro-American characters in her novels, they do appear in short stories such as "A Misstep of the Mind" (1972) and "The Geologist's Maid" (1975). Furthermore, some of her stories contain elements that are the beginning of her novels. For instance, "I Never Saw Morning" (1961) and "Nobody Answers the Door" (1964) are a complement of her first novel *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964). For Evans, Tyler is a very good short-story writer but her stories need critical attention and a compilation is a must in coming years. [10] Tyler's liking for short stories is clear given that she has edited three anthologies, all in partnership with Susan Ravenel: *The Best American Short Stories*

[9] The reason for the lack of a compilation may be related to the rejection of the idea by the writer, who would not consider her production to be worthy of such a compilation.

[10] In his dissertation López Berho López Berho analyzes numerous short stories but he admits that the analysis is difficult to undertake given that there is not a compilation.

1983 (1983), *Best of the South: From Ten Years of New Stories from the South* (1996), and *Best of the South: From the Second Decade of New Stories from the South* (2005).

In addition to her facet as a short-story writer, Tyler has been a very prolific reviewer for *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New Republic*. She has reviewed works such as Joyce Carol Oates's "Fifteen Tales" (being her first review recorded in 1976), Paul Theroux's "Picture Palace" (1978), Margaret Atwood's *Dancing Girls* (1982), "The Stories of Muriel Spark" (1985) or her review of the "Collected Stories of Wallace Stegner" (being her last review found in 1990). Although her reviews are not a part of this dissertation, some of her comments may be used to study her own work. This phase as a reviewer shows her intellectual interest to be in touch with other writers and, despite her seclusion to the public and the critics, it also illustrates her willingness to belong to the literary community.

2.2. ANNE TYLER AS A SOUTHERN WRITER.

Anne Tyler has been labelled as a southern writer in spite of the fact that she was born in Minnesota and has grown up mostly in the North. Moreover, she sets most of her writings in Baltimore, a city which is not an example of southernness. In her own words: "I don't consider myself Southern… though I suppose I'm that more than anything else" (qtd. in Cook 157). In this section then, we will see what features make her belonging to the Southern literary tradition despite the fact of not being born in a Southern town.

Her "first three novels were set in South Carolina and evoke the landscape, the speech patterns, and the mores of the region" (Bail 16). For Updike she is a very good

example of Southerness because she "gives us a border South, busy commercializing its own legends, a New South where the traditional slave-boy iron hitching post has had its face…painted white and where faith healers live in hideously slick decors of sculptured carpets and glass knickknacks" (Updike, "Family Ways" 118-19).

Allen labels her as a "regional" writer because "her characters are old-fashioned in the way they live and in the way they define themselves" ("Anne Tyler" 27). Regional literature is a movement that took place at the end of the nineteenth century which focused on the characters, their language, their customs and other similar features from a specific region in the United States. Tyler could be considered one modern regionalist writer because she creates characters that, despite living in the twentieth or the twenty-first century, still follow the old traditions of their ancestors. What is more, there is always a tendency in her stories to look back at the past to find the answers for the present problems. For instance, in her most recent novel from 2015, *Spool*, she presents the Whitshanks clan where the reader meets different generations: the first one fights for their survival during the Great Depression whereas the last one witnesses the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and the Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

In addition, like other Southern authors she pays attention to topics such as family relationships, motherhood, marriage or death. Yet, she is "obsessed with family" (Gibson 48), since she uses family as the center of all her stories in order to show the conflicts in marriage, child rearing and bearing. Typical families in Tyler are the Tulls in *Dinner*, the Davitches in *Grownups*, the Donaldsons in *Digging to America*, and the Whitstanks in *Spool*. In fact, for Mary Robertson, her treatment of family shares some similarities with the sagas of Faulkner because she "shows that the desire for family purity leads to entropy" (141). Hence, her families are always disorganized and messy, giving a sense of loss and decline of the values of the old South despite the reticence of

some of the members of the clan. Furthermore, she has been compared by scholars such as Susan Norton and Margaret Gullette with John Updike because "both writers treat 'domestic' themes. They center their narratives on family, focusing on the household, the quotidian, and the requirements of the inner circle" (Norton 1). However, her approach is different, since she has "a quirky, unromantic view of adulthood, in which the typical fictional signs of crossing the threshold–courtship, love, marriage, the intimate marital relationship–don't have much importance" (Gullette 326).

Although Updike (1932-) may be the closest writer in style, Anne Tyler also belongs to a generation of Southern women writers who have followed the tradition of the literary South. The so-called Southern Literary Renaissance was mainly led by male writers such as William Faulkner or Robert Penn Warren, although women as Catherine Anne Porter are also considered as being part of this first generation. After that, female literature gained more importance and the next generation of writers includes gifted women such as Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor or Carson McCullers. These writers were characterized by their use of the Gothic and the grotesque. Anne Tyler also shows some connections to the bizarre world of her predecessors since she uses eccentric characters and her novels are full of weird moments that create laughable scenes. Her "Gothic streak is seen in Tyler's fondness for describing her character's dreams, altered states of consciousness, or bizarre, surreal events" (Bail 20).

The dominance of women authors in the South is so clear that Tyler mentions once that "writing in the South is like painting china – it seems to be a woman's occupation" (qtd. in Lueloff 22). In fact, the aforementioned two generations were followed by a more contemporary group of women writers who started working after the Second World War. Although the list of authors is very long, the most relevant names included in *The History of Southern Women's Literature* by Carolyn Perry and

Mary Louise Weaks are Doris Betts (1932-2012), Gail Godwin (1937-), Bobbie Anne Mason (1940-), Anne Tyler (1941-), Alice Walker (1944-), Rita Mae Brown (1944-), and Lee Smith (1944-).

The use of common topics and settings belonging to the Southern tradition has labeled the aforementioned writers as Southern. Yet, what is to be Southern nowadays? As Perry and Weaks mention, "Southernness is more of an abstract construct than a concrete reality… [T]he concept of Southernness has evolved as people… have spoken and written of the region as the South" (611). Tyler herself "has questioned whether regional labels still retain any real meaning" (Bail 17). Furthermore, modern Southern writers are helping to "neutralize outdated images of women by attacking the myths with confidence, zeal and a sense of humor" (Perry and Weaks 442).

With the exceptions of Tyler and Brown, these writers have been born in the South and set their stories in Southern landscapes. However, their stories are about common topics that belong to a modern society that goes beyond the traditional agrarian South, which has evolved to an urban world. As a result, Anne Tyler portrays "a society with a disintegrating tradition, one in which family structure is deteriorating and love is no longer a dominant force" (Young 466). In fact, her novel *The Tin Can Tree* has still reminiscences of the old South. Set in the little town of Larksville, tobacco is a major means of life for a lot of families but it also reflects the changes that are taking place because "the tobacco fields get smaller each year, and the younger people who do go off to college find work elsewhere" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 59).

Likewise, Anne Tyler "write[s] of a people moving from a closely knit, ordered community to a society without traditional values" (Young 468). Consequently, those characters that have been raised under traditional patterns, have a hard time to adjust to reality. This is the case of Ben Joe Hawkes in *If Morning Ever Comes*. He is considered

as an outsider in his family and he never comes to terms with the situations that he has to face because he "displays a typical southern fault in his inability to accept the fact that time is changing" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 9). On the one hand, Ben Joe thinks that, once his father has died, he is now the patriarch who has to take care of his family because he is the only male. On the other hand, he feels frustrated because he cannot understand why, being the only boy, his mother does not need him anymore. Yet, he does not realize that his mother, sisters and grandmother already have accepted the death of the father and have carried on with their lives without the male figure. This idea of the isolated male in a family full of women will be later used in other novels such as *Morgan's Passing* or *Noah's Compass*, where neither Morgan nor Liam seem to get along with their wives and their daughters because they fail to understand that women are no longer fully dependent of their husbands/ fathers.

As a result of this shift from the agrarian to the urban in the Southern society, Anne Tyler sets most of her novels in Baltimore, a medium-size city that differs from the small and rural settings where traditional Southern literature is located. Actually, Paul Binding labels Anne Tyler as the "first urban Southern novelist" (25). As she states, Baltimore is a "wonderful territory for a writer – so many different things to poke around in. And whatever it is that remains undeniably Southern in me has made it easy for me to switch to Baltimore" (qtd. in Evans, *Anne Tyler* 9). In another interview given in 2004 she mentions that "Baltimore is such a gritty, quirky city, so very much its own unique self, that I feel it adds texture to my novels. Then again, we could argue that it's not literally Baltimore at all; it's an alternate-universe Baltimore" (interview with Bethanne Kelly Patrick 3).

The sense of belonging to a place which is so common in Southern literature is what makes Tyler's characters feel so attached to their hometown. As Nick Hornby puts

it, "Tyler's novels are in no meaningful sense "about" the city; her… characters just happen to live there" (54). For example, it is significant that characters such as Ezra in *Dinner* or Liam in *Noah's Compass* are linked to the city in such a way that they do not want to move anywhere else despite the passage of time. Although in some novels there is a trip, the characters always return to Baltimore, because to "many of Tyler's characters, Baltimore is home, not only literally but metaphorically" (Hornby 54-55). For instance, in *Ladder of Years*, Delia Grinstead, who is living in her old family house in Baltimore with her family, decides to abandon them while they are on holidays at the beach. She starts a new life in another town called Bay Borough. She finally abandons her new life to come back to Baltimore because her family is disintegrating without her. In this case, Baltimore symbolizes stability and the routine of the family, whereas Bay Borough implies the abandonment and the unknown.

In her more recent novels it is worth mentioning her book *Back When We Were Grownups*, since the main character, Rebecca, goes back to her hometown Church Valley (Virginia) in order to find what could have happened if she had stayed there when she finished college. In her numerous trips to her hometown she remembers how the landscape has changed, which symbolizes how much she has changed as well.[11]

Similarly, for Daphne Athas Southern literature is not the same nowadays. Although there are still traces of the old times in the techniques used, women writers are "analytical now and in content devoid of disguise. If you are to find the South in them, you must look for it in style" (306). In other words, when reading a Southern novel we

[11] We receive a rather detailed description of the new South that Rebecca sees while she is driving and how some areas look decaying:

> Then she was driving through the frayed hem of the city, through a wasteland of broken-paned factories and tarp-covered mountains of tires … The scenery grew more spacious – weedy and brambly and shrubby. She was sorry to find, though, that the rolling pastures of her girlhood had been replaced by housing developments. The developments had an established, dowdy look to them; she could tell they weren't brand-new. (*BWG* 127)

cannot expect any more to find a Southern accent in the language or to have a rural setting or an African-American character. As Tyler narrative illustrates contemporary Southern literature is a mix of different cultures, an urban setting which is almost Northern where characters are more worried with English grammar than with using a particular accent and where women are no longer considered the Southern belles but are plump, middle-aged and lack style when dressing.

According to Doris Betts, another distinctive feature of Southern female literature is the way these writers tell a story. They base their novels on anecdotes, which results in stories full of little details which enrich the characters and the plot itself. Women writers of the South use their anecdotes in a funny way in order to add an important point to the story. Hence, these little anecdotes are what really build the whole story. For instance, the opening lines of *The Beginner's Goodbye* are a depiction of a mixture of fantasy and anecdotes that reminds to the Gothic scenes used by Tyler's predecessors. This novel portrays the relationship of Aaron and his wife Dorothy when she comes back from the dead to talk to him:

> The strangest thing about my wife's return from the dead was how other people reacted.
> We were strolling through Belvedere Square, for instance, on an early-spring afternoon when we met our old next-door neighbor, Jim Rust. "Well, what do you know," he said to me. "Aaron!" The he noticed Dorothy beside me. She stood peering up at him with one hand shielding her forehead from the sun. His eyes widened and he turned to me again.
> He said, "How's it going, Jim?"
> Visibly, he pulled himself together. "Oh… great," he said. "I mean… or, rather… but of course we miss you. Neighborhood is not the same without you!" (*BG* 3)

An important point to consider is the use that Southern women writers make of humor and what is so distinctive about Southern comedy. As it will be analyzed in subsequent chapters of this thesis, sometimes wit is used in a subtle way. In other words, more things are implied than the actual meaning that the words denote:

> What is essentially Southern among the younger women… is not content or theme but the music of language still drawled in rhythm, still arranged in a particular way. That arrangement is becoming cooler and more underdone in a form of disguise known to all women, since the prose says one thing and means four, by implying dense, invisible secrets beneath the signs and allusions in the sentences. (Doris Betts, "The Fiction of Anne Tyler" 7)

Obviously, they also use evident jokes and hilarious situations, but the way they play with the language makes the reader have more than one interpretation to the situation. Paul Binding also includes the use of humor and the eccentric when he enumerates the elements which make of Tyler a Southern writer. He emphasizes the fact that, although she does not write about the countryside, her label as Southern is clear because of her interests:

> Anny (sic) Tyler is a Southern writer… in her concern with the large, ramified family, in her social inclusiveness (reflecting the still comparatively cohesive nature of Southern society), in her use of gossip, particularly the "tall story," as a way of learning about people and their worlds, in her concern with the eccentric, obsessive person. Her work is distinguished by a joyous mostly non-ironic humour, by a remarkable (and for me Southern) tenderness in her depiction of the relations between men and women, by a mediumistic sense of place. (Binding 25)

Despite Binding's consideration of Tyler's humor as being non-ironic, it is true that Tyler's style includes all of the aforementioned qualities. For this reason, she is one of the major exponents of Southern writing at present time. In his essay "The Future of Southern Writing," Donald Noble considers that Tyler is one of the writers "to watch as she matures and expands into increasingly important themes" (582). I do not think that Tyler is going to change her discourse in coming stories, for she is going to continue writing about Baltimore families with a humorous style. Her concerns, however, have evolved through time the same as the Southern writing has changed from the 1960s on. Thus, in spite of her age and her recently announced retirement, I am sure that Anne Tyler will still offer a portrayal of the South as a changing place with a contemporary scenario where its past will play an important role.

2.3. ANNE TYLER AND FEMINISM

In her article "Still Just Writing" Anne Tyler explains how difficult it was to be a female writer and, at the same time, a mother and a wife. Her husband had a very demanding job in a hospital and she was the only one who could care for the children. However, she complains in this article that although "[she] enjoyed tending infants…, it was hard to be solely, continually in their company and not to be able to write" (Tyler 7). Nonetheless, motherhood for her did not mean a halt in her writing career. She felt that with it she had "grown richer and deeper" (9) but, at the same time, she had to organize her time in a different way in order to cover the needs of her family as well as her professional life.

Even though Tyler always refuses to acknowledge autobiographical details in her novels, her personal experiences as a mother and a writer have influenced the way Tyler views and portrays families. In addition, her women, mothers or not, usually have a sense of attachment to their families but, at the same time, they have a need of fulfillment outside of the domestic sphere. For this reason, in the following paragraphs I am going to answer the following question: Is Anne Tyler a feminist writer? If so, which are the strategies that she uses to convey her feminist vision?

According to feminist critics such as Myra Jehlen and Toril Moi, feminist writers "must try to undo the patriarchal strategy that makes "feminity" intrinsic to biological femaleness, and at the same time insist on defending women precisely *as* women" (Moi 82). Eventually, Tyler will reveal in a subtle way that most of the problems are rooted in the patriarchal society, but she does not defend women in her stories, she listens to them instead. For this reason, from the feminist point of view, it would be difficult to consider Tyler as an explicit and overt feminist writer given that she does not usually state it clearly in her writings like other Southern writers such as Lisa Alther or Rita

Mae Brown. Moreover, as we will see, there is not a unanimous conclusion about it. As Linda Wagner-Martin suggests, she is difficult to classify because "feminist as it may seem at times, in other texts Tyler is … anti-feminist" (qtd. in Bail 29). Because she uses domestic topics limiting the social sphere in which men and women interact, "a feminist reader might think that only female actions having more public importance than Tyler's seem to have can help the cause of women" (Robertson 119). On top of that, "Tyler's women characters do not rebel; they do not kite off for independent lives and careers; they generally appear singularly oblivious to the strong feminist issues of the day" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 143).

What is more, the fact that Tyler uses a lot of female characters that have a very strong role in their domestic sphere provokes that, at first sight, critics like Allen consider that Tyler is a traditional writer using traditional family roles following patriarchal models. Scholars like K.K. Sunalini, however, add that "Tyler is not a typical feminist author in the sense that she is not strident. She does create strong women characters … but she invariably tends to place them in traditional roles as wives and mothers" (impressions.50webs.org, n.pag.). Because Tyler's women cook, take care of their children, needle and do the shopping. Thus, for feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar, who represent a gynocritical perspective that analyzes the impact of the representation of women, this is the wrong model of woman: "Destroyed by traditional female activities – cooking, nursing, needling, knotting – which ought to have given life as they themselves give life to men, the women of this underground harem are obviously buried in (and by) patriarchal definitions of their sexuality" (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 94).

According to Allen, Tyler "sees things from a feminine (though not necessarily "feminist") point of view" ("Anne Tyler" 27). In fact, she points out that her "characters

seem eerily untouched by any of the revolutions, be they sexual or feminist... Not only do none of Tyler's wives see themselves as feminists, they apparently do not even acknowledge that such a creature exists" (27). Furthermore, following Coward's view, Tyler's stories are not in line with what feminism intends because her stories occur within the domestic sphere, a place in the literary tradition where there was a "rigid separation between the public economic sphere and the private domestic sphere" (Coward, "The True Story" 39). Generally speaking, contemporary feminism seeks to revert this trend by placing women in society rather than keeping her at home with her family.

Nevertheless, other scholars wonder why literary feminism has passed her by completely on the basis of her depiction of women as strong characters "often stronger than the men in their lives, but solidly grounded in traditional roles" (Pollitt 82). For Evans, Anne Tyler's feminism lies in the ordinary life that her characters have and how through the daily routine gender roles could be reversed and the traditional roles could be criticised:

> Anne Tyler and her work do not readily suggest association with strong feminist positions… Tyler's position is perhaps not so much an indifference to the issues that confront women *and* men as it is a constant emphasis… to center her attention on ordinary people caught up in the daily efforts of family life. People caught in ordinary life, of course, need to be aware of shifting gender roles and responsibilities. And if many of Tyler's women characters disappoint us by refusing to become strong, competent, and independent, Tyler's views on feminist issues are not altogether confined to the lives her women characters choose to lead. Nevertheless, issues that touch feminist nerves thread their way through Tyler's novels and show characters who react to these issues. (*Anne Tyler* 138-9)

Although it is true that Tyler depicts women in charge of the domestic tasks from her very first novel, as we shall see, the home is what usually empowers the woman as opposed to the man. The domestic is also the place where men and women show themselves as they truly are. Home should not always be taken as an anti-feminist place.

For Schaeffer, Tyler is a feminist writer because she "reminds us that the highest stakes, not only for women, but for men as well, are in the domestic arena where, through struggle and compromise and with daily courage, we learn to persist and endure" (25). Furthermore, in Southern women's literary tradition home is generally a place of empowerment and it "functions as a synecdoche for female autonomy; it becomes the place not only of comfort but of power and freedom" (Michie 60). If one takes a first glance to *If Morning Ever Comes*, the first novel written by Tyler, the women in the Hawkes family are devoted to the domestic sphere. Even though the women in this novel seem comfortable with the patriarchal standards, it is by no means a traditional novel and it already contains some feminist details. Although Mrs. Hawkes is most of the time needling, her mother is usually cooking and the older girls take care of the younger girls, we find Joanne, the elder daughter. She has abandoned her husband and has come back to her hometown to be with her family, something that Ben Joe does not approve but his mother does not criticize:

> "Mom," Ben Joe said, "is Joanne home or isn't she?"
> "*Yes*, she's home."
> "Well, then, why? And when did she get there? Why didn't you…"
> "She left," his mother said vaguely.
> "Just now? Didn't she know I was on the phone?"
> "No, I mean she left Kansas."
> "Obviously she left."
> "She took the baby and ran away from her husband."
> "*What*?"
> …
> "Ben Joe, is there a bad connection on your end? Can't you hear me?"
> "I can hear you."
> "Well, don't be so dramatic, then. What's done is done, and it's none of our affair." (*IMC* 13)

With this funny conversation at the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Ben Joe expects her mother to react in a different way, criticizing what her daughter has done. But Mrs. Hawkes does not want to step into her daughter's marriage because she has

suffered the bitterness of being deserted by her husband, something that has made her a stronger yet bitterer woman.

In Tyler's novels there are numerous examples of female characters dominating the domestic life of the family without which the family would break. One of the clearest examples is Mary Tell in *Celestial Navigation*. She is seen as a dominant woman because she has to be in charge of every single detail when her husband Jeremy is working in his studio, which is almost always. With these words Olivia, a boarder in their house, describes what Mary meant to her:

> *So earthbound*, she was. Always nagging and tidying and bringing him her little domestic problems. Knocking on the door: "Jeremy, the storm window man's here with an estimate and won't take any signature but yours. *Won't* you please come out. Do you have any idea what goes into the running of this house?" If they ever start a men's liberation movement, I'll join it in a flash. (*CN* 225)

Despite Olivia's words, the truth is that without Mary the house is a chaos, since Jeremy is an agoraphobic artist with little skills for domestic issues. Miss Vinton, another boarder of the house, describes the situation when Mary spends some days at the hospital after giving birth and Jeremy is left in charge:

> I went home and found everything in chaos – Buddy cooking spaghetti, Jeremy changing Hannah's diaper, Mr. Somerset stroking the carpet with an old bent broom. There is something so pathetic about men trying to figure out the way a house works. "Here," I said to Jeremy, "let me do that." He had laid a clean diaper on the floor but he seemed to be having trouble getting Hannah to set herself down on it. (*CN* 138)

In a more recent novel, *Grownups*, we see how Rebecca, although some years younger than her dead husband, has to take care of four girls once she becomes a widow. Taking care or her daughters is something that overwhelms her but, at the same time, it comforts her:

> The worst days had been the ones where she had time enough to think. She thought, What am I going to do with all the years ahead of me? The easier days were the chaotic ones, where she proceeded from minute to minute just dealing with demands. Soothing the children, cooking their meals, helping with their

> homework. Standing stolid and expressionless when NoNo pushed her away and ran sobbing to her room, or when Patch asked, "Why couldn't *you* have died, and Daddy gone on living?" (*BWG* 234)

According to Bail, Tyler thinks that "the feminist perspective is too partial" (10). Although her novels deal with family and domestic issues, she uses typically female topics such as motherhood, the mother-children relationship, married life, and husband-wife tensions, but she does so without excluding men from her writings. Having said that, it is the way she narrates and the techniques that she uses what make her interesting to the feminist readers and critics since her "narrative strategies disrupt the conventional expectations of the family novels" (Robertson 121).

In order to see how Tyler is a different feminist, it is important to comment on the most important feminist movements and feminist critics. This way, we will identify the most relevant feminist traits in Tyler's work and the parameters that can be used to approach her work following a chronological order in the waves of feminist criticism. With this background information we will be able to approach her work from a feminist perspective using some of the critical thinking provided by different schools which could be in line with Tyler's vision of the female. This is a crucial point in this dissertation, given that there are not so many accounts on Tyler's feminist perspective. Petry's article "Tyler and Feminism" and Ruth Saxton's ""Crepe Soles, Boots, and Fringed Shawls: Female Dress as Signals of Femininity" which analyze some aspects of Tyler's feminism are some of the few essays which analyze this topic more closely. Another interesting source is the already cited book by Elizabeth Evans called *Anne Tyler* (1993) where the scholar gives a feminist depiction of Tyler at the end. Nonetheless, most of the materials mentioned do not study in depth the feminist issues underlying in Tyler's fiction, they rather concentrate in superficial aspects without providing a complete overview. Thus, with this section of the dissertation my aim is to

give a broader scope of Tyler's approach to feminism in order to fill the void of scholarly materials.

Beginning in the 1970s, literary feminist criticism from the early phase of the Anglo-American second-wave feminist theory represented by the work of Kate Millet and Mary Ellmann revolted against patriarchy and the mainstream culture arguing that the canons that were established by men excluded women. For this reason, women had to speak up and begin a new literature that re-shaped the classical structures. They used strategies such as direct language straight to the point and clearly critical with the society. Anne Tyler cannot be read under the rhetorical premises suggested by this early school because her style is characterized by subtlety since "her books are not conceived in anger, immersed in sex, nor focused on competition between male and female" (Brock 2). Having said that, sometimes her characters express a clear feminist position. For instance, when Mary was still with her first husband, she remembers how her mother-in-law helped her with the baby, something that her husband was unable to do:

> And after the baby! I'm ashamed to say how much I leaned on her. She didn't interfere, she never tried to take over, but whenever I was feeling lost and too young she was right there handing me hot milk and talking on and on in that airy, fake-tough way she had, appearing not to notice anything was wrong but soothing me all the same. Could a man do that? No man that *I* know of. (*CN* 72)

Nevertheless, Tyler prefers the use of literary strategies such as irony and comic situations as well as eccentric characters in order to criticize the patriarchal society. In addition, some of her techniques to overcome the gender stereotypes are in line with the stereotypes of feminity which Mary Ellmann points out in her book *Thinking About Women* (1968). Ellmann "shows how women writers have known how to exploit, for their own subversive purposes, the stereotypes of them and their writing created by men" (qtd. in Moi 35). These stereotypes are as follows: formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy, the

Witch and the Shrew. Anne Tyler uses some of the aforementioned categories. For instance, the figure of the Witch is present in her novel *Dinner* in the character of Pearl. When the absent father returns to see his children after Pearl's death, he is pleased to see his family as a united group but Cody states that their mother was "a witch" (*DHR* 305). With this term Cody summarizes what Pearl has meant to him. In this sense, Tyler uses Pearl as a way to portray that "motherhood was not in every case a happy instinct, a gift of the life course" (Gullette 328).

Another example of how Tyler critically uses the stereotypes that Ellmann describes is her portrayal of spirituality and irrationality, since she sometimes depicts women with a chaotic life where their heart governs their reason. This is the case of Jenny, Cody's sister in *Dinner*. In her early youth she visits a fortune teller because she wants to know if she should get married to her college sweetheart. The third chapter title in *Homesick Restaurant*, "Destroyed by Love" echoes the destiny predicted to Jenny by a fortune teller: "if you don't go on and get married, you'll be destroyed by love" (99). According to Bradley Bowers, it "rings with the melancholy and melodrama of a country song title, and the joke it creates for the reader is the same shared by listeners of those ballads of lost love" (50). Reading the scene, one realizes that the fortune teller is a fraud and even Jenny realizes at the end of the chapter: "Why, she had even had to listen to the radio for tomorrow's weather!"(114). Nonetheless, Jenny follows her advice and gets married. That the fortune teller proves to be false is shown some months after the marriage. Jenny has come back to Baltimore alone because, as she tells Ezra, her husband Harley is "so clever; you don't know how far his cleverness can extend" (102). Although she provides numerous examples illustrating how Harley is so perfect that he cannot stand it any longer, the most interesting fragment comes when she rereads his letter of proposal:

> See how he had dated it: *18 July, 1957* – a form that struck her as pretentious, unless of course he happened to be English. She wondered how she could have overlooked the pompous language, the *American courtship* (as if his superior intelligence placed him on a whole separate continent), and most of all, the letter itself, the very fact that it was written, advancing the project of marriage like a corporation merger. (106)

Jenny's spirituality and irrationality contrasts with her husband's perfection, which far from being good for their marriage, is the cause of its breaking. Therefore, Tyler's portrayal of these stereotypes reinforces Ellmann's thesis of subversion.

Apart from the more radical perspectives of early second-wave Anglo-American feminism in the 1970s, in her essay about American feminist criticism in this period, Cheri Register points out some elements that female literature must fulfill in order to be considered feminist: "(1) serve as a forum for women; (2) help to achieve cultural androgyny; (3) provide role-methods; (4) promote sisterhood; and (5) augment consciousness raising" (211).

Let us examine how Anne Tyler's work includes all five elements Register considered necessary for women's narrative to be feminist. According to Register's definition of "forum," literature has to portray realistic female experience so that women can feel identified with what they read and with the female characters. With her novels, Tyler uses real-life situations of women. For example, women who feel themselves underestimated by their families like Delia in *Ladder of Years*; women who are abandoned by their husbands like Pearl in *Dinner* or women who, in turn, run away from their husbands like Mary in *Celestial Navigation*; women whose wish is to become mothers like Bitsy and Ziba in *Digging to America;* or successful women like Dorothy in *The Beginner's Goodbye*. In addition, she uses common situations where women could feel identified with. For example, when Maggie and Serena, now middle-aged women, are talking about how time has passed and how their body has changed:

> "Menopause!" Maggie said. "You've been through menopause?"
> "Gladly," Serena told her.
> "Oh, Serena!" Maggie said…
> "Well, goodness," Serena said, "why should that bother you?"
> "But I remember when we first got our periods," Maggie said. "Remember how we all waited? Remember," she said, turning to the Barley twins, "how that was once the only thing we talked about? Who had started and who had not? What it must feel like? How on earth we'd keep it secret from our husbands when we married?" (*BL* 296-297)

Register also mentions the term "androgyny" to refer to the equality between men and women and how feminists want "a new social order founded on "humanistic" values, some of which are traditionally "female" and not respected in contemporary society" (212). Although some of Tyler's novels and female characters can be considered as being associated with the traditional roles of men and women, it is also true that Tyler also depicts families where men and women share their responsibilities in the family. For instance, there are couples like the Yazdans and the Donaldsons in *Digging to America* whose male characters "are concerned about how they relate to intimacy, family life, and personal relationships" (Durham, "Anne Tyler's Vision of Gender" 144). Despite the adoption, both fathers, Sami and Brad, are very implicated in the care of their little girls:

> Sami sat in an antique rocker a good six inches lower. He was nodding at Brad's description of the joys of fatherhood. "Sunday mornings, Jin-Ho and I go out for croissants and the New York Times," Brad said. "It's my favourite thing of the week. I love it! Just me and my kid together. You ever do that with Susan? Go off on your own for a jaunt?" (*DA* 29)

Nevertheless, in Tyler's fiction there are more fathers whose parenting role is more a job than a natural instinct. For example, Liam, a divorced man in his sixties is forced by the circumstances to babysit his grandson, something that he does not really enjoy because he "had no idea what to do with a four-year-old" (*NC* 138). On top of that, he wonders what other grandparents may feel about their grandchildren:

> Strange how unconnected he felt to this child. Not that he had anything against him; certainly he wished him well… But the fact that they were related by blood seemed too much to comprehend. Did other grandparents feel this way? (*NC* 141)

His lack of skills is no more than a reflection of his inability to be a good father, no wonder that his daughters also feel unconnected to his father. Tyler uses this type of male characters in order to reinforce the idea of the woman as the nurturer but, as we shall see, the use of men in Tyler's novels is crucial to consider her as a feminist writer.

The concept of "androgyny" is directly linked to the role-models which, according to Register, should "instill a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on men" (212). Many of Tyler's female characters are fully independent; what is more, they question male standards and their actions. This is the case of Cicely in *Saint Maybe*. She rejects Ian's proposal of marriage because she thinks that they are too young and she wants to do other things before having her own family. Another example is Dorothy in *The Beginner's Goodbye*. Although she dies at the beginning of the story, through the perspective of Aaron the reader discovers how she had a successful career as a doctor and was not keen on domestic issues such as having children or cooking and doing housework. Nevertheless, these characters from her more recent novels are rare in her first works, since most of the times it is the woman who takes care of the house whereas men "play insignificant roles as heads of households" (Gilbert, *Anne Tyler* 256). The case of Jeremy in *Celestial Navigation* is the most outstanding one. Being an agoraphobic and eccentric artist, he fails to connect with his own children and has no word on the domestic issues because he is too focused on his own work:

> The basement walls were lined with case lots of Mary's household goods. There was an entire cabinet of sneakers, waiting to be grown into. Another of toilet paper. A barrel of detergent big enough to hold two children. Was this necessary? He felt that she was pointing something out to him: her role as supplier, feeder, caretaker. "See how I give? And how I keep on giving – these are my reserves. I

> will always have more, you don't even have to ask. I will be waiting with a new shirt for you the minute the elbows wear through in the old one." (*CN* 160)

The sense of community among women is also another pattern that Tyler uses in her novels by depicting different families and situations where most of the conflicts arise between men and women and woman-centered relationships are reinforced. It is what Register defines as the feeling of "sisterhood." This situation can be seen in novels such as *Digging to America*. Although there is a sense of competition between the two families regarding the education of their adopted daughters, Bitsy and Ziba usually have the same preoccupations; they are united by a new concept of motherhood despite their different cultural backgrounds and origins:

> Ziba had told her once that her parents believed that people who couldn't have children shouldn't have children; it wasn't meant to be. "Destiny!" Ziba had said with a laugh, but Bitsy had not laughed with her. Instead she had reached out and covered Ziba's hand with her own, and Ziba's eyes had flooded suddenly with tears. (*DA* 75)

Finally, Register mentions the notion of literature as an instrument to raise consciousness about the woman's position in society by providing realistic accounts of the development of the female personality. This idea is portrayed in all of Tyler's stories, for all of them delve into the ordinary lives of the female characters, their perceptions and their feelings towards their husbands and how they would like to change their lives.

As we have seen, the aforementioned elements have their place in Tyler's narrative. In Register's words, "the ideal feminist fictional work is one that fulfills all five functions in equilibrium" (215). Thus, her writing can be considered as fulfilling the feminist literary perspectives of the early 1970s.

The more mature second wave of Anglo-American feminism of the late 1970s and 1980s also set its theories against patriarchy but it started a revolution in literary

criticism. They wanted to analyze major literary works from the point of view of women, hence, changing some of the classical visions of the main books written by male authors. The term "gynocritics" was first introduced in this period by Elaine Showalter, who sought to study the woman as writer taking into account her sociological context. As Gubar states:

> The images or themes or lexicons to which women writers appeared especially drawn, their uses of a recurrent cast of characters, their attraction to certain authorial strategies, gender-related standards at work in the publication or reception of their books, the distinctive reading patterns of female readers: all sustained the attention of feminist scholars (*Critical Condition*, 116-117).

With "gynocriticism" women's literature was recovered and feminists started a revision of literary works from the point of view of the feminist reader. Furthermore, this school of thought did not accept anything related to masculinity as a way of giving predominance to women's works because "the programme of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories" (Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics" 224). For Showalter, women writers from the 1920s onwards are part of what she calls the "Female phase." This stage is characterized by rejecting both the imitation of male literature and the protest in order to turn to women centered experiences.

Within gynocriticism, Josephine Donovan includes the so-called "cultural feminism," a branch of feminist theory which considers women as a separate community with their own culture and customs. For instance, Donovan mentions that women "have been confined/consigned to the domestic or private sphere" (101), which, as it has been mentioned, is one of Tyler's most remarkable traits. Donovan also discusses how women have been "assigned the childrearing role" (103). As we will see when talking about family, Tyler's women usually have a nurturing role whereas men

are usually missing or have problems to cope with parenting. On the one hand, men like Liam in *Noah's Compass* have a rather distant relationship with their children after they divorce:

> Liam had barely known Kitty as a little girl, to be honest. She'd been one of those last-ditch efforts – a save-the-marriage baby born late I their lives, only she hadn't save the marriage (surprise, surprise), and within the year he'd become a visitor to his own family. And not so frequent a visitor, at that – least frequent of all with Kitty, since she had been so young. (*NC* 124)

On the other hand, women like Rebecca in *Grownups* absorb her husband's family in order to become the caretaker:

> Had it ever crossed her mind that Joe had married her for her usefulness? Yes, it had crossed her mind. And never more so than after he died; just up and wilfully died and left her to cope on her own.
> Now, though, she saw what he had rescued her from: that ingrown, muted, stagnant, engaged-to-be-engaged routine that had started to chafe her so. Oh, he had been just as useful to her; no doubt about it. (*BWG* 246)

With these lines Rebecca also reveals how she needed a man in her life, hence their marriage was also a positive thing for her. For this reason, some feminist critics within the gynocritics current may consider that Anne Tyler could not be a representative feminist writer. According to Coward, "contemporary women protagonists are positively garrulous about their intimate personal histories … the female protagonist has become the speaking sex" ("The True Story" 39). Nevertheless, as it has been mentioned, Tyler does not exclude male protagonist from her novels. On the contrary, she gives them central roles, crashing against Showalter's gynocritical parameters because she does not exclude the influence of men in women's lives. The first lines of *A Patchwork Planet*, for instance, clearly state who the protagonist is: "I AM A MAN you can trust, is how my customers view me. Or at least, I'm guessing it is" (*PP* 3). At the end of the novel the same words appear, although the stress is not on the word MAN, as in the opening lines, but on the fact that he can be trusted: "Then she

unfolded my note. *Sophia*, she read, *you never did realize. I am a man you can trust*" (*PP* 288).

Anne Tyler chooses both male and female voices as narrators of her stories. Due to that, feminist writers such as Hélène Cixous would consider Tyler as a non-feminist writer. Cixous belongs to the French feminist literary critical school centered on the premises of an "écriture féminine" which is "a practice of writing 'in the feminine' which undermines the linguistic, syntactical, and metaphysical conventions of Western narrative" (qtd. in Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism* 9). For this reason, having male characters as protagonists of Tyler's novels contradicts Cixous' statement that women "must write about women and bring women to writing" because a woman "must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history" (311). What is more, for Cixous feminist texts have to "struggle to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic, split open to closure of the binary opposition" (qtd. in Moi 108). Tyler has a rather conventional style given that she does not experiment with language or uses disruptive narrative techniques. Hence, her vision of literature moves clearly far away from what Cixous's considered as the real feminine literature, which should use a poetic style and language that went beyond the syntactical order, the patriarchal symbols and the sequential narrations.

Tyler's male characters are a way of showing the tensions in the family and a way of empowering women because Tyler "deals sympathetically and redemptively with male fecklessness and helplessness" (Lawson, n.pag.). Through her narrative the reader realizes how men have flaws, which she laughs at by using humor or by creating eccentric characters which clearly show these defects.

> The qualities which make… men so desirable are, actually, the qualities which feminists have chosen to ridicule: power (the desire to dominate others); privilege (the exploitation of others); emotional distance (the inability to communicate);

> and singular love for the heroine (the inability to relate to anyone other than the sexual partner). (Coward, "Female Desire" 174)

All these elements mentioned by Coward are part of Tyler's male characters. For instance, in *If Morning Ever Comes* Ben Joe Hawkes feels that he is in charge of his family when the truth is that his family ignores him. Consequently, his desire to dominate others is frustrated and he leaves his family to start a new life with his new wife, whom he expects to stay at home and take care of their future son:

> He knew… the careful little apartment where Shelley would always be waiting for him, like his own little piece of Sandhill transplanted, and asking what was wrong if he acted different from the husbands in the homemaking magazines but loving him anyway, in spite of all that. And then years on top of years, with Shelley growing older and smaller, looking the way her mother had, knowing by then all his habits and all his smallest secrets and at night, when his nightmares came, waking him and crooning to him until he drifted back to sleep, away from the thin, warm arms. And they might even have a baby, a boy with round blue eyes and small, struggling feet that she would cover in the night, crooning to him too. (*IMC* 197)

Ben Joe's thoughts describe a woman that fits in the patriarchal definition of good mother and good wife who devotes her life to take care of her husband and her son.

Although in general none of Tyler's male characters is known for exploiting others, it is true that there are some male characters who have a job which allows them to have some privileges. This is the case of Jeremy in *Celestial Navigation*. He is an artist and this job allows him to be isolated from his own family, which fosters his isolation by considering him a genius who cannot be disturbed.

> I couldn't think what to say. I looked off down the stairs, so as not to embarrass him. Finally I asked, "Would you like me to take care of the children today?"
> "You think that I'm not up to it," he said.
> He startled me. I said, "Why, no, Jeremy, I know you are."
> "I can do things like that."
> "Of course, but – if you're working on something."
> "I'm not working on anything at all."
> He shut the door again. What could I do? (*CN* 135)

The inability to communicate effectively is one of the elements that most of male Tyler's characters have. As a result, there are misunderstandings and some male characters feel frustrated and dominated by women. This is the case of Liam Pennywell in *Noah's Compass*. He is a divorced man who meets a woman that can change his life but he fails to give way to his feelings, hence the relationship comes to an end: "She must have wanted so much, underneath! And he had given her so little… In the most unforeseen way, Eunice really had turned out to be his rememberer" (*NC* 251).

Finally, Tyler's male singular love for the heroine is evident in novels such as *Breathing Lessons* and *Ladder of Years*. Both male protagonists, Ira and Sam respectively, usually criticize and even ridicule their wives but they are highly dependent on them and so are their children.

We can also analyze in Tyler's work a feminist approach to the representation of the family. The "whole notion of "proper" family is patriarchal" (Robertson 139) and she is able to show that there are different types of families in which the father is not the leading member. That is why sometimes she uses what has been called as "dysfunctional" families. This concept has been mentioned by reviewers such as Spector when commenting on Tyler's work. It refers to families where there are chronic problems that interfere with the normal functioning of the family. According to the TWU Counseling Center (Texas Woman's University Counseling Center), such problems are mostly related to the role of the parents in the family: "Some parents under-function, leaving their children to fend for themselves. Other parents over-function, never allowing their children to grow up and be on their own. Others are inconsistent or violate basic boundaries of appropriate behavior." (1). For Tyler, there are many parents who under-function, and she usually depicts them running away from their families such as Beck in *Dinner* or Tina in *Grownups*. Sometimes there is a

member of the family who occupies the blank space left by the missing parent such as Rebecca in *Grownups* but sometimes that role is assumed by the remaining parent like Pearl in *Dinner*. In fact, sometimes the fleeing parent is idealized in such a way that Rebecca considers that "the way to win your family's worshipful devotion was to abandon them" (*BWG* 87).

Opposed to the under-functioning parents we find the over-functioning ones like Mrs. Pauling. She has got three children but she protects the boy, Jeremy, who receives all her attentions to the detriment of his sisters. Amanda, Jeremy's eldest sister, describes with bitterness the situation in her family, whose father also abandons them:

> It never occurred to her that she was being displaced in Mother's affection. It occurred to *me*, of course. I was the oldest. I had been displaced years ago. I saw how Mother had room for only one person at a time, and that one the youngest and smallest and weakest… In all other situations Mother was a *receiver*, requesting and expecting even from her own daughters without ever giving anything out, but she spoiled Jeremy from the moment he was born and I believe that that is the root of all this troubles. A mama's boy. She preferred him over everyone. (*CN* 17)

Her use of male characters comes as a surprise to reviewers such as Updike, who states that in "a time when many woman [sic] writers find themselves quite busy enough proclaiming the difficulties of being female, Anne Tyler persistently concerns herself with the moral evolution of male characters" ("Leaving Home" 129). In an interview given to *El País* in 2013, Tyler explains why she gives such an importance to male characters. She mentions that in the education that she had received there was no difference between man and woman. Yet, she considers that men and women have different types of reactions and thoughts. That is why she combines them in her novels. According to her, on the one hand, narrating from a male point of view is more limited than using a female voice because women say how they feel whereas men take a lot of time to realize about feelings. In fact, she believes that men are very constrained

because they “are almost forced by society to hide their feelings” and she even considers that “we are always worrying about women's liberation, but how about men?" (Interview with Lisa Allardice n.pag.). On the other hand, she likes men and she feels comfortable with them because she has had a very good relationship with the men in her life, i.e. her father, brothers, and husband. It is worth mentioning here that, although the scope of this thesis wouldn’t allow for a thorough study of Tyler’s work under the perspectives of male or masculinity studies, it is clearly a theoretical field to be explored in the future given Tyler’s fondness for her male characters.

Nevertheless, although men have a central role in her novels, she often makes fun of them by depicting men that do not have the characteristics described in the patriarchal structures to lead their families. In fact, when asked in an interview why her male characters are not especially manly, she answers that “real-life men aren't all that macho” (Interview with *Daily Mail* n.pag.). This is the case of Ben Joe in *If Morning Ever Comes*. Being the only and elder son of a widow with six daughters, he is supposed to be the patriarch of the family. However, the older sisters are the ones who support his studies with their jobs and administer the finances of the family. According to Alice Hall Petry in her essay “Tyler and Feminism,” “everything about him is reversed” (34) but he is not able to see it and he keeps on trying to govern the family as he thinks his father would have done. The fact is that not even his father was a “good” patriarch, for he had an affair with another woman in town resulting in a boy who was named after his father, a privilege that Ben Joe had always resented. What is more, Ben Joe’s father wanted to escape from the Hawkes women but eventually couldn’t due to his sudden death. The same as his father, Ben Joe is isolated from his family and, as Stella Nesanovich states, he “is something of an alien in his home” (17).

After having analyzed the main gender representations in Tyler's work in a general way under the light of second-wave Anglo-American school paradigms, we turn now to study Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which can help us understand some aspects of Tyler's work. Butler belongs to the third wave of feminist theory, which developed in the 1990s. In this third wave, "more attention began to be paid to images not only of feminity but also of masculinity" (Gubar, *Critical Condition* 117). Furthermore, in this period, feminist criticism started to question the concept of gender and the meanings of "man" and "woman." Butler argues that "gender identity is not innate, but rather a set of behaviors that all members of a culture perform" (qtd. in Kowaleski-Wallace 86). In her book *Gender Trouble* published in 1990 she explores how gender is an artificial creation that favors patriarchal views. Through her theory she questions second wave feminism given that they highlight the female in essentialist terms establishing an opposition between the male and the female when both genders and sexual identities are socially and performatively constructed. It seems that Tyler supports Butler's view in the sense that she represents masculinity with traits commonly associated to the female and feminity with male features. By using this unstable representation of masculinity and femininity she is supporting Butler's view that gender is culturally constructed and individually performed. For this reason, when Tyler uses apparent traditional models of masculinity or feminity that transgress their typically associated traits she is laughing at the traditional standards established for men and women. Through her fiction we can find numerous examples on how she "performs" gender by using "weak" male characters that are given a typically female responsibility in order to help the family. Nowadays, women "take primary responsibility for infant care, spend more time with infants and children than do men, and sustain primary emotional ties with infants" (Chodorow 3). According to Chodorow, when "biological

mothers do not parent, other women, rather than men, virtually always take their place" (3). We can find examples of both in Tyler's novels. On the one hand, we can find women taking care of non-biological children in Tyler's novels, such as Joan in *The Tin Can Tree*, Rebecca in *Grownups* and Mrs. Yazdan in *Digging to America*. On the other hand, there are also male characters who assume their role as "mother" even though they could leave the parenting role to other women. For instance, Ian Bedloe in *Saint Maybe* decides to become a father and a mother to her three dead brother's children. Moreover, he does not let his mother or other relative to take care of the children because he believes that he is to blame for his brother's death. Durham calls Ian's attitude as "gender blending" because he assumes "a parental role usually attributed to the female" ("Anne Tyler's Vision of Gender" 144).

However, fathers who are in charge of their children are not usually successful because they are generally busy with their job. For instance, Barry in *Grownups* is a successful businessman with a son (Peter) and he is about to remarry one of Rebecca's stepdaughters. In the novel there is a scene when Peter wants to drown himself because he cannot cope with his father's new marriage. When they rescue him his clothes are wet and he has to change them. Rebecca observes him while he stripes "exposing tweaky pale dots of nipples and dingy, stretched-out underpants fraying at the edges. (This was what happened, Rebecca reflected, when a father had sole custody.) Everything was too big for him." (12).

Similarly, Ezra Tull in *Dinner* assumes the role of organizing the family meetings so that his siblings and his mother stay in touch. In addition, he is the one taking care of his mother until she dies. His maternal personality contrasts with the lack of ability of his mother Pearl to be a support for her children. As Voelker puts it, "Ezra's restaurant is an extension of his own nurturing soul. His mother could not feed" (129).

With the aforementioned examples we can conclude that Tyler's approach to motherhood and fatherhood is very different from the conventional roles assigned in traditional families. Even though on the surface her families may seem to follow the conventions, by using transgressive femininity and masculinity models she is following a postmodern vision of gender identity. In addition, her stories support the idea that women and men are forced to replicate what they have learnt from the tradition but they can be classified as "strong women" and "weak males," which contradicts the patriarchal vision of gender.

Traditionally, women are the nurturers of the family because of physical and psychological reasons. In patriarchal society women are designed for finding happiness in motherhood, whereas in Tyler's realistic novels it is not always the case. According to Quiello, "Tyler understands that marriage and motherhood are often symbolic of structures designed to imprison women" (64). For this reason, she sometimes depicts characters who want to escape from this stereotyped reality. Some examples of uncommon mothers are Pearl and Pauline, who are sometimes considered as being bad by their own families and this affects their condition as women, since they are seen as monsters by their own kin: "The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who *has* a story to tell – in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her" (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 58). Pearl reflects what Karen Elias-Button mentions regarding the role of mothers in contemporary fiction by women: "The most disturbing villain in recent women's fiction is not the selfish or oppressive male but instead the bad mother" (qtd. in Nina Baym 289). According to her, mothers are usually seen as the bad ones and they are usually killed by the author in the course of the narrative in order to redeem their image for the reader. As opposed to the bad mother we find Adrienne Rich's idea

of the "good mother" that she explored in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience* (1976). Though she published her book in the 1970s her ideas are still in vogue since she explains how motherhood is an institution which imposes a set of rules to the woman in what refers to childrearing. Therefore, when a woman is not able to fulfil these regulations she is automatically blamed and considered as a "bad mother." In line with her thesis, women "get gratification from caring for an infant… because they experience either oneness with their infant or because they experience it as an extension of themselves" (Chodorow 85). Pearl is a good example of a woman who does not enjoy being a mother, and on her deathbed she expresses how her children could have been better with another woman: "You should have got an extra mother" (*DHR* 1). Although it is a "funny thought" (*DHR* 1) it shows the bitterness that lies in Pearl for being the only support for her children. In a way, she is also repenting of some unpleasant situations that her kids have suffered due to her inability to cope with the fact that she has been abandoned by her husband. Although Pearl is the best example of it, another mother that is seen as bad by one of her children is Barbara in *Noah's Compass*, since she has a rather tense relationship with her youngest daughter, whom she does not understand. Kitty explains with these words their relationship: "I just feel like she's acting crazy. Every little thing I do, it's "Kitty, stop that," and "Kitty, you're grounded," and "Kitty, how often must I tell you." Senile dementia; maybe that's what I mean" (*NC* 126). Barbara feels that she is losing her daughter because she is imposing too many barriers. As a result, Kitty turns to her father so that she can enjoy a freedom that her mother would not have granted her. Eventually, as we will see when talking about the family, the novels of Tyler reveal that the relationships between mother and daughter are not always easy.

A different approach to motherhood is adoption, a topic that is not commonly treated in modern fiction. This situation is portrayed in *Digging to America* where two families (and two mothers) live adoption in a different way. Furthermore, Tyler uses adoption in order to break the stereotypes of masculinity. Traditionally, when a couple failed to have children it was considered to be the woman's fault. Nevertheless, in one of the couples, the American-Iranian, Tyler breaks the patriarchal standards that are present throughout the cultures by depicting what she calls the "failure" of the man:

> She winced too at recalling her automatic assumption that Ziba's failure to get pregnant was exactly that – *Ziba's* failure. When they discovered that it was, instead, Sami's failure, Maryam had been shocked. Mumps, perhaps, the doctors said. Mumps? Sami had never had mumps! Or had he? Wouldn't she have known? Did he have them while he was away in college, and he had felt too embarrassed to mention such things to a woman? (*DA* 21)

As we have said, Tyler transgresses gender stereotypes but she also uses some of these stereotypes to show the patriarchal versus feminist duality in society. As Joyce Durham states, Tyler's "men can be nurturing as well as women, and women can exhibit patriarchal attitudes" ("Anne Tyler's Vision of Gender" 152). Bitsy, the other adopting mother, shows a lot of patriarchal comments when talking about childcare, hence she is a completely different woman from Ziba:

> "Nap?"
> …
> "Oh! I wish!" Ziba said. She ladled rice onto her plate. "But two days a week I'm at work, and the other days I'm trying to catch up with the laundry and the cleaning and such."
> "You work?" Bitsy asked her.
> "I'm an interior decorator."
> "I couldn't bear to work! How could you leave your baby?"
> Ziba stopped dishing out rice and sent Maryam an uncertain glance.
> It was Lou who broke the silence. "Well, Pat here left her baby from the time he was six weeks old, and see how well he turned out?"
> …
> "But it's the most formative time of their lives," Bitsy said. "You'll never get those days back again." (*DA* 36)

With her last remark Bitsy illustrates how she has assumed her role as nurturer. Not only has she accepted the conventions of the stay-at-home mother but she also criticizes the behaviors that do not match her idea of motherhood and the "good mother."

In addition to non-biological mothers, male mothers and mothers that fail to enjoy motherhood, Tyler also uses female characters that reject having children. This is the case of Dorothy in *The Beginner's Goodbye.* She is a professional woman who considers that her medical career is more important than having children or doing typical housework things such as cooking. Even her family criticizes Dorothy's lack of domestic attitudes:

> [Dorothy was] too professional, my sister said. Ha! There's a novel objection. Dorothy was a doctor. I work as an editor in my family's publishing firm. Not all that great a disparity, right? What Nandina meant was, too *intent* upon her profession. Too work-obsessed. She left for her office early, stayed late, didn't greet me with my slippers in the evening, barely knew how to boil an egg. Fine with me. (*BG* 10)

As we have seen, Tyler includes males as main characters in her novels in order to show that men and women do not follow a fixed pattern, but they follow their instincts and own agency. This is a very feminist conception because, as Eagleton puts it: "Not only may a man behave in a way that is deemed 'feminine' and a woman behave in a 'masculine' manner but our very understanding of what constitutes 'masculine' and 'feminine' changes constantly in time" (158).

The fact that Tyler uses men as first person narrators occurs in some of her novels such as *A Patchwork Planet*, *Noah's Compass* and *The Beginner's Goodbye*. Despite being the main characters in the novels, the stories of these men (Barnaby, Liam and Aaron) go around the women in their lives, namely, their wives, ex-wives, lovers and daughters. Thus, Tyler gives voice to these women to criticize what the main character

does because "women do not see things in the same ways as men, and have different ideas and feelings about what is important or not important" (Selden 121).

Also a feminist critic from the 1980s whose work was analyzed by Moi, Annette Kolodny, mentions two patterns in female fiction: "reflexive perception" and "inversion." The first one has to do when a female character is in "situations she had not planned" (qtd. in Moi 71) whereas inversion occurs when "the stereotyped, traditional literary images of women… are being turned around" (qtd. in Moi 71). Tyler uses both patterns in her novels. We can find reflexive perception in almost all her novels, since her female characters are usually involved in unplanned situations. From her early novel *A Slipping Down Life* we can see Evie carving the name of her platonic love Casey in her forehead. Another example is to be found in *Earthly Possessions*, where Charlotte is kidnapped by a bank robber just when she was about to abandon her husband. Even in her latest novels we do find Dorothy in *The Beginner's Goodbye* hit by a tree which kills her and later she becomes a ghost that can only be seen by her husband.

Inversion is part of many of her female characters such as Eunice in *Noah's Compass* or Martine in *A Patchwork Planet*. Both are described as being dull women with rather masculine traits. These are some of the words that Liam uses to describe Eunice's personality:

> She cared little about food in general – made not so much as a gesture toward cooking, and never seemed to notice what he gave her to eat.
> …
> She never wore dresses; just those peasant skirts or balloony slacks. Nor did she use cosmetics.
> …
> She was refreshingly indifferent to domestic matters. She didn't try to rearrange his furniture, or spruce up his wardrobe, or balance his diet. (*NC* 159-160)

According to Gilbert and Gubar, one of the ways women have to confront the male is the use of humor in order to laugh at situations, which will make that women

feel more empowered in their roles. In Virginia Wolf's words "women writers should learn to laugh, without bitterness, at the vanities…of the other sex" (qtd. in *No Man's Land* 339). The use of linguistic strategies in order to subvert patriarchy is the core of the theories of the French feminists who introduced the aforementioned term of "écriture feminine." Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous are part of this group of feminists.

According to Irigaray it is important for women to express their own pleasure no matter if they have to be disruptive. Although, as it has been mentioned, Anne Tyler cannot be considered an experimental author, some of the techniques she uses (e.g. humor, irony) as well as her eccentric characters are a way of expressing a certain pleasure that favors the feminine side. As Rose Quiello explains in her essay about the use of language in some of Tyler's novels, women in Tyler's novels "represent the sense of fragmentation experienced by women who are prohibited by society from expressing their sexual desires, yet rebelliously seek to fulfill them in spite of the consequences" (53). An example of it is Evie, the protagonist of *A Slipping-Down Life*, who carves in her forehead the word "CASEY." This word is the name of the man she loves, hence, by carving his name she expresses her desires instead of repressing them. As a result, women like Evie challenge male authority by doing unconventional actions. Tyer's novels are full of uncommon situations were women take a decision that will affect their lives forever in spite of the general opinion of the most traditional characters.

Another critic within the poststructural third-wave feminist literary criticism is Julia Kristeva, who describes some stylistic and thematic elements which can be found in literature written by women. According to her, among the themes that women use in their texts more recurrently is the concept of reformulating love because the "Western conception of love… today fails to satisfy the needs and desires of a woman's body"

(284). This idea is particularly true in Tyler's novels, since in all of them she explores love from different perspectives. Although most of the times her conception of love does not involve sex or passion, there is a search for a perfect communion with the loved one, especially on the side of the woman. As a result, when the woman feels that her life is void and lacking of romantic stimulus on the side of her husband, she feels frustrated. That is why many female characters in her novels abandon or divorce their husbands: Evie in *A Slipping-Down Life*, Mary in *Celestial Navigation*, Delia in *Ladder of Years*, Emily in *Morgan's Passing*, Sarah in *The Accidental Tourist*, Fiona in *Breathing Lessons* or Pauline in *The Amateur Marriage*. Although there are also male characters who abandon their wives (this is the case of Beck Tull in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*), the number of desertions of women is higher. Thus, this concept of the woman leaving the man is a way of empowering the woman and giving her the option of starting a new life. This feminist notion questions the patriarchal standards where the man is in charge and the only one who decides and the gender stereotypes on Western romantic love.

Also worth considering in this essay is the approach mentioned by Belsey and Moore. They point out that, when analysing a feminist text, the reader might consider "how the text represents women, what it says about gender relations, how it defines sexual difference" (1). Regarding the representation of women in Tyler's novels, it is difficult to give a general account of Tyler's female characters, since each one of them has got some peculiarities that make them unique. Despite her belonging to the Southern tradition of literature, the depiction that Tyler makes of women in her novels is far from the beautiful and delicate women of past times. Rather than that, her women are active and independent, although they sometimes lack self-confidence. Thus, Tyler is helping to deconstruct the ideal Southern woman by "replacing the stereotype with a

strong, creative, and sexy woman who more often has a career than a beauty crown" (Perry and Weaks 443). Nevertheless, we can distinguish between traditional women and "free-spirited" women. According to Saxton, "fringed shawls, draped fabric, anything sensuous and colourful and unusual separates the free-spirited "gypsy" women from the dutiful mothers and daughters who seek to please others and not to offend" (66) because "woman's clothing correlates with her identity" (66). In this sense, characters belonging to the first group follow the established conventions and are willing to take care of their husband and children. They normally work at home or have a job which allows them to do the domestic tasks because they are "forced to rely on men to provide the money needed to support them and their children" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 94). Some examples of these "proper and monied Roland Park matrons of Baltimore" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 90) are Mrs. Emerson in *The Clock Winder*, Maggie in *Breathing Lessons* or Pauline in *The Amateur Marriage*.

The second type of woman is, as Evans labels them, "streetwise." These female characters have their own job (sometimes not a common one), do not behave as they are expected and wear unusual outfits. These characters are, among others, Martine in *A Patchwork Planet*, Daphne in *Saint Maybe*, Kitty in *Noah's Compass* or Muriel in *The Accidental Tourist*. Let us examine in detail the later, given that they are the ones who usually challenge the male figure.

Martine is depicted as a man from Barnaby's point of view. Her body as well as her clothes are not very feminine and Barnaby's sharp comments help to picture a woman "male" that is Barnaby's best friend. For example, there is a sexual encounter between Barnaby and Martine and the description that Barnaby makes of her is not very

sensual: "I'd never thought of Martine as a woman. Well, she wasn't a woman; she was just this scrappy, sharp-edged little *person.*" (185)

Daphne and Kitty are very similar characters. Both are the youngest in their families and they want to be different from their siblings. They are also more connected to the new trends in society and sometimes they act as if they were "bad girls." This term, coined by Regina Barreca in her book *They Used to Call Me Snow White… But I Drifted* (1991), refers to an anti-prototype of woman that is not able to follow the typical gender models of women as life bearers, nurturers and caretakers of their children (4). Both Daphne and Kitty are young and the novels narrate the problems of their age, namely, their sharp criticism of their families, their fight with the established conventions, their unusual clothing style, and their ability to shock and even irritate other members of their families. For instance, Kitty, Liam's adolescent daughter in *Noah's Compass*, has decided to move and start living with her father because her relationship with Barbara, her mother, is not very good due to her constant disruptions. Her appearance is just but one example of her different conception of life: "Kitty was wearing one of those outfits that showed her abdomen, and in her navel she had somehow affixed a little round mirror the size of a dime. From where Liam stood, it looked as if she had a hole in her stomach. It was the oddest effect. He kept glancing at it and blinking" (*NC* 75).

Muriel is also a "bad girl" because her life is not conventional: she is divorced, she has an unusual job as a dog trainer and she behaves according to her instincts. The three of them are radically opposed to Kitty's elder sisters and her mother, Macon's wife, Sarah, or Maggie Moran. They all fit in the concept of "Good Girl" that Barreca describes:

> Control is the quality most explicitly associated with Good Girls… Decorum and poise, the ability to be both demure and self-possessed, these are the trademarks of the Good Girl. She is mature but never precocious. She is affable and easy to please. Immune to temptation… Good Girls don't swear, sweat, succumb, or satirize…Bad Girls don't necessarily swear, sweat, succumb, or satirize but they can be counted on to make a little trouble. If the quality associated with Good Girls is control, the quality most explicitly associated with Bad Girls is excess. Bad Girls overdo things, make messes, and are generally reluctant to control themselves (*They Used to Call Me Snow White* 46-47).

"Good girls" have been accepted by society whereas the "bad girl" has been rejected and condemned by it because she breaks the standards in society. As Barreca mentions, the "Bad Girl has only recently been granted permission to be the heroine" (*They Used to Call Me Snow White* 44). That is why Daphne, Kitty, and Muriel are sharply criticized by other characters. For instance, when Muriel announces to Macon that she has quit her job as a dog trainer to spend more time with them, Macon gets angry at her decision:

> "… I've quit."
> He looked over at her. "Quit?"
> "Well, at the Meow-Bow…"
> "You quit the Meow-Bow?"
> "So what?"
> He couldn't explain the sudden weight that fell on him.
> "It's not like it really paid much," Muriel said. "And you do buy most of the groceries now and help me with the rent and all; it's not like I needed the money. Besides, it took so much time! Time I could spend with you and Alexander! Why, I was coming home nights literally dead with exhaustion, Macon."
> …
> "Figuratively," Macon said.
> "Huh?"
> "You were figuratively dead with exhaustion. Jesus, Muriel, you're so imprecise. You're so sloppy. And how could you quit your job like that? How could you just assume like that? You never even warned me!"
> "Oh, don't make such a big deal about it," Muriel said. (*AT* 186)

Macon does not want Muriel to be jobless because that would mean that he has to be in charge of her and her son, and he is not really committed to that extend. In this scene it seems that Muriel acts without thinking about the future but, in fact, she is trying to say to Macon that she really wants them to stay together.

Another feature of Bad Girls is their use of language, since they say what they want to say in order to challenge authority:

> Bad Girls say what they think. This is particularly important because what the Bad Girl says out loud is usually the same thing that everybody else is thinking but is too ashamed to admit. This is often at the heart of women's humor – the ability to say out loud what nobody thought a girl was allowed to think, let alone say (Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White* 49).

After the scene that we have just commented on with Muriel and Macon, there is another one that takes place some days later in which we see how Muriel express very clearly how she realizes about Macon's feelings for her when he proposes to pay for her son's education:

> "What are you saying, Macon? Are you saying you're committed?"
> Macon cleared his throat. He said, "Committed."
> "Alexander's got ten more years of school ahead of him. Are you saying you'll be around for all then years"?
> "Um…"
> "I can't just put him in a school and take him out again with every passing whim of yours."
> He was silent.
> "Just tell me this much," she said. "Do you picture us getting married sometime? I mean when your divorce comes through?"
> He said, "Oh, well, marriage, Muriel…"
> You don't, do you. You don't know *what* you want. One minute you like me and the next you don't. One minute you're ashamed to be seen with me and the next you think I'm the best thing that ever happened to you."
> He stared at her. He had never guessed that she read him so clearly.
> "You think you can just drift along like this, day by day, no plans," she said. "Maybe tomorrow you'll be here, maybe you won't…"
> Macon said, "All I'm saying is –"
> "All *I'm* saying," Muriel told him, "is take care what you promise my son. Don't go making him promises you don't intend to keep." (*AT* 188-189)

With these words Muriel empowers herself and we see her in a more serious tone than in the previous dialogue. Macon is usually seen as a very "restrained" man (Bail 122) as opposed to Muriel's easy-going way of accepting things. But this time it is Muriel the one who leaves Macon at a loss for words, showing how important childcare is and how little he knows about the sacrifice it means.

Sometimes the concept of "Bad Girl" has been associated with that of feminism. Although being a feminist may imply being a "Bad Girl" it may not function the other way around. Muriel, Daphne and Kitty could be considered "Bad Girls" but they are not feminists most of the time (i.e. they do not act according to the feminist ideals but according to their likes and dislikes).

Apart from the aforementioned representations of women, Tyler creates women characters that Dorothy Faye Sala Brock labels as "managing women". She defines this type of women as "strong, competent, independent, fully capable of caring for themselves, their husbands, their children, and other friends and relatives, too, if necessary, as well as holding another job if family finances demand" (4). She distinguishes between two types of managing women: the regenerative kind and the rigid style. What follows is a chart that I have made summarizing the main qualities of both categories as explained by Dorothy Faye Sala Brock:

Table 1

Types of managing women and their qualities

REGENERATIVE	RIGID
Affectionate and warm	Unable to communicate her affection
Positive influence for the family	Negative influence for the family
She adapts and endures	She endures but does not adapt
Able to learn from mistakes	Unable to learn from experience
Examples: Maggie, Rebecca	Examples: Pearl, Mrs. Pauling

What is more, scholars like Erin Rose Mahaffey have seen particular aspects of female power in Tyler's heroines and their use of the car. In her dissertation she studies how two women, Delia in *Ladder of Years* and Elizabeth in *Earthly Possessions* are

able to make a turn in their lives by abandoning their families. According to her, these "women are able to speed off…to a land of independence, free thought, and sexual freedom" (5). However, other female characters such as Maggie in *Breathing Lessons*, Martine in *A Patchwork Planet* and Rebecca in *Back When We Were Grownups* are also drivers, although it does not mean that they are going to desert their families. With the car (or even the truck like Martine) "these women…are able to create lives for themselves that differ from the stereotypical existence of making dinner and making beds" (Mahaffey 5).

With Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore's view, apart from analysing how Tyler represents women in her novels, it is necessary to examine how her texts portray gender relations and sex differences. At this point it is necessary to distinguish between sex and gender. In the classic sense "the sex of the individual depends on anatomy, gender is a culturally constructed artefact" (Palmer 13) or, in Robbins' words "sex is the immutable, gender the mutable" (211). Although they are much related, in Tyler's novels it is important to bear these two concepts in mind because, as it has been commented on when talking about Butler's theory, there is a role-reversal in many of her stories, where men perform the role of women and vice-versa. Butler also redesigns the binary by considering sexual difference (sex) as constructed or inscribed in the body as well.

According to Ángela Vallvey, Tyler's male characters are monotonous, accommodated and coward, with little expectations in life. However, as she states, women are not as good as men and they lack that holiness that men have. What is more, she even mentions that Tyler's female characters lack the "troubled point" (194) that her male characters exceed. While recognizing that male characters are usually dull and straightforward (for example Ben Joe in *If Morning Ever Comes*, Macon in *The*

Accidental Tourist or Liam in *Noah's Compass*), it is difficult to classify them as holy or saint, not even Ian in *Saint Maybe*. As a matter of fact, this pretended holiness does not exist for any character, be it male or female, since all of them are "troubled" at some point or other. For example, take Mrs. Pike in *The Tin Can Tree*, she cannot cope with the death of her little daughter and she is unable to work or tend her family. As Bail puts it, she "only awakens from her cocoon after her son runs away from home" (24).

As we can see, in Tyler's fiction there are sex and gender differences that the author parodies using characters who interchange their roles of men and women. Although in a novel like *Breathing Lessons* the domestic is treated from a female point of view in other novels such as *Saint Maybe* and *Noah's Compass*, as it has been mentioned, it is the man who has to do the domestic tasks, including childrearing. Tyler, the same as Butler, does not consider the "male" or the "female" as fixed and closed categories but they are mutable.

Another idea that is worth mentioning related to feminism is the way Tyler portrays marriage. As we shall see in the section devoted to it in this dissertation, marriage in Tyler's novels is not like a fairy tale because even if they have found the "right man or prince" women sometimes feel that married life is not what they expected. Although Tyler's women characters depend on men, "a large number of these women also want to run away, and many of them do" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 119). This escape from their lives is another feminist touch because it shows that they are not conformist with the lives they have and, being aware of the difficulty to expect a change in their husbands, they decide to become independent and run away. Some examples of it are Evie in *A Slipping-down Life*, Delia in *Ladder of Years* and Charlotte in *The Amateur Marriage*.

Another point that shows her narrative as non-overtly feminist is the fact that Tyler does not use "liberated, independent, self-assured, educated women ready to claim an equal place (and pay) in work and the professional world" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 55). Her major characters are instead middle-aged women who are entering a period in their lives where their children are no longer children and their husbands live a rather accommodated and monotonous life where romanticism is not present. The best example is Maggie Moran in *Breathing Lessons* but there are others such as Sarah, Pauline or Delia. The fact that Tyler uses this archetype of woman is not accidental. She prefers to use this model in order to deconstruct the idea of family and the role of women in society, which is departing from the traditional one in which the women's aspirations are having a family. Tyler does not choose young attractive women as the protagonists of her novels. Instead she depicts women in her middle years and how the passage of time has affected their marriage and their families. For Woodward, Tyler's "middle-aged women are a resourceful if daffy lot. They have lively interior lives. They can improvise… They can also recognize when it's time to go home" (110-11). Rose Quiello in her article "The Hysterical Use of Language" comments on the term hysteria and how it has been commonly related to women. For her, Tyler has "reconceptualised the hysteric" (51) by means of depicting women who know what they want although they may seem irrational to other characters. The best example of this type of character is Muriel in *The Accidental Tourist* because her "perpetual displacement of meaning through her illogical sense-making operations implies the infinite possibilities of many meanings, which then threaten the hegemony of the prevailing order" (Quiello 59).

To summarize, as we have seen, there is not a unanimous opinion about whether Tyler could be considered a feminist writer. Most of the critics that consider that she is not feminist argue that, in dealing with the domestic, she relegates "women to the

private sphere of sexual relations and family life, while debarring their entry into the public one of professional work and political struggle" (Palmer 14). Nevertheless, as it has been mentioned along this section, she uses domestic issues to empower women. When men have to be in charge of family life the author makes fun of them by depicting weak males that are unable to take care of their children or to do the cooking, for example. In addition, most of her male characters are a failure in sexual relations and end up abandoned by their wives or girlfriends. Furthermore, as Palmer points out, novels dealing with female areas "of experience such as motherhood, woman-identified relationships and women's community are in fashion [because] the "private" domestic area… has received re-evaluation" (42). To conclude, Anne Tyler has a very good conception of women as able to transgress the patriarchal system but she is not a polemic or radical feminist writer. Her subtlety is such that she is able to confuse critics who are not able to read between the lines or are far from doing an in-depth analysis of her male and female characters. In the following sections I am going to explore more carefully the devices that make her a good exponent of feminist writing.

As we have seen, Tyler shows a preference for women "who do not let themselves drift into a state of inaction but instead are sharp, independent, intelligent, and realistic" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 141). For all the aforementioned aspects, Anne Tyler could be considered not only a feminist but a posfeminist writer. For Paul Christian, rather than "rejecting feminist values, postfeminism, at least as conveyed in Anne Tyler's work, should be seen as a complication or even an evolution of feminism" (281). What is more, as something typical of a postfeminist work "Tyler does not place the blame for gender inequity on men and instead suggests that…many women have accepted these unfair situations for too long and could change their circumstances with some effort"

(Christian 279). Thus, Tyler's compass is showing a different perspective of feminism, one in which men and women interact without having an assigned role in life.

CHAPTER 3

THE AMATEUR MARRIAGE IN TYLER'S NOVELS

Why did popular songs always focus on romantic love? Why this preoccupation with first meetings, sad partings, honeyed kisses, heartbreak, when life was also full of children's births and trips to the shore and longtime jokes with friends?

Anne Tyler ~ *Breathing Lessons*

Although *The Amateur Marriage* is the title of one of Tyler's latest novels, I believe that this story is a good example of what marriage is for Tyler. The conjugal union is something amateur or unprofessional for which not everybody is ready and where the unskilled lovers may not always make the right choice. When talking about *The Amateur Marriage* in an interview, Anne Tyler mentions that "all marriages are amateur, and all husbands and wives are peering wistfully at other marriages and imagining that other people know how to do it better" (interview with *The Daily Mail* n.pag.). Actually, her novel deals with what she calls in the interview a "central problem" of marriage: "A man who avoids intrusion and a woman who yearns for a kind of mutual immersion" (interview with *The Daily Mail* n.pag). Two opposed views of marriage which confront in her stories resulting in arguments, bitterness and, above all, frustration. Thus, I have used *The Amateur Marriage* to entitle this section where I would like to explore why marriage is a crucial element in her novels and how these opposed feelings affect the couple. Marriage is a key theme in Tyler's fiction because Tyler presents the complexities of gender identity with it.

The same as the word "family" is undeniably linked to Tyler, the idea of marriage is always present in her stories. That idea explains why I have decided to start the analysis of Tyler's themes by examining the status of her couples. If we understand how her couples work we can appreciate the creation of her families better. In fact, as we will see, it is remarkable how she usually unites characters with opposed visions and behaviors and the impact of their relationship in their families. It is what Doris Betts has labelled as the "marriage of opposites" (4). This idea is very well illustrated by Pauline and Michael's vision of the conjugal union in *The Amateur Marriage* since "Pauline believed that marriage was an interweaving of souls, while Michael viewed it as two

people traveling side by side but separately" (*AM* 46). These different conceptions illustrate how women are usually the givers whereas men are the receivers.

Consequently, many female characters in Tyler's novels suffer. Marriage is not what they had expected. They sometimes feel frustrated because they discover that marriage is not as ideal as it is presented in the romantic novels that some of them read such as Evie, Delia or Pauline. At this stage it is interesting to wonder why Tyler's heroines read romances. Following Janice Radway's premises, they want to escape a reality they do not like in order to get involved in a "fantasy relationship where the heroine is frequently treated as they themselves would most like to be loved" (60). Through literature women have been trained to hope for a romantic union that has been idealized. Nevertheless, Tyler's female characters most often than not marry because it was one more convention or in order not to become an old maid. For this reason, they try to rebel against the tiresome routines that create their bitterness and their feelings of imprisonment. Some of these women run away from their husbands like Delia in *Ladder of Years*, Mary in *Celestial Navigation* or Charlotte in *Earthly Possessions*. A special case is Dorothy in *The Beginner's Goodbye* because after her death she comes back as a ghost in order to discuss with her husband how their marriage was a failure.

According to Elizabeth Evans the married women in Tyler's novels struggle to get independence but "in the end get and accept the closed-in life of family and household duties" (*Anne Tyler* 116). That is why those wives who desert their family come back (like Delia or Charlotte) or if they do desert their husband forever they take their children with them (like Mary or Evie). This idea is especially relevant since it shows a commitment of the woman with her duties as mother even over her duties as wife, giving a predominance of the children over the husband. Whereas the husband deserts

forever and creates another family, the wife takes their mutual children with her in order to carry on with her life.

For Tyler marriage is a convention of society and most of the times her characters are dragged to it because it is only one step more in their lives. Tina, Joe's unconventional ex-wife in *Back When We Were Grownups*, describes how marriage is part of the patriarchal structures and how she felt liberated once she left her husband and children:

> Oh, … women may find marriage useful during that little childbearing phase. But then as the years go by, they need their husbands less and less while their husbands need them more and more. Men expect all that listening and marveling and yes-darling-aren't-you-amazing, those balanced meals and clean sheets and waxed floors, and then the blood-pressure monitoring and the low-sodium diet, and the hand-holding when they retire and can't think what to do with themselves. And the wives, meanwhile, start longing to get free. They start running off to their ladies' luncheons and their women's book-club meetings and their girls-only wilderness trips.
> ….
> You have to admit that love is a waste. It's expensive, it's inconvenient, it's time-consuming, it's messy… (*BWG* 92)

With these words Tina explains what most of Tyler's middle-aged women feel in her novels. Not all of them desert their families, though. Tyler takes marriage as a serious event in life, an important step that becomes a relevant topic in her fiction. Edward Hoagland compares Tyler to Jane Austen in the sense that her novels deal with the domestic issues of marriage, since she "is interested not in divorce or infidelity, but in marriage – not very much in isolation, estrangement, alienation and other fashionable concerns, but in courtship, child raising and filial responsibility" (140). As opposed to Austen, however, Tyler introduces a transgression in the idea of the ideal romance that follows the patterns described by Radway. Thus, in subsequent paragraphs I am going to explore the different issues related to marriage that Tyler exposes in her stories as a way of showing her even greater commitment with the family. I will analyze why her

characters marry and desert, the implications of divorce as well as the private issues of the couple. This section is not going to analyze the humor within the marriage because, as I have already mentioned, for Tyler marriage is a serious topic and most of the dramatic scenes come as a result of the bitterness that marriage can sometimes provoke.

Tyler's vision of marriage and family shows how "America is a matriarchy, and her novels reflect that view; her typical plot contains unemotional or repressed or silent men yoked to more dynamic women who usually function as a life force" (Allen, "Tyler's Triumph" 22). This is what has been called as "marriage of opposites." A term coined by Doris Betts in her article "Tyler's Marriage of Opposites" where she exposes how the "characters oppose, juxtapose, and resolve" (Betts 4). As Evans explains, "Tyler's characters often marry totally unsuitable partners or at least enter marriage with an indifference that baffles" (Evans 47). This idea of the suitability of the partner is of paramount importance in her fiction, since most of her couples are clearly "mismatched," to use a term that most of Tyler's critics use. Although the reader has the feeling that the marriage is not a good idea for such opposed characters, the truth is that most of the couples endure. As we can read in one of her novels she compares marriages to fruit trees "with different kinds of branches grafted onto the trunks. After a time they meld, they grow together, and it doesn't matter how crazy the mix is … if you tried to separate them you would cause a fatal wound" (*AM* 192). This marriage of opposites can be exemplified by novels from different periods, i.e. *A Slipping-Down Life*, *Celestial Navigation*, *Earthly Possessions*, *Breathing Lessons*, *Ladder of Years*, *The Amateur Marriage* and *The Beginner's Goodbye*. Except in the last one, the other stories have a common outline with a naïve and floppy woman married to a rigid and deeply-concerned-with-his-job husband. Traditionally, men have always been considered the economic sustenance of the family whereas the women are left for

domestic issues or light jobs. By exaggerating these stereotypes, Tyler wants to make her point evident: What happens when the woman tries to take control of her life or feels frustrated with the monotonous life she has acquired through patriarchal behaviors? In this sense, Tyler seems to follow Chodorow's idea of the "reproduction of mothering" by which women contribute to the division of labor in a society where women take care of the children whereas men work to feed the family. In her own words "women have been primary parents *now* because they have always been" (Chodorow 14). Thus, Tyler's female characters feel unsatisfied with their life because they have not had their chance to follow their career aspirations. This is especially clear with characters such as Elizabeth or Charlotte, who try to have their own job while they take care of the children.

Some reviewers criticize Tyler's similar plots and characters, because her books may contain "much common knowledge, too much received knowledge" (Fay 89). Although the writer may recycle character traits, her couples are never exactly the same as they struggle to make their marriage work. What is more, these critics have missed Tyler's point completely. What she wants is to present traditional couples as a way to portray a daily situation that the reader is familiar with in order to depict how women need to escape the tensions of the domestic life. Sometimes Tyler's heroines escape their marriage literally, by means of leaving their husbands, or metaphorically, by daydreaming about a romantic union that would only happen in the romances they read. This is a transgressive point in her fiction that can be read from the point of view of the feminist literary criticism. In her article "Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context" (a summary of her relevant work *Women Read the Romance. Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984)), Janice Radway already mentioned how reading a romance implies "a flight from some situation in the real world which is

either stifling or overwhelming, as well as a metaphoric transfer to another, more desirable universe where events are happily resolved" (60). Thus, Tyler's characters such as Evie, Delia or Justine read romantic novels as a way to escape a reality they do not like. For instance, young Evie has grown up reading romances and watching soap operas with the cleaning lady who works for her father. As a result, she wants to duplicate the scenes that she has read about when she falls in love with Drum: double-dating with her best friend, a perfect wedding, a nice house, and children. Yet, when she is about to marry Drum she realizes that she is not going to get any of those things because Drum does not love her. Eventually, she will get the house and the child she wanted but, ironically, she will separate from Drum.

Evie's story in *A Slipping-Down Life* is a rarity in the writer's fiction since her stories usually start when the couple is in their middle-age and had been together for some years now. For Tyler, the story begins where others end. At the beginning we see a happy couple which seems to be disintegrating as time passes and they know each other's limitations. That is why one of her reviewers has called her stories as "unhappily ever after" (Pritchard 6). For instance, Delia remembers how Sam arrived to her father's house when she was the youngest of three sisters. Sam "had chosen the youngest and prettiest, the shy little one on the right who didn't think she stood a chance" (*LY* 28) as if it were a fairy tale. Although the story "had *ended* like a fairy tale" (*LY* 28) given that Sam and Delia had married afterwards, Tyler shows how "real life continues past the end" (*LY* 28). When Delia considers how Sam entered their lives she starts to wonder why he had married her and the connections to the fairy tale continue throughout the story. Sam's explanation is very simple: "I'd completed all my training by then. I'd reached the marrying age, so to speak. The marrying stage of life" (*LY* 38). But Delia feels fooled and that is when she first runs away. Although this time she is away for

some hours only, in her mind she considers her marriage a failure and starts to feel trapped by her life and her routines.

Similarly, chapter one of *The Amateur Marriage* delves back into how Pauline and Michael first met. The way the writer narrates these first pages by using the Second World War as the romantic background of the story, a promising happy ending seems ahead. In fact, when the couple gets married at the end of the chapter, the last lines could be the end of any other book: "They were such a perfect couple. They were taking their very first steps on the amazing journey of marriage, and wonderful adventures were about to unfold in front of them" (*AM* 33). Not for Tyler, who presents a couple married by the circumstances and a doubtful bride. These doubts, as well as their opposed characters, will result in a disastrous marriage which will come to an end some decades later. Their quarrels about different issues show their opposed views for a lot of important aspects of their life, namely, money, house or even sex. Thus, the readers "are given to understand that the two were mismatched from the start. They misunderstood each other for most of their married lives" (Fay 87).

As we have seen with *Lather of Years* and *The Amateur Marriage*, Tyler's references to fairy tales and the idealization of the romantic love between the lovers are present in her narrative. For this reason, it is worth mentioning how these references are once more an example of Tyler's commitment with the feminist ideas. According to feminist literary criticism, fairy tales have contributed to establish gender stereotypes in an early stage of life. When reading the fairy tales, children are already being "conditioned to assume and accept arbitrary sex roles" (Zipes 3). What is more, in *Don't Bet on the Prince* (1987), Jack Zipes explains how fairy tales "prepare females to become passive, self-denying, obedient and self-sacrificial … as well as nurturing, caring, and responsible in personal situations" (3). Having said that, Zipes mentions that

fairy tales are not responsible for the reinforcement of the patriarchy, but "they are symbolical forms which reinforce self-destructive social and psychological patterns of behaviour" (8). By bringing to the forefront the fairy tales in her narrative, Tyler is trying to make clear that her characters do not follow the conventions of the heroic prince and the submissive and innocent woman. As a result, her male characters lack bravery and are comfortable in monotony whereas her female characters are not usually beautifully perfect. With the use of heroines that are not particularly praised by their beauty, Tyler sides with the feminists who "objected to men's use of women as sexual objects" (Hoffman 3).

Another mismatched couple from the beginning, Junior and Linnie Mae in *Spool*, is a new example of this marriage of opposites which includes the consideration of the woman as a sexual object. Their story takes place in the period of the Great Depression and it is told in a southern scenario where her "father grew burley tobacco, and he owned his land outright. Her mother came from Virginia" (*SBT* 285). Some weeks after their first date he discovers that she is thirteen, almost half his age. He is surprised at how developed she seemed with her "large breasts" and her "sandals with high heels" (*SBT* 281) but he is determined to leave her on account of her age (something considered a crime). Nevertheless, she has idealized their affair so much that decades later she still considers they had "one of the world's great love stories" (*SBT* 248). In fact, their story recalls one of the southern love stories between lovers with different backgrounds who are set apart because they do not follow the conventions. After being caught lying together by her father, Junior is forced to leave the town. Five years later, once she is old enough to take her own decisions, Linnie Mae traces his whereabouts and leaves her parents to be with him until they finally marry. On the contrary, for Junior, "stupid of him" (*SBT* 281), their affair was a mistake from the beginning. He

sees Linnie Mae as a burden for his career as a constructor and he expresses "how deeply he had longed to free himself all these years" (*SBT* 325). Nevertheless, from his patriarchal point of view, he believes that she will not be able to survive without him. Despite her youth and inexperience it is clear that she loves him intensely and, as it turns out, thanks to her, Junior was able to establish his building company due to her socializing skills and her hardworking spirit. But he is unable to see her sacrifice for him with his constant complains about her Southern accent and her naïve and conventional ways that do not match with their new upper-class life.

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Fairy tales have also presented a vision of romantic love where courtship is idealized. Romantic love is "the idealization of the love object and a disinterest in utilitarian ends" (Hoffman 2) which nowadays it also includes passion and sex. Romantic love contains two basic forms: passionate and companionate (Castelao, *Twentieth-Century Border Love Poems* 16). Tyler's couples usually lack passion because most of them have been together for a long time but their relationship is still based in a strong affection. The romantic courtship is another element favored by the patriarchal beliefs which Elaine Hoffman labels as an act "designed to woo the woman" (52) in spite of her initial opposition to the male. According to Hoffman it is a ritual that favors the male ego while it controls the female sexuality (53). Tyler's novels depart from these conventions of romantic by presenting short or non-existent courtships where both men and women feel at ease. By eliminating the courtship or limiting its duration in the stories, Tyler is also restraining the male's power in the relationship and, at the same time, she is starting to demystify romantic love. In addition, her stories are

more related to what Hoffman has labelled as "impedimented love" (28) which presents romantic love as something that has to overcome a lot of obstacles; once the problems disappear, so romantic love does. We can see this idea in characters such as Justine (*Searching for Caleb*), Emily (*Morgan's Passing*), Evie (*A Slipping-Down Life*) or Mary (*Celestial Navigation*). Once they overcome the familial opposition to marry the man they want, they start finding all the defects on their husbands when before their union they were only able to see the positive traits due to their idealization of the man they love. Tyler's wives have high expectations of their husbands at the beginning, thus reflecting the traditional "romantic ideology" by which men are "less emotionally involved in the relationship, while women are more practical and realistic, but more intensely involved in the actual experience of love" (Castelao, *Twentieth-Century Border Love Poems* 40). Yet, once they have been married for some years women feel unsatisfied when they discover that their husbands just want to settle to lead an ordinary life. Charlotte summarizes perfectly this thought about Saul which can be extrapolated to other Tyler's husbands: "he'd only been a poor, homesick G.I., longing for house, wife, family, church. A common type" (*EP* 112). Other husbands such as Jeremy in *Celestial Navigation* are not so common. As we will mention when we reach the section about humor, Jeremy is one of Tyler's most eccentric characters. He has numerous phobias and, on top of that, his art makes him lead a parallel life. Nevertheless, when he meets Mary he starts to see her like "an old-time heroine in one of the Victorian novels his mother used to read to him" (*CN* 88). Mary is a runaway mother in despair who has deserted her husband to be with another man and, in return, she has been abandoned by her lover. Both Jeremy and Mary get together because they need each other but Jeremy's love is a true one at the beginning. Having said that, Jeremy's romantic love for Mary is quickly forgotten once they are together. Mary accepts Jeremy's proposal

for the sake of having a place to stay with her daughter, to feel loved and protected. However, as time passes, Jeremy's romantic admiration for Mary turns into an artistic love for his creations inspired on her own soul but not on her qualities as a wife or as a mother. On the contrary, Mary's initial dislike and pity for Jeremy becomes a more solid love based on Jeremy's fragility and, why not, on his ability to create works of art that she views as representations of his love for her.

Furthermore, Jeremy's agoraphobic nature together with his reclusive desire of being left alone contrasts with Mary's fecundity which results in a crowded house with six children and several boarders. Their opposed views lead us to the conclusion that "Mary and Jeremy are not a good fit and cannot remain together" (Voelker 82). At the end, Mary, freed from her first husband, wishes to get married to Jeremy in order to consolidate their union but Jeremy's weaknesses and fears to the commitment force her to run away with the children. Thus, Jeremy is left alone as he has always wanted but his artistic universe is also destroyed since his source of inspiration is gone. Additionally, Mary is for Jeremy his "Earth Motherly manager" (Petry, *Anne Tyler* 115). Despite their apparent differences each one of them has married for a convenient reason that goes beyond love: their union is based on the need for the other. Consequently, when Mary finally yearns for Jeremy's love is when she leaves him on account of his inability to commit to her. Her priorities have changed but not Jeremy's, who feels comfortable in the routine they have established.

Yet, Jeremy is not the only male partner who favors the same old routine over the unexpected. Predictability is what husbands seem to prefer whereas the wives long for a more romantic union where the accidental and the impulses are more important than the round-the-clock certainty. With these archetypes of husbands and wives, Tyler illustrates how "gender socialization has prepared women through centuries to seek love

as the quintessential path to self-realization through marriage and motherhood, while it has encouraged men to seek their identity quest through achievement and power" (Castelao, *Twentieth-Century Border Love Poems* 42). This idea is shown with husbands such as Saul (*Earthly Possessions*), Ira (*Breathing Lessons*), Sam (*Ladder of Years*) and Michael (*The Amateur Marriage*). These characters have in common a job which lets them have their own timetable: Saul is a preacher, Ira and Michael have their own shop, and Sam is a doctor. However, rather than spending more time with their wives they prefer dedicating it to their clients and their career, which could result in a frustration similar to Ira or Michael or in an increasing solitude such as Saul and Sam. As a consequence, there is a juxtaposition of traits that results in a snowballing disappointment of their wives, who expect more from them. We have analyzed how wives are just the opposite to their male partners, who are "emotionally illiterate, self-absorbed, and unambitious" (Norris, n.pag.). That is why some of these women run away briefly (like Pauline) or for a longer period of time (as Delia or Charlotte).

Although at the end of *The Amateur Marriage* it is Michael the one who decides to separate from Pauline, only some years after their marriage she left their house for some hours after Michael's harsh words in one of their arguments: "I'm just fed up with you. I'm disgusted. I'm sick to death of you and your nasty disposition. I never should have married you" (*AM* 50). Pregnant with their second child, she feels miserable. That is why she decides to run away together with their baby daughter Lindy. Nevertheless, her flee is merely a sign of her impotence to face the fact that her husband dislikes her, a feeling that he expresses more than once throughout the novel. Furthermore, Michael considers her runaway as one more flaw of his wife, since he did not expect that behavior which does not fit in his routines: "Her fickle, irresponsible unpredictability" (*AM* 51). Finally, he starts to feel the void that her absence has left and he goes out to

find her. Although she has not gone very far, just to her parents' house, it seems they have had time to reflect on their mutual love:

> He was astonished all over again by how dear she was, and how fragile and slight. "I thought you'd never come for me, I thought you'd given up on me, I thought you didn't love me," she was whispering, and he said, "I could never give up. Of course I love you. I couldn't *not* love you. I wouldn't know to not love you." (*AM* 57)

The scene of their reconciliation shows that they cannot live without each other. When they are apart they wish they were together but when they are together they are unable to speak without hurting each other's feelings. Their love-hate relationship triggers their divorce some decades later. As their own daughter Lindy explains to Michael, the origin of their problems was their completely different characters: "You were ice and she was glass … Two oddly similar substances" (*AM* 304). This comment echoes the "marriage of opposites" that we have already discussed. When Michael listens to his daughter's criticism, he reacts by giving excuses and putting the blame on their amateur marriage: "We did the best we could. We did our darnedest. We were just … unskilled; we never quite got the hang of things. It wasn't for lack of trying" (*AM* 304).

Pauline's absence is very short if we compare it to that of other female characters. Charlotte, for instance, is missing for some days whereas Delia is absent for a year. Both of them escape from their husbands for a similar reason: their children are already grown-ups and don't need them anymore and their husbands are more concerned with their jobs than with spending more time with them. In a way, they feel no longer loved by their husbands and, on top of that, they consider that they are no longer needed in their families. Coincidentally, just the day Charlotte was about to leave her husband she is kidnapped by a young robber called Jake. Although she is a little bit shocked by the circumstances, she sees her journey with Jake as an opportunity to start a new life away

from the town she has always lived in. Perhaps *Earthly Possessions* is Tyler's more adventurous book because of the introduction of a criminal in its cast of characters. Furthermore, Charlotte's decision to leave her husband is a milestone in her fiction given that "after six novels in which she spun understated webs of interpersonal relationships, in which individual freedom warred with family loyalty, eccentricity fought conventionality and settled vied with foot-loose as the approved lifestyle, Tyler has become explicit" (rev. of *Earthly Possessions*, *Library Journal* 1213).

Delia's adventure is more accidental in the sense that it was not planned nor it was forced. The same as Charlotte and Pauline, her escape is "a rebellion against the patriarchy" (Brookner 35). She is fed up with housework and sacrifices and she feels no longer needed in her family. Hence, "Delia's desire for the romantic coupled with the growing loss of affection from her children lead her to dissolve the relationships in search of comparably more rewarding relationships" (Lancaster 59). Of the three women she is the one who spends the longest time away from her family because she wants to prove herself that she can lead a different life without a man by her side. [12] Nevertheless, she ends up leading the same life that she had before, being the only difference the fact that she receives a wage now. She has to take care of a child and do the housework for a man, Mr. Miller, who has been abandoned by his wife. Therefore, Delia faces a similar situation to the one she has just left at home. What is more, Mr. Miller's ex-wife "becomes Delia's double and says things that sound just like her" (Bowman 59). That is how Delia starts to realize that her situation "begins to resemble

[12] She was living with her father in the familial house when she married "a man who is very much like her father, but she allows herself to remain in many ways a young maiden" (Bail 176). Her husband Sam inherited her father's practice and they continued living in the same house with her father in one of the rooms.

the one she ran away from" (Bail 175) with a man to take care of and a boy who is little by little becoming a teenager like her own son.

Delia comes back to her family the same as Charlotte. Although their life seems to be the same as before their departure, they have learnt to appreciate what they have and to endure. Moreover, the days apart from their families have been enough for them to fulfill their frustrated aspirations before their marriage. For instance, Charlotte wanted to go out of her hometown and see other places. With the robber's runaway she visits other cities but she realizes that it is not necessary to leave her husband, her house and her children in order to have new experiences. Thus, she ends the book saying: "We have been traveling for years, traveled all our lives, we are traveling still. We couldn't stay in one place if we tried" (*EP* 200). Delia, on her turn, has seen what it is to live in a different town and have a job. She has also realized that her family and her husband do need her because while she was away "things have fallen apart" (Bail 175). Her husband Sam is living on canned soup and her children yearn for homemade food. Apart from that, we see how she was the bridge who connected the children to the father, since now that she has left the children are not on speaking terms with their father. On top of that, Delia's own sister has tried to function as a substitute wife and mother without success, something that has also provoked misunderstandings. To make things worse, Delia's daughter has planned her wedding with her school sweetheart. The marriage issue is too much for Sam, who is not able to cope with the situation and needs Delia to handle things for him. Moreover, his patriarchal attitude makes him believe that her own daughter is jumping from "her father's house to her husband's house" without considering her school prospects (*LY* 242). After Delia's return things start to go right again so she sees how much she is still needed in her family although

her role is different. She only needs to adapt to the new circumstances: now the children are no longer kids but they still need a mother to turn to when things go wrong.

With these novels, Tyler achieves to explore "the later stages of marriage, when many of the romantic illusions have been pared away or at least irreparably eroded" (Bail 181). We see how the woman is the romantic and the dreamy partner whereas the man is more prosaic and practical. This transgressive idea of the escape in the marriage is related to Chodorow's theories which explain how women feel linked to their mothers, something that affects their autonomy and makes them duplicate the nurturer role that they have learnt from them. On the contrary, male children tend to separate more from their mothers because they want to depart from those qualities that they identify as part of feminity. As a result, Tyler depicts males that are more detached from intimacy whereas the females need to break personal boundaries. As we will mention when talking about the family, women are not the only deserters, husbands also abandon their wives in order to escape from a woman they no longer love and a family that overwhelms them. The difference between their desertions is that women's departures tend to be more temporary whereas husbands leave for good and not to return again.

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Desertions and absences are signs of miscommunication and opposition between the partners. In the novels previously analyzed there is a recurrent idea that is present in many novels: marrying for necessity. We can summon some examples up: Mary needed a father for her daughter and money to survive whereas Jeremy needs a substitute mother once her own mother dies; Junior needs Linnie Mae for her sexual passion while

she wants to be with him to escape her destiny in a Southern town. We can label this idea with the term of the "useful person" in a marriage. The word "useful" appeared referred to the marriage in one of the scenes in *Grownups*, hence it is worth including it in this section. Rebecca and NoNo, one of her stepdaughters, have a conversation over the lists that NoNo's new husband writes for her. The lists include different tasks that she is supposed to do in order to help him organize their life and that of her stepson Peter. NoNo feels devastated because she believes she is merely a servant in the couple and she even has visions about it: "I was wheeling a baby carriage and I was wearing a maid's uniform. Gray dress, white apron, white shoes, those white, nurse kind of stockings that always make women's legs look fat…" (*BWG* 238). Rebecca, who has also felt the same way when she married NoNo's father, tries to explain her why both of them have also married for a reason: "isn't he useful, too? Before, you were all alone in the world" (*BWG* 238). With this passage Tyler illustrates how marriage is not always the product of love but a combination of different factors. Most of her female characters marry because they do not want to be alone and they get the first chance to be married without considering other possibilities. It does not mean that they marry without loving their future husbands though, but maybe an intense love is not the main reason for their marriage. We can find numerous examples of women who repent their choice or, at least, who wish to go back to the past for a reconsideration of the circumstances. For instance, when Charlotte's mother was in "her mid-thirties – still a maiden teaching school, living in her dead father's house beside the Texaco station" (*EP* 10) she married the first man that crossed her life. Their marriage was the result of a practical arrangement so that none of them would be alone. Probably, he married her because, being a traveling photographer, he wanted to settle somewhere. Charlotte's mother married him because as she confessed to her daughter some years later, she did not want

to stay alone: "I married him out of desperation," she told me. "I settled for what I could get. Don't ever settle, Charlotte" (*EP* 61). Far from following the advice, paradoxically, Charlotte makes the same mistakes: She also married the first man that showed some interest in her and settled with him in her mother's house. She does not follow her mother's advice in part due to her responsibilities with her mother, whom she was not able to leave behind, and also because, as Chodorow's theories explain, she is reproducing her mother's role in the family. Pearl Tull in *Dinner*, Macon Leary's sister in *The Accidental Tourist*, Aaron's sister and Peggy in *The Beginner's Goodbye* follow the same pattern: a maiden in her mid-thirties or early forties whom everybody considers a spinster but finally marries the first man who appears in her life and shows some interest in them. The same as Charlotte and her mother, they marry in order not to feel lonely and to escape spinsterhood.

The figure of the spinster has been a continuum in literature and, as we have pointed out, it is also present in Tyler's fiction. Before proceeding with the analysis of marriage in her novels it is worth mentioning why this figure is relevant in her stories and why it is connected to this section. First of all, let us explain what this term means. Often also labelled as "old maids," spinsters are "women who have reached at least the age of 35 without marrying" (Cotts 310). As we have seen some of her married characters were once considered old maids but they finally marry. Nonetheless, Tyler also offers a cast of unmarried women who remain alone and seem to be happy about it such as Amanda and Miss Vinton in *Celestial Navigation*, and Delia's sister Eliza in *Ladder of Years*. As Susan Cotts and Olwen Hufton have explained, the reasons for a woman to remain unmarried may be quite different: lack of love, search for independence and autonomy, care for other relatives or fulfil their career aspirations are a few of them. In addition, these women represent the new single woman, since they do

not yearn to be married and it can be considered "a form of revolt, a conscious choice to remain single, to work toward equality, and to reject the demands, restrictions and inequalities of middle-class marriage" (Freeman and Klaus 395). Therefore, Tyler presents a duality between the women who marry out of desperation because they do not want to be classified as "old maids" and the women who willingly choose to remain single as they do not find a suitable partner. What is more, these single women reflect the current trend where the figure of the spinster has changed, "removing from the unmarried woman the stereotype of the unattractive, pathetic old maid" (Freeman and Klaus 410). Miss Vinton's thoughts perfectly summarize this idea of the new single woman:

> I have never been married and never planned to be, never had the inclination to be. Yet I don't believe I am an unhappy person … I had the usual number of young men to come calling when I was the proper age. Still, I did not once consider the possibility of marrying any of them … I was the one who nursed my mother through her final illness. I chose to; it wasn't a case of the put-upon spinster daughter. (*CN* 139)

Tyler does not use spinsters as main characters because she focuses more on married life. Nevertheless, she uses single women as secondary characters to show this opposition of married versus unmarried: a wrong choice can lead the woman to feel even more frustrated than if she had remained single. Likewise, for some married woman the marriage is a trap they cannot escape, as one of her characters explains: "Funny how men always worry ahead of time that marriage might confine them … Women don't give it a thought. It's afterwards it hits them. Stuck for life! Imprisoned! Trapped forever with a man who won't let you say 'parenting'" (*LY* 228). These words are uttered by Ellie, a woman who after being married for a decade decides to abandon her husband and her son in order to satisfy her professional ambitions. Although she is not a single woman, after her desertion she behaves as if she were single again. Ellie is a

clear example of an absconded wife who wants to feel as single women feel: independent. For women no longer need anybody to take care of them, but they need to feel their share of self-sufficiency.

Apart from the spinster it is also worth noting the existence of women who are alone because they have been abandoned by their husbands, as we will see when talking about the family. For Evans, whereas "these particular women are forced to be self-sufficient and independent, their lives are still narrow and limited" (*Anne Tyler* 108). Thus, these women lead a spinster life while being married. Pearl Tull is the best example of it, since she married Beck Tull in order to get out of spinsterhood and some years later she is again alone with three children to take care of. She is forced by the circumstances to have an autonomous life and work to support her children. As a result, she will end up being a bitter character and leading the traditional lonely life of a spinster. On top of that, Pearl functions as the "witch" of the fairy tales, since her frustration has been so high that she conveys her bitterness by inhibiting her children's wishes to the extent that they are afraid of her even when they grow up.

As we have seen most of "Tyler's women characters do marry… but the fact of their marriage does not make the reader sigh with satisfaction and close the novel" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 117). The same as the wives marry for a practical purpose, the husbands have reasons for not skipping the chance of getting married. As reviewer Andrea Henry wonders when talking about Pauline's and Michael's devastating marriage, "the million dollar question is, Why did they ever get together?" (21), the answer is related to an idealized version of love and marriage: whereas Pauline needed "to have a nice boy to wave off to war" Michael wanted "to have a good-looking girl fling her arms around him on his return" (Henry 21). As we have previously mentioned, Tyler's husbands are usually pragmatic and systematic, hence their reasons to marry are

more related to the social conventions and their idea of finding somebody to help them with their jobs. But some characters can surprise us, like Barnaby in *A Patchwork Planet*, who married his ex-wife because he wanted to straighten out his life after a disruptive adolescence: "Just as some people marry for money, I had married for goodness" (*PP* 217). Other male characters have other reasons to marry: Aaron married his second wife in order to have somebody to cook and take care of him, Ira wanted to get free from his aging father and his sick sisters, and Sam wanted to inherit Delia's father's practice.

The idealization of the partner is another reason for marrying. As some of Tyler's female partners confess, their husbands have idealized them to an extent that they do not longer love the same person. This idealization reminds us again to the aforementioned notion of romantic love, which is "demarcated by the understanding of our subjectivity as particular and the idealization of the other as sublime" (Castelao, *Twentieth-Century Border Love Poems* 16). In *Morgan's Passing* we see how Emily and Brindle, two married women, express the problems they have because of this idealization. Emily narrates how some men express their love for her because "they liked … their idea of her" (*MP* 78). Brindle, on her turn, has problems in her marriage with her school sweetheart because in a way both of them have idealized each other. They have married in their middle-age after losing their former partners and spending all those years thinking about their teenage relationship. Nevertheless, her husband clearly shows an obsession for her as he continually watches her graduation photograph and wears a bracelet that she gave him when they were teenagers.

Despite the adversities most of the couples stay united and only some couples divorce such as Pauline and Michael or Jesse and Fionna Moran. In fact, as Christina Schwarz mentions Pauline and Michael's marriage recreates that of Ira and Maggie

Moran (Jesse's parents in *Breathing Lessons*) "in a minor key" (108), with the chaotic and emotional wife married to the rigid and grim husband. Nevertheless, the Morans's marriage is able to endure despite the passage of time and their discussions thanks to the lessons that both of them have learnt: they know "how to place marriage, time, and life itself into a perspective that would enable [them] to continue down a not always smooth road" (Petry, *Understanding* 251). In addition, for both of them marriage is an institution, not only an accidental commitment, as it happened to Pauline and Michael. Even the Morans' son, Jesse, takes marriage as a routine full of sad discussions: "same old song and dance," he says (*BL* 349). For Ira, however, his marriage is "steady as a tree; not even he could tell how wide and deep the roots went" (*BL* 349). But, of course, he agrees that arguments are always a downside which affects the couple deeply the same as loyalty and affection are always welcome.[13] But maybe his son believes that marriage is the "unvaryingness" (*BL* 349) of life which he does not want for himself. Nevertheless, Jesse's marriage to Fiona is a failure from the beginning, since it is only based in the conception of their daughter and Maggie's stubbornness to unite them against all odds. Much the same as Pauline and Michel it is clear that Jesse and Fiona are unable to connect with each other and that is why they must remain apart.

Although Tyler rarely mentions the word "divorce" as the formal separation of the wife and the husband, the constant flees, the arguments and the misconnections affect the traditional idea of family. In their 2013 study, David M. Blau and Wilbert van der Klaauw describe the changes in the structure of the American family. According to them, the family unit has experimented relevant transformations in the last few years,

[13] Ira thinks of the pros and cons of marriage when he compares himself with his son: "Same old arguments, same recriminations. The same jokes and affectionate passwords, yeas, an abiding loyalty and gestures of support and consolations no one else know how to offer; but also the same old resentments dragged up year after year, with nothing ever totally forgotten" (BL 349).

especially the increase of the number of divorces. Tyler's novels reflect this pattern, since divorces seem to be more common in her novels written from the 1990s on such as in *A Patchwork Planet*, *The Amateur Marriage*, *Noah's Compass* and *A Spool of Blue Thread*. In all the stories the divorce seems to be a relief for the couple. For example, Michael felt "freed" and as if somebody had lifted "a burden" (*AM* 190). Yet, after the divorce there is always some kind of connection between the partners.

Following Paul Amato's conclusions about divorce there are two theories related to the consequences of it. The traditional view sees the "two-parent family as the fundamental institution of society" where children grow up in stability and security (1270). The second perspective presents divorce as a "second chance for happiness for adults and an escape from a dysfunctional home environment for children" (Amato 1270). In fact, if the couple stays together despite their conflicts there seems to be a fictitious separation that makes the family's existence even harder due to the crisis that affects the marriage and how wounds instead of healing become bigger and bigger. Michael Anton seems unable to understand why his wife reads magazines with covers which say "How to Stop Marital Fights Before They Start" and "Inside: "Why Do We Argue So Often?" (*AM* 44). But the truth is that all their quarrels make the marriage "hell" (*AM* 175), as Michael confesses when he is about to leave Pauline. Pauline is surprised with Michael's severe words and is not willing to accept that their marriage is over. But Michael is determined to end up their relationship because for him it is "such a waste to go on being wretched together. Better late than never" (*AM* 190). With his resolution Michael represents the spouse who "wants the marriage to end more than the other spouse does" (Amato 1272) because Pauline believes that Michael could still change his mind.

One of the reasons for the divorce in Tyler's couples could be related to the aforementioned "marriage of opposites" but, surprisingly enough, most of them stay together. Another reason for a divorce could be related to the doubts that some women have before the marriage. These second thoughts are common in Tyler's stories since we can find some examples of female characters that express their anxieties before the marriage, i.e. Charlotte, Fiona, Elizabeth, Delia's daughter Susan, and Pauline. However, with the exception of Elizabeth these women eventually marry the man they have doubts about and some of them marry forever. With their decisions, the writer is worried about "paths taken and, in particular, paths not taken" (Allardice 54). What is more, it seems that for them the decision of marrying goes beyond their will and it is more related to what other members of the family have arranged for them or what society may think about their rejection. This is the case of Pauline, who just on the verge of getting married changes her mind much to the surprise of the guests: "Says she doesn't know what she was thinking… says all they do is fight… says he never wants to go anyplace and… always so unsocial and… such a different style of person from her, so set in his ways, won't budge…" (*AM* 34). These words narrated in a free indirect speech style so common in Tyler echo throughout the book, since far from being just part of the wedding tensions they become the reason why Pauline and Michael cannot stay together. Charlotte in *Earthly Possessions* also expresses her doubts about her marriage with Saul but she is unable to do so because she expects to change her life with him: "I should have refused. I wasn't helpless, after all. I should have said, "I'm sorry, I can't fit you in. I never planned to take a second person on this trip." But I didn't … It really didn't occur to me to turn him down" (*EP* 69). She yearns to live an independent life without her mother in a different town. But her expectations are

frustrated when Saul not only promises to stay with Charlotte's mother but he settles in their house.

Elizabeth in *The Clock Winder* is the most interesting character in what refers to marriage, since she is able to escape the conventions and finally take a decision according to what her heart dictates on her. She is an unpredictable character. She arrives to the Emersons' life the same as she leaves them, without revealing much of her previous life. The fact is that she has left her parents' house and her college studies, quite a predictable life. His father, a preacher, is "not just a biological father but also that more symbolic paternal figure, a minister" (Petry, *Understanding* 81). Whereas Elizabeth's sister marries and has children as expected from her, Elizabeth is not so sure of this life and that is why she decides to leave them. After spending some time with the Emersons she falls in love with one of them, Matthew, despite of herself. She fights her feelings and tries not to give credit to her heart. But once Timothy, another Emerson, commits suicide after learning that she does not love him back, she resolves to leave the Emersons on account of their unpredictability and moodiness added to her own remorse for the death.

After coming back to her parents' house, she resumes her predictable life, meets a boy and accepts his proposal to marry. The only problem is that she realizes that the reason why she is marrying is more related to what her father expects from her than the love she feels for her husband-to-be. Elizabeth feels forced to marry because "it is a socially acceptable sign of maturity, and one especially expected of a preacher's daughter. Love simply is not at issue" (Petry, *Understanding* 82). The way Tyler narrates her escape from the wedding reminds us of a movie where the girl runs away with the wedding dress before the attentive eye of all the guests:

"I don't," she said.

> No one breathed. Elizabeth's father snapped his book shut.
> "I'm sorry, I just don't," she said.
> …
> "Did you ever?" all the women were asking, rising and clustering together. "Did you ever hear of such a thing?" the fat lady said. "I always did want to see somebody do that," a man told Margaret. (*CW* 182-3)

The guests cannot believe that she is not going to marry after all and everybody wonders why she fled. The way her doubts before the wedding are narrated reminds us of the way Pauline reacted before her wedding. [14] Despite her father's opposition and her family's words not to worry and consider her thoughts as nerves for the wedding, Elizabeth's obstinacy answers back in a way that Pauline would not have dared to: "How do *you* know? Maybe they're just saying that, and they regret it all their lives. It's a conspiracy" (*CW* 183). In a way, Elizabeth's words are true if we come to think of other Tyler's marriages, especially that one of Pauline and Michael, since both of them regretted it all their lives. Pauline was unable to cancel the wedding because she was afraid of how society would judge her. Similarly, according to Petry society was "about to force [Elizabeth] to make the biggest mistake of her life" (*Understanding* 83). However, she is able to free herself from the conventions despite what the people and even her own family could believe, hence abdicating "her roles as dutiful daughter and submissive lay person" (Petry, *Understanding* 83). Nonetheless, she does not consider herself a courageous woman, since she was unable to reject her father's canons before: "If I was so brave, how'd get into that wedding in the *first* place? Oh, think about Dommie, he's always so sweet and patient. And my family doing all that arranging, and people coming all that way for the wedding" (*CW* 185). The fact that she still feels some

[14] Elizabeth's doubts are narrated by her sister, a third person who does not understand why Elizabeth does not want to marry:

> "She'd told us she'd changed her mind," Polly said. "Told us just as we left the house. Father said no. He said, "Liz, now all the guests are here," he said, "and you owe them a wedding," and she said, "Well, all right, if a wedding's what you want." (*CW* 183)

remorse for the man she has abandoned, a victim of her impulses, and all the arrangements that will be canceled illustrates how her straining to the conventions is latent in her thoughts.

Contrary to the women with doubts we have got the women who marry out of a sudden impulse without thinking too much on the consequences. Some of them are Delia, Evie, Justine or Rebecca, who change their lives in only a few days. In this sense, Justine and Evie can be considered the most remarkable characters in spite of their youth. Both of them marry despite their families' doubts about the wedding. Both seem to be quiet girls whose parents believe that their daughters are going to follow the proper ways established by society but, surprisingly for them, they turn out to change their lives with their weddings. Although they are ready to confront their family to marry the man they want they still yearn for a religious celebration with familiar guests to celebrate the occasion. Nevertheless, none of them has a proper wedding since Evie marries secretly with a couple of friends as guests whereas Justine's father refuses to attend the wedding to give her away.

Justine in *Searching for Caleb* seems to be a very traditional girl who follows the standards in a rather convinced way especially because she belongs to the Pecks, an extremely conservative clan. However, her traditional views would be affected by her love for her cousin Duncan. Although she tries to repress these feelings, she is unable to do it for a long time. Hence, she surrenders to Duncan's desires and they decide to get married. Although Duncan has no intention of having a proper wedding he accepts Justine's traditional idea of the wedding as a family event. Duncan does not understand why she is so settled in her notion of the wedding but he eventually accepts her desires:

> "Justine, why does it matter? They're just a bunch of *people*, just some yellow-haired, ordinary people. Why do you have to ask for their approval?"
> "Because I love them," Justine said.

> He didn't have any answer for that. Love was not a word he used, even to her. (*SC* 540)

As they had predicted the family is devastated by their union on the basis that they are cousins, something that is against all conventions. Justine's parents would not allow it, especially her father, who locks her up in a room as if she were a princess of a fairy tale who has to be saved by her true love. However, Tyler's female characters are more autonomous and Justine just needs a toothbrush to open the door on her own in order to escape from the fictitious prison in which her father has locked her up. The marriage is finally accepted by the family, all except Justine's father, who did not even attend the wedding. Consequently, Justine's marriage provokes her parents' separation and their eventual deaths, something which will change Justine's perception of things due to her feelings of guilt. She has chosen marriage above her family whereas her mother destroyed her marriage because she was unable to abandon her family. Ironically, Duncan and Justine suffer the same pain as their parents when their daughter Meg elopes to marry a priest whom they do not consider suitable for her. As a result, we see how for Tyler marriage and family are two powerful institutions which are interrelated and still have a lot of influence in the characters' lives. In addition, once again we receive another reference to the fairy tales, by presenting Justine as the innocent maid who has to be taken away by a male hero who rejects every type of familial tie. Their bliss once they are married is illustrated by the setting they choose to live: a goat farm. Although it seems a very bucolic place at the beginning, Duncan soon realizes that it is a tiring and hardworking life which amounts to nothing and drags Justine out of it with the promise of a better life, a promise that he will never keep. Once more the writer deconstructs the perfect union based on the romantic love.

Evie's family situation in *A Slipping-Down Life* is completely different to that of Justine. She lost her mother when she was born and she has been alone with her widowed father ever since. He is the archetype of the silent widower who is unable to connect with his daughter because he is still mourning his wife. As a result, Evie has to learn to take care of herself. Her physical appearance does not help her to develop close relationships except for another girl with whom she shares physical and emotional traits. Although Drum is the first and only boy that she has ever met, she marries him because he is "an alternative to a life of endless evenings" (*Kirkus Reviews* n.pag.). On the contrary, he marries her on account of her willingness to help him no matter what. His discourse about change is just a façade to hide his real intentions:

> "I like you. I want to get married. I feel like things are just petering out all around me and I want to get married to someone I like and have me a house and *change*. Make a change. Isn't that enough? Don't you want to change your life around some?"
> …
> "Oh, well. Why not" (*SDL* 92)

Of course, Evie is fed up with her simple and monotonous life full of dreams related to love such as "a courtship, with double dates and dances, and matching shirts" (*SDL* 92). Her "why not" answer illustrates how deeply she wants to change her life although she knows that Drum will not fulfill her aspirations of being truly loved. Tyler chooses again an innocent and romantic woman who yearns for the perfect romantic male. Drum fulfills the stereotypes of the virility that we can find in romantic novels, since he has a popular job, drives a car and is able to fight for his rights. Although the marriage is Drum's idea to abandon his parents and realize his dream of becoming a star, we discover that he is a weak husband, with lack of self-confidence as a musician and an idealized vision of the married life with a woman cooking for him. On the contrary, little by little Evie imposes her ideas on how they will get married, the house

they will live in, how and when Drum will play, and other events that will mark the beginning of her adulthood. Thus, the consequences of the marriage are more devastating for him than for her, as she seems to be more mature and "empowered by the experience" (Petry, *Understanding* 59) whereas he is left alone with his immaturity and his slipping-down life. Through the course of the novel Evie has suffered a transformation from a young "old maid" to a "protofeminist," to use the term that Petry employs (*Understanding* 67). This term implies what Evie is at the end: an autonomous woman, with a house inherited from her dead father and a job in a library that will grant her the means to support her baby without a man by her side. Her pregnancy has made her a stronger woman, since she leaves her husband in order to take care of a baby that she has secretly wanted and for whom she does not desire to lead Drum's lifestyle.

Eventually, Drum is left alone singing about Evie and wondering what happened to her. Although we do not get information on Drum's real thoughts, Drum is an example of how most of Tyler's husbands wonder why their wife reacts in an unexpected way. Another example is Michael in *The Amateur Marriage*, whose opinions express his inexperience to cope with women and how he seems unable to understand her wife:

> He wasn't certain, though, how much of Pauline's moodiness was due to pregnancy and how much just, well, things going wrong between the two of them. Oh, women were so mystifying! And he was so unexperienced! "What did I say? What did I do? What was it?" he always seemed to be asking. Did other men have this problem? Was there anyone he could discuss this with? (*AM* 39)

These words are triggered by Pauline's anger when Michael told her to buy a kettle as a present for her birthday. She wanted something more personal with a romantic touch and certainly she expected him to give it to her as a surprise. A discussion for a simple daily issue hides something more serious: "How would I know what you want for your birthday? I'm twenty-two years old! The only woman I've ever

bought a gift for is my mother! And Mama's always loved getting presents that were useful!" (*AM* 37). As we will mention when talking about the family, the presence of the mother is so strong that her sons are unable to break the ties that unite them to her. That is why some of them treat their wives as their mothers and they sometimes behave as a child who needs constant care by the nurturing figure of a woman.

This idea of the husband associated with a child is present in other novels such as *Celestial Navigation* or *Ladder of Years*, where the husbands are unable to take care of the house or the children. Jeremy is so focused on his creations that he is not a trustworthy father. What is more, throughout the novel we discover how Mary always treats him like a boy by preparing food for him and taking care of the boarders and even managing his artistic career. Mary, the same as Delia, depends financially on her husband and, in return, her husband relies on her for all the other domestic issues. That is why it is so hard for the women to desert their husbands. When Linda, one of Delia's sisters tells her to dismiss Sam, Delia's answer reveals her financial dependability: "Really? On what money? … If not for Sam, we'd have lost this place long ago. Who do you think pays the property tax?" (*LY* 309). Mary provides a similar answer to Miss Vinton. She feels that the children are her responsibility but she is not financially independent: "I feel that every new baby is another rope, tying me down like a tent. I don't have the option to *leave* any more. I'm forced to depend on him. He's not dependable" (*CN* 142). Contrary to Mary's financial need for Jeremy, we find his emotional need for her, something that goes back to the idea of necessity for the partner in order to keep the marriage afloat.

After discussing why Tyler's couples get married and some of the drawbacks that set them apart, it is important to highlight the tensions in their most private moments as another idea that lies under the marital problems. Tyler does not usually speak of sex in

an overt way and when she does her descriptions tiptoe through the issue. In fact, as we have mentioned before, she has been criticized for not being more explicit about it and for not developing the sexual scenes more. Nonetheless, Tyler has already said that she is not so much interested in such moments since for her the characters also need a little bit of privacy. [15] Consequently, we can label her as a writer who searches for intimacy, which "involves the cognitive characteristic of willingness to reveal to the other, the emotional characteristic of caring deeply for the other, and the behavioral characteristic of being comfortable in physical proximity" (Hatfield, qtd. in Castelao *Twentieth-Century Border Love Poems* 41).

Sometimes she touches on it as a way to imply that the couples which do not even have a good sexual connection are doomed to be destroyed. In fact, the men are the ones who seem to be more reluctant to talk about it explicitly. For instance, when one of Morgan's daughters is about to marry his wife brings up the sex issue in a very natural way while he takes it as a taboo topic:

> "Morgan, in this day and age do you believe the bride's mother would still give the bride a little talk?"
> "Hmmm?"
> "What I want to know is, am I expected to give Amy a talk about sex or am I not?"
> "Bonny, do you have to call it *sex*?"
> "What else would I call it?"
> "Well…"
> "I mean, sex is what it is, isn't it?"
> "Yes, but, I don't know…"
> "I mean, what would you say? Is it sex, or isn't it?"
> "Bonny, will you just stop *hammering* at me?"
> "Anyhow," she said, returning to her list, "in this day and age, I bet she'd laugh in my face." (MP 93)

Bonny's insistence illustrates how patriarchal society has always rejected talking about sex in an overt way with husbands or children. Morgan's reticence exemplifies

[15] See page section 2.1. in this dissertation.

this tendency as he embodies the patriarchal attitude. On the contrary, Bonny views it as a natural issue, especially when she finally foreshadows that maybe their daughter already knows about it, even more than what she does. Morgan does not want to hear about it because he still thinks of his daughters as mere children showing no commitment as a father on their development towards adulthood and he even blames Bonny for her lack of responsibility.

Women seem to accuse their husbands for their routines even when it comes to their most private moments. The male inexperience in sex may be something that lessens their virility so they try to avoid it by doing mechanical movements or, like Will Allenby, by studying the diagrams in a specialized book because he was "so scientific about it!" (*BWG* 84). Following the standards, the males are the ones expected to lead the sexual life of the couple but when they fail to do it properly the females feel disappointed. It seems women are more empowered for their husbands' lack of sexual skills but then they are also unable to produce a more rewarding sexual life in the couple. In order to show how Pauline and Michael were so different and the number of quarrels they had, Tyler uses sex as another example of their numerous differences. Thus, she depicts a rather mechanic and predictable man even for sex since he has scheduled Saturday as their making-love day. Furthermore, he backs up his inability to understand his wife on the basis of his inexperience in sex when his wife complains: "Did he have to start out the same, exact way every single time? The same rote moves, the same one position? Michel had been dumbfounded. "Well, but, I mean, how else…?" (*AM* 43). With these words it seems that the husband is even more inexperienced than the wife, whose expectations are higher. An analogous impression arises when Evie narrates how her sexual relationship with Drum was dull and lacking of passion: "Their love-making was sudden and awkward, complicated by pitch dark

and a twisted nightgown and the welter of sheets and blankets that Evie kept covering herself with" (*SL* 105-6). Drum's aversion to Evie's body incites Evie to cover it even in their private moments, something that affects their sexual life negatively. With these examples Tyler is demystifying the idea of the male as the sexually skilled one. As Radway points out the male characters in romances are usually in charge of the sexual part of the relationship while the women are expected to be innocent and faithful to their unique love (64). While Tyler still follows this pattern by presenting spotless women who arrive to marriage without any previous sexual experience, she introduces a transgressive element: her women complaint for their husbands' lack of skills, something that lessens their virility and it is another element that threatens their hegemony in the marriage and in the family.

Sometimes the scenes Tyler narrates describe how the desire of the couple had been such that they could not stay away from each other. However, with the passage of time the passion has ended and these passionate moments are only memories of the past:

> They had stayed at an inn downtown that no longer existed, and every morning lying out here side by side with their bare, fuzzed arms just touching they had reached such a state that, eventually, they had to rise and rush back to their room. Once even that had seemed too far, and they'd plunged into the ocean instead, out past the breakers. (*LY* 72)

Although this description corresponds to Sam and Delia, it can apply to other middle-aged couples such as Elizabeth and Saul, Maggie and Ira or Red and Abbie. With it, Tyler implies that the passage of time not only damages the physical attraction that men and women feel but it is also of no help for those couples which were not primarily founded in love. Nevertheless, there are strong couples such as that of Maggie and Ira in *Breathing Lessons*, who are able to catch up with the lost time in any moment despite the circumstances:

> Ira said, "¿Maggie?" but he made no move to stop her. She straightened up to loosen his belt and unzip his fly.
> "We can sit right here in this chair," she whispered. "No one will ever guess."
> Ira groaned and pulled her against him. When he kissed her his lips felt smooth and very firm …
> "Maggie Daley!" Serena said. (*BL* 324)

This scene has been commented on by many reviewers, since it is a very Tylerian moment where black humor is at its highest stage. Both Ira and Maggie have just attended the funeral of one of their school friends when they start remembering the first year they were married. Both of them agree that it was awful because they had a lot of quarrels on account of their inexperience. In Ira's words: "[they] were just learning back then" (*BL* 324). Those memories are the cause of that flash of passion that allows them to start kissing each other. Suddenly, their widowed friend Serena finds them together in the bedroom she shared with her deceased husband.

Getting caught before the actual sexual intercourse takes place is not new in Tyler, since most of her sexual scenes end in an abrupt way. In her most recent novel, *Spool*, the way Linnie Mae and Junior were caught in the barn by her father reflects the desire of the couple, which is what finally unites them, despite the traditional Southern schemes:

> …he bent to set his lips on hers and his hand slid lower on her neckline, down inside it, where it didn't seem she was wearing a brassiere ... He squeezed, and she drew a sharp breath, and he pressed her back toward the corner of the barn and laid her down on the hay, not once taking his lips away. He kicked his boots off, somehow. He got free of his overalls and his BVDs all in one move. Linnie was struggling out of her drawers, and just as he reached to help her he heard… not words but a sort of a bellow, like the sound a bull makes, and then, "Great God Almighty!" (*SBT* 291-2)

The simile to the bull evokes how Linnie Mae's father reacts once he discovers his daughter. His fury is an instinct, the same as Linnie and Junior are following their carnal desires for each other. A similar scene occurs when Evie finds her husband Drum lying in bed with another girl, although the description is not so explicit as the one with

Linnie and Junior, since when she finds them they are already sleeping after being together. It seems that with time Tyler has become more evident when it comes to sexual encounters, although the scenes are still very short and not very numerous. She is not interested in the sexual intercourse, she is more concerned with the feelings of her characters and their thoughts about the love or the lack of love they feel instead. Generally speaking, it may be related to the fact that "women are not interested in the visual display characteristic of male pornography, but prefer process-oriented materials detailing the development of deep emotional connection between two individuals" (Radway 64).

The aforementioned sexual scene with Linnie and Junior has some additional implications in the couple. Junior has to leave and they do not have time to say anything else to each other. Some years later, when she asks him why he left her she feels enraged:

> "Why weren't you interested in me?"
> "What, I was interested, honest!"
> "Oh, we both know what you were interested in." (*SBT* 317)

It is clear that Junior only felt a physical attraction for the young Linnie who is not Junior's type. Nonetheless, his ambition has led him to have a lonely life where she is the only woman he has ever met. Although he detests her country ways and her poor language, the truth is that he finally ends up doing whatever she wants such as getting married or having children. Maybe a joke that their grandson Stem says some decades later shows a deeper reality where women are also the domineering force in the marriage: "My wife decides the little things, like what job I take and which house we buy, and I decide the big things, like whether we should admit China to the U.N." (*SBT* 194). Although it is true that most of Tyler's wives have a great share in the decisions

the couple makes such as having children or moving to a different house, sometimes they feel trapped in their life because they wished things were different.

That is why some of Tyler's married wives have a short affair or a flirting with another man while they are married. Even though it is nothing serious and it never has any sexual implication, it illustrates how they yearn for something they lack in their marriage: passion and the unexpected. When women feel frustrated with their marriage they meet other men at times but when the affair is getting too physical they return to their husbands feeling guilty and, at the same time, liberated. For example, in *Earthly Possessions* Charlotte starts to have a crush on Amos, her husband's brother, who spends some weeks with them in their house. She wants to be with him "for not being Saul … or for being a younger, happier Saul. He carried no freight of past wrongs and debts; that was why I loved him" (*EP* 178). But when Amos proposes her to leave with him she turns him down. She feels a high responsibility for the house and all the relatives who rely on her. Nevertheless, Amos accuses her of being passive, something that she despised in her husband: "Passive. You're passive, Charlotte. You stay where you're put. Did you ever really intend to leave?" (*EP* 181). Charlotte is not but one example of passive character, something that even Updike has mentioned as a drawback in Tyler's narrative. [16] She complains on her husband and her predictable life and just when she has an opportunity to leave she rejects it. As Levy mentions, the "main business of Charlotte's life is to learn how to translate her feeling of helpless passivity … into a kinder, more optimistic, assessment of herself and her life. Charlotte eventually succeeds" (126). Because in the end she and all the other characters want to "live good, useful, and happy lives" (Levy 126).

[16] See page section 2.1. in this dissertation

For similar reasons, Delia is unable to continue meeting the handsome and young Adrian Bly-Brice in *Ladder of Years*. Although they are almost strangers, Delia is enthralled at the possibility of having a man interested in her. She wants to find in Adrian what she lacks in her marriage, although "it was shameful how pleased she felt, and how lucky, and how rich" (*LY* 12). Nevertheless, when the sexual tension rises and Adrian comes closer the circumstances help her to leave:

> Adrian came up behind her. He turned her to face him and wrapped his arms around her, and this time she didn't move away but set her hands at his waist and strained upward to meet his kisses. He kissed her mouth, her eyelids, her mouth once more. He whispered, "lie down with me, Delia."
> Then the phone rang. (*LY* 52)

The phone is the signal for Delia to remember who she is and what she is doing. That is why she rushes out of Adrian's house. When Adrian asks her what she is afraid of her subconscious gives her the answer: "*I'm afraid of getting undressed in front of someone thirty-two years old*" (*LY* 52). The same as Evie, Delia shows a concern for her body and how her imperfect figure may not please the man. Although this idea may follow the patriarchal beliefs, Tyler introduces it as a way to illustrate how women have been taught to watch their body, which is objectified for the male pleasure.

Both Delia and Charlotte finally do the right thing and they do not cheat on their husbands because they want to arrange the life they already have instead of committing to another partner who would create them more emotional troubles. With Eunice in *Noah's Compass* we live a similar situation, although her married status is not revealed at the beginning and the reader, the same as Liam, is led to believe that she is a single woman. However, the truth is that she married the wrong man because she wanted to please her family. When she met Liam, an older man, she did not mention that she was married because she wanted her second chance, as she points out: "I felt so attracted to you, right off, and I thought about what it would be like to start over with the right

person, do it *right* this time, but I knew you wouldn't give me a second glance if you found out I was married" (*NC* 186). Eunice really wants to leave her husband but she would only do so if Liam accepts to be with her. Yet, Liam is having problems to cope with the fact that he has been dating a married woman without knowing it. Consequently, he rejects Eunice's proposal to get married:

> "I can leave, though, Liam! I don't have to stay. Why don't you ask me to leave him?"
> …
> "You're somebody else's wife, remember? You're already committed."
> "I can undo the commitment! People undo them all the time. You undid yours." (*NC* 212)

Through Eunice's words we can see how Liam is the passive one this time. She is willing to leave her current life to be with him, but maybe he is too settled in his routines to start a third marriage again. On top of that, he is hurt because the woman he considered that had been untouched by a man is in fact married. Hitherto, we can ask the same question as Liam: "what *was* the right thing?" (*NC* 215). According to the traditional morals the right thing for Delia, Charlotte and Eunice is to stay with their husbands. They eventually do so but not without having their own share of happiness: Delia with her unplanned escape to Bay Borough, Charlotte with her kidnapping and Eunice with her proposal of marrying to another man. Even though they come back to their old lives and their character has not changed at all after the events they have gone through, we feel that something inside them has changed so that now they value more what they have (their husband, children, house, job). With these examples we can see that Tyler "does not write tragedies but her comedies are not free from pain: and yet her account of marriage can often seem accepting, affirmative" (Miller 88).

In *The Beginner's Goodbye* Tyler explores marriage from a different perspective, since she uses the supernatural to delve into another dysfunctional marriage. Aaron and

Dorothy seem to be a good match when they decide to marry since both of them are pragmatic, businesslike and unromantic. Aaron follows the patterns of most of Tyler's male characters given his monotonous life and his lack of sensibility. Likewise, Dorothy does not share the emotionality of other female characters such as Maggie or Delia, hence resembling more the male characters. In addition, as she mentions herself, she is not a nurturer. [17] The similarity in their character traits is what makes their marriage to turn plain and passion-lacking. But none of them realizes their failure until Dorothy dies unexpectedly when a tree crashes over her.

Nevertheless, Dorothy is not dead and gone forever, since she appears as a ghost some times before she vanishes. The meaning of Dorothy's return is not very clear for some reviewers such as Stephen Hupp (35) and Henry Carrigan (75), for they consider that it is a way of helping Aaron to cope with the sudden death of his wife and start a new life again. Other reviewers like Barbara Vancheri (n.pag.) and Pamela Norris (literaryreview.co.uk, n.pag.) reach a more sensible conclusion, since they consider that the reason why she keeps on appearing after her death is a way of making Aaron reflect on the rights and wrongs of their marriage so that he does not make the same mistake again. [18] In a very Tylerian style, at the beginning we are led to think that they are one of those happy couples who suffer an accident that marks them forever but the truth is that they already have scars from the years they have been together, as Aaron reveals at the end:

> Then why was our marriage so unhappy?
> Because it *was* unhappy. I will say that now. Or it was difficult, at least. Out of sync. Uncoordinated. It seemed we just never quite got the hang of being a couple

[17] Dorothy comments on how others see her and criticize her ways: "I'd see your secretary thinking, *Poor, poor Aaron, his wife is so coldhearted. So unnurturing, so ungiving. Doesn't value him half as much as the rest of us do*" (*BG* 236). Curiously enough, the secretary she refers to is Peggy, who would end up marrying Aaron at the end of the novel.

> the way other people did. We should have taken lessons or something; that's what I tell myself (*BG* 231).

With these words Tyler comes back again to the idea of the amateur marriage, the lack of experience and how the unskilled partners have problems to succeed. As one of the characters who appears in the novel explains to Aaron, marriage is "a whole new beginning. You're entirely new people; you haven't made any mistakes yet" (*BG* 161). But as they spend time together, Aaron starts to realize about some of Dorothy's flaws, for instance, her disregard for her appearance: "It was true that I had been charmed at first by her lack of vanity, but now and then it struck me that she was looking almost, well, plain, and that this plainness seemed willful" (*BG* 163). What is more, he even adopts a patriarchal attitude when he considers that her reason for not paying more attention to her clothes is because maybe she does not value him so much so as to impress him.

One of the first times that Dorothy appears as a ghost she says to Aaron something that puzzles him: "We could have talked all along. But you always pushed me away." (*BG* 179). Aaron does not understand why she feels that way but as we see the way he remembers her and the things he did not like, we realize that he is always sharply judgmental. For instance, he criticizes her looks, her clothes, the way she did not do any housework or cooking, how he did not like the way she was so professional even though she was not working, and other similar ideas: she was "so normal and clumsy and ordinary" (*BG* 186). When they first met one of the reasons why he felt attracted to her was that she was not like other women. Yet, as time passes, those things he admired turned into reasons not to like her. In a way, Aaron yearns for the typical housewife that is always worried about his problems and concerned with her appearance. Consequently, once Dorothy's ghost disappears and their marriage issues

are settled, we find Aaron married to Peggy, his secretary. Opposite to Dorothy, she is a nurturer woman who likes cooking, socializing with other people and other common familial tasks. In addition, she is willing to have children, something that Dorothy rejected. That is why we see here the opposition of the independent woman, the ideal of the feminist, versus the domestic woman, the prototype of the patriarchal society. At the end of the novel it is not clear who wins, since Aaron remembers with nostalgia Dorothy while he enjoys a new life with his second wife and his toddler daughter.

Aaron's last meeting with Dorothy is what triggers her freedom and her final escape from earth. Aaron has always rejected her ways on the basis that they are not so conventional: "We're neither one of us the type for that, thank heaven" (*BG* 231). In their last conversation Aaron accepts he is to blame because he was always so fixed in his ideas that he did not realize that he was destroying their marriage little by little. Aaron's acceptance of guilt is also his redemption, which frees Dorothy from their past together. Hence, she is able to leave Aaron forever.

With this story Tyler "explores the notion that loved ones don't disappear from our lives when they die. Their voices echo in our heads or they simply appear and disappear without fanfare in the most mundane of places" (Vancheri, n.pag.). In addition, it is a way of showing us a little bit of the writer, since she has admitted in an interview that it was difficult for her to cope with the death of her husband. [19] This idea of being married after death is not new, especially in her most recent novels. Other characters such as Liam in *Noah's Compass* or Dave Dickinson in *Digging to America* try to find another woman because they are unable to bear the solitude and they see

[19] In a recent interview Tyler expresses how it was hard to adjust to a new situation in which she could not speak with him: "The main thing I thought after my husband died was 'Where did he go?' You can't have that much vitality and exuberance and joyfulness and it just comes to nothing. No! It's got to be somewhere. I'm not religious, but I really did sit very still and think, say something to me. He never did" (Interview with Lisa Allardice n.pag).

themselves young to be alone forever. On the contrary, other characters, especially the female ones, are reluctant to get married after they are widowed because they still feel very attached to their husbands. It is the case of Rebecca in *Grownups* and Maryam in *Digging to America*, both of them middle-aged, with a house and a job of their own and grandchildren to take care of. Maybe it is that responsibility of family and career what makes them passive when it comes to finding another man. But the truth is that in their inside they are not ready to forget their husbands, since the memories of the past are still very vivid in their minds.

Maryam is a very stubborn and lady-like woman. Although her marriage was arranged in the Iranian way, she deeply fell in love with her husband, the first and only man she had ever met. Nevertheless, as we go through the novel we find out that she did not spend so many years with her husband because he died soon. That is why maybe she has idealized him, since she keeps on talking about the good things while her son Sami does not see so many positive traits: "Demanding. A very *demanding* man. I always wished Mom would stand up to him more" (*DA* 222). In fact, Dave Dickinson, the man who wants to marry her, wonders why he is not able to break the "pane of glass" that is between them and he wonders "if she still feels ... loyal to her husband's memory. Or maybe *bound* to him by some Iranian social custom" (*DA* 234).

Although he feels that Maryam is different from other women because she belongs to a different culture, he tries to act as gallantly as possible, something that Maryam does not always like given that she is an independent woman. That is why she refuses to marry him, although at the beginning she accepts his proposal to get married:

> "Maryam," Dave said. "Will you marry me?"
> Maryam stopped swiping at her hair and stared at him. The girls were still working away, but Dave said, "Okay, kids, that's enough now." Reluctantly, they stepped back.
> Maryam said, "What?"

> "This is a formal proposal," he said, and he dropped to his knees beside her. "Will you be my wife?" (*DA* 248)

Maryam accepts his proposal because she is forced by the circumstances. Being a traditional person, shy and quiet, it was difficult for her to reject Dave in front of everybody with all their family and friends staring at her. But it is outspokenly clear that she regrets her consent afterwards declaring that it was the worst mistake of her life (*DA* 251). Moreover, it is also a clash of cultures, since Maryam is still rooted in her Iranian style whereas she feels overwhelmed by Dave's American ways: "He is so American," Maryam said … "He takes up so much space. He seems to be unable to let a room stay as it is; always he has to alter it" (*DA* 252). Ziba, on her side, does not see Dave's behavior as being American but a male pattern of rearranging things to suit their needs. Yet, Maryam is fixed on his Americanism: "Americans are all larger than life" (*DA* 252). With such declaration we see how Maryam feels threatened by being with a man because it would imply losing her independence and her routines. She is identifying Dave with Americans because she has not adapted herself to the American customs. What is more, keeping her Iranian attitude is a way of reinforcing her autonomy. Thus, Maryam is an unusual woman whose refusal to marry again condemns her at the eyes of society. As Quiello states, the writer "establishes a strong sense of women's isolation from language, which is directly linked to the marginal position they occupy outside the locus of power and authority, by presenting us with unconventional women who pay a high price for their unconventional lives" (53).

In any case, why would such a determined woman accept to date Dave if it were not for love? The answer goes back to the concept of usefulness that we have discussed before. In a way, she feels that Dave needs her, the same as her husband needed her: "In the end, that had been her downfall: the wish to feel needed" (*DA* 317). This feeling of

necessity is what puts Rebecca and Joe Davitch together in *Grownups*. The same as Mr. Yazdan, Joe dies some years after they get married. Rebecca has spent more years as a widow than married. Consequently, she has got problems to find love again. That is why she starts thinking about her youth sweetheart, whom she left to marry Joe. At the beginning of the novel we see how she wants to change her life in what refers to love even though society could consider that she was too old for that: "most people her age would say it was too late to make any changes. What's done is done, they would say. No use trying to alter things at this late date" (*BWG* 4). Her feelings are of dismay, since she feels very young still and, on top of that, she believes that she has altered her life in such a way that she is an "impostor" (*BWG* 138). When she finally meets her old sweetheart, Will Allenby, she considers that now her life is going to go back to the moment when she deserted him and she is going to catch up with him all those moments that were not granted to them when she left. Despite their efforts to make the relationship work, when Will and Rebecca try to come closer her family wouldn't allow them to have some privacy. The first time they have dinner in her house everything was going fine until her relatives started to show up by coincidence or by forced chance: Zeb (who has a crush on Rebecca even though she does not know it) and his uncle, one of Rebecca's daughters and her son. That is why at the end of the evening Rebecca feels that her intimacy has been violated by her family and the dinner had turned out "another family melee with an extra person added" (*BWG* 183). Finally, she sees that her relationship with Will is not possible because she has changed so much whereas Will is still the same methodic man she met in college in addition to his lack of self-esteem. Actually, he admits that he lacks "some talent everyone else takes from granted" (BWG 151). With his words Will resembles Ezra in *Dinner* when he was dumped by another woman, Ruth, who married Ezra's brother. Both Will and Ezra are deeply rooted in

daily routines and show a rejection for change. Eventually, this is what leads Ruth and Rebecca to turn them down.

Rebecca's family did not approve her marriage with Joe on the grounds of their different ages and backgrounds. In spite of their opposition, she spent a lot of happy moments with him. Apart from Rebecca, there are other female characters whose families have also problems to admit the marriage of the daughter to a man they have not chosen such as Mrs. Emerson, Elizabeth, Evie, Justine, Jenny or Mary. Despite their families' dissatisfaction these women stand up for themselves and decide to marry the man they have chosen, as if it were a fairy tale story where the female character has to overcome many difficulties to achieve the happy ending. Yet, once they have married the man they wanted, most of the times they regret their decision, as if agreeing with what their families had told them earlier, hence contradicting the romantic vision of marriage as a never-ending source of happiness.

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The dysfunctional couples that have been previously analyzed usually live in the same house with their children, whose development from babies to teenagers and even young adults is often narrated in the story. The tensions in the couple are usually passed on to their children, who usually have problems to establish long-term love relationships which are sometimes chaotic and they even end up in divorce. The most obvious cases are the three children in the Tull family or Linda Anton in *The Amateur Marriage*. Due to the lack of a well-structured family, these young characters undergo different circumstances by which it is evident that the situation with their parents makes it more difficult for them to have a conventional marriage. Jenny Tull, for example, has to

marry three times in order to find a suitable man. The first one was too perfect and scientific, the second one was too aggressive. The third one is what she wanted but he comes with a bunch of children that Jenny has to take care as well. Meanwhile, Ezra Tull is dumped by Ruth, his only girlfriend, and is unable to start another relationship afterwards. His brother Cody was envious of Ezra's relationship and he does not stop until Ruth realizes that maybe Cody is a better catch than his brother. Ezra's acceptance of the situation contrasts with Cody's perpetual idea of his brother stealing back Ruth again. Although Ruth has realized her mistake by the end of the novel Ezra has no plans of claiming her back since he is not a skilled lover and the restaurant is the perfect substitute for his lack of romantic passion.

The three of them have grown up in a family which seem happy at the beginning but when their father left them it made them all sink in despair, that is why they are homesick. In her monographic book about Anne Tyler's novels, *Understanding Anne Tyler*, Petry dedicates chapter 8 to explain the different reactions Tyler's children had towards their parents' broken marriage. As she mentions, the novel illustrates the "inner resources, the attitudes, and the strategies that enable the three Tull children to become functional adults *despite* their childhood home" (Petry 190). Yet, the three of them replicate their parents' frustrated marriage since they are not able to find the true love. Furthermore, the relationships they have seem more an escape from their family than a more romantic version of what they have seen at home.

Lindy Anton in *The Amateur Marriage* follows a similar path. Being the eldest of the Anton children she is the only one who realizes about the problems in her parents' marriage. That is why she runs away from her family, gets caught in drugs and becomes a single mother of a child named Pagan. Her story reflects the hippie movement of the 1960s but, at the same time, mirrors the psychological damage her parents' quarrels

have done to her, since she mentioned at the end that they had been "hell" on their children (AM 304). Nevertheless, when she returns to the family some years later she wants to catch up where she left them until she realizes that it is too late to find things the same, especially after their parents' divorce and her mother's death. Her eventual appearance reminds us of Beck Tull's return and his idea of the perfect family in *Dinner*, although this superficial perfection is what they both abhorred, hence they abscond.

These examples show how troubled marriages affect the children, although sometimes we do not get a direct account on their feelings because they seem distant to their parents or self-sufficient such as Charlotte's daughter Selinda, Delia's children, Justine's daughter Meg and Daisy Moran. As we will mention when talking about the family, the mother-daughter relationship in Tyler's fiction is not usually very close. Most of the daughters seem to disagree with their parents' eccentric ways and try to undo their chaotic lives by going away from them as soon as possible.

Meg Peck in *Searching for Caleb* is one of the most interesting examples because she defies her parents by eloping with a young protestant minister called Arthur. Tyler illustrates how she is an autonomous girl even when she was still a baby and how her desire for a well-established routine contradict her parents' nomadic life. Although Meg loves her parents, "she had developed a permanent inner cringe from wondering how they would embarrass her next. They were so – extreme. So irresponsible! … All she really wanted was to live like other people" (*SC* 587). Nonetheless, Meg's desire to lead an ordinary life turns against her when she discovers that her marriage with Arthur is not what she had expected. Arthur's job as a minister and his willingness to succumb to his mother's instructions turn the marriage into a union lacking love and intimacy. As a result, Meg believes that she is living "among *crazy* people" (*SC* 637), which is

precisely what she wanted to avoid when she left her eccentric parents. Justine tries to give her advice on how to cope with the situation, since she herself was forced to adapt to Duncan's shifting character. On the contrary, Duncan is surprised at her passivity and wonders how she can "accept whatever comes along? Endure? Adapt?" (*SC* 637). Despite his words it is clear that Meg will endure the same as her mother and other female characters in Tyler's fiction had done before her.

Regardless of how Tyler's couples end, together or apart, most of them still remember their marriage as the best way to spend life and to overcome the adversities in life. As Barnaby, one of Tyler's most disruptive characters explains, marriage is like a contract that should last forever: "Finally, you're just with who you're with. You've signed on with her, put in half a century with her, grown to know her as well as you know yourself or even better, and she's *become* the right person. Or the only person, might be more to the point" (*PP* 219). Thus, there is "a sense in her books of a necessary survival of the institution, which can overcome mismatch and departure" (Miller 85-86). Nevertheless, we get the impression that the institution of marriage survives because most of the characters still consider it as an obligation imposed to them by society. As one of them states in *Ladder of Years*, "most folks marry just because they decide they've reached that stage. I mean, even if they don't have any particular person picked out yet. Then they pick someone out. It's like their marriages are arranged" (*LY* 149).

To sum up, in this section we have analyzed the different types of marriages that we can find in Tyler's fiction: united couples, divorced partners, absconded spouses, and widows and widowers unable to forget. In addition, we have explored the reasons why Tyler's couples are sometimes dysfunctional and why some of the spouses desert. Apart from that, we have examined the references of fairy tales that are present in

Tyler's narrative as a way to deconstruct the idealization of marriage as something perfect and long lasting. Although both partners suffer the same for the failure in marriage, as we have studied, most often than not it is the woman the one who struggles more in order to do what it is considered to be the right thing as a result of an idealization of love. That is why Tyler presents women who realize that life is not like a fairy tale although it can have fairy tale moments. If the women are so unhappy with their husbands the question is: Why don't they divorce? For Tyler it seems that marriage is a bond that cannot so easily be broken. It is not only a question of legal issues but also a broader thing that would have repercussions in a lot of parts of their lives: children, house, job, money, and shared past and memories. Therefore, Tyler presents marriage as something that couples have to preserve and take care of, although she agrees that it is not always easy. Moreover, with her marriage of opposites Tyler tries to depict a reality where couples remain united despite the passage of time because husband and wife still need each other in order to carry on with their lives.

Once more Tyler departs from the established conventions of the romantic stories where the male and the female protagonists have a perfectly romantic union. Nonetheless, her compass drives us to a safe place where husband and wife will still spend joyful moments together despite the passage of time and the adversities, being the choice of the right partner the condition to fulfil each other's dreams.

CHAPTER 4

TEARS AND JOYS ARE IN THE FAMILY

She couldn't bear to think that their family was just another muddled, discontented, ordinary family.

Anne Tyler ~ *A Spool of Blue Thread*

It is impossible to write about Tyler without mentioning the word "family." A recurrent idea in Tyler's work, the family is also something traditionally associated with the South and the ability of women to focus on family issues. As Doris Betts points out in her introduction to *Southern Women Writers*, "Southern female writers emphasize the concrete in family and household" (2). Maybe it is "southern women writers who are primarily responsible for keeping the family unit alive in novels" (Durham, "Anne Tyler's Vision of Gender" 143). This Southern tradition as well as Welty's influence on Tyler's work may have triggered that passion that the author has about families. Researchers and reviewers always comment on how the family is of paramount importance for Tyler "as a kind of atemporal refuge where, for better or worse, long-lost children, siblings or even parents return for solace" (McPhillips 464).

What is more, her descriptions of the family help us understand her idea of kinship and how it is the only place where we can find happiness. For example, the beginning of *Saint Maybe* presents a family which seems to be unique, the Bedloes: "They were never just the Bedloes, but the Bedloe *family*, Waverly Street's version of the ideal, apple-pie household" (*SM* 4). These remarks of this perfect American family are completed by the fact that they "believed that every part of their lives was absolutely wonderful. It wasn't just an act, either. They really did believe it" (*SM* 8). This idea of the perfect family looks very similar to the description that Tyler offers of her latest creation, the Whitshanks, given that "like most families, they imagined they were special" (*SBT* 36). With the Bedloes and the Whitshanks we get an example of a description of the families when the novel begins. We usually get a portrait of a happy family that, despite common adversities, is able to carry on with joy. As a reviewer of *Saint Maybe* pointed out, "the family pictured as a kind of leaky but durable vessel that ferries her motley characters down the tortuous river of time" (Parini, nytimes.com).

Yet, there are always important issues which arise throughout the novel and the reader discovers that maybe the family is not as happy as it seemed at the beginning since Tyler's "great gift is playing against the American dream, the dark side of which is the falsehood at its heart" (Sinkler, nytimes.com). Actually, in her most recent novel she already gives a hint of the quirky nature of the Whitshanks because "they had a talent for pretending that everything was fine" (*SBT* 37). As we will see, Tyler's families look ideal to the outsider but when we get to know them better we realize that, although they are not unhappy, they have to face adversities in order to stay united as any other real-life family.

I have borrowed the title of this section from Gullette's article "The Tears and Joys are in the Things" because it summarizes clearly what family means for Tyler and her characters, namely, moments of incredible joy and never-ending love intermingled with sad scenes, rancor and bitterness. This is a common topic in the Tylerian family universe: endurance. Every single one of her novels brings up a new issue of the family, which makes it a changing entity as time passes. Actually, none of her families is destroyed because for Tyler family is "changing, not dying" (Everhart 2). From her more traditional families such as the Morans, the Pecks or the Bedloes to her more modern families such as the Yazdans or the Whitshanks, all of them seem to add a new element to a complex unit. As Everhart explains, Tyler "presents a myriad of family structures, none of which is ideal, but all of which work reasonably well for the individuals within them" (2). Different examples of families can be found throughout the different periods of Tyler's career. Blau and Van der Klaauw in their article "What Determines Family Structure?" (2013, 583) describe different types of families which I am going to illustrate with some of Tyler's novels:

- Traditional families with an established marriage and two or three biological children appear in novels such as *The Tin Can Tree*, *Breathing Lessons* or *The Amateur Marriage*. These families sometimes include extended members who either live with them or depend on them such as Jane, Ira's sisters and Mrs. Anton.
- Families with cohabitating biological parents can be seen in *Celestial Navigation*, since Jeremy and Mary never marry and they have five children together. Nevertheless, both of them act as if they were married. Therefore, at the eyes of society they form a family with a biological mother and a married stepfather for Darcy, Mary's daughter with her real husband.
- Families with a biological mother and a cohabitating stepfather can be found in stories such as *Morgan's Passing* and *The Accidental Tourist*, since both male protagonists leave their wives to live with another woman with own children.
- Families with no man appear in novels such as *Dinner* or *Grownups*. Nevertheless, these families lack the male head for different reasons since Beck abandons the family in *Dinner* whereas Joe had died in a car accident. Both Pearl and Rebecca are unable to find love again.

This classification of families, however, does not include other ideas that are present in Tyler's fiction such as adoption (presented in *Saint Maybe* or *Digging to America*) or the inclusion in the family of non-biological children (analyzed in *Celestial Navigation* or *Spool*). In addition, Blau and Van der Klaauw show in their study how divorce affects the traditional idea of family, which is something we have analyzed in the previous section related to marriage.

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Some scholars criticize Tyler because her "families lack not only neighborliness; they lack any sense of belonging to a larger social order" (Gilbert, "Anne Tyler" 252). This statement may be true when it was written in the 1990s, but her contemporary novels portray families that relate to the society that surrounds them instead of behaving as insular entities. For instance, when Dorothy dies in *The Beginner's Goodbye* Aaron receives a lot of casseroles from his neighbors showing their concern for him. In return, he sent them some messages to express his gratitude. Another example can be found in *Digging to America*, where two apparently different families which have not met before, the Donaldsons and the Yazdans, start meeting every year to celebrate the arrival of their adopted daughters. This celebration, known as the "arrival party," will bring together different cultural backgrounds and different perspectives of mothering which are in tune with real life situations.

Nevertheless, it is true that Tyler's families seem to have a cannibalistic behavior, since they are able to hurt themselves, something that damages the family structure but does not destroy it. For good or bad, everything happens inside of the family: arguments, flees, distrust, jealousies, criticisms as well as celebrations and other similar joyful events. However, all the positive and negative situations that each family undergoes cause the unity to be even stronger. [20] Having said that, before analyzing more in depth how Tyler sees families, it is important to note what family is. For Nesanovich, families "are groups of people united for survival, people sharing a common experience of life, despite their differences and the essential isolation of one

[20] For this reason, she is compared with writers as Eudora Welty. According to Bowers "Tyler's characters are forced to deal with each other within their family structure, much like the characters who populate Eudora Welty's families" (49).

person from another" (21). A similar idea of family is that proposed by Paula Eckard, who states that "the family is the base from which the individual moves into society and acquires a sense of community" (34). In Tyler's words, family is the only one which can help its members against adversities:

> I always say that family life serves the same useful purpose as those high-rise fires in disaster movies. It throws people together at close quarters and allows their true characters to emerge. And unlike mere friends, family members can't very easily give up on each other and walk away; they have to stick it out. So there you have the perfect breeding ground for a plot. (Interview with Bethanne Kelly Patrick n.pag.)

What is more, Anne Tyler is interested in what happens inside of the family. As Hoagland states, she "is touched by their lesions, by the quandaries, dissipated dreams and foundered ambitions that have rendered them pot-bound" (140).

That is why scholars like Leo Schneiderman or reviewers as Jay Parini have labelled her families "dysfunctional." This idea of the dysfunctional family is repeated by numerous critics as a way of defining the central problem in Tyler's families: miscommunication. Thus, Tyler does not consider it as the only issue in order to understand her characters: "I resent the fact that blurbs on my books always say I'm concerned with lack of communication because I don't think communication is really all that hot between people. I don't think it's necessary or desirable in a lot of cases" (qtd. in Petry, *Critical Essays* 39).

Another characteristic of her fiction is that her "families are for the most part unhistorical and unchanging, groups wherein types persist unaffected by changes in social patterns in the towns where they live" (Gilbert, *Anne Tyler* 251). Other scholars, however, understand Tyler's families to be closer to reality. According to Strawser, her characters are so real that the reader "can see a bit of his own mother, father, brother, or

even self in their blurted-out words, their unspoken impulses, their mistakes, and, with any luck, their moments of triumph" (22).

In line with Susan Gilbert's statement, critics such as Everhart or Schneiderman have claimed that her families are not a reflection of contemporary American family life for various reasons. On the one hand, her families are usually large and include several generations living together in the same ancestral house, which is not a common thing in contemporary America. On the other hand, they seem to remain untouched by the historical events of the twentieth century, such as the Second World War, the Vietnam War or the Civil Rights Movement. Yet, the problem with most of the criticism on Tyler's work is that it only focuses on her novels from the beginning to her success novels but there is hardly any study of her novels from the late 1990s on. That is why it wouldn't be fair to generalize and say that all her families live together or that she neglects historical or contemporary issues.

Concerning the families who live together in the same house, they are not so common in Tyler's fiction, although we can find some examples in two of her North-Carolina novels, *If Morning Ever Comes* and *The Tin Can Tree*, where the core family lives with the extended family. In the rest of her novels most of the children live independent lives in their own homes although they always come back to visit their parents and spend some days with them in the familial house. Remarkable examples of it can be found in *The Clock Winder*, *Grownups* and *Spool*.

Although it is true that Tyler seems to situate her families in a neutral Baltimore which seems unaffected by real life circumstances, she sometimes includes small scenes where current topics appear. For instance, in *Breathing Lessons* there is a moment where there are some notes on racism when Maggie lied to a black driver and repents when she realizes that it was an old man: "He thinks we're racist or something and lied

about his wheel to be cruel" (*BL* 334). Some pages later we see some protests against the abortion when Maggie's daughter in law is attending a clinic to abort. While Maggie tries to convince her not to do it we are shown some of the signs that could be found at the entrance of the clinic: "THIS CLINIC MURDERS THE INNOCENT, one sign said, and another showed a blown-up photo of a beautiful smiling baby with GIVE HER A CHANCE printed in white across her mop of black curls" (*BL* 402).

In addition, *Saint Maybe* includes a passage with the Vietnam War when one woman narrates how her son died and in the *Amateur Marriage* the Second World War is the background for Michael's and Pauline's first meeting while a parade was taking place and most of the young men in the neighborhood enlist: "All six of the Szapp boys are enlisting, haven't you heard? And a couple of their friends besides. They've got this banner – "Watch out, Japs! Here come the Szapps!" (*AM* 5). Likewise, in her most recent novels she includes passages related to homosexuality and the terrorist attacks of September 2011 in New York (*Spool*), multiculturalism (*Grownups*, *Digging to America*) and even violence (*Noah's Compass*). Tyler uses these events as a way to set a contemporary and realistic background for her story but she is not really interested in social or historical events. In *Grownups* she even makes a point on how her female characters feel about their world and its problems when Rebecca is remembering her life before being a mother:

> And she had once been so political! She had picketed the Macadam cafeteria on behalf of its underpaid workers; she had marched against the war in Vietnam; she had plastered the door of her dorm room with anti-nuclear stickers. Now she could barely bring herself to vote. All she read in the newspaper was Ann Landers and her horoscope. Her eyes slid over Kosovo and Rwanda and hurried on (139).

The underlying meaning of these words is related to how a mother is supposed to leave everything in order to center her existence in being a mother and a wife. Therefore, once she has a family priorities change and she can only care for what

happens to her family and inside of it. Current topics, although treated in the background, are part of the action given that they affect the lives of her characters. Nevertheless, the writer wants to focus on the family as the epicenter of her stories in order to highlight how women are so absorbed by their families that they hardly ever have time for other issues.

Other critics such as Everhart suggest that Tyler follows the tradition of the novel of manners since she observes what happens around her and writes about it. Having said that, it is difficult to include Tyler among novelists such as Austen or Edith Wharton, since she does not judge her characters but she lets them act without imposing barriers or rules to follow. In addition, she is not so much interested in the romantic and traditional idea of the family and the marriage, but rather how her characters endure when something unpredicted happens. Tyler exploration of family goes beyond moral issues to transcend into the importance of family for the individual given that for Tyler "family is seen in the light of cosmic necessity" (Gibson 48). Moreover, "Tyler's families live through a repeating pattern of desertion and reunion. Those who desert – or escape – inevitably carry their pasts with them; those who remain are in danger of becoming too passive" (Gibson 49).

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Mary F. Robertson classifies novels about families into two groups: those having to do with the psychological traits of the family and those using "family sagas to represent larger historical changes" (120). Clearly, Tyler focuses more on the first type of family novels since "her prevailing theme has been the struggle of the individual to be a part of a family and to be an entity separate from that family" (Everhart 13).

Nevertheless, some of her novels use family sagas such as the Pecks, the Antons and the Whitshanks to analyze the rise and fall of the family with the passage of time. As we have mentioned, with these sagas the writer also covers different periods of time where some historical events appear in the background of the story. The word "saga," however, may not be completely accurate for Tyler; rather, the term "clan" is more appropriate when talking about her fiction, as Virginia Schaefer explains. According to this scholar, Tyler presents a lot of clans, since families are "biogenetically linked groups in which identity is based on similarities in genes, temperament, build, and habits" ("The Nature of Kinship" 16). Meticulous as she is in her descriptions, Tyler usually shows how children resemble their parents. For instance, when Jeremy in *Celestial Navigation* is thinking about how his children look like, he realizes that none of them bears a resemblance to him: "It seemed to him that all of his children were miniature Marys. He could find no physical resemblance to himself… But then he looked at Darcy – still blond and blue-eyed, nearly as tall as her mother now but with someone else's frail bones. *Her* father had not been eclipsed … How come?" (*CN* 158). Darcy is Mary's first child with her husband, with whom she stayed for some years before she left him. The fact that the girl has some resemblance to her father is a way of remembering Jeremy that Mary is still married to that man. If their children look like Mary is a parallelism with their lives, since Jeremy does not spend any time with his children and he is not even concerned with their birth. In addition, they resemble their mother in the way they behave and the habits they have because she is the only one who spends time with them.

An extended version of the family, clans are "unified through a series of mysterious duties" (Schaeffer, "The Nature of Kinship" 17). Examples of typical Tylerian clans are the Emersons, the Tulls, the Pecks, the Gaitlins, the Davitches and

the Whitshanks. Each one of her novels describes one clan that shares similarities and differences with the others but none of them is identical to the rest. For instance, if we compare the aforementioned Tulls in *Dinner* and the Davitches in *Grownups* have in common the following elements with variations:

- The father is absent but whereas Beck Tull deserted them Joe Davitch died in a car accident.
- The mother is usually not well regarded by her children. However, Rebecca is a tender mother with all her daughters and grandchildren whereas Pearl is more rude and harsh with them.
- They usually have gatherings to celebrate things which usually finish in an unexpected way due to accidents, misunderstandings or similar things since "the family dinner stands as a major image, serving as a paradigm for family expectations that come so often to disappointment" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 133).

Clans usually inhabit ancestral houses with some particularities which make them unique. Tyler generally describes the familial dwelling as part of the family and, apart from being "material manifestations of home" they "serve as signals to the reader about the conditions and characters of their inhabitants" (Green 12). From the very first novel to the last one, the buildings where the clans live are related to their feelings and actions in very much the same way as in *The Little House*, the novel that Tyler read over and over again when she was a child. Tyler's concern for houses reaches her most recent novel to the extent that the Whitshanks' business is the construction of houses. Actually, the family's patriarch has even built their familial house, which is for him part of the family: "The two were one and the same" (*SBT* 49). The Whitshanks' house is very similar to Tyler's typical examples of familial houses such as the Hawkes' house in her

first novel and the familial building where Aaron's sister lives in *The Beginner's Goodbye*. As we can see in the descriptions that Tyler gives of both houses, they have some similarities:

> A long, low wire gate stood in front of it, although the fence that went with it had been torn down years ago when the last of the children had left the toddler stage. The lawn behind it had been allowed to grow wild and weedy, half as high as a wheat field and dotted here and there with little wiry shrubs and seedy, late-fall flowers. And the sidewalk from the gate to the front porch was cracked and broken; little clumps of grass grew in it (*IMC* 33).
>
> Nandina lived in the house we'd grown up in, a brown-shingled foursquare north of Wyndhurst… Even in the daytime the house was dark, with its small, oddly placed windows and heavy fabrics (*BG* 82-83).

Both Ben Joe (*If Morning Ever Comes*) and Aaron (*The Beginner's Goodbye*) visit their familial house for a short time. Their descriptions of the house show a dislike for it, as they highlight the darkness of the houses as a result of the passage of time. Both houses are big and old and they seem to awake negative feelings on the two characters. On the contrary, the place where Ben Joe and Aaron live apart from their families is a more practical place that suits their needs. Whereas Ben Joe lives in an apartment, Aaron's home is a bungalow which suited them fine since it had "all on one floor, with a light-filled sunporch tacked onto the living room where we could stash the computer and Dorothy's medical journals" (*BG* 21-22). The familial houses look more impressive, that is why their descriptions are usually more detailed, while the new homes do not receive so much attention. Ben Joe's and Aaron's ancestral houses look dark and somber for them because the Hawkes women and Nandina respectively are cold and distant, which is why Ben Joe and Aaron do not feel at ease there. For Tyler the characters that inhabit a house have some similarities with it, as if the building had a life of its own similar to that of its inhabitants. What is more, "Tyler's houses depict her characters' conflicts over the nature of familial life" (Green 12). For instance, the house

where Aaron lived with Dorothy is partly destroyed by a tree, which causes Dorothy's death. As a result, Aaron's monotonous life changes, and so does the house, which undergoes some transformations. The bungalow mirrors Aaron's own adjustment to a new existence without Dorothy and both of them are able to endure.

Due to their desire to stay apart from their families, Ben Joe and Aaron are two examples of what Doris Betts calls "runaway" because they have left their familial houses as a way to escape from the power of their mothers and sisters. Being a runaway does not always mean to abandon the family forever as Ben Joe's father did; it is rather a feeling of rejection for one's own family and a desire to find another family. Other examples of runaways are Cody, Barnaby or Liam. Although most of the times they are usually males there are also female characters with a similar profile such as Elizabeth or Jenny. As opposed to the runaways, Betts exposes another extreme: the stay-at-home. They are usually those characters who never leave their families and are deeply rooted in the familial house. Contrary to the runaways, the stay-at-homes are usually female characters. Ben Joe's and Aaron's sisters are clear examples of it but we can also name Charlotte (*Earthly Possessions*), Delia (*Ladder of Years*) or Rebecca (*Grownups*), although they also have their own runaway moments. [21] They usually have a symbiosis with the family business, which they usually improve thanks to their kindness and patience. A good example is the Open Arms, the Davitches' party business which has been improved thanks to Rebecca's warmth towards the clients as if they were part of the family:

[21] They sometimes need a little break, which they usually think over and over as they see how much their family relies on them. If they finally leave they will always return. For instance, Charlotte decides to abandon her family because the "marriage wasn't going well" (*EP* 3) but she decides to come back after her adventurous journey.

> In the Davitches' view, the Open Arms existed simply to provide a physical space, sometimes with food and drink as well if the customer was misguided enough not to hire an outside caterer. What they hadn't understood was that almost more important was an invisible oiling of the gears, so to speak. (*BWG* 54)

Other recurrent themes in Tyler's fiction are: "leaving and returning: the desire for dream-parents and dream-lives but the confrontation with real ones; conflict between individual freedom and duty to others; the pull between private and social life" (Betts, "The Fiction of Anne Tyler" 28). That is why in this section I am going to explore the different tensions that occur in Tyler's families given that, as we have mentioned before "all of her families, not just the less traditional ones, have problems" (Everhart 3). Therefore, I am going to pay attention to how she portrays the mother-daughter/son relationship, fatherhood and runaway fathers, step-children and adoption, and multicultural families. For each issue I will present examples of different novels in order to cover the different periods of Tyler's work so that we can see if her idea of family has evolved with time.

In Tyler's work the mother has a central role in the family and her community. Without her the family would not exist since her idea of community is matriarchal, as Linda Wagner-Martin suggests (32). According to her, contemporary Southern literature has turned their focus to a matriarchal community where "women characters have been – and still are – drawing much of their sustenance and their wisdom from a female line of ancestry" (32) as opposed to the dominant role of the male in patriarchal groups. According to Catherine D'Arcy et al., mothering "is an important rite of passage in many women's lives. It also brings women into … 'the institutions of motherhood'. Even for women who do not become mothers, the effect of the motherhood institution can be profound" (30).

Tyler has got families without fathers that are able to endure despite the adversities but families without the maternal figure are rare. We can only find one novel in Tyler's fiction - *A Slipping-Down Life* - where the mother dies and the daughter, Evie, has to carry on without any maternal figure to help her. In this case it is the father the one who has to take care of Evie but he is usually working and she lacks affection. That is why she ends up obsessed with Drum, the musician to whom she will later on marry. For some critics such as Susan Gilbert, Tyler's "insistence on the primacy of roles of mother, spouse, and tender of the hearth is certainly old-fashioned, if not antifeminist" ("Anne Tyler" 276). Nonetheless, Tyler uses the traditional role of the mother in order to show her commitment with the family. For this reason, her mothers are more in line with the contemporary feminist view, which argues "for social and cultural change to support 'mothering' as an empowering rather than oppressive experience" (D'Arcy et al. 31).

All over her fiction Tyler analyzes the concept of motherhood and presents multiple examples of mothers with different profiles. However, most of the times she uses strong mothers with some flaws that make them more connected to the reality. In order to understand her idea of motherhood it is worth mentioning the concept of the "good mother" critically analyzed by Adrienne Rich in the 1970s. According to her, motherhood is divided into two parts: the real experience of motherhood by women in opposition with the experience that a woman has as a mother and her impact on the institution of motherhood, which she defines as "societal expectations, assumptions, laws and rules which govern how a woman is expected or, in some cases, forced to mother her children" (qtd. in Porter 5). Although the idea of the "good mother" has changed over the years, it is still based on the rearing of children regardless of the fact that the woman may work outside of the home. By depicting the real experiences of

motherhood in her novels, Tyler shows its ambivalences therefore she challenges the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Hence, we can classify Tyler's mothers according to their role in the family into patriarchal mothers and working mothers. Patriarchal mothers usually follow the conventions of the traditional standards because they work at home and we can usually see them sewing or at the kitchen. [22] Examples of it would be Mrs. Hawkes and Mrs. Pike. Mrs. Emerson and Mrs. Gaitlin also follow this model but they belong to well-off families, so their housework tasks are usually more related to organizing dinners and other social activities. Pearl is a working mother despite herself. Although her ideas are similar to the other patriarchal mothers, she is forced to work outside of her home because of her husband's flee. They all have in common an emotional distance from their families who makes them seem cold. As Pope points out, although "these women show strength and preparedness for any situation, some of them, for a variety of reasons, are self-absorbed and, therefore, do not use their strength to nurture their relationships with the most important people in their lives. As a result, they are frustrated, bitter, and lonely" (12-13).

The second category is that of working mothers, who "are now expected to have outside work *and* bear, preserve, nurture and train their children to be acceptable members of society" (Porter 13). Their job is not financially needed to sustain their families but they want to work outside their house such as Maggie, who has a nurse position, or Ziba, who is a part-time decorator. Inside of this category we can find at-home-business mothers like Rebecca (*Grownups*), who has her own company. Other examples are Charlotte (*Earthly Possessions*) and Delia (*Ladder of Years*), who have

[22] According to M. Porter's studies a woman in the mid-1960s, the decade when Tyler's first novel was published, was still "encouraged to spend all her time at home caring for the house and child. Thus the 'good mother' now was the mother who wanted children, loved them unconditionally, and was constantly available to them" (Porter 10).

inherited a job from their father and feel frustrated about it because they have not chosen it and initially had other aspirations for their career. In addition, as mothers, they are "[c]ompassionate, creative, maternal, devoted, assertive, and accommodating" (Pope 14). Nevertheless, they have their dreams for different lives such as Rebecca. The Davitches clan relies on her for everything because she is the motherly figure they need. Nevertheless, she yearns for a different life, as her dreams and thoughts show. Rebecca's dreams are what triggers her "quixotic interior journey, with results both funny and touching, as she explores the differences between being herself and playing the roles assigned to her by the family" (Smith 108).

In addition to the overwhelming presence of the mother, Tyler's families usually lack the father figure for different reasons: "the father had died or absconded before the action begins. In other instances, the father is remote and self-absorbed, or is still an unformed, irresponsible youth" (Schneiderman 69). From her very first novel to her more modern ones (*Grownups* or *Noah's Compass*), this prototype of family seems to be a domineering force in Tyler's work. Given that the mother is the central pillar of the family, she is under a stressful situation in which the domestic issues are a heavy load that makes her lack a deep affection towards her children. This is the case of women such as Mrs. Hawkes, Mrs. Emerson, Pearl, Mrs. Pauling or Rebecca, who do not represent the patriarchal stereotype of a tender loving mother because they are too concerned with everything that surrounds them. Although Pearl in *Dinner* is the clearest example of the "witch" archetype (as we have mentioned in other sections of this dissertation), she is not a unique character in Tyler's fiction. Tyler creates this type of ambivalent mother with a strong role in the family in order to suggest "emotions common to many women as they grapple with maternal roles and struggle to give their children earnest measures of love and acceptance" (Eckard 33-34). For example, when

Mrs. Emerson in *The Clock Winder* is explaining her feelings about her husband's death she leaves some bitter remarks about her children's attitude towards her: "I *can't* go for comfort to my children. They're not that kind, not at all … They are always moving away from me; I feel like the center of an asterisk. They *work* at moving away... They find me difficult" (*CW* 17). What she really wants to say is that she feels lonely but she is too stubborn a woman to say that aloud. In fact, her simile with the asterisk implies a certain solitude that she has assumed although she dislikes it. Nevertheless, in an act of downplaying the Emersons' attitude, Elizabeth, the listener of Mrs. Emerson's complaints, states: "Oh, well… I reckon most families work that way" (*CW* 17). With these words Elizabeth is trying to comfort the aging mother but, in a way, she is foreshadowing her own relationship with her parents. Nevertheless, as Dorothy Faye Sala Brock points out, in Tyler's families "the influence of the mother is clearly of paramount importance. By her presence or absence, she is at the center of every family… Fathers often run away, actually or figuratively, children may try, but they can never really escape their mothers' influence" (11). [23]

According to Paulina Palmer, usually feminist scholars "presented the bearing and rearing of children as a form of drudgery. They held them culpable for keeping women tied to the home, thus preventing them participating in the public sphere of paid employment and political struggle" (96). Tyler's representation of the mother clashes with this feminist idea, since most of the times she stays at home or has a minor job in order to stay at home with her children. That is why Tyler has been considered as the

[23] In line with Brock, Schneiderman explores Tyler's perception of the family in *Breathing Lessons*, which can serve as a model for other novels: "Her fictional parents seem to have greater ego-strengh than her fictional children, possibly because Tyler's families have weak father or no fathers at all. Tyler's fictional mothers have some of the 'tough' traits of survivors; sometimes they are self-absorved and remote; sometimes they are overprotective and infantilizing. But they are rarely, if ever, cruel or destructive" (78).

antifeminist model of writer. Nevertheless, her concept of the mother follows the feminist approach to motherhood, since they represented the mother with "resentment" and "hostility" (Palmer 96) given that she was considered as "the tool of patriarchy, accusing her of socializing the daughter into a subordinate role" (Palmer 113). Hence, Tyler's mothers and daughters do not usually get on well, since the daughter usually tries to escape her mother's influence with the fear of ending up like their own mothers. Despite this "matrophobia," most of the times women are unable to follow their own convictions.[24] For instance, Charlotte in *Earthly Possessions* tries to lead an independent life apart from her mother but just when she is leaving for college his father suffers a stroke and she is forced by the situation to remain at home with her mother: "home, trapped, no escape… I saw my life rolling out in front of me like an endless, mildewed rug" (*EP* 56). It is as if destiny had chosen for her. Sometimes Tyler's characters have been accused of passivity, especially her female characters. Charlotte is not an exception because she is not able to break the ties with her mother due to her sense of responsibility. Even when she gets married she stays at home with her husband and her mother.

The close mother-daughter relationship is a rare issue in Tyler's fiction because mothers are usually overprotective with their sons or if they only have daughters they do not seem to be so affectionate. This idea contradicts the patriarchal dimension where the son is an autonomous individual whereas the mother "tends to cultivate a symbiotic bond with her daughter since she seeks unconsciously to re-create the intimate bond she enjoyed with her own mother" (Palmer 114). Most of the times mothers and daughters are distant from each other and as soon as the daughter leaves the family house her

[24] "Matrophobia" is a term used by Adrienne Rich and refers to the fear of becoming one's mother (qtd. in Castelao, "Madre ausente" 159).

communication with her mother is not very frequent or shows a lack of personal confessions. This is the case in novels such as *The Clock Winder* with Melissa, Margaret and Mary, *Celestial Navigation* with Laura and Amanda, *Breathing Lessons* with Daisy, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* with Jenny or *The Amateur Marriage* with Lindy. Most of the times Tyler presents a mother who feels a stronger preference for her sons. Consequently, Tyler's "mothers rarely serve their daughters well… The mother is often out of tune with the world of the daughter" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 92).

Regarding *Celestial Navigation*, Mrs. Pauling's preference for Jeremy is based on two facts: her lack of a male figure once her husband abandons the family as well as Jeremy's weak nature. Mrs. Pauling does not treat her children with equity since one of them is more dependent than the others: "Mother was a *receiver*, requesting and expecting even from her own daughters without ever giving anything out, but she spoiled Jeremy from the moment he was born and I believe that that is the root of all his troubles. A mama's boy. She preferred him over everyone" (*CN* 17). This reflection is done by Amanda, who shows her frustration and resentment towards her mother. But "Amanda's anger is symptomatic of her profound, unexpressed pain over her mother's death. Death is, for the survivor, the final abandonment, and anger is an apropriate response to such an abandonment" (Farrell 222). Since Amanda is one of the marginalized daghters, her perception is biased against her siblings, especially his brother, because she "felt her mother had emotionally deserted her for the younger children" (Farrell 222). Similarly, Maggie's son Jesse in *Breathing Lessons* is much more independent than Jeremy. However, Maggie is as overprotective with him as Mrs Pauling with Jeremy. Her failure in raising him adequately is what spoils him:

> When Jesse was just a baby Ira was always saying, "Don't pick him up every time he cries. Don't feed him every time he's hungry. You'll spoil him."

> "Spoil him?" Maggie had asked. "Feeding him when he's hungry is spoiling him? That's nonsense."
> But she had sounded more confident than she'd felt. *Was* she spoiling him? (*BL* 391).

The problem with Maggie is that she is too indulgent with him. On the contrary, Maggie's husband, Ira, is more strict and less loving. These opposed views towards child rearing are the origin of most of their arguments: "They had quarreled over Jesse ever since he was born, it seemed now, always taking the same stances. Ira criticized, Maggie excused" (BL 402). According to Bail, "Maggie is everyone's mother. She is warm and expansive, opens her heart to strangers, and collects strays" (139) but with her daughter Daisy she is not able to transmit the same feeling of motherhood as with Jesse. In fact, she seems resentful of the fact that her daughter is so autonomous since she was a baby: "She had always been a bit precocious. In her infancy Ira had called her Lady-Baby, because she was so mature and reserved, her small face a knot of opinion" (*BL* 396).

Nevertheless, Daisy seems a distant character in the novel, which pays more attention to Jesse's troubled life and marriage. Daisy's relationship with her mother is not at all developed in the book because it seems that for Maggie her son is more important. As Hoagland points out, "Maggie, although exasperating, isn't sad, and like… Ezra Tull… she is trying to make a difference, to connect or unite people, beat the drum for forgiveness and compromise" (142).That is why Maggie tries to help Jesse with his broken marriage, for which Maggie is responsible since she is the one who forces the union by means of lies and tricks.

With both Jeremy and Jesse Tyler portraits two dependent sons that are weaker than their sisters, therefore, they constantly demand their attention and their cares, especially from their mothers. This archetype is repeated in more modern novels such as

The Beginner's Goodbye, where Aaron remembers how his mother and sister were usually overprotective with him because of his small disability (he needs a cane to walk):

> Mom would literally wring her hands as she watched from the front window, but my father told her to let me do whatever I felt capable of. But of course he was off at the office all day, and middle-aged by then besides.
> …
> So I mostly spent my childhood fending off the two women in my life – my mother and my sister, both of them lying in wait to cosset me to death. (*BG* 17-18).

Aaron's weakness is a mixture of two previous male characters: Ezra, the clumsy child in *Dinner*, and Michael in *Marriage* who also has a minor incapacity as a result of a war wound. The difference from Aaron to these previous male characters is that he wants to be a normal man, hence his love for Dorothy whom he liked because of "her matter-of-fact attitude, her avoidance of condescension" (*BG* 63).

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As we have seen, it is not easy to analyze the mother-daughter relationship in Tyler, since there are always more strings attached. Generally speaking "the intensity of the bond between mothers and daughters often seems to push to the margin other forms of relation and consequently to decenter the traditional image of the patriarchal family" (Clayton 141-2). Women seem to be isolated from other forms of socialization such as friendship because they are too focused on their families and they do not have time to meet friends. This idea of a community of women is "regarded by feminists as providing both refuge *from* and a challenge *to* the oppressive facets of a patriarchal society" (Palmer 126). Yet, Tyler usually depicts women with few or no friends, which highlights their strong commitment with the family and their separation from society,

which is a characteristic of the patriarchal structures. Therefore, "…it is the absence of women's friendships in Tyler's novels that in great part creates the extreme isolation that many of the women characters endure and denies them the network of information and support that women traditionally give each other" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 92). Thus, some of them try to escape such solitude by abandoning their families like Delia or Charlotte. As we can see with these two characters the ideas of "community and relationships are central to the development of the self" (Mulligan 191). Others like Rebecca wish for a more outgoing life and wonder how their own personality has changed over the years (*BWG* 53).

We can see this lack of friendship in previous novels such as *Celestial Navigation* or *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. When Mrs. Pauling dies almost only the ladies from her church attended the funeral parlor, which is an example on how religious women are supported by her community. Pearl is a typical example of isolated woman. Even her children see her apart from the community. The following passage illustrates Cody's feelings about her isolation, which makes him feel different from other children:

> What he wouldn't give to have a mother who acted like other mothers! He longed to see her gossiping with a little gang of women in the kitchen, letting them roll her hair up in pincurls, trading beauty secrets, playing cards, losing track of time … He wished she had some outside connection, something beyond that suffocating house (*DHR* 60).

In fact, when Pearl died, her family could not find friends or relatives to call because "she never wrote anyone, and most of her relatives are dead" (*DHR* 294). It is worth exploring Cody's thoughts during his mother's funeral after the minister had said that she "was a devoted wife and loving mother and a pillar of the community" (*DHR* 295). The priest gave a general speech which could be applied to anybody but Cody's meticulous nature makes a complete analysis of Pearl's existence:

> It slipped the minister's mind… that she hadn't been anyone's wife for over a third of a century, that she'd been a frantic, angry, sometimes terrifying mother; and that she'd never shown the faintest interest in the community but dwelt in it like a visitor from a superior neighborhood (DHR 296).

Cody's depiction of his mother delves back into her solitary nature and how she had not been at all the loving mother and the sociable person that society, and even her own family, would have expected of her. Nancy Chodorow, one of the most relevant feminist scholars on motherhood, analyzes in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1979) how women learn to mother as part of the requirements of society because "[b]eing a mother… is not only bearing a child – it is being a person who socializes and nurtures" (11). Consequently, Pearl's life failed in all the patriarchal domains of the woman: the marriage, the children and the society.

A different example is Mrs. Emerson in *The Clock Winder*. Despite her husband's death and her children's absences, she is a sophisticated aging grandmother who has got friends to meet. Nevertheless, her solitude is more evident at the end of the novel when everybody seems to be away from her due to her obsessive way of organizing her children's lives: Elizabeth is no more her handyman, she has lost her servant, some of her friends have died and her children are more absent than ever. As a result, she starts to wonder about her role in the family and how she sees her grandchildren, her friends and her house (*CW* 188). This isolation from social life is highlighted by her description of the house, which seems to be the seclusion place she does not wish to abandon. However, her family is what really matters for her, given that minutes after she suffers a stroke she starts looking around her kitchen and wondering how her children are going to manage without her:

> How fortunate that she has got the children grown before this happened. They *were* grown, weren't they? Weren't they? … How could she bear to look down and see her poor, unsatisfied children struggling on without her? And don't tell

> her she wouldn't see them. If heaven was where people stopped being concerned with such things then no woman would be happy there (*CW* 193).

Mrs Emerson's duties towards her children are so powerful for her that she even thinks about them when she is about to die. Maybe these thoughts are what keep her alive, since she is able to resist the stroke and see how her children and Elizabeth come back to take care of her the way she had always wanted.

The Clock Winder and *Grownups* are the two novels where Tyler analyses the mother-daughter relationship more in depth, since both stories picture a mother with several daughters. For both of them, the relationship with her children is not easy, since the daughters are not usually close to their mother. In addition, although Rebecca is younger, they are both widows, something that makes even more difficult for them to manage their large families.

The Clock Winder is a more traditional story, since it does not include the concept of divorce or the step-children that we see in *Grownups*. It pictures a family with Mrs. Emerson as "the vortex of the Baltimore Emerson family" (*Kirkus Reviews* n.pag.) but she is unable to "establish a strong emotional and spiritual core from which to deal with people and events" (Petry, *Understanding* 75). As opposed to other Tyler matriarchs, she depends on external people to do the domestic tasks such as the cooking, the gardening and the housekeeping. For Petry, her self-reliance is the problem for the whole family, since her children haven't learnt to be independent from her given that she wants to control everything. Mrs. Emerson has seven children, among them three daughters: Melissa, Margaret and Mary. Although Melissa does not appear in many scenes, Margaret and Mary seem to be the strongest children of the family since they are the ones who are able to take their own decisions and discuss them with their mother. Mary, for instance, argues with her mother about who is going to take care of her

children while she is on holidays. After some consideration, Mrs. Emerson offers to babysit but Mary prefers her mother-in-law because her mother is an overwhelming presence for her:

> "Mother, can't you stand on your own *feet* any more? You're out here all the time, and every visit you make I have the feeling you might not go home again. You get so *settled*. You seem so *permanent*. You act as if you're taking over my household." (*CW* 192)

Mary's words troubled Mrs. Emerson in such a way that she suffers a stroke because she does not want to see the truth. This preference of the mother-in-law over the own mother is not new since it also appears in other stories such as *Celestial Navigation* or *Earthly Possessions*. Both Mary and Charlotte have a difficult relationship with their mothers which forces them to rely on their mothers-in-law, eccentric women whose existence does not depend on a man and are completely opposed to Mary's and Charlotte's mothers. Their fondness for external women is a way to replace their mother with another model the daughter likes more: an active and independent person with eccentric ideas instead of the passive and monotonous mother who is always criticizing her daughter's actions. The novels about women's lives re-create a bizarre world and "the child sees its world as essentially eccentric. All children, after all, believe that their family is more bizarre than the next one" (Coward, "The True Story" 41). Yet, "the alienation a daughter faces when she rejects her mother's lifestyle is compounded by guilt over disappointing her parents and feelings of inadequacy for not meeting their expectations" (Kanoza 30). This failure in accomplishing the expectations of their families is what provokes the search for a substitute mother who seems more supportive.

Similarly, the mothers also try to find substitute daughters in outsiders although their reason is different, since they want to fill the void left by the distant daughter. This

idea of the substitute mother and the substitute daughter is very clear with Mrs. Emerson and Elizabeth in *The Clock Winder*. Due to the difficulties Mrs. Emerson has to get along with her daughters, she prefers Elizabeth, who is the handyman for the house but ends up fixing Mrs. Emerson's familial life as well. Mary is jealous of her mother's preference but "Mrs. Emerson in fact is depending upon Elizabeth to help her hold her life together, and Elizabeth benefits by finally having someone who depends upon her. In their differentness, Elizabeth and Mrs. Emerson fit together 'like puzzle pieces'" (Bail 44-45). Whereas Elizabeth has failed to fit in her own family, who consider her as the black sheep without prospects, her success as a handyman turns her into a crucial person for the Emersons, who cannot live without her. For "Mrs. Emerson knows nothing of Elizabeth's past and thus frees the young women from her history of failure to blossom into a competent caretaker" (Kanoza 30). Thus, Elizabeth abandons her own family who had always criticized her decisions. In my opinion Elizabeth escapes her rather conservative family (with another preacher as father) because she does not want to have a traditional role of daughter, wife and mother. Although she ends up marrying and having children, her independence as a woman is bigger, since the Emersons are the ones who rely on her. Thus, she enjoys the restoring role (both metaphorically and literally) that this family has given her in detriment of the submissive role that her own family would have granted her.

Back When We Were Grownups presents the mother-daughter conflict from a different perspective. In this story we learn how Rebecca thinks back about her past and how her decision of marrying an older man instead of her college sweetheart changed all her previous plans. As she intends to retake her broken relationship the reader meets her large family of step-daughters and step-grandchildren. As opposed to Mrs. Emerson, she is a very active woman since she is able to balance her responsibilities as the head

of the family with the managing of The Open Arms, her party business. The name of the business is not casual, given that Rebecca always receives family and strangers with her arms open, showing her generosity and her warmth, a trait which also makes her differ from Mrs. Emerson. Thus, there is a bittersweet impression given that it seems that she does not receive as much as she gives from her step-daughters and even from her own biological daughter. For instance, when she informs them about her love affair, their answer is not what she had imagined, since two of them feel anger and another one expresses her lack of interest for Rebecca's relationship:

> Only Biddy reacted as she was supposed to. "A man in your life! Really" she said. "Oh, Beck, I didn't realize."
> …
> Sometimes Rebecca thought that the whole point of having lots of daughters was, the law of averages said at least one of them might behave right at any given time. (*BWG* 211-212)

This scene shows how there is a lack of empathy on the side of the daughters, who are commonly used to having their mother available for them at any time to take care of their children and to organize family gatherings. With a man by her side their supremacy feels threatened and that is why most of their reactions are not what her mother had expected. As we have mentioned, Tyler's women don't have female friends they can trust so Rebecca cannot talk about her frustration or make any confessions to anybody. This isolation is even more highlighted by the fact that Rebecca's step-daughters seem to long for a different one. Even though Rebecca tended her family, her dead husband is preferred over all her efforts:

> The easier days were the chaotic ones, where she proceeded from minute to minute just dealing with demands. Soothing the children, cooking their meals, helping with their homework. Standing stolid and expressionless when NoNo pushed her away and ran sobbing to her room, or when Patch asked, "Why couldn't *you* have died, and Daddy gone on living?" (*BWG* 234)

Moreover, she wonders what her stepdaughters think of her and remembers the beginnings right after her husband's death in a car accident:

> Of course there'd been a few of those you're-not-my-mother scenes at the start. ("You cow!" Patch had shouted once. "You big old frumpy fat cow; just wait till my mama gets back!") By now, though, all three seemed cordial and even affectionate, in an offhand sort of way. (*BWG* 42)

Apart from what the children think about their mothers it is also worth mentioning what the mother sees in her children that she doesn't like. These negative feelings to her own children are what make her feel frustrated as a mother and, to a certain extent, as a wife. For instance, when Delia (*Ladder of Years*) starts to wonder about leaving her family it is because she feels she is no longer needed by her three children, which she describes as "great, galumphing, unmannerly, supercilious creatures" (*LY* 18). This is one of the causes for her temporary flee away from her family.

According to Leo Schneiderman, the reason why some parents (mothers and fathers) abandon their family is because they "require proximity rather than intimacy" since they want to find another family "as an antidote to loneliness" (79). This idea can explain why some of Tyler's characters, especially the fathers, abandon their families, since most of them create another family when they leave their wives. When we talk about fatherhood in Tyler's families, we can consider two opposite ideas: her "abdicating fathers" (Voelker 26) and her fathers with "impressive fathering skills" (Mahn Nollen 218). Let us explore these two different categories, since they depict a perspective that may seem patriarchal but, in a sense, is a vindication of the role of the female in the family.

Abdicating fathers usually leave in a quiet and spontaneous way, as if the situation had not been planned in advance. As Voelker mentions "Tyler's abdicating fathers… always seem to act with an inadvertence that surprises even themselves" (26).That is

why sometimes the wives think that they may come back. Nevertheless, the "departure of fathers has consequences, but scarcely tragic ones. The family members endure" (Voelker 26). Some examples of how fathers desert can be found in different stages of Tyler's career such as in *If Morning Ever Comes*, *Dinner* or *Noah's Compass*. Their escape is usually narrated with a comic touch that reduces the dramatic tension of the moment in a very Tylerian style, which presents them as funny victims of their own selfishness. Let us see some examples of it taken from three novels in different periods. In *If Morning Ever Comes* Mr. Hawkes deserts his family for a kinder woman with whom he has a boy. Nevertheless, Ben Joe always rejects the idea of the desertion for "if his father had meant to go to Lilli Bell's, he wouldn't have played that bagpipe joke on them. He loved every one of his children; he wouldn't have left them with any unkind tricks" (*IMC* 62). Mr. Hawkes leaves his family suddenly without even saying so. Although the reason why he left is not clear, Petry suggests that it may be related to Mrs. Hawkes' "refusal to talk at all about deeply emotional matters" and her silences, which are "childish denials of reality" (*Understanding* 37). A similar reason could be the key for Beck Tull's desertion in *Dinner* but at least he explains to his wife clearly the reasons why he wants to leave his family:

> One Sunday night in 1944, he said he didn't want to stay married. They were sending him to Norfolk, he said; but he thought it best if he went alone… "Why?" she asked him, calmly enough. He didn't answer. "Beck? Why?" All he did was study his fists… He would change his mind in the morning. "We'll sleep on it," she told him.
> But he said, "It's tonight I'm going." (*DHR* 7-8)

Although it is difficult for Pearl to cope with this situation, she got some feedback from her husband, who wrote her from time to time to inform her of his whereabouts. Pearl does not want to accept the situation since she believes that her husband will come

back any time soon. In spite of this self-denial of the reality, she is able to endure even at the expense of her own children, who suffer her rage and her frustrations.

In a more modern novel, *Noah's Compass*, Tyler also presents a similar situation with Liam's father, an eighty-year-old man who left his family for another woman. However, the father here has always tried to have a close relationship with his children, even though the circumstances were not easy:

> "I didn't desert, you know. I did play fair and square. I leveled with your mother and asked her for a divorce. I sent her money every month as regular as clockwork, and I tried to stay in touch with you and Julia. You think I had it easy? It was hell, there for a while. And everybody looking at me like I was the villain – some bad guy in a dime novel. I was no villain. I just couldn't bear to go to my grave knowing I'd wasted my life. I just wanted my share of happiness. Can't you understand how I felt?" (*NC* 209)

Although the fathers leave their wife forever, they eventually come back sometime to see their children. Even Beck (*Dinner*), who is absent throughout the whole novel, appears at the end. In addition, most of them face cold-hearted women who become even more and more distant due to the broken marriage and the rage they feel towards their husbands.

When analysing Tyler's abdicating fathers some questions arise. Why do they leave? Why do they create a new family if they already have one? One reason for leaving may be related to childrearing. Tyler usually depicts weak fathers who feel frustrated with their career or men with a very demanding job. In addition, they are unable to cope with the birth of their children, who is usually seen as a female's responsibility. Whereas women seem to be more mature after the birth of a child, men seem to yearn for their lost supremacy in the family and normally treat their progeny in a distant way. As Margaret M. Gullette states, while for "most of Tyler's women, the baby, not the husband, is the true sign of entry into responsible adulthood… Tyler's male characters don't feel so intensely about the young." (327).

We can find numerous examples of such lack of tenderness on the part of the fathers, who sometimes father a large number of children such as Mr. Hawkes or Morgan. Even the fathers who stay at home are what Deborah Lee Pope labels as the "retreating male" who usually "may resolve their impulse to leave home or they may be doomed to remain in a state of withdrawal" (ii). Examples of retreating males can be Ben Joe, Jeremy, Ira, Michael, Liam or Aaron since they are too dependent on women for the domestic tasks. On the contrary, Tyler also creates the "competent female" who are generally "self-centered and inhibiting in their management of their families or they may possess or develop a revitalizing flexibility" (Pope ii). We can think of Elizabeth, Mary, Maggie, Rebecca, Pauline and Barbara, since they try to adapt to their husband's needs. For instance, Jeremy in *Celestial Navigation* sees Mary as "supplier, feeder, caretaker" (*CN* 160) the same way that Michael in *The Amateur Marriage* says of Pauline "she was a much stronger person than he was" (*AM* 41).

Despite these differences between men and women in Tyler's novels, the writer denies that female characters are stronger: "I'm not interested in generalizations about the sexes. Men and women can do anything the other sex can do" (qtd. in Willrich 509). Another reason for fleeing fathers to create another family may be the belief that their original family does not work properly for them. Yet, they do not seem able to understand that they are part of the problem. Moreover, they "find their own biogenetic, nuclear families so lacking that they adopt replacements" (Norton 13). Examples of it are Mr. Hawkes, Morgan, Beck Tull, Macon and Liam. Morgan, the main character of *Morgan's Passing*, is one of the most outstanding examples because when "he casts aside his first family for another, it is apparent that he merely trades one set of bothersome details for another" (Durham, "City Perspectives" 49). He even voices this idea with an ironic tone: "I transplanted all the mess from home. It's like some crazy

practical joke. Isn't it?" (*MP* 260). Given that the male capacities to nurture haven't been developed the way female ones are, they are prepared for "their less affective later family role, and for primary participation in the impersonal extrafamilial world of work and public life" (Chodorow 7).

Yet, Tyler's male characters do not only "achieve growth or salvation by splitting off from a marital relationship or a family of origin, but the narrative centrality of the primary family can become dislodged by the acute insinuation of certain well-developed extra-familial characters into the lives of primary family characters" (Norton 3). This is the case of women such as Muriel (*The Accidental Tourist*), Sophia (*A Patchwork Planet*) or Eunice (*Noah's Compass*). These women are outsiders in the family but they achieve some changes in the male characters that make them feel better than with their previous wives. Sophia, for instance, succeeds in rebuilding Barnaby's broken relationship with his daughter and he makes him more available to his parents. Nevertheless, except Muriel, none of the other female characters achieves to stay with the male character for a long time since there are unforeseen circumstances that change the situation. By adding this outsider element, Tyler "optimistically permits the basic survival of a "traditional" family while at the same time broadening its membership" (Norton 6).

Apart from the absent fathers, Tyler also uses fathers with remarkable fathering skills that make them quite unique. Although they are not so common in Tyler's fiction, we can mention some examples such as Ian, Sami, Brad and Stem. They have in common something that Tyler also uses in her novels as a recurrent device: non-biological children (Ian, Sami and Brad) or non-biological parents (Stem). In the case of Ian in *Saint Maybe* he makes a commitment to take care of his nieces and nephew after considering himself responsible for the death of their parents. That is why he assumes

his role as primary caretaker. As we have mentioned in the section of Tyler and feminism, there is a role reversal which is described as "countercultural" by reviewers such as Hawley, since Ian assumes a role who is usually reserved for women, an uncommon situation even for his parents:

> "I don't believe this. I do not believe this. No matter how long I've been a mother, it seems my children can still come up with something new and unexpected to do to me."
> "I'm not doing this to *you*! Why does everything have to relate to you all the time? It's for me, can't you get that into your head? It's something I have to do for myself, to be forgiven." (*SM* 127)

Moreover, Tyler highlights Ian's masculinity before assuming his parental role by describing Ian as a stereotypical outgoing teenage boy who enjoys going out with Cicely, his girlfriend. These qualities are even more emphasized with his sexual desires, which are narrated in different passages. Sexual scenes in Tyler's fiction are rare, that is why their significance in this novel is so evident: "He saw himself as a plotter and a predator, sex-obsessed; Lord, there were days when thoughts of sex with anyone – it didn't have to be Cicely – never left his mind for a moment" (*SM* 108). But once he enters the Church of the Second Chance and decides to change his life, he assumes his role as "a "male mother" who nourishes and supports children" (Durham, "City Perspectives" 49). What is more, his familial burdens are such that he avoids any sexual relation until he finally meets Rita, who will become his wife at the end of the novel. We can see Ian's development as the head of the family. At the beginning he is an immature teenage boy with hardly any concern for family but throughout the novel he is able to organize his life in such a way that he not only ends up taking care of three children but also doing the housework and taking decisions for his parents.

Ian's abnegated motherly role is not new. Tyler already includes this idea of fathering children that do not share biological traits with the protagonists but end up as

part of the clans in earlier novels such as in *Earthly Possessions* where Charlotte's mother has doubts about Charlotte being her true daughter. Such doubts are passed on to Charlotte, who believes that she is not her mother's true daughter. In addition, Charlotte also mothers a boy who is not hers or her husband's but has been abandoned by her mother. Although she already has a daughter her desire to have another child is such that she is willing to accept this "informal" adoption in order to take care of another child:

> "Charlotte, he hasn't got a father, his mother ran off and left him with his grandmother, and this morning we found the grandmother dead. I assumed you'd want him."
> "But then his mother will come back," I said. "We could lose him at any moment." I started folding napkins.
> "We could lose anybody at any moment. We could lose Selinda."
> "You know what I mean," I said. "He isn't ours."
> "Nobody's ours," said Saul. (*EP* 138)

Saul's last sentence is another example of the idea of belonging to a family in spite of the different genes.

This assimilation to a family also happens in her latest novel, *Spool*, where "Stem was not a Whitshank. But only in the most literal sense" (*SBT* 81). Douglas (called Stem by most of the members of the family) starts living with the Whistshanks after his father's death. Nevertheless, he is taken as one of them. In fact, he seems to be the preferred child by his non-biological parents, since he was "naturally good … obedient and sweet-tempered and kind; he didn't even have to try" (*SBT* 12). As a father he is usually with his three boys, although it is his wife the one who stays at home and does most of the housework. It is as if he had developed a paternal responsibility to counteract the fact that he had no biological parents. Nevertheless, he is very different from his non-biological brother Denny, who is divorced and sees her daughter only

some days a month. As we will see at the end of this section, Denny and Stem represent the duality of the good son and the black sheep in what refers to family matters.

Fatherhood and motherhood are considered by Tyler not only as a biological condition but also part of the human nature. Step-children as a result of second marriages are also part of the issue, since they grow up with a different mother from her biological mother. It is the case of mothers such as Jenny, Rebecca, Barbara and Abby who despite having their own biological children they also have to take care of a non-biological progenies that transforms the family into a large entity where the ideal term is difficult to find:

> It was pathetic to recollect that once, when Rebecca was first married, she had suggested to the girls that they call her "Mom." "But you're not our mom," they had said. "That would be a lie." Oh, children were such sticklers for the absolute, literal truth. (The other day, introducing Peter to the plumber, Rebecca had said, "Meet my future stepdaughter's stepson; I mean my stepdaughter's future stepson. My stepgrandson-to-be, I mean.") (*BWG* 90)

Tyler's cast of characters includes non-biological stepchildren as a way of vindicating a more modern idea of family in order to get closer to the definition of clan that we studied at the beginning of the section. We have already commented on how *Dinner* is a good example of Tyler's approach to family. In it, Tyler "examines many facets of family relationships, particularly as they evolve between mother and child, fester between siblings and extend into the world beyond" (Eckard 34). Jenny, the youngest of the Tull children, does not have a lot of recollections of her father before he deserted them. Nevertheless, she is able to carry on with her life in a successful way, since she ends up becoming a pediatrician and has a lively family life. Yet, she finds the right man for her after marrying three times. Eventually, she has seven children to take care of, only two of them of her own. This large offspring will provoke funny situations that she is able to see as part of a natural process of childrearing, especially when the

children are not biologically hers. One of the funniest anecdotes occurs when she goes to visit one of her stepsons' teachers because Slevin has stolen something from the school. When the teacher, who is a priest, tries to give details of the stolen object he is at a loss for words: "A rhinoceros foot… in the shape of an umbrella stand. Or an umbrella stand in the shape of a rhinoceros foot. It was an actual rhinoceros foot from… wherever rhinoceri come from" (*DHR* 220). The priest is being serious when he explains the subject and so does Jenny when she says: "I wonder if his mother had a rhinoceros foot" (*DHR* 220). What Jenny means is if Slevin's mother could have had a similar object to the one that the priest is just describing. But the priest understands it literally, ie. if Slevin's mother could have had a foot the size of a rhinoceros. Jenny realizes that her thought could have a double meaning and she starts to laugh at the same time that she tries to explain what she really meant: "I don't mean *she* had rhinoceros feet… oh, Lord…" (221). Jenny also takes it as a joke when her mother accuses Slevin of stealing her vacuum cleaner. At first Jenny does not believe that her stepson could have stolen something but her mother tells her not to trust him because "he's hardly more than a stranger, Jenny. I mean, you got those children the way other people get weekend guests" (210). When Jenny finally finds the vacuum cleaner in Slevin's room she and Pearl wonder why he has done it. Whereas Pearl believes that "he is asking for a psychologist or some such" (211), Jenny is more realistic and considers that "more likely he's asking for a neater house… The dust balls on his closet floor have started raising a family" (211). Later on, Slevin excuses himself and tells Jenny that he had stolen the vacuum cleaner because it reminded him of his mother. So when Jenny is talking to the priest, she makes fun of the fact that Slevin may steal anything that reminds him of his mother:

> "Picture it! Grand pianos. Kitchen sinks. Why, we'll have his mother's whole household… her photo albums and her grade-schools yearbooks, her college roommate asleep on our bed and her high school boyfriends in our living room." (*DHR* 221)

For Jenny the whole situation is extremely funny and she takes it as a comic thing. Her laughter is a way to laugh at herself for not being a common housewife but a doctor who does not have time for cleaning. It is her way of vindicating her role as a mother but also her role as a woman with her own professional life apart from motherhood and domestic life. In spite of having a large family with five non-biological children, Jenny never seems to be as overwhelmed as Rebecca but she is rather optimistic. That is how Tyler pictures her families: "Her characters face disappointment and often tragedy, and most of them do so with courage and good humor" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 65).

In *Digging to America*, one of her later novels, Tyler goes even further and she includes the topic of the formal adoption together with an ethnic element which already appeared in *Grownups*. The novel presents Tyler's typical white middle-class family and one American-Iranian family. Although they did not know each other before, both families are linked by the arrival of an adopted Korean girl. [25] It presents a modern idea of family where fathers participate in the domestic tasks in a more spontaneous way than in previous novels. According to Guleria and Neelakantan Sami and Ziba "share a happy married life free from gender stereotyping. Considering that both of them are employed, Sami is wise enough to reject role stereotyping altogether and happily assists Ziba with household responsibilities including child care (3).

In addition, they share a concern for giving birth together with the woman. The only parental tasks that fathers cannot do is giving birth and breast-feeding. Apart from

[25] The idea for the novel is part of Tyler's experience, since her husband was Iranian: "At the time we married, he had over 300 close relatives, all intricately involved with each other …They were so much fun to watch that I thought I would like to invent a similar family for my book" (qtd. in Cincotta, n.pag.).

these biological aspects, the psychological and even legal implications of being a parent should be equally shared by the mother and the father. Nevertheless, "the contemporary reproduction of mothering occurs through social structurally induced psychological processes… women's mothering reproduces itself cyclically. Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother" (Chodorow 7). That is why when this desire of motherhood is not fulfilled a feeling of void and guilt invades the woman. For instance, before considering adoption Bitsy Donaldson tried for a long time before she gave up the idea of having children of her own. What is more, she even considered that it was her fault:

> [Bitsy] spent fifteen years trying to get pregnant … She endured every possible test and grueling medical procedure, and more than once it was on the tip of her tongue to ask her doctors "Could this be *my* doing? I don't mean just my body's doing; I mean, is it my nature? Am I not soft enough, not receptive enough? (*DA* 68).

Bitsy's words echo Charlotte's attitude after her miscarriage: "This is just something my body did" (EP 138). In *Digging to America* Tyler analyzes how adoption is a way for fulfilling the desire to mother in two different families for it is presented as an alternative to biological mothering. As the novel develops we discover how Bitsy has convinced herself that adoption is not only a way of mothering but also a way of doing a good thing for a child in need. That is why she starts considering her decision as something better than just giving birth as other mothers have done: "Oh, wasn't adoption *better* than childbirth? More dramatic, more meaningful. Bitsy felt sorry for those poor women who had merely delivered" (*DA* 87).

The different cultural backgrounds are not the only difference in the two families. For the Donaldsons, the American family, adoption is their only way of being parents because Bitsy is sterile. On the contrary, for the Yazdans it is the man the one who cannot produce children. These different situations contradict the patriarchal idea of the

always virile male and the sterile female. Even Maryam Yazdan had assumed that it was Ziba the one to blame: "She winced too at recalling her automatic assumption that Ziba's failure to get pregnant was exactly that – *Ziba's* failure. When they discovered that it was, instead, Sami's failure, Maryam had been shocked." (*DA* 21). Coming from an Iranian family, the stigma of a sterile male is what could put Maryam against adoption but she accepted it as part of her son's happiness and another way of becoming part of the American culture.

Another difference that the novel depicts is related to the different ways of mothering. Bitsy is the traditional stay-at-home mother who rejects working outside of the home in order to take care of the children whereas Ziba has a part-time job as a way to escape the traditional standards of the patriarchal Iranian society and so becoming a more Americanized woman. In addition, their different outfits provide a complete different image of the mother. Whereas Bitsy is considered a "homespun wife," Ziba shows a more modern image which is "mesmerizing" (*DA* 30). As Tummala-Narra puts it, the "myth of the perfect mother encompasses the wish of maintaining a woman's sense of youthfulness and attractiveness" (8). In this sense, Ziba is a more modern mother despite her traditional cultural background. With her Tyler tries to portray an Iranian woman that has become so American that she has reached the ideals of the American dream more than even Bitsy, the white American middle class mother. That is why her clothes are always fashionable and attractive whereas Bitsy's are informal and motherly.

The aforementioned ideas of parenting biological and non-biological children are a way of showing a "central theme of Tyler's fiction: how people affect each other, how the lives of other alter our own" (Yardley, washingtonpost.com). Consequently, her stories not only show happy family moments but they also depict siblings' rivalries and

resentments. Most of the parents that have more than one child show a preference of boys over girls, something that provokes jealousies. What is more, if there are more than two boys within the family the kindest boy is the one preferred whereas the other one may end up becoming a black sheep. This idea is already present in *The Tin Can Tree* with the hypochondriac Ansel and his tolerant brother James but it is later on developed in *Dinner*, *A Patchwork Planet* and *Spool*. The black sheep usually has an opposed sibling who is more innocent and easy-going such as Cody versus Ezra, Barnaby versus Jeff and Denny versus Stem. Jenny is the first one to introduce this term because she feels that she misses something in her family, as her thoughts in the following passage show:

> But really. Were they all here? In Jenny's new mood, her family seemed too small. These three young people and this shrunken mother, she thought, were not enough to sustain the occasion. They could have used several more members – a family clown, for instance; and a genuine black sheep, blacker than Cody; and maybe one of those managerial older sisters who holds a group together by force. (*DHR* 111)

Instead of missing the paternal figure, she mentions the archetypes of a family such as the person who usually tells jokes (the "family clown"), the disreputable member of the family or "black sheep," and a loving sister to keep the family "together by force." The way Jenny thinks of her family is funny because she misses to have something that she already has in her family, although maybe it is not so clearly defined because she has not been raised in the "proper" idea of family. Cody can be considered both the black sheep and the clown, given that he is always making ironic remarks of his family. Ezra is the one trying to unite the family but his family is unable to see it, considering that he is too absorbed in his restaurant.

Nevertheless, one of the characters that best represents the idea of the black sheep is that of Barnaby. With *A Patchwork Planet* Tyler's message is "that we can trust that

all people genuinely fit into this patchwork planet, even those with incongruous private lives – lives that remind us, oddly enough, of our own" (Steinberg 51). Barnaby is a thirty-year old divorced man who lives in a gloomy apartment and works as handyman for a company called Rent-a-Back. As part of his work he has to help a lot of people, mostly elderly, who really appreciate his job and consider that he is a "good person" (*PP* 3). Having such a good reputation for his reliability among his customers, his family does not trust him on account of his disruptive teenage life. Consequently, he is taken as the black sheep because he does not seem to have aspirations, as his ex-wife points out: "A rented room, … an unskilled job, a bunch of shiftless friends. No goals and no ambitions; still not finished college at the age of thirty" (*PP* 19). His family's expectations on him were very high and he has failed to fulfil them, something that his family considers an offense, as his mother's words explain: "He has deliberately chosen employment that has no lasting point to it, no reputation, no future, in preference to work that's of permanent significance. And he's doing it purely for spite" (*PP* 79).

Likewise, Tyler's last novel presents Denny, a young man with no prospects. He is unable to keep the same job for a long time the same as he can't have a steady girlfriend or a permanent house anywhere: "It seemed jobs kept disappointing him, as did business partners and girlfriends and entire geographical regions" (*SBT* 20). As a result, his family does not trust him. As opposed to Barnaby, Denny does not say what he thinks, something that puzzles his family. What is more, his long absences and his silences are what make him a disgraceful member of the family. But as the novel develops we learn that it is envy what makes him abandon the family because he has a serious rivalry with his stepbrother Stem. In fact, there is even a violent scene (a rare phenomenon in Tyler's fiction) provoked by Denny's idea of Stem supplanting his role as son and brother. That is why he says "you wish I weren't staying … I'm well aware

you want me out of the way. It's no surprise to me" (*SBT* 144). However, it is pure egoism what makes him behave that way, since his parents have been deeply concerned with him since he was born. What is more, even his sisters are angry with him for "consuming every last little drop of [their] parents' attention and leaving nothing for the rest of [them]" (*SBT* 33).

§

As we have shown, Tyler's families have evolved from the apparently traditional Southern family in *If Morning Ever Comes*, *The Tin Can Tree* or *Searching for Caleb* to the multicultural family in *Grownups* or *Digging to America*. This multiculturalism gives an international dimension to the family since it is part of the globalization process. In spite of living in the same city for decades, Tyler's families have met people from different countries, such as Min Foo, who has married three times, twice with non-white men:

> "Min Foo's having a baby? I thought she was divorced," he said.
> "She was, Poppy, but then she married Hakim, remember?"
> "Hakim! Good glory, not another black man!"
> "No, Poppy, he's Arab. What a way to talk," Rebecca said, sending a glance toward Lateesha. (*BWG* 139)

Similarly, in *Digging to America* Tyler analyses the Americanization of the Iranian immigrant families who came to the country in search for a better life. Maryam Yazdan personalizes the Iranian woman who is unable to completely merge with the American culture whereas her son and her granddaughter are an example of the complete assimilation to the American culture. In fact, when his own son Sami criticizes the Americans as if considering himself an outsider Maryam answers: "You with your Baltimore accent … American born, American raised, never been anywhere else: how can you say these things? You're American yourself! You're poking fun at your own

people!" (*DA* 98). In addition, with the Donaldsons, Tyler presents an open family who tries their best to accommodate foreigners but still exercises some kind of patronizing idea which is not well seen by the Yazdans:

> Bitsy said, "We certainly love *your* cuisine," and she started telling Ziba about something she'd had in a restaurant… Then Pat wanted to know if the Yazdans had run into any unpleasantness during the Iranian hostage crisis… [Maryam] was tired to death of the subject, frankly. (*DA* 34)

This slight resentment is little by little transforming the Yazdans' opinion of the Donaldsons until there is a fight between the two fathers, Sami and Brad. In spite of their violent reaction and given Tyler's peaceful nature, both families become friends again and continue their meetings as if nothing had happened.

Tyler's success as a writer is due to her depiction of families where cheerful moments such as birthdays, anniversaries, births, marriages and other joyful scenes come together with sad events such as funerals, illnesses and accidents. As Evans states: "What keeps families at odds in Tyler's fiction is a never-ending array of tense moments and often a desire for the ideal rather than an acceptance of reality" (*Anne Tyler* 128). One of the most famous familial scenes in Tyler's fiction is when Beck (*Dinner*) comes back to attend Pearl's funeral. While they are having dinner, Beck really believes that his family is like a united clan similar to the ones that he has seen on TV. However, Cody, the only one that is able to voice what everybody knows, makes a bitter and sarcastic reflection about his family: "You think we're some jolly, situation-comedy family when we're in particles, torn apart, torn all over the place" (*DHR* 305). With these words, it is evident that even the characters believe that their family is not one of those happy families that appear on TV. Miscommunication is the cause of it all.

Hence, it is clear that "Tyler does not spare her fictional families their troubles, yet most of them endure, and some face the future with optimism" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 133). [26]

In her stories "tragedy and comedy are indisputably linked" (Bennett, *Comic Visions* 58) because this tragic comic view is "the intensely physical definition of home and belonging" (Hornby 55). Although Tyler herself states before writing *Dinner*, "well, all right, I've joked around about families long enough; let me tell you now what I really believe about them" (qtd. in Petry, *Understanding* 186), she certainly explores family relationships by means of comedy. Furthermore, the "sheer risk in family relations means that failure is always possible and that what is *supposed* to be a happy family situation is not always so" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 131). For Tyler, "[h]owever troubled and strained relationships may be, family and community represent 'home', and, for better or worse, the individual must come to terms with this" (Eckhard 34).

Tyler has usually been accused of using too ordinary people as characters for her novels, which make them less interesting because the action does not develop in a thrilling way. Nevertheless, as Whittemore points out, we need characters that, despite their eccentricity, are a reflection of common people because "[s]ome of us know such people very well, and to see them explained, even a little, in American literature makes us glad" (theatlanticonline.com). With her depiction of common people, the writer advocates for a wide variety of roles and family types which the reader can associate with their own, as one of her characters states: "They're *us*, in a way" (*SBT* 136). Tyler presents more versatile family models and gender roles within family than what it apparently looks at the beginning. She is not interested in great stories with extremely

[26] As she states in a letter written to Patricia Willrich talking about *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*: "I just wanted to show both sides of family life – that it can be horrific at times, but that it is the one situation that we are generally forced to go on with, even so, picking ourselves up and trying again in the morning. And that is valuable in itself" (508).

dramatic moments, she prefers instead real life situations that are common not only in the United States but in other parts of the world as well.

As I have explained in this section, family is for Tyler the entity which is able to unite the individuals even though it may be the source of misunderstandings, resentments and arguments. Therefore, "Tyler writes about the family – not as a passé institution or an inevitable battleground, but rather as the central shaping influence in the development of the individual and the individual's search for the meaning of life" (Brock 3). In spite of their tensions and their search for joy they "remain the only dependable unit against which to gauge one's identity" (McPhillips 465). That is why "the family goes on, in her books; and the range of Baltimore life, together with the Maryland polity, goes unstressed" (Miller 89).

The word "homesick" that we see in the title of one of her best novels expresses a general meaning that can be extrapolated to her other titles because as Petry explains, depending on the situation the meaning is different. [27] On the one hand, most of Tyler's characters do not feel at ease when they are at home and that is why they escape from their families. On the other hand, it is that nostalgia for the home and the family what makes them return, which usually provokes on them the same feelings that made them leave on the first place. Nevertheless, the family is always the place to come back, to feel safe and cozy, although it may imply some distress.

With her depiction of family Tyler does not only follow the tradition of Southern literature but she is also an example of contemporary American fiction. She is able to

[27] Petry gives a very detailed explanation of the meaning of the word "homesick" in the novel:
At one level, "homesick" can mean "sick for home," longing nostalgically for the warmth and security associated with the locale and group with which one is most familiar ... On another level, "homesick" can mean "sick of home," yearning to break free of the structures which are the underside of that security ... On a final level, "homesick" can mean "sick from home" – psychologically debilitated as the result of "home" (*Understanding* 185-6).

conjoin the traditional idea of family with a more modern vision of it which still goes around the mother, although her compass points to a direction where a different variety of gender roles are found and where there are different types of families which show how the woman has a more relevant role in society while keeping her predominance at home.

CHAPTER 5

HUMOR AND THE ECCENTRIC

They might be perfectly intelligent, but they were subject to speckles and flushes; their purses resembled wastepaper baskets; they stepped on their own skirts.

Anne Tyler ~ *Noah's Compass*

One of the features that critics mostly praise about Anne Tyler is her humorous tone and her use of the eccentric. There are numerous references to her use of humor. On the one hand, for Dale Salwak Anne Tyler has a "quietly comic touch; an unobtrusive but perfectly controlled style; and a prodigious gift for bringing to life a variety of eccentric characters" (ix). On the other hand, Elizabeth Evans highlights how humor "pervades Tyler's fiction as a natural device to help balance life's disappointments" (*Anne Tyler* ix). Despite the recurrent references to her humor, most of the articles on her work just mention her wit without analyzing in depth Tyler's humorous techniques. As Ralph Stephens points out "the sources of her humor and its thematic and structuring functions in her work clearly merit fuller attention" (xi). Only Barbara Bennett's article entitled "Attempting to Connect: Verbal Humor in the Novels of Anne Tyler" gives an insight detail on Tyler's use of language for humorous purposes. That is why before exploring Anne Tyler's humor it is worthwhile exploring why her wit and female humor in general have not deserved the attention of scholars.

Female writing has always had a secondary role in literay studies and only in the twentieth century critics and public alike have acclaimed the qualities of the writings composed by American women such as Harper Lee, Carson McCullers or Toni Morrison, to name a few. Despite this general recognition "humorous writing by women has suffered even greater critical neglect than other forms of female literary production" (Gillooly 474). Why has women's humor been ignored by scholars and public alike? Lois Rudnick answers clearly: "The simplest explanation is that women are not supposed to have a sense of humor… Humor is at odds with the very definition of womanhood. Humor is aggressive; women are passive" (671). This idea of the passivity of women has also been highlighted by María García Lorenzo. According to her, women have traditionally been "object, not subject, of humor due to their lack of power,

their passivity and their invisibility in the sociopolitical structure" (my translation 51). This thesis is also supported by Ed Piacentino, who points out that women's concerns were devalued by society and confined to the domestic sphere because society valued more the masculine pursuits. What is more, the stereotype of woman was that of "helplessness, physical weakness, incompetence, submissiveness, suffering and emotionality" (Wolff, qtd. in Piacentino 126).

According to Eileen Gillooly, there are many reasons why women's humor has been disregarded. One of them is the fact that it "has seldom fitted easily into the traditional nomenclature of the comic" (474). Readers are usually confronted with universal standards that, most often than not, have been created following a male point of view. However, women's experience has been constructed as different; hence, their writings reflect their places and actions. In order to portray a different scenario, women depart from the established patriarchal conventions and develop a different way of using humor and "[i]t is this disruptive aspect of women's humor –subtle and diffuse– that distinguishes it most clearly from traditional comic forms" (Gillooly 475). This unsettling feature of women's humor is related to the way women writers are interested in "challenging the most formidable structures because they keep women from positions of power" (Burleigh msmagazine.com).

In addition to experiencing reality in a different way, female humor employs subtle language techniques as opposed to male humor. Male humor is sometimes characterized by jokes, dirty language and mockery in order to reach the comic effect. In comparison, female humor is not so obvious, because women "rarely tell jokes; instead, [they] tell stories" (Barreca, "What's sounny?" n.pag.). Thus, it "works inconspicuously to unsay what its sober expression says, to undermine cultural myths and authoritarian figures overly endorsed by the text" (Gillooly 480). Women mock

structures (family, society, etc.) from the standpoint of those who have been silenced, ignored or scorned. For this reason, "women's humor calls into question the largest issues, questions the way the world is put together" (Barreca, "What's sounny?" n.pag.).

The lack of academic works dealing with female humor in literature is also probably due to its misunderstanding on the part of the critics because "female humor represents a tactic of personal survival, a political and psychological strategy for managing the anger and frustration arising from the experience of oppression" (Gillooly 481). When studying Tyler's techniques, we will see how Tyler's characters show their anger and their frustrations in life by using witty language. This type of subversive humor is labeled as disruptive because it is a way to call on the attention of the reader and the society in general to reflect about the role of women in society and the changes that must still be done. This special use of the language is what Regina Barreca calls metaphor-into-writing, which for her is a common pattern in women's humor:

> By attaching a buried, literal meaning to what is intended to be inert and meaningless, women writers subvert the paradigmatic gesture of relief that is seen to characterize comedy. A joke usually depends on the equation between initial error (taking something literally) and final pleasure (discovering that it is only meant figuratively). Here the process is reversed; the joke depends on the error of believing language to be used figuratively when it is used literally (*Last Laughs* 244).

Some examples of this idea of the metaphor-into-writing can be seen in Tyler's novels as a tool to show bitterness and sarcasm. One of the best ones can be found in *The Amateur Marriage*. As we saw before, the marriage of Michael and Pauline was not a happy one. Tyler uses metaphor-into-writing in order to show how their arguments were sometimes funny despite their bitter remarks. As we mentioned when talking about their marriage, one of Pauline and Michael's most relevant discussions arises when Aaron misses the opportunity to surprise Pauline for her birthday and his pragmatism leads him to give her money to buy herself a present. Pauline, who is very

sensitive with the pregnancy and pays a lot of attention to the details, is furious with him. However, instead of stating it clearly she starts telling a story while they are having breakfast the following day. With this story she clearly shows her feelings with a very ironical touch:

> "Once upon a time, there was a woman who had a birthday."
> Michael stopped pouring his cereal and looked across the table at her.
> "It was January fifth," Pauline said. "The woman was twenty-three."
> "Why, that's your birthday, too!" Michael's mother told her. "That's how old you turned, only yesterday!"
> "And because this woman happened to be at a low point in her life," Pauline went on, "she was feeling very sensitive about her age."
> Michael said, cautiously, "A low point in her life?" (*AM* 35)

By starting the conversation as if she were telling a fairy tale, only her husband is able to understand what she means but her mother-in-law really takes the story literally. After introducing the story and giving some remarks about how bad she is feeling with the pregnancy, she continues daydreaming about what could have been her ideal birthday with her husband:

> Luckily for this woman … her husband was very understanding. He hated for her to feel bad! He decided he would devote himself to making her birthday perfect.
> …
> "He got up in the morning … he tiptoed out to the kitchen, he fixed her French toast and orange juice. He came back with a tray and said, 'Happy birthday, darling!' Then he brought her the flowers that he'd stowed earlier on the fire escape. A dozen long-stemmed roses; never mind the expense. 'You're worth every bit of it, darling' he said. 'I just wish they could be rubies.'"
> …
> "And her present … was … was … something personal … He would never give her anything useful! And he'd never just tell her to buy it herself! (*AM* 36)

With her last remark, even her mother-in-law has realized by now that the story she was telling was actually her own. By expressing her feelings through a narrative Pauline accomplishes her goals: to communicate her frustration to her husband, and to show her mother-in-law how their marriage is not what she had expected due to Michael's lack of romanticism. The metaphor-into-writing serves Tyler to soften the

tensions of the frustration but it is even more bitter because Pauline is not only telling it to her husband but also to a third person, thus avoiding a direct confrontation.

Another point to consider is the little importance that humor has had for critics and scholars. In the introduction to *Comic Visions, Female Voices* (1998), Barbara Bennett believes that humor is not so important for scholars because they have considered it as being less important than tragedy (1). This could be a fact, since comedy has always been taken as a minor genre portraying unimportant events to make people laugh or simply to entertain. Another important contribution to this discussion is done by John Maclachlan. He provides a good explanation on how tragedy and humor have common points and also differences:

> Tragedy and humor, different as they may be, share some important qualities. Both depend upon emotion to make their points, and both reach towards the essences of human behavior… The essential difference between tragedy and humor, then lies in the fact that the latter is by preference indirect, depending upon inference drawn from its implications to make its point, generally succeeding best when it is most subtle. Tragedy meanwhile goes straight to the point, affirms with a strong impact, and leaves the subtleties to take care of themselves. (157-158)

According to this explanation, the problem with humor is that it is also more difficult to understand if done in a subtle way, which can provoke different interpretations. For Maclachlan, then, comedy and tragedy are on the same level but humor depends more on the social and cultural issues surrounding it. That is why, when addressing women's humor, it is crucial to know their specific point of view.

§

The scholarly works previously cited deal with general ideas related to women's humor and they can help us understand how Tyler's humor is a way of showing her

feminist perception against traditional conceptions. Nevertheless, they do not provide sufficient information about Anne Tyler's work and the techniques she uses. Although many critics remark Tyler's humor, there are not enough articles focusing on why and how she uses humor. Hence, this section of the dissertation is going to explore Tyler's humorous skills, paying a special attention to her use of the eccentric.

Anne Tyler masters subtle humor where what is said counts as well as what it is not said. Consequently, her novels are not generally labeled as being comic but as being a drama in which funny situations may occur. That is why female humor approaches real-life situations closely. Therefore, it is not easy to identify, examine and classify her comedy and only through an in depth reading it is possible to appreciate the amount of humorous situations and comments that Tyler exploits in her works.

In *Last Laughs. Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (1998), Barreca establishes some of the features that characterize women's humor. First of all, she states that women write "comedies which destroy a social order" (8) and, as a result, humor is considered a weapon to defy traditional conventions and power structures. Some of Tyler's novels are a good depiction of this challenge, especially those in which the woman abandons her husband such as in *A Slipping-Down Life*, *Celestial Navigation*, *Earthly Possessions*, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and *Ladder of Years*. In *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, for example, the author defies the male established conventions by depicting Pearl's daughter leaving her first husband on the basis that he is extremely perfect: "He's so clever; you don't know how far his cleverness can extend. I mean, it's not just math or genetics he knows all about but the most efficient temperature for cooking pot roast, the best way to organize my kitchen – everything, all charted out in his mind" (*DHR* 102).

As we have already mentioned when talking about Tyler and feminism, Daphne in *Saint Maybe* and Kitty in *Noah's Compass* are both a prototype of the so-called "bad girl," who confront their family and live their ways, even if this implies challenging society as a whole. Both of them go against the established conventions by opposing the traditional patriarchal patterns with its established gender roles where "[w]omen are supposed to be a woman, or, what's even worse, the "total woman." The Good Girl/Bad Girl split is the division of woman into two parts that seem never to meet: Madonna and whore, angel and seductress" (Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White* 42).

Another feature that Barreca mentions is the fact that women do not usually include a happy ending in their novels, but their works can be considered humorous (*Last Laughs* 8). Although it may be true that novels written by female writers do not have traditional happy endings, the works written by Tyler do not have sad endings either. According to Levy, "Tyler's optimism, her belief in the possibility of grace, and her frequent granting of second chances all contribute to the sense of the comic in her novels. For comedies end happily" (122). After closing the book, the reader does not have a depressing feeling since things go back to place somehow. It is rather a bittersweet impression because the main characters have faced hard times throughout the story but they finally get a reward. For instance, in *The Beginner's Goodbye* Aaron has to come to terms with his wife's death and her return from the dead. As he mourns her and tries to understand why she comes back, he is able to marry again. However, he still thinks of Dorothy in the last lines of the book: "It would be untruthful to say that I never think of Dorothy anymore. I think of both Dorothys – the one I married and the one who came back to visit" (*BG* 262).

Furthermore, Barreca points out that comedies written by women "may contain very little joyous celebration" (*Last Laughs* 8). For instance, it is worth remembering

how, the same as Ezra in *Dinner*, Rebecca in *Grownups* is always organizing parties for her family. Yet, there is always something that prevents them from having a cheerful time together: "Oh, nothing in this family ever flowed from start to finish without interruption. Their lives were a kind of crazy quilt of unrelated incidents – always some other family to consider, some strangers getting married or retired or promoted" (*BWG* 107).

Apart from the elements that have been mentioned so far concerning American female literature and humor, an important point to consider is what is so distinctive about Southern comedy. A quality typically associated with Southern humor is its relationship to tragic events, something which has been labelled as the "Southern Grotesque." This term was described by Flannery O'Connor, one of the clearest exponents of the grotesque in Southern literature, in her essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" (1960). For her, the grotesque occurs when "the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life" (utexas.edu). Modern writers have focused their attention on everyday catastrophes that can happen any time in any situation: "Often women's humor deals with those subjects traditionally reserved for tragedy: life and death, love and hate, connection and abandonment" (Barreca, *Last Laughs* 31). Therefore, tragedy is understood here in a very wide sense, as long as it carries some suffering to the main characters. In Tyler's work, "humor becomes the factor that saves characters, authors and readers from sinking into despair, helping them find the balance between living with tragedy and being overwhelmed by it" (Bennett, *Comic Visions* 39).

For Voelker, Tyler's vision of tragedy is more related to the accidental, which is how most of her characters face unpredicted situations and dramatic moments. Apart

from the accidental deaths of Janie Rose, Dorothy or Danny there are other gloomy scenes in which the unexpected plays a major role. For instance, Liam learns of Eunice's marriage to another man by meeting Eunice's mother while he is buying some milk:

> "Mrs. Dunstead?"
> …
> "I'm Liam Pennywell," he told her.
> …
> "The man who's been seeing your daughter," he said.
> "Seeing… Eunice?"
> "Right. I happened to overhear your name and I thought I'd - "
> "Seeing, as in …?"
> "Seeing, as in, um, dating," he said.
> "That's not possible," she told him. "Eunice is married."
> "What?" (*NC* 177-178)

For Liam it means the end of his happiness, since Eunice is now the woman he loves and he could have never imagined that she was with another man. On top of that, this whole scene happens in a supermarket where he had gone for an ordinary thing and, accidentally, his life changes.

For Sweeny, these accidental moments where the tragedy shapes the life of most of the characters in the story are what she calls "intimate violence" given that "they disrupt the characters' closest relationships with parents, siblings, or children" (80). This is the case of Lindy Anton's mysterious disappearance in *The Amateur Marriage*, which gives way to a fracture in her family, especially in her parents' marriage:

> Separately, Karen and George both checked to see if Lindy had come home last night. Karen checked first. A worrier by nature, she couldn't burrow back into her late-Sunday-morning sleep until she had stumbled out of bed and down the hall to Lindy's room. And then – because she found the bed not slept in and the room silent and empty – she was still awake to hear George check later, returning from a noisy pee in the bathroom. (*AM* 98)

The way Tyler narrates how Lindy's family realizes about her disappearance shows how distant she was from her parents, since they were the last ones to see it. The

previous abstract shows how her siblings knew that she was leaving and they checked Lindy's room at different moments. We see how Karen is quieter while her brother is noisier, especially when he goes to the bathroom. This scatological detail is what gives the scene a touch of black humor. This comic hint contrasts with the seriousness of Lindy's disappearance, since she leaves a void feeling in the family which will remain an aching memory throughout the story.

With some of the previous examples we can see how Tyler uses wit in a subtle way. In other words, more things are implied than the actual meanings of the words denote, something that Betts considers a very Southern feature:

> What is essentially Southern among the younger women… is not content or theme but the music of language still drawled in rhythm, still arranged in a particular way. That arrangement is becoming cooler and more underdone in a form of disguise known to all women, since the prose says one thing and means four, by implying dense, invisible secrets beneath the signs and allusions in the sentences. (Doris Betts, "The Fiction of Anne Tyler" 7)

Obviously, Tyler also uses evident jokes and hilarious situations, but the way she plays with the language makes the reader have more than one interpretation to the situation. For example, in *Celestial Navigation* Jeremy is Mrs. Pauling's favorite child, which provokes Amanda's anger with her mother because she does not understand why her mother prefers him despite his feeble nature:

> "You love Jeremy more than you do me," I told her once. I said straight out. She didn't deny it. "Well, honey," she said, "you have to remember that Jeremy is a boy." I thought I knew what she meant, but now I'm not sure. I *thought* she meant that boys were more lovable, but maybe she was just saying that they took more care. That they were weaker, or more accident-prone, or more likely to make mistakes. Who knows? It doesn't matter what she meant; the fact is she did love him more. (*CN* 31)

In spite of all the different reasons that Amanda can find about why a boy is more important for her mother, she misses the right one, which is why this scene contains an ironic view. An abandoned wife, Mrs. Pauling finds in Jeremy the man of her life

against all odds, which is what Amanda cannot understand. With this example, Tyler is criticizing those traditional families in which the boys are more appreciated than the girls on account of their belonging to the dominating gender.

Although Tyler does not typically use the Southern accent in most of her work, the "humor of Tyler's first two novels derives from close observation of the incongruities in daily family life, a homey humor, much of it in the careful rendering of the folk speech of small−town Southerners" (Gilbert, "Anne Tyler" 258). There are some clear examples that illustrate how Tyler uses this type of speaking, which gives a great deal of genuine behavior to her characters. For instance, the following scene where Ben Joe's grandmother is polishing and, at the same time, singing a song reflects Gram's feelings for a different life:

> "When I was *si-ingle*,
> I wandered at my *e-ease*.
> Now that I am *ma-arried*,
> Got a flat-heeled man to please…"
> "Gram," Ben Joe said, "has Lisa gone downtown yet?"
> She refolded her cloth and smiled at it, still singing, because she was at the loudest part and no one could stop her at a loud part:
> "And it's oh, *Lo-o-o-ord*,
> I wish I was but one lone girl again…" (*IMC* 81)

The lyric looks like a traditional song in the form of the Southern speech but when we analyze it more closely we realize that it represents a feminist view of the free woman. On top of that, it even strikes more the fact that it is sung by an elderly woman. Nevertheless, as the story develops the reader can appreciate that Gram is not the typical Southern lady, but she is a rather unconventional woman. In a different scene she goes to visit her old sweetheart who is lying in his deathbed. Before the visit she gets ready. One would expect her to wear a conventional dress with some shoes following Pearl's or Amanda's style but she chooses to wear her gym shoes and an old coat from her son:

> "I'm Bethany Jane *Chrisawn*!" she caroled out loudly. The nurse came swiftly to the doorway and put one finger to her lips, but Gram was watching only Jamie Dower. "*Now* you remember?"
> "Bethany…" … "Bethany! Bethy Jay *Chrisawn*, that's who!"
> Ben Joe breathed again, and Gram nodded smugly.
> "Bethy *Jay*!" the old man roared.
> "Mr. Dower, *please*," the nurse said.
> "Well, I'll be," said Jamie Dower. He lay back down and shook his head as he stared at her. "Bethy," he said, "you surely have changed some" (*IMC* 124).

The way Gram introduces herself and her complete name and how the man reacts is a clear illustration of Southern folk speech. Furthermore, their meeting gives place to a set of remembrances of their Southern town, their origins, their marriages and their families, all of which leaves the idea of how everything has changed since them. As if Tyler couldn't miss the opportunity to show her humorous skills, their dialogue turns into a hilarious sequence of names and anecdotes in the most typical Southern way:

> "… He has now got a wife and six healthy children Donald Sandra Mara Alex Abigail and uh, uh, Suzanne and one of them –"
> "I got a grandchild named Susannah," Gram said.
> "*One* of them, I say –"
> "How's she spell it?"
> "*One* of them went to *Europe*!" the old man shouted joyfully.
> "Is that so!"
> "Summer before last, she went."
> "*My* Susannah is spelled kind of like "Savannah," Georgia," said Gram. "Only it's *Sus*annah."
> "Well, mine's not. It was Sandra that went to Europe. She got to see the Pope."
> "The Pope!" Gram's mouth fell open. "Why, Jamie Dower, you haven't gone and become a–" (*IMC* 126)

Humorous as this passage is, Tyler's wit is not always so straightforward. Consequently, it is especially relevant to analyze the techniques that make of Tyler's humor something so distinctive in her style. In addition to the accidental, language plays a crucial role in Anne Tyler's novels. Why is the linguistic element the key to understand Tyler's humor? According to Bennet, one of Tyler's major concerns is miscommunication or what Bennet calls "missed connections," since she "uses humor to illustrate the lack of communication that is the source of much of this

tragedy/comedy in her novels and in modern society." For this reason, the way her characters use language is an important point in her fiction. She sometimes uses family gatherings in order to show this miscommunication within the family. As a result of this lack of communication, comic situations occur. For instance, the first time that the reader receives a full account of one of the family dinners at the Homesick Restaurant, it takes place when Jenny comes back from the university in order to inform her family that she is going to get married. But Ezra has also something to tell and he proposes a toast just in the middle of a discussion between Pearl and Cody:

> "Please," Ezra said. "Mother? Cody? It's a family dinner! Jenny? Let's have a toast."
> Jenny hastily raised her glass. "A toast," she said.
> "Mother? A toast."
> Pearl's eyes went reluctantly to Ezra's face. "Oh," she said, after a pause. "Thank you, dear, but wine in all this heat would settle on my stomach like a rock."
> "It's a toast to *me*, Mother. To my future. A toast," said Ezra, "to the new full partner of Scarlatti's Restaurant."
> "Partner? Who would that be?"
> "Me, Mother." (*DHR* 95)

When he asks her mother to join the toast, Pearl thinks that he is offering her a rhetorical toast. But Ezra soon clarifies that the toast is to him as the new partner of the restaurant. However, Pearl does not understand the situation and, as a result, she provokes a comic misunderstanding. She is so sure that her son would attend university that she does not consider for a minute that he could be working in a restaurant. Hence, the humorous situation leaves a bitter feeling, because it is clear how the mother is not able to understand neither her son's words nor his actions.

§

The eccentric plays a relevant role in the universe of Tyler. One of the most outstanding elements of Tyler's wit is her use of the eccentric because she "never uses wit to ridicule her characters but rather to celebrate their eccentricities,…to present her characters sympathetically, to allow them room to be themselves – however odd they appear to us" (Levy 123). When talking about the eccentric it is important to define what we understand with that term. The best definition is provided by Frances H. Bachelder: "odd, somehow out of place, ranging somewhere outside our concept of 'ordinary', they manifest the various aberrations that human beings are all prone to" (43). Furthermore, Bachelder mentions that fear is one of the reasons why characters may seem so puzzling. Likewise, Evans labels the quirky characters in Tyler's novels as a "dotty character" who "entertains by willful and odd actions – actions that are incongruous, unexpected, offbeat" (54). Tyler, however, considers that peculiarities are part of every human being: "People are always saying we understand you write about quirky characters, and I think, isn't everybody quirky? If you look very closely at anybody you'll find impediments, women and men both" (Interview with Lisa Allardice). In a way, Tyler's eccentric characters remind us of the Southern grotesque character described by Alan Spiegel as a "type of character that occurs so repeatedly in contemporary Southern novels that readers have come to accept ... In fact, so regularly does he appear, and so distinctive is his appearance, that the very Southern-ness of the novel can often be defined by his presence" (428).

The humanness of Tyler's eccentric characters has also been remarked by some of her reviewers such as Jonathan Yardley in his review of *The Clock Winder*:

> They aren't eccentric because they're abnormal, they're eccentric because they're human. In almost all her books... Tyler has explored the oddities of humanity with a cool yet loving eye, finding unexpected depth in ordinary people and showing how they manage to hang on to each other despite all the forces that conspire to drive them apart. (washingtonpost.com, n.pag.)

The eccentricity of Tyler's characters is also part of their lives, as they usually have strange occupations and few "are focused on any tangible goal, fewer still are concerned with money or careers…What they do is often so incidental to who they are that it is hard to recognize a Tyler character by his or her occupation" (Levy 126). Some of these quirky jobs include Macon's job as a guidebook writer who hates travelling, Muriel's job as a dog trainer, Eunice's employment as a rememberer, Barnaby's occupation as a handy man or Rebecca's business for hosting events. Most of them started their career in an accidental way which adds an even quirkier view of them. Yet, for Tyler the eccentric is not a planned situation:

> I've never thought of my characters in those terms-ordinary or eccentric-or consciously chosen them for such qualities. What leads me to write about someone is simple curiosity. How would it feel to be so-and-so? What's the relationship of that couple I saw stepping off the bus? Really, it's a decision based not on artistic considerations but on a zest for plain old gossip. (Interview with Bethanne Kelly Patrick n.pag.)

One of Tyler's most eccentric characters, with a noticeable artistic career, is Jeremy Pauling from *Celestial Navigation*. Being an artist, some scholars like Petry or Bail state that "Jeremy and his creator have a good deal in common" (Petry, *Understanding* 100). The problem with Jeremy is that he "embodies hyperbolically Tyler's tendency towards reclusiveness" and "to observe the world from a distance" (Petry, *Understanding* 103). On top of that, Jeremy suffers from agoraphobia and he has a hard time when he leaves his house. But it is the real world he fears, as this description suggests:

> These are some of the things that Jeremy Pauling dreaded: using the telephone, answering the doorbell, opening mail, leaving his house, making purchases. Also wearing new clothes, standing in open spaces, meeting the eyes of a stranger, eating in the presence of others, turning on electrical appliances. (*CN* 86)

Yet, most of the characters in the novel seem to be fully aware of Jeremy's distinctiveness, which makes them try to understand his actions and, in a way, help him in case of need. When Jeremy's sisters arrive to their mother's house, they find Jeremy on the stairs, the place where his mother died:

> "He's not himself at all today," Mr. Somerset told me.
> People say that about Jeremy quite often, but what they mean is that he is not like other people. He is *always* himself. That's what's wrong with him. (*CN* 13)

Amanda, one of Jeremy's sisters, is the most critical figure with him and she is the only character that behaves in a rather irritated way with her brother due to her being resentful for her mother's preference for him. Jeremy is an example of what Godwin has labelled as displaced persons, "who persist stubbornly in their own destinies. They are 'oddballs', visionaries, lonely souls" (71). Despite his desires of being left alone and his clear lack of social skills, Jeremy is able to fall in love with Mary. Their fictitious marriage produces five children, who are the contrast for Jeremy's quietness.[28] Nevertheless, Jeremy is not able to connect with none of his children. In fact, as he suggests, none of them calls him "dad" and there are few moments when he is with them. One of the scenes when Jeremy really tries to be a father occurs towards the end of the novel, when he goes to Mary's cabin to ask her to come back with him. For once in his life, he forgets about his own self and his art and abandons his house and his studio. In an act of generosity, he even buys some presents for the children, but his lack of practice is illustrated by the fact that he buys some surprise balls without knowing the content. Jeremy is very enthusiastic about giving some gifts to his children but the presents turn out to be something he did not expect. The narration of the scene is hilarious:

[28] Although they live together and pretend they are married, Jeremy and Mary never get legally married due to the rejection of Mary's first husband to divorce her.

> The first to find anything was Pippi. A little ping sounded at her feet. "Oh!" she said, and bent and picked up a flat tin whistle the size of a postage stamp. She turned it over several times. "It's a whistle," she said finally. She blew on it, but the sound that came out was whispery and toneless… He looked over at Darcy, who had just found her surprise – another whistle. Everyone had whistles. Some had one, some two or three. The only difference between them was the colors… One by one the children lifted the whistles to their lips, blew them, lowered them, and looked at Jeremy. They seemed not so much disappointed as puzzled. (*CN* 263)

Their puzzlement is illustrated by a short silence which was only broken by the baby's inability to open hers and Mary's words afterwards. It is an awkward moment which once more shows Jeremy's inability to cope with social and family usages.

But Jeremy is not the only one of Tyler's characters who can be considered eccentric. As Voelker has suggested, Macon in *The Accidental Tourist* and Ezra in *Dinner* share some traits with Jeremy, especially their inability to establish fruitful social relations and their reluctance to abandon their house. Tyler seems to use eccentric males as a way to show their flaws in an attempt to confront the patriarchal gender stereotypes. The fact that some of them have problems to abandon their house is also relevant because it somehow shows how men are afraid of the public/social sphere and secure in the domestic, something which is more commonly associated with the traditional wives. As we noted when talking about feminism, especially when examining Butler's gender performativity theory, these men are not behaving as it would be expected from them at the eyes of society, thus performing a response to situations usually associated with women. That is another reason why the three of them have been considered as eccentric.

Having said that, the eccentric is also related to the term "ex-centric." For Linda Hutcheon, Postmodern literature does not focus on traditional topics but tries to move to the margins of society in order to highlight the importance of the "ex-centric." In her words: "the renewed interest not in the general, universal, central-but in the socially and

historically specific, the particular, the de-centred (or ex-centric) of our culture: the local, the regional, the ethnic, the female" (25). Moreover, the bizarre in fiction is more and more usual because "life today is more fragmented and chaotic than before" (Hutcheon 28). What is more, to be "ex-centric, on the border or margin, inside yet outside is to have a different perspective" (Hutcheon 34).

In line with Hutcheon's thesis, Tyler's novels are full of eccentric and ex-centric characters that depart from the established patterns. For her, eccentric characters are those who are peculiar or odd whereas, following Hutcheon's term, ex-centric characters, are those who leave the center of things and move to the margins of thought or behavior. Marginality is "much more than a site of deprivation; … it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" (bell hooks 239). What is more, to be "in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (bell hooks 238). Generally speaking, Tyler uses a lot of ex-centric women that do not behave as it is expected of them, hence they are marginalized. It has to be noted that being on the margin does not mean being ignored or apart but rather being scorned or criticized for being different. By depicting her characters, especially the female, as extreme and odd Tyler can be thought to depart from the feminist empowering images of women. Thus, the ex-centric may be one of the reasons why it is difficult to label Tyler as an overt feminist writer, as it has already been mentioned in the first section of this dissertation. Her ex-centric characters can be also included in the perspective of "queerness" proposed by Butler. In line with Butler's premises, Tyler portrays men and women as ex-centric as a way of showing that they are queer or deviant from traditional gender roles and behaviors. With this idea, Tyler tries to illustrate how roles are assigned or performed and how agency of different assigned gender roles affects men and women alike. These notions can be appropriately included within the framework of a

postmodern feminist literature. Maybe the character that best shows this "queerness" is Morgan Gower (*Morgan's Passing*), "a character of Gargantuan eccentricity" (Binding 28). Paul Bail compares him to Jeremy Pauling but "turned inside out – highly extraverted and social but equally obsessed with the unconventional logic of his own inner vision" (97). Instead of secluding himself at home like Jeremy, he enjoys going out to meet different people and to play different roles because he wants to experiment with the idea of being somebody else. Thus, he has a lot of different outfits and hats that he wears in order to hide his true self. With this novel Tyler brings to the forefront the idea of the "mutability of identity and the blurred boundary between authenticity and play acting" (Bail 103). Although Morgan does not transgress gender roles, with such a mutable character Tyler is calling our attention on the idea of change as the basis for happiness.

He is obsessed with having multiple personalities because he is unable to change his life. Tied to a monotonous job in a hardware store, married to a wealthy woman and father of seven daughters as well as having her aging mother and spinster sister living under the same roof seem too many obligations for a man who shows no commitment to anything. As he confessed to the Merediths, the couple of puppeteers whose life fascinates Morgan, his family is "very normal, very ordinary; they seem *determined* to be ordinary" (*MP* 108). Although his wife is aware of his obsession for the disguise, she is unable to stop it because she does not understand why he is behaving that way. The fact is that, beyond all his masquerades, his lies and his costumes, there is a man trapped in a reality he wants to escape. Thus, he eventually leaves his wife to start a new family with the puppeteer woman.

In subsequent paragraphs I am going to explore the ex-centricities of Tyler's characters and how their actions contribute to provoke comic situations and also

illustrate how gender is an issue in Tyler's work. García Lorenzo classifies these ex-centricities into three different types: language, mobility, and body. Taking into account García Lorenzo's classification, several examples taken from five of Tyler's novels are going to be provided in order to illustrate how they serve the author to use wit in a subtle way and, at the same time, add a criticism to society. The novels that I have selected for this purpose are *If Morning Ever Comes*, *Celestial Navigation*, *Dinner*, *Saint Maybe* and *Noah's Compass*. Given that most of Tyler's work is humorous and offers a wide range of eccentric characters, the selection of the novels responds to the criterion of variety of periods within her work, so that we can offer a complete vision of her humorous devices. Consequently, we will see how her techniques have evolved, if such a thing happens in her work.

Regarding language ex-centricities, Bennett outlines the different types of verbal humor that Tyler exploits in her novels. As we have already mentioned, the reason why Tyler uses humor in her language is crucial to understand her "missed connections" because, following Tyler's remark, "miscommunication is one of the situations that most often lets characters say something funny" (qtd. in Bennett, *Comic Visions* 59). Bennett is the only scholar who explores how miscommunication within a Tylerian family causes incongruities. According to her, there are four ways in which the lack of communication can be materialized: linguistic errors, psychological shifts, inadequate words and non-traditional means of communication.

Linguistic errors occur when someone says a different word from what they meant in a subconscious way, something that provokes awkward moments. Ezra's humor in *Dinner* can be considered unconscious because sometimes he is thinking aloud, thus provoking misunderstandings. For example, when Jenny (Pearl's daughter) arrives in Baltimore and meets Ezra, she asks, "How is the restaurant?" (101) and, in return, Ezra

answers, "She's not at all well." Apparently, it seems that Ezra makes an error and personalizes the restaurant "as if it were a ship" (101). This use of the language confuses Jenny but, not realizing the confusion created, Ezra comments on about it: "The treatments are making her worse. She can't keep anything down." With this additional remark, Jenny realizes that he is referring to Mrs. Scarlatti, the owner of the restaurant, hence clarifying the situation. One type of linguistic error is malapropism, the replacement of one word with another having a similar pronunciation. For example, when Ezra, Pearl's eldest son, is at the hospital with Mrs. Scarlatti, he is told that another patient has a "heart rumor" instead of saying a "heart murmur" (*DHR* 119). The joke lies in the use of the words "rumor" and "murmur" which have a similar meaning in general terms but "murmur," when applied to the heart, is a pathology. This misunderstanding softens the term "heart murmur" and provokes a smile on the hearer instead of causing worries for the terrible news. Although not part of the novels that I have chosen for the study of language, it is worth mentioning the importance of Muriel (*The Accidental Tourist*) in this sense, since she is the character who is most commonly associated with malapropisms by most reviewers.

Tyler also uses the technique of abrupt changes of subject as a way to soften the meaning of the conversation. But it is a recurrent device which serves to create confusion and, at the same time, to introduce unexpected ideas to the story. For instance, towards the end of *Noah's Compass* the reader discovers that Liam's father abandoned them to live with another woman:

> "So! What do you call this little thing?" Bard asked. He was looking at Liam's car.
> "I call it a Geo Prizm," Liam said. He took his keys from his pocket.
> "I prefer something a bit more substantial, myself," Bard said. "Especially on the Beltway. They drive like maniacs on the Beltway! And not a cop in sight. I wish you kids would stop acting like I walked out on you or something."

> The change of topic was so sudden that Liam almost missed it. He was about to step around to the driver's side when he stopped short and said, "Pardon?"
> "I didn't desert, you know…" (*NC* 209)

This unforeseen revelation leaves Liam startled because the conversation was about Liam's car, an unimportant matter, and changed to something much more personal without even an introductory word. The impact of this confession is also on the reader, who can now understand more about Liam's attitude in the story, given that he himself also left her daughters behind when he divorced.

A similar situation already happens in Tyler's first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*. Ben Joe's return home is a way of remembering things that he has long forgotten, such as his father desertion, which is revealed little by little in the story. One of the first hints occurs when Ben Joe's mother and grandmother are discussing about his choice of university. The topic, however, switches to his father immediately:

> "No fault of his," Gram said.
> "Well, it's not fault of *mine*."
> "If my son'd had his say," Gram said, "Ben Joe'd have gone to Harvard, that's where."
> "Your son could've had his say. If he'd come back he could've had his say and welcome *to* it, but what'd he do instead?"…
> "Who made him like that?" Gram shouted. "Who made his house so cold he chose to go live in another's, tell me that!"
> Ben Joe cleared his throat. "Actually," he said, "if I'd made better grades I'd have gotten a scholarship to Harvard. I don't see how it's anyone's fault but my –" (*IMC* 49)

In this conversation it is Ben Joe the one who wants to avoid the topic by intervening in order to change the topic again. By interrupting he wants to avoid confrontation and, at the same time, he does not want to bring up a painful and delicate topic. On the contrary, the two women want to express their feelings in order to heal the wounds that are still hurting them.

But Tyler also uses confusions in order to laugh at the way language works and how characters tend to assume things, which provokes funny situations. The following quotation from *Noah's Compass* is a good example of it:

> "So the two of you get along?" Eunice asked.
> "Oh, yes, as well as can be expected. Considering she's an adolescent.
> "Her mother is adolescent?"
> "What? No, Kitty is. Kitty's the adolescent. I'm sorry; you were asking about her mother?"
> "I just meant… you know, do you talk with her mother on the phone and all."
> "We have to talk on the phone; we've got three daughters," Liam said (*NC* 128).

Liam is talking to Eunice about his adolescent daughter Kitty and his relationship with his ex-wife whereas Eunice is just trying to know a little bit more about Liam's complicated family situation, since he is a widower and has divorced his second wife afterwards. For Liam, however, it is a completely normal circumstance. That is why with the question "you were asking about her mother?" it is as if he were accusing Eunice of not understanding anything at all.

In addition to malapropisms and misunderstandings, Tyler makes use of language errors made by some characters, normally female characters, who are usually corrected by others, normally male characters. For instance, when one of Liam's daughters is trying to find the explanation why his father has been attacked, she mentions a famous quote which results to contain a mistake:

> "I don't want to say you had it coming," Xanthe said, "but mark my words, Dad: "Those who cannot remember history are condemned to repeat it." Harry Truman."
> "The past," Liam said reflexively.
> "What?"
> ""Those who cannot remember the *past* are condemned to repeat it." And it's George Santayana."
> Xanthe gazed at him stonily, her eyes the same opaque dark brown as her stepmother's. (*NC* 21)

By gazing at Liam "stonily" Xanthe shows her disapproval to her father's remark. While she is trying to be helpful with her father his correction is a way of not paying attention to her and, at the same time, patronizing her.

Another kind of verbal humor occurs when a character provides an unexpected remark or answer, somehow unrelated to what has been said before. According to Bennett, this type of device occurs when characters want "to shift attention away from sensitive issues, usually intending to avoid awkward, rude, or unpleasant conversations" ("Attempting to Connect" 64). Examples of this device take place in *Noah's Compass*. For example, when Liam is moving to his new apartment with Damian:

> Since there were no cars ahead of them, Liam knew it had to be his own bumper sticker Damian meant. (BUMPER STICKER, it read – a witticism that no one before had ever seemed to appreciate.) "Why, thanks," he said. And then, feeling encouraged: "I also have a T-shirt that says T-SHIRT." Damian stopped chewing his thumbnail and gaped at him. Liam said, "Heh, heh," in a helpful tone of voice, but still it seemed that Damian didn't get it. (*NC* 6)

A similar feeling can be obtained when Liam is at hospital after being hurt by an intruder in his house:

> "I'm Dr. Wood," the bearded man told Liam. "The hospitalist."
> Hospitalist?
> "Mr. Pennywell, do you know where you are?"
> "I have no idea where I am," Liam said.
> "What day is it, then?"
> "I don't know that either," Liam said. "I just woke up! You're asking impossible questions."
> …
> "So," he said. "The president. Can you tell me who our president is."
> Liam grimaced. "He's not my president," he said. "I refuse to acknowledge him." (*NC* 16-17)

In this conversation with the doctor Liam shows his characteristic way of speaking literally about everything, which is maybe why his daughters have labelled him as "obtuse" and "rolled their eyes at each other when he made the most innocent remark. They called him Mr. Magoo." (*NC* 22). The fact that her daughters compare

Liam to Mr. Magoo only proves how little they know him. Liam is not absent-minded or stupid when he makes such comments. He is being extremely sharp and smart, instead. Yet, he is unable to connect with his family, another example of miscommunication in Tyler's families.

Liam is also capable of exasperating the police officer that comes to ask him questions about the intrusion he suffered on the basis of his pickiness for precision in language:

> "I understand you left your back door unlocked."
> "That's what they tell me."
> "Pardon?"
> "That's what they tell me, I said!"
> He had thought he was speaking quite loudly, but it was hard to know for sure inside all that gauze.
> "And when did you retire?" the man asked, writing something down.
> "I'm not exactly calling it retirement yet"
> "Pardon?"
> "I'm not exactly calling it retirement yet! I'll have to see how my money holds out."
> "When did you go to *bed*, Mr. Pennywell. On the night of the incident."
> "Oh." Liam reflected for a moment. "Wasn't that last night?" (*NC* 23)

Another example occurs when Liam has just met Eunice, the women with whom he will have a love affair some weeks later. As many of Tyler's ex-centric women characters, Eunice has got a peculiar occupation. She has got a position as a rememberer, a sort of assistant for the president in an important company. Liam is interested in meeting her because he considers that maybe she can help him in remembering how he was attacked. But just when she is in the middle of her explanation on how she works at the office she says:

> "PeeWee's good."
> "Pardon?"
> "For coffee. PeeWee's Café." (*NC* 103)

This play on words is even more ironic when Liam himself reflects some weeks later on the sound of Eunice's name: "All at once the name sounded vaguely

embarrassing. The *u* sound reminded him of *urine*" (*NC* 170). Eunice has Liam's ability to change subject and so manipulate the scene. This is what Liam usually does with his daughters, his sister and his ex-wife but he is not so used to being the one left at a loss for words.

The same as Macon in *The Accidental Tourist*, Liam reflects on the use of certain words and expressions in everyday situations:

> The word *assailant* momentarily derailed him. It was one of those words you saw only in print, like *apparel*. Or *slain*. Or… what was that other word he'd noticed?... *Exclaimed*. That was another word you saw only in print. (*NC* 61)
> …the place to the left was a mission for indigent men. (That was how the sign in the window phrased it. Would indigent men know the word "indigent"?). (*NC* 81)
> "I don't know why not," the cashier told her. "In both stores, your number is how we access your account."
> "Access" as a verb; good God. The world was going to hell in a handbasket. (*NC* 177)

Interestingly enough, Liam also reflects on the masculinity of language by reflecting on how we usually assume that some of the most common words that are used nowadays such as "burglar" are generally associated with the male: "Funny how people always assume a burglar's a he ... "Aren't there any women burglars? Somehow you never hear of them" (*NC* 49). But he also criticizes the fact that one of his daughters named his son "Jonah" due to its religious association and the sad implications of the story:

> "Why Jonah?" Liam had asked. "What's next: Judas? Herod? Cain?" Louise had looked puzzled. "I mean, Jonah's was not a very *happy* story, was it? Liam asked.
> All Louise said was, "I do know someone named Cain, in fact."
> "Does he happen to have a brother?" Liam asked.
> "Not that I ever heard of."
> "Inn-teresting," Liam said.
> "Hmmm?" (*NC* 56)

With all these sarcastic remarks about the use of language, Liam has come to be hated by each one of his daughters. Furthermore, he is usually treated hard due to his inability to show empathy with none of his kin. Nevertheless, through the course of the

novel, the reader realizes how through "some combination of initiative, fate and chance, Liam discovers in his search for his missing memory just how much he has repressed, and he finds himself open--to love and to hurt--at an age when he thought he'd left such emotions behind" (McLeese 670).

The fourth type of device commented by Bennett is that of non-traditional communication, which occurs when characters refuse to use words. According to Bennett, it is a way of lessening "the threat of miscommunication" ("Attempting to Connect" 75). In Tyler's work food has a communicative function, which words alone cannot fulfil. For example, the opening chapter of *Celestial Navigation* deals with Mrs. Pauling death from the point of view of Amanda, one of her daughters. She has always been very critical with her mother and siblings, and that is why she does not share their meal:

> They could eat through anything. When I came out I saw their plates just heaped with food, omelettes and rolls and several kinds of cake. I said, "Well, don't come to me with your indigestion, that's all I have to say." Which stopped them for a moment; they wiped their mouths and looked up at me with identical foolish expressions. But then they returned to their plates and paid me no more mind. (*CN* 25)
> …then to top it off Laura said, "When this is over I'm going to have to go back on my diet." As if Mother's passing were a picnic! A vacation! Some kind of eating spree! (*CN* 26)

In this passage, the dinner symbolizes the family reunited again, although Amanda is not able to share it with them as a way of showing her frustration and her anger towards her family. By means of scenes like that, where the death of a mother is partly forgotten by something so mundane and physical as hunger, characters "survive both trivial and serious events, and some do so with high spirits, good humor, and appealing ways" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 66).

Food is also part of the language of love, since most of the times when there is a celebration characters devote a lot of time to prepare the food as a way to show how

much they care for the loved ones. Yet, most of the times, there is always a problem. For instance, at the beginning of *Saint Maybe*, when Ian is hired by Lucy and his brother to take care of their children, he has got an important appointment with his girlfriend Cicely, since he hopes to have his first sexual encounter with her. Nevertheless, he is running late while Cicely has been preparing a lot of food:

> "Everything's stone cold," Cicely said.
> "Well, don't worry. The dinner's not important –"
> "Not important! I've been slaving all day over this dinner! We're having flank steak stuffed with mushrooms, and baked potatoes stuffed with cheese, and green peppers stuffed with – "
> "But how about Stevie? Did Stevie get to bed all right?"
> "He got to bed hours ago."
> Ian groaned.
> "Is that all you care about" Cicely asked. "Don't you care about my cooking?"
> "Oh! Yes! Your cooking," Ian said. "I've been looking forward to it all day."
> "No, don't say that! I'm afraid you'll be disappointed." (*SM* 41-42)

This scene shows how for Cicely food is part of the ritual of love and sex, whereas Ian is only interested in the sexual part now that he is going to be late. There is also an ironic point in this passage, since just when Ian's brother dies, Ian is thinking about how that night "will be determinative of his future – but in an entirely opposite direction from what he imagined" (Bail 157).

It is now clear that language is a crucial element in Tyler's wit. For her, the different linguistic devices that have been previously explored are a way of portraying that the lack of communication and, even more, a fluent contact within a family is the key for a good family relationship. In addition, the way male and female characters use language also shows how verbal power is important, given that "Tyler plays with the reproduction of a feminine language in that she provides us with certain patterns of discourse which she allows her female characters to violate" (Quiello 59). In this sense, her male characters are more constrained, whereas the female ones are free to use language as a way to express their feelings in an overt way. Furthermore, her "perpetual

displacement of meaning through her illogical sense-making operations implies the infinite possibilities of many meanings, which then threaten the hegemony of the prevailing order" (Quiello 59). With this idea Tyler seems to use the stereotypical relation of gender and emotion by which women have a more emotive expressive register. However, instead of being downsized by their feelings, the writer uses them as a way to empower them because they are more eager to express their feelings. Such attitude illustrates how Tyler weakens men since they are linguistically incompetent when it comes to talk about what they feel.

Moreover, the use of language is a mirror of social differences so, when a character makes a mistake or misuses words when talking it reflects some lack of education as opposed to the other characters who are always correcting. For this reason we can consider that "Tyler has a sure knack for the voice, using odd words, incorrect grammar, and homely expressions to let characters reveal themselves" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 84). Furthermore, most of the times, the male characters are the correctors and the ones looking for perfection, whereas the females are the ones being corrected since they are more easygoing and spontaneous. This antagonism reminds us of Cixous's description of patriarchal binary oppositions: male/female, mind/body, culture/nature. By correcting the women, men feel intellectually superior to them (i.e. mind, culture) but the truth is that they are socially unskilled and lack the linguistic resources to convey their emotional state. Hence, language is another barrier that women break in an attempt to transgress the patriarchal standards too.

Now that we have commented on the linguistic ex-centricities, mobility ex-centricities will be examined. According to García Lorenzo, it occurs when female characters move a lot because they travel, they escape or they drive from one place to another. But this can also be applied to her male characters, who sometimes desert their

families, like Beck in *Dinner*, Bard Pennywell in *Noah's Compass* or Mr. Pauling in *Celestial Navigation*. Most of them leave for good without a previous notice or with few explanations, such as Mr. Pauling:

> Our father was a building contractor who left us thirty-four years ago – went out for a breath of air one evening and never came back. Sent us a postcard from New York city two weeks later: "I *said* I needed air, didn't I?" "Yes, he said that as he left, I remember he did," said Mother, dim-witted as ever. (*CN* 30)

Having said that, there is a significant difference between the male and the female flees. When a father leaves his family, most often than not he never comes back to them. Although they may appear later in the story, father and mother will not be together again. The mothers, on the contrary, usually come back to their families as a way to show their commitment with their families and their husbands in a "return to the center, to old houses, and old traditions, and old usages" (my translation, García Lorenzo 55). Nonetheless, there are some exceptions to this pattern which can be found in some of the novels that we are analyzing in this section, especially in *Celestial Navigation*.

Mr. Pauling, Jeremy's father in *Celestial Navigation*, is not the only one who abandons his family. Mary Tell, Jeremy's wife, also deserts him since she is fed up with his lack of sensibility towards her. Yet, when Mary leaves him, she also takes her six children with her in order to go to a cabin. Although she yearns for Jeremy to call her back, at the end she discovers that she has to try and live her life without a man by her side:

> I began to see how every move I had made in my life had required some man to provide my support – first Guy when I left my parents, then John Harris when I left Guy, and Jeremy when John Harris left. Now I couldn't imagine any other way to do it… Eventually I would give in and find someone, Brian or someone else, it all came to the same thing. (*CN* 222)

Deserting Jeremy is a way of liberating herself from the chains of marriage and, at the same time, a way to test herself and her abilities to continue her life alone with six children. This is a very feminist perspective, since at the end of the book we see how Mary has developed from a completely dependent teenager to a mature single mother. Anyhow, leaving a man is not new for Mary. Before deserting Jeremy, Mary has already abandoned her husband Guy because she has fallen in love with another man called John. She wants to divorce Guy to get married again but he rejects her proposal with a funny letter where we can perceive his rage by the way he writes it:

> You froze me out. Don't you think I got feelings too? What do you think I been thinking all these years? Oh I don't count I'm just a man. You put me in mind of a black widow spider, soon as you got your child then a man isn't no more use to you.
> …
> NO you can't have a divorce… You can't have a divorce as long as you live and don't try coming back of I'll kill you, I mean it, I'll kill you and Darcy both of you don't neither one mean a thing to me. I mean this Mary I'm glad you're gone. (*CN* 79)

With these words we can see Guy's frustration with Mary. The way he uses language is what makes the situation funny, since his letter is full of grammar and punctuation errors. In addition, he compares Mary to a spider that eats him after having offspring. In this sense, it contradicts the previous passages where Mary recounts how Guy disliked many of the things she did, especially those related to motherhood:

> But mealtime was another thing he couldn't stand. I was breast-feeding; he said it gave him a funny feeling. Every time I unbuttoned my blouse he left the room. "Other people use bottles," he told me. "Why go back to this way, now that they've invented something better?" (*CN* 71)

Similar remarks are what make Mary disapprove of him and, eventually, leave him. He is too manly a husband for her, since he enjoys motorcycling and is not at all involved in domestic matters. The same as other Tyler's heroines, her flee is not planned and she runs away for good. Interestingly enough, through Mary's eyes the

reader has been thinking that it was John the one that put pressure on Mary to leave Guy but at the end of the chapter we discover that it was her idea to leave that way:

> I said we might wait and you said no, we'd better do it now or not at all. You didn't even stop to pack a bag. Once you'd made up your mind you wanted to get going, you said. You weren't the kind to –"
> "Oh, never mind," I said. I didn't want to hear what kind I was. (*CN* 82)

It is her willing to change her life what makes her run away like that. This unplanned escape contrasts with her later flee from Jeremy, when she starts "making mental lists of what [she] would need for the children – just the essentials" (*CN* 190). However, when she leaves Guy she is very confused because John is a married man himself and he does not have the courage to leave his wife. He always has an excuse:

> "Right now she's taken with the idea of being a homebody again. Says she wants to settle down, have children, grow vegetables. For Carol that's ludicrous, I told her straight –"
> "Children?" I said. "You got as far as talking about *children*?"
> "*Carol* did, I said."
> "You said she couldn't have any children."
> "Oh, well, she's talking now about going to a doctor for some tests. Wants me to get tested too."
> "What would they test you for?"
> "To see if it's me that can't have them."
> "That's ridiculous," I said. "It's hardly ever the man."
> "Fifty per cent of the time it is." (*CN* 81-82)

John knows that children are very important for Mary. By generating doubts about his masculinity he is achieving what he wants in order to stay with Mary without committing himself much. It is clear that John will never desert his wife but he is taking advantage of Mary's weak position as a way to feel himself the center of a woman's life. Being with Mary empowers him, since his wife has become an independent person:

> John says, she was a homey type. She made all the curtains and cooked and kept house, but then she got restless. She took one of those courses you see advertised in the newspaper and became a model, and after that she was never home at all any more… "Not at all like the person I married. I wanted a wifely wife, someone warm and loving that smells like cinnamon." Which made me feel happy, because he always says *I* smell like cinnamon. (*CN* 59)

At the beginning Mary is contented with the situation but when she does not accept to continue like that he abandons her. As a result of her feeling abandoned, she feels attracted to Jeremy's cares. All the aforementioned examples show how Mary embodies the mobility ex-centricity as a way of vindicating her place in the family. Yet, her choice of mate is not the best one in any case, since the three men in her life have failed her somehow. That is why she never comes back to them, nor to her parents. For this reason, she is different from other female heroines who come back to their families and she acts according to the standards of the male characters who never return.

The third type of ex-centricity is what García Lorenzo labels as body ex-centricity, which is typically associated with the female characters. In the selected novels there is always an example of one or more women who are concerned with appearances. As we will see, Tyler descriptions of women are very detailed, since she not only gives information on the clothes they wear but also on their make-up, their hairstyle or their shoes. For this reason, I am going to discuss the body ex-centricities in the following characters: Joanne, Pearl, Lucy, Mrs. Bedloe, Eunice, Mary and Amanda. According to García Lorenzo, ex-centric female characters in Tyler wear very colorful clothes defying propriety when dressing. Nevertheless, from the selected novels only Eunice (*Noah's Compass*) can be considered to follow this trend, since even Liam considers that her clothes are rather inadequate. These were his observations at the beginning of their relationship:

> The assistant's unfortunate fashion statements were becoming familiar to him. Even from a distance he recognized the too-long skirt (in some bandanna-type print of red and blue, today) that made her seem to be walking on her knees as she rounded her car, and the sleeveless blouse that rode up and exposed a bulge of bare midriff… (*NC* 98)

Eunice, with her rememberer job and her easy-going ways, usually reminds us of Muriel in *The Accidental Tourist*, who is commonly labeled as one of Tyler's most ex-

centric characters because she meets most of the aforementioned categories. Both Muriel and Eunice are part of what we have previously labelled as regenerative women, given that they are able to heal the male character's troubled life, namely Macon and Liam. Nonetheless, their body ex-centricities can be compared to other female characters that are usually considered more traditional.[29] Nonetheless, all of them can be considered eccentric, since "one of Tyler's most important skills is making the most extraordinary, even grotesque, women quite believable" (Brock 3) by means of their exaggerated concern for appearances which provokes funny moments too.

As opposed to Eunice, Pearl (*Dinner*) and Amanda (*Celestial Navigation*) are more conventional in their external appearances. Both of them respond to the typical Southern woman, who cares for her image as a way to be respected in society and, at the same time, their way of showing their esteem for the established conventions. Nevertheless, their worry for looking well and fine provokes funny moments too.

Before dying, Pearl loses her vision more and more but she does not want to admit it and pretends that she stills sees all the same. This idea is within several humorous events, especially when it is obvious for the listener that she is pretending. For example, one morning she looks out of the window and says, "what a sunny morning!" As Ezra notes, all "she said carried references to sight. He couldn't tell if she planned it that way" (*DHR* 267). At first Ezra thinks that she can at least distinguish some things but then he realizes that "her dress was done up wrong… one side of her collar stuck up at an angle and the flowered material pouched outward, showing her slip in the gap between two buttons" (*DHR* 267). As a matter of fact, she is aware that the doctor has told her that she is blind but instead of assuming that she is losing vision she questions

[29] See section 2.3. , Anne Tyler and Feminism, in this dissertation

his professionalism by saying, "He thinks I'm blind" (*DHR* 268). She even goes to the baseball games with Ezra, even though she cannot see. Ezra wondered why she did not use a radio to follow the game but "she worried people might think it was a hearing aid" (*DHR* 280). Being blind at the end of the novel symbolizes how "she refuses to see what she is doing to her children" (Hobbs 18) throughout the story. Thus, it is not only a physical disability what she has but also a psychological barrier which prevents her from seeing her children's needs and pains. That is why Pearl's denial of her physical impairment is also a refusal to admit her lack of skills as a mother, although at the end of her life there is some acknowledgement when she confesses her inability to really understand each of her children. At the same time, she declares that she only had children in order not to be alone, a selfish attitude towards maternity which contrasts with the traditional idea of being a mother, the nurturer and the caretaker. Although Pearl represents the traditional woman in the way she dresses and speaks, she does not follow the standards of motherhood.

Another interesting scene that reveals part of Pearl's personality occurs when Ezra is describing some old photographs to her mother and she is asking if she is in any of the photographs. The way she asked about her past seems as if she is trying to picture herself when she was young in order not to forget her own image now that she is losing her sight. For Ezra, however, it is just an example of her selfish personality:

> To tell the truth, he didn't believe that relatives were what his mother was after. Ladies and gentlemen drifted by in a blur; he did his best to learn their names, but his mother dismissed them airily. It was herself she was hunting, he sensed. "Do you see me, at all? Is that the dinner where I wore the pale blue?" Her single-mindedness sometimes amused him, sometimes annoyed him. There was greed in the forward jutting of her chin as she waited to hear of her whereabouts. "Am I in that group? Was I on that picnic?" (*CN* 271)

In fact, this scene between mother and son is not only a search of Pearl's lost self, but also a shift of roles. Now it is the mother who needs the son, because "Ezra appears

as a mothering, phoric figure in more than one respect; he displaces Pearl, acts as her sight, her memory and her voice" (Pelorson 603). Thus, Tyler uses humor and wit in order to manage this shift of roles so that the novel does not break the standards in such a clear way. She rather uses subtlety as a tool to transform reality through the eccentricities of her characters.

All these examples illustrate how Pearl tries to continue her life despite the passage of time and her illness. Tyler has usually created old characters such as Pearl in her novels in order to analyze family relationships and time. As the writer states in an interview with the specialized website BookBrowse.com "time has always been a central obsession of mine--what it does to people, how it can constitute a plot all on its own" (n.pag.). Since the day that her husband left her, Pearl has always been strong enough to do things independently and now she does not want to depend on others. Tyler uses the reading of Pearl's youth diaries as an illustrating device to know more about her thoughts and her life. Her diaries are also very brief and highlight homely events that are full of comic remarks but lacking interesting facts and emotions. Ironically, in one of the entries she herself notes "I hope I will not put anything foolish in it as I have been known to do before." For example, in the first entry of the diary that is presented, she mentions that she "spilled half-pint in the buggy coming home and had a nice job cleaning it off the cushions" (*DHR* 273). She even accompanies this fact with the following remark "I can assure you" as a way to keep the interest of the reader and emphasize how much she worked on cleaning the car. One of her comments related to her measurement makes Ezra laugh for its naiveté and the sexual implications of an innocent girl in her puberty: "I have developed in every possible sense" (*DHR* 274). Only when she writes about her suitors does Ezra realize that her mother has had aspirations and finally his father has failed to accomplish them.

As we have seen Pearl is a very complex character whose body ex-centricities show a lot of elements present in Tyler's novels, namely, motherhood, passage of time, and miscommunication. With regards to Amanda in *Celestial Navigation*, she is a very rigid woman who feels a lot of resentment towards her mother. That is why she is always too sharp in her criticisms, especially in what refers to clothes:

> [Laura] wore her maroon knit, which was supposed to slim her some but didn't. Bulges showed in the gape of her coat. I was in my good black wool with the rhinestone buttons, and my squirrel-collar coat and my gray bird-wing hat that exactly matches my hair. But I might as well not have bothered. The plastic scarf and the Rain Dears spoiled the effect. (*CN* 4)

She also mentions the fact that she has not been married and compares herself with Miss Vinton, one of the boarders in Mrs. Pauling house:

> She wore what she always does, a lavender cardigan over a gray tube of a dress, baggy mackintosh, boatlike Mary Janes on her great long feet. She shook hands like a man, bony hands with straight-edged nails and nicotine stains. Rides a bicycle everywhere she goes. *You* know the kind. "Well, it was very thoughtful of you to come, Miss Vinton," I said, but meanwhile I threw a good sharp glace at her clothing to show I had taken it in. If she noticed, she didn't care. Just gave me a horse-toothed smile. I suppose she thinks we have something in common, both being spinsters in our forties, but thank heaven that is where the resemblance ends. (*CN* 11)

The way Amanda describes Miss Vinton clearly illustrates how she despises women who do not follow the conventions. Amanda is proud of her appropriate way of dressing and when the other characters do not behave according to the classical standards she criticizes them sharply. Her description is funny, since she uses words such as "horse-toothed smile" or emphasizes the word "you" in order to portray a grotesque character.

A third type of female character would be the one represented by Lucy (*Saint Maybe*) and Joanne (*If Morning Ever Comes*). They do not wear noticeable outfits but they are not dull either because they do care for appearances, especially when it comes to call the attention of a man. Joanne, Ben Joe's sister, describes her style in a clear

way: "I always did like first dates … I was good at those. I know what to wear – not so dressy it made them shy and not so sloppy they thought I didn't give a hoot" (*IMC* 53). Both Joanne and Lucy are considered a prototype of the feminine by scholars like Ruth O. Saxton because they wear clothes that highlight their feminity or use lipstick in a way that men can consider attractive. Lipstick is one of Lucy's qualities that Ian describes with more detail from the beginning:

> Her dress was scoop-necked and slim-waisted and full-skirted. She wore extremely red lipstick that seemed not gaudy, for some reason, but brave. Ian was entranced (*SM* 6).
>
> Ian thought of Lucy's grey eyes and her perfect, lipsticked mouth. The red of her lipstick was a bitter red, with something burnt in it. She had had things her own way every minute of her life, he suspected. Women who looked like that never needed to consider other people (*SM* 42).

Contrary to what Ian thought of Lucy, whom he takes as a "brave" person who does not need to consider what other people think, she is a very fragile woman. On top of that, her outfit clearly exemplifies how she sees herself as a "commodity whose value depends upon her desirability to males … always conscious of her surface image and what it will fetch on the market" (Bail 169). That is why when her husband dies and not even her body seems to help her to find another man or a good job, she commits suicide. Thus, body ex-centricities like the ones we have commented on, are part of the feminity of Tyler's characters but they are also a way to hide their fears and their weak condition. The external outfit they wear shows a self-confidence that they usually lack. For this reason, most of the times male characters assume that "her appearance is identical to her self" (Saxton 72) on the grounds of the impact their feminine traits make on them.

A fourth type of woman is the one represented by other female characters who do not care about their appearance because they are too concerned with motherhood or other domestic issues. This category is very well represented by Mary (*Celestial*

Navigation) or Mrs. Bedloe (*Saint Maybe*). They are usually labelled as motherly, which eliminates their feminity, especially for men. This is how Mary described herself when she was a mother of one child: "I would stand in front of the mirror and see how wide-hipped and expansive I was, how tall I loomed, bigger than life, *full* of life, with not enough people to pour it into" (*CN* 76). Later in the narrative we will see how she gives birth to five more children, which transforms her into a woman with a very active "role as supplier, feeder, caretaker" (*CN* 160).

We have shown how "Tyler's heroines consistently demonstrate a movement away from the center into 'other' areas. They move into the cosmic world as well as the underground world, subverting the order they are expected to serve" (Quiello 62). For this reason, Tyler uses fortune tellers in some of her stories, since they are a connexion between the supernatural realm and reality. This association with the supernatural is also part of her heroines' eccentric character. We have already mentioned Jenny's visit to the fortune teller in *Dinner* when talking about Tyler's feminism but we also have Justine Peck in *Searching for Caleb* who is a fortune teller herself or Brindle, Morgan's sister in *Morgan's Passsing*, who usually has tarot cards.

Fortune-telling is not the only supernatural element in Tyler's fiction. She has also used dreams as a way to explain the characters repressed feelings. Characters like Ben Joe, Jeremy or Rebecca have dreams about their expectations and their life. For instance, Rebecca in *Grownups* starts to consider if her life could be different on the basis of her dreaming about a son. She had a girl and three step-daughters so she started to remember about her high-school boyfriend and what could have happened if she had married him:

> "I had the oddest dream," she told Poppy over breakfast.
> "Were there any numbers in it?"

> She was startled, not so much by the question as by the fact that he had heard her. Nowadays, he seemed to be absent so often. She looked at him over her coffee cup and realized, much later than she should have, that he was dressed wrong. He was wearing a pair of brown suit pants and a sleeveless undershirt but no shirt, so that his suspenders cut directly across his whiskery bare shoulders.
> …
> "Sorry, no," she told him. "This was about a boy. He seemed to be my son."
> "Which one?"
> "Pardon?"
> "Which of your sons was it?"
> "Poppy," she said. "I don't have any sons."
> "Then what'd you go and dream about them for?" (*BWG* 24)

Her dream is what triggers her search for her lost sweetheart in the novel because she wanted to learn what happened to him after she left him to marry another man. As usual, Tyler's comic touch lies in Poppy's description of his clothes and his reaction towards her revelation.

For Rose Quiello the figure of the witch is part of the supernatural realm, since they "represent all that is unrepressed and, in the case of Pearl, even violent" (62). As I have previously mentioned, Pearl is one of the few female characters that does not behave as expected of a mother, since she used to beat and insult her children. It is what Gilbert and Gubar have labelled as the "monster" figure, which is so typical in patriarchal texts. However, I believe that it is difficult to include Pearl among the supernatural, since her behaviour is quite realistic and responds to her stress for raising a family on her own:

> Oh, she'd been an angry sort of mother. She'd been continually on edge; she'd felt too burdened, too much alone. And after Beck left, she'd been so preoccupied with paying the rent and juggling the budget and keeping those great, clod-footed children in new shoes. (*DHR* 18)

Yet, the ghostly figure of Dorothy in *The Beginner's Goodbye* is something that really shows Tyler's development towards the supernatural or the Gothic and gives way to some humorous details as well: "Was there some theme here? Was there some unifying factor that triggered her visits? The first time, I had been reflecting on our life

together; but the second time, I'd been perusing the butter lettuce, for Lord's sake" (*BG* 179). In this passage Aaron is wondering why he has not seen Dorothy in the last few weeks and he starts thinking about the clichés usually associated with this type of situation. But, in a Tylerian approach there is always room for humor, so serious as the tone may be. She introduces the "butter lettuce" moment as a way to laugh at the commonplaces of ghosts as they have generally been portrayed in literature and the cinema.

Another device Tyler uses to illustrate part of her characters eccentricities is the way they accumulate things. For example, Mrs. Pauling (*Celestial Navigation*), who used to collect pieces of news:

> They stuffed all her envelopes, and for years I unfolded them one by one and tried to figure out their relevance to me. I never could. Puppies were rescued from sewer pipes, orphaned rabbits were nursed by cats, toddlers splashed in wading pools on Baltimore's first summer day. Nothing that meant anything. (*CN* 23)

As Margaret M. Gullette mentions, Tyler's is a "peculiar world, in which material things loom so large, but the most important attribute of a set of objects is their quantity. The reason… is that her characters have to decide whether accumulation is a good thing for them or not" (324). Maybe that is why she uses a company called Rent-a-Back in *A Patchwork Planet* given that they are usually dealing with old possessions that people accumulate. What follows is a description of one of the attic from Mrs. Alford, one of the elderly people that usually request the services of the company:

> I groped overhead till I connected with the lightbulb cord, and then all this junk sprang into view: trunks and suitcases and lamps, andirons, kitchen chairs with no seats, electric fans so outdated you could have fit a whole hand inside their metal grilles. (*PP* 29)

Worth mentioning is the fact that the owners of all these objects are usually old women who live in big old houses such as Mrs. Alford, Mrs. Pauling or Pearl because for Tyler things mean "responsibility, fidelity, fixity and status" (Gullette 326). Hence,

for Tyler the older her characters are the more things they possess. It is interesting to read how Amanda in *Celestial Navigation* found Mrs. Pauling's room when she died and what she could read in her will:

> *I believe I want Laura to have my personal jewelry, all except the little amethyst finger ring for Mrs. Pruitt at the church and Papa's flip-top pocket watch for Jeremy and some small memento, I just can't decide which, for Miss Vinton. Maybe Laura could select something. Amanda can take the English china and the silver, except for my teaspoon collection which I think might go to Mrs. Jarrett. Also she may have the wooden rack to keep it in.* (*CN* 31)

The fact that Mrs. Pauling thinks of everybody to distribute her most precious possessions suggests that those things were as significant to her as the people she mentions. Her words are written in an informal way which reminds us of Pearl's diary entries, which allow the reader to go into the writer's feelings, given that we don't get to hear Mrs. Pauling's words when she was alive.

Old characters are very important in Tyler's universe for they appear in most of her novels having a major part. In a world where the elderly seem to have a minor role in society, Tyler uses them to show how they still have a lot to say, although sometimes their behaviour is unexpected because they are deaf or show some kind of senile dementia such as Mrs. Glynn in *A Patchwork Planet* and Poppy in *Grownups*. Mrs. Glynn is one of the best exponents of Tylerian literature, since she is old, she is deaf, she is traditional and, at the same time, she has got her ways. Some of her dialogues are hilarious just because she is deaf and the words that she uses make her scenes more enjoyable:

> "It's not that I'm antisocial," Mrs. Glynn said. "Am I, Sophia."
> "Goodness, no, Aunt Grace. Just independent."
> "Pensive? Well, I do like to have my thinking time, but –"
> "Independent, is what I said."
> "Oh. *Independent*. Yes" (*PP* 91-92)

In this sequence she has just met Barnaby, whom at first she confuses with Bartleby, and we discover how she likes being on her own. After this, she asks him about his origins and his family:

> "It's a long story," I said.
> "Lost art? Why is that?"
> "A *long story*. Complicated." (*PP* 92)

Her hearing made conversations complicated with her but it adds a comic tone to the story:

> When I asked her in the canned-fruit aisle, whether she liked mandarins, she said, "I like *any* kind of instrument," and at the register she took offense when the clerk offered plastic or paper. ("*Naturally* I can pay for it, or why else would I be here?" she snapped.) (*PP* 99)

Another old character who usually provides humorous moments is Poppy (*Grownups*). He is an old man who seems to be a little bit senile and on the verge of dying but he is able to make it through the whole novel. Rebecca does not particularly like him but he is the only person that lives with her after her husband died. He is about to be one hundred years old and he is enthusiastic about celebrating it:

> "Your birthday!" She felt disoriented. "The birthday you just had?"
> "The birthday coming up."
> "But that's not till December!"
> "Yes, December eleventh. I'm going to be one hundred."
> "Well, I know that, Poppy," she said.
> …
> "I do happen to have a guest list," he said.
> "Wonderful, Poppy."
> She thought he meant he had a guest list *somewhere*, but he started fumbling through his trousers and finally came up with a small, fat square of folded paper. (*BWG* 25)

With Poppy, Tyler works one of her best comic scenes where the shadow of death seems to go over him. It occurs in the welcome party for Rebecca's new-born granddaughter. Suddenly, Poppy starts feeling sick and everybody believes that it is a

heart attack. Once in hospital they discover that far from the worst predictions, he just had a banal problem due to his tendency to overeat:

> Poppy opened his eyes and said, "I believe they're trying to finish me off."
> "Nope. They're letting you go," Zeb told him. He was peering now at the chirpy machine. "Turns out it's indigestion."
> "It is?"
> "I just spoke with the resident."
> "Oh! Indigestion!" Rebecca cried. It was such a wonderful word, she felt the need to say it herself.
> "I hear you had three cupcakes at the baby-welcoming," Zeb told Poppy.
> "Well, what if I did? I've eaten far more, many a time." (*BWG* 160)

Poppy's final remark is a confession and, at the same time, he is not assuming his fault in the situation because at last he adds: "Well, I don't know what the world is coming to… if a man can't eat three measly cupcakes without folks calling an ambulance" (*BWG* 160).

Mrs Glynn and Poppy Tyler are two old figures who have no fear of old age and who seem to have grown old only in the outside but not in the inside. We get the same impression with other old characters such as Pearl, Liam or Maryam, since they never think of the burdens of their age but it is their families who remind them that their age presupposes a certain behavior. Throughout her narrative, Tyler has always used elderly characters with a secondary role. As the writer herself ages, it seems she gets more conscious of age and her elderly characters start to have a more relevant role in her novels such as Liam (*Noah's Compass*) or Maryam (*Digging to America*).

One more characteristic of Tyler's humor is "the way she allows her characters' minds this free play and then follows them on their whimsical and entertaining digressions, digressions which are both funny and endearing" (Levy 124). Tyler's asides sometimes interrupt the main action by giving a funny remark or by showing a comic touch of the speaker. In fact, many of Tyler's novels are built with detours and flashbacks such as *Earthly Possessions*, *Grownups* or *The Beginner's Goodbye*. For

instance, while she escapes with her kidnapper in *Earthly Possessions* Charlotte remembers when she first left her husband on account of an argument about her dead mother-in-law's furniture:

> This was Alberta's furniture that he'd stored instead of selling, for some reason, back when he sold her house. We hadn't been married a month when he hired a U-Haul and brought everything home with him: her rickety bedroom suites, linoleum-topped table and worn-out chairs, her multicolored curtains and shawls and dresses… (*EP* 100)

We have already commented on Tyler's characters inkling for accumulating things. The issue here is that Charlotte's husband does not even ask her about it and she does not agree with keeping those old pieces which they were not going to use. Consequently, she tries to get rid of them without telling her husband. Furthermore, she plans a way to discard them one by one but she has problems deciding which one to throw away first:

> The bureau? Or the end table? Part of me wanted to work my way through the kitchen chairs, but there were eight of them and that would be so boring, week after week…
> His attitude now was fond but abstracted – not what you look for in a husband. He'd settled me so quickly into his life; he'd moved on to other projects. (*EP* 101)

With this abrupt change of topic she is letting us know that the relationship with her husband is not easy and that is why she decided to leave him for good. In addition, the furniture is just an excuse for her to decide something in her life, which has been subjected to her parent's will first and then to her husband. As usual in Tyler's novels, the heroine is not able to achieve her original plan. Thus, her husband discovers her because she did not consider all the details. Once she has discarded the bureau she leaves her house but when she comes back she finds it at home again:

> "Why," I said. "What is *this* doing here?"
> "I found it by the trashcan," he said.
> "You did?"
> "Luckily, it's Columbus Day and nobody picked it up."
> "Oh. Columbus Day," I said.

> "How many other things have you thrown away?"
> "Well…" (*EP* 103)

Charlotte is so unlucky in her purpose that just the day when she decides to take the step it is a bank holiday. Her husband Saul seems very hurt because it is his belongings she is throwing away. It is then when Charlotte starts to think of leaving him. The aforementioned passages are a good example of the title of the novel, *Earthly Possessions*, since Charlotte wants to get rid of everything she owns, even her marriage, in order to start a new life. Yet, as we have seen, things seem to be difficult to leave behind.

Tyler's humor is also a depiction of society and the multidimensional aspects of human beings. Although she has been accused of mainly using white middle class characters, her novels include different types of people with different jobs and expectations. Thus, humor "allows her to look at many issues and many types of people… and to do so without rancor or bitterness" (Evans *Anne Tyler* 68).

§

Characters' names "reflect their taste or lack thereof" (Evans 84). Although her main characters usually have a serious name, some of her secondary characters usually have strange names such as Rebecca's children in *Back When We Were Grownups*, Min Foo, NoNo, Biddy, Patch, as well as her husband's uncle, whom everybody calls Poppy, or Zeb, her brother-in-law. With these names we see that Rebecca's family is very informal and they prefer using nicknames. It contrasts with other well-known Tylerian families such as the Calebs or the Tulls, who never use nicknames to call the members of their families. Why may Tyler use such nicknames? In the case of the Davitches, it is

a way of showing the mixture of cultures within the family, since some of Rebecca's daughters have relationships with Arab or African-American men. In addition, it portrays how this family seems to communicate better than other Tylerian families, since they usually talk about their problems or the things that annoy them.

Pagan or Destiny in *The Amateur Marriage* are also some striking names but they have a deeper meaning. Destiny is the person who is keeping Pagan while his mother is in the retreat. Her name is literally to be the destiny which has united Pagan with his grandparents and she is also the link towards Lindy, their daughter. At first, the Antons are surprised about her choice for the name Pagan but, taking into account that Lindy lived in a commune with hippies, the name is seen as a protest against the Puritans, who used it back in ancient times.

The names of the businesses the main characters have, such as the Open Arms, Rent a Back, Meow-Bow Animal Hospital, or the Homesick Restaurant, are also a reflection of Tyler's universe in which these names also say a lot of their characters. As we have mentioned, Rebecca is the responsible for the development of the Open Arms due to her open attitude and her desire to get on well with everybody. Hence, the name of her business reflects how she opens her arms to everyone in her family and, even her clients and workers.

Also worth mentioning is the name of Tyler's invented religion of the Second Chance in *Saint Maybe*. The way this religion is presented, it sounds as something completely false but the ironic thing is that it is what Ian really needs, a second chance to redeem himself for his actions and start again. Probably influenced by her Quaker's background, as Evans notes, when Tyler depicts a preacher or a religious situation, the scene is usually humorous. Although she has sometimes stated that she is not interested in religion, for her the rituals and the ministers are generally the object of her mocking.

Most of the times, when "Tyler is satiric, she bears down on religion, though never in a malicious tone" (Evans *Anne Tyler* 69). Her most religious novel can be considered *Saint Maybe* but even in the title there is an ironic metaphor of its main character, Ian Bedloe. When he is confessing to Reverend Emmett, he expects to receive redemption immediately but he is asked to sacrifice his life instead, something he is reluctant to assume:

> "What kind of a cockeyed religion is this?"
> "It's the religion of atonement and complete forgiveness," Reverend Emmett said. "It's the religion of the Second Chance" (*SM* 124)

He is in despair after his brother kills himself because he considers himself responsible for his death. In addition, his brother's wife, Lucy, unable to cope with her husband's death, commits suicide by an overdose of pills. In fact, he even feels ashamed for his thoughts when, during the first service that he attends, he starts laughing at a woman who has lost her son. Nevertheless, the narrative of the story is so hilarious that the dramatic tension for the death of a dear one is intermingled with the comic effect of the situation:

> "These things happen," he says. Says Chuckie was a, what do you call, fluke accident. Forgot to put his parachute on."
> Ian blinked.
> "Forgot!" his neighbor marveled in a voice like a dove.
> "`Forgot!´ I said. `How could that be?´ This soldier tells me, it's the army's considered opinion that Chuckie had just jumped so often, he'd stopped thinking about it. So up he comes to that whatever, that door where they jump out of, the whole time making smart remarks so everybody's laughing – you remember what a card he was – and gives a little kind of like salute and steps into empty air. It's not till then the fellow behind him says, `Wait!´ Says, `Wait, you forgot your - ´"
> "Parachute," Ian's neighbor finished sadly. (*SM* 118)

That is why Ian enters the church of the Second Chance (a name that will proof accurate in the case of Ian). Following the preacher's advice, Ian changes his life completely. Thus, he is closer to sanctity at the end of the novel.

Apart from the name, we discover that the Second Chance is a religion that has some rules such as the ban for smoking or drinking beer and coffee. However, the reverend has not considered the trespasses to these rules on the basis of maintaining the community:

> I figured I was setting up the ideal doctrine. But now I see how inconsistent it is, how riddled with holes and contradictions. What do I care if someone drinks a cup of coffee? Wouldn't I have done better to ban TV? And here's the worst, Ian: the thought of doing that did cross my mind, back in the beginning. But then I said, no, no. And never admitted the reason, which was: how would I get any members, if I didn't let them watch TV?" (*SM* 259)

With these words Tyler is mocking at religious conventions that are not really supported in any dogmatic idea. What is more, she even criticizes the fact that religion does not impose rules that could be unpopular by means of exaggerating Reverend Emmett's rules.

Another example of preacher is Saul in *Earthly Possessions*. However, his wife Charlotte is not religious. That is why she is reluctant to see him as a preacher. On top of that, his being a preacher changes him forever:

> … "What If Christ Had Never Come?" That always makes me laugh. I can think of a lot we'd have missed if Christ had never come. The Spanish Inquisition, for one thing. For another, losing my husband to the Hamden Bible College. (*EP* 108)

Saul becomes a preacher although Charlotte does not like it. At the beginning she thinks that maybe he can change his mind but she realizes soon that he is not going to give up. The funny thing is the way she daydreams about her husband's possible future:

> I had a lot of foolish hopes, those first few years. I imagined that one day he might lose his faith, just like that, and go on to something new. Join a motorcycle gang. Why not? We'd travel everywhere, Selinda and I perched behind him. I would be hugging his waist, laying my cheek against his black cloth back.
> Black cloth?
> Oh, it was ingrained, by now: even on a motorcycle, he'd be wearing his seedy suit and carrying his Bible. He would never stop being a preacher. (*EP* 111)

Anne Tyler's comedy is rather respectful with religion, since she does not use the slapstick comedy, one of her more particular traits. June Sochen defines this type of comedy as a "physically rough-and-tumble style" (141). Tyler sometimes uses absurd situations that involve people falling or hurting themselves unintentionally as a way to laugh overtly, something that contrasts with her subtlety. Two of her novels are especially well-known for their slapstick scenes, namely, *Breathing Lessons* and *The Accidental Tourist*. Let us take a look at two humorous moments where the slapstick plays a major role.

One of the most commented ones occurs in the first novel mentioned, when Maggie crashes her car just after going out of the garage where her car has been repaired. She is usually laughed at by her husband and her family because she is awkward and too innocent. However, she is able to obviate their criticisms in order to focus her attention on the important issues:

> She rolled down her window and called, "Bye now!" and the manager glanced up from his clipboard. She glided past him – a woman in charge of herself, for once, lipsticked and medium-heeled and driving an undented car.
> A soft voice on the radio said, "Well, I'm about to remarry? The first time was purely for love? It was genuine true love and it didn't work at all. Next Saturday I'm marrying for security."
> Maggie looked over at the dial and said, "Fiona?"
> She meant to brake, but accelerated instead and shot out of the garage and directly into the street. A Pepsi truck approaching from the left smashed into her left front fender – the only spot that had never, up till now, had the slightest thing go wrong with it. (*BL* 244-245)

Alice Hall Petry defines Maggie as an "unflattering, even denigrating caricature of a middle-aged woman" (qtd. in García Lorenzo 55) because she is not able to dominate her own body. However, she is a very visceral woman that is deeply affected by everything that surrounds her. Her accident is a hyperbolical act that expresses her feeling of surprise at what she has just heard.

The other slapstick scene occurs when Macon in *The Accidental Tourist* stumbles in the basement and hurts himself. It happened when Macon was going downstairs to use the dryer, a domestic task that he is not used to doing. The description of his fall is very visual, since the writer uses Edward, the dog, as the cause of Macon's accident:

> Just then, an eerie howl rose from… where? From the basement's very air, it seemed. It continued steadily; it grew. Edwards, who must have been expecting this all along, kicked off instantly with his sturdy, clawed hind legs against Macon's diaphragm. Macon felt the wind knocked out of him. Edward whomped into the wall of damp body bags on the clothesline, rebounded, and landed in the center of Macon's stomach. Macon set one foot blindly in the wheeled basket and his legs went out from under him. He stepped down hard into empty space. (*AT* 40-41)

Macon, the self-sufficient Macon, who is always correcting others' mistakes and who presumes of his knowledge, is accident prone. In a way, Tyler is laughing at all those men who criticize others but, at the same time, have their own flaws. By ridiculing Macon in the first chapters of the book, we can see that he is not in control of everything as he pretends.

Why does Tyler use the slapstick? This type of comedy was used to show "personal weakness, an essential trait of humor" (Sochen 143). However, by using slapstick for both men and women, Tyler equals them instead of using it to depict the supremacy of one over the other. For her, male and female have moments of weakness when accidents happen, especially when doing things that do not form part of their routines. That is why her style is so different from other writers of the period. In a way, she is revolting against all type of conventions, by making the absurd to dominate over gender stereotypes or issues. Furthermore, by using such awkward moments, Tyler combines the verbal comedy with the physical comedy as a way to introduce common domestic scenes that can happen to anybody.

In addition to the slapstick, Tyler also uses dark humor but its purpose is different. She uses this type of humor when there is a moment of real pain that is described with a humorous tone, for example Evie carving the letters in her forehead backwards in *A Slipping Down Life* or when Ian's brother dies in *Saint Maybe*. Both situations imply a bloody scene that she tries to avoid by means of dark humor. The same happens when Ian's sister-in-law dies. The description of Lucy's overdose is mixed with a domestic scene in which one of her children throws a diaper in the toilet, which provokes the water to pour. Lucy, however, has her mind in a different problem, what causes a misconnection with her oldest daughter:

> She said: "Do you believe this? Do you believe a person would just have to fend for herself in this world?"
> "Won't the plumber come help?" Agatha asked.
> "It's Howard Belling all over again," her mother said, which was confusing because, for a second, Agatha thought she meant that the plumber was Howard Belling. "It's the same old story. Unattached, they tell you. Separated, they tell you – or soon about to be. And then one fine morning they're all lovey-dovey with their wives again. How come other people manage to have things so permanent? Is it something I'm doing wrong?"
> "No, Mama, *you* didn't do anything wrong," Agatha said.
> Her mother tipped another pill into her mouth and took another swallow of Coke. (*SM* 80)

It is clear that Lucy feels so lonely that not even her children can prevent her from the overdose. Through Agatha's innocent eyes we see how her mother is dying little by little before them. But Tyler's humorous machinery is working again and she does not only describe Lucy's resentment towards men, but the way she creates confusion with her words, bringing to the scene their toilet's problem. Black humor in this case is used to divert the attention from Lucy's actions as a way to create more tension and a doubt on the reader. Will she finally do it? Well, yes, she will, as we discover some pages later. But Tyler is not interested in providing more details on the grizzly parts. As a consequence, we are informed of Lucy's death when Ian's mother calls to inform him:

> … she went to bed herself and just, I don't know, I mean there's no sign she did it on purpose but when we walked in she was flat on her back and breathing so slowly, just a breath here and another breath there, and this pill bottle sat on her nightstand totally empty. There wasn't any letter though or anything like that. So it *couldn't* have been on purpose, right? But why would she take even one of those pills? Our family's never held with sleeping pills. I always say, get up and scrub the floors if your can't sleep! Do some reading! Improve your mind! (*SM* 90)

With these words it is clear that Ian's mother is also in doubt about how Lucy died but she prefers to believe that she had sleeping problems. The way she puts it, her words sound humorous because she gives different options to avoid pills while Ian's mind is trying to cope with his responsibility in Lucy's death. In addition to her remarks, Mrs. Bedloe also provokes a funny misunderstanding when she explains that she is not going to tell Lucy's children about their mother's death:

> He said, "They don't know yet?"
> "No, and we're not ever going to tell them."
> Maybe the shock had sent her around the bend. He said. "They're going to have to find out sometime. How will you explain it when she doesn't come home from the hospital?"
> *Or when she fails to show up for Thomas's high-school graduation or Agatha's wedding*, he thought wildly, and he almost laughed.
> "I mean we're not going to tell them they might have saved her," his mother said. "If they'd phoned earlier, I mean. They'd feel so guilty." (*SM* 91)

By choosing the word "ever" it seems Ian's parents have decided to hide the news from the children forever. This misunderstanding provokes some laughs in Ian, who starts to picture in his mind different situations in the future. It sounds ironic to see that Ian is almost laughing when the situation is so dramatic, especially for the children.

Another example takes place in *The Clock Winder*. While Mrs Emerson is talking on the phone with one of her daughters she suffers a stroke that paralyses half of her body. When she wakes up after the stroke she is still lying on the floor alone in the kitchen and she starts to remember when her children were younger. The following passage exemplifies how her memories refer to the days when they used to chew gum:

> Then she saw a small gray brain, a convoluted bulb growing on the inner side of one table leg. Shock caused new chills to grip her chest, before she realized that she was looking at a chewed piece of gum. Chewing gum. She saw cheerful rows of green and pink yellow packets strung across the candy counter at the Tuxedo Pharmacy. She saw her children snapping gum as they came in for supper, a nasty habit. Chewing open-mouthed, on only one side, their faces peaceful and dreamy. (*CW* 193)

Thus, in these few paragraphs we can see Tyler's humor at its best. Her comical touch when a drama comes in, her bright side to the story and her right choice of words is what makes of her something so distinctive in contemporary literature.

The use of two apparently different humoristic devices such as the slapstick and the black humor illustrate Tyler's mastery of female comedy. Both "slapstick and screwball comics break out of established patterns. Both types of humor challenge the accepted limits. In this sense, both are anarchic, threatening, and rebellious" (Sochen 152).

Tyler's humor has always been a complete compendium of eccentric characters with a mixture of slapstick and black humor without forgetting the irony as well as the language play and the silence. For this reason, we can conclude that her literary style has not changed since she first started writing. Although she may have updated her Southern scenario and her characters to make them look more modern in a multicultural America, her humor remains the same. Scholars like Susan Gilbert (252) or John Updike ("Loosened Roots" 88) feel that her stories are circular, maybe so is her humor. Through the passage of time she has been able to keep on conjoining all the elements that have made her famous and acclaimed.

All the aforementioned examples show how we "are amused by and laugh at the funny and the absurd, the incongruous and the unexpected, the verbal twist and the visual peak" (Evans, *Anne Tyler* 89). Tyler's compass signals a direction towards

optimism because life is a succession of tragic and dull moments that we can overcome with a slight touch of humor.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person.

Anne Tyler ~ *Back When We Were Grownups*

As we have studied throughout the previous sections, Anne Tyler is interested in daily issues with little action and hardly exciting situations. In addition, her romances are predictable and lack romantic tension. Furthermore, some of her critics have commented her straightforward way of narrating things and her dull plots. Then, why is Tyler so appealing for readers? Her characters, male and female, lack a lot of characteristics that make them likeable. On the one hand, they are most of the times unattractive like Evie or have disabilities like Michael or Aaron. On the other hand, although we can find some young characters such as Ian, Ben Joe or Evie, most of the times she uses middle-aged characters like Rebecca or Elizabeth or even old couples such as Abby and Red. In addition, some of them are sometimes irritable, such as Maggy or Liam, and clumsy like Ezra and Delia. Then, what is it so delightful about them? Why reading about them instead of reading about perfectly young and attractive characters? Tyler's characters and stories are what readers are expecting, people and events where they can see themselves reflected because what Anne Tyler narrates can happen to anyone. People can marry for love or for other reasons, they can hate their family but have to come to terms with them, and why not, everybody has a particularity that makes us eccentric to the eyes of others. As Whittemore states, "one doesn't go to Tyler for the shock of the new. One goes to her for the pull of the old … Tyler's books all teem with family, and virtually all of them chronicle repression shaded by grief—who fights it, who succumbs to it" (theatlantic.com, n.pag).

Our lives are a series of events that can sometimes be cheerful or gloomy, funny or serious, full of accidental and unplanned situations intermingled with our daily routines. Furthermore, Tyler "does not consider her characters' lives fixed" (Levy 117) and that is why most of the times her characters have second chances, what make the stories entertaining and, at the same time, realistic. What is more, as we have seen,

Tyler is also a worthy heiress of the Southern tradition of the grotesque with her accidental events which are a turning point in her stories. They are sometimes small incidents such as domestic accidents, sudden encounters or surprising arrivals. Nonetheless, she also presents more important actions such as deaths or weddings in an unplanned way. Her accidental world is what makes her stories more entertaining and, even though she is narrating sad events, the way she introduces us to them makes us see how life is not only a series of planned situations but it is also full of unexpected happenings which can alter our conception of life. That is Tyler's universe, acclaimed by writers such as John Updike, Nick Hornby and Eudora Welty.

Apart from these main themes, Tyler's mastery lies in the way she is able to describe situations using the right words, or even the wrong ones to create a humorous scene, and the adequate pauses and silences. Moreover, her fiction reflects with utmost realism the society we live in. Her characters populate Baltimore the same way they could inhabit other occidental cities, since the reader can feel identified with what they think and the problems they have. Nevertheless, she has been labelled as a Southern writer for numerous reasons, which Susan Gilbert summarizes:

> The primacy of family as her subject, the attention to time, the influence of the past on the present and future, the settings, the use of one setting over and over, the attention to manners and to folk speech, the range of characters from the quaintly anachronistic to the eccentric to the grotesque, the writer's sense of being outside are all qualities for which she and other writers are tagged as Southern. ("Anne Tyler" 274)

When one reads for the first time one of Tyler's books it is easy to consider the reading as something light and easy because she does not use complex language or innovative literary techniques. Nevertheless, one of the most intricate issues in her fiction is the way she illustrates gender. Throughout the dissertation I have analyzed how femininity is portrayed in her stories as a way to illustrate how patriarchal attitudes

are still present in our actions and feelings. Hence, the inclusion of humor is what helps the author to hide a feminist perspective that is not easy to identify if one does not look at it closely. For this reason, Anne Tyler can be compared to Lucille Ball, a comedian who once said: "I'm not funny. My writers were funny. My direction was funny. The situations were funny. But I am not funny. What I am is brave" (qtd. in *Ms Magazine*, n.pag.). Tyler's bravery consists in having the ability to appeal to male and female readers alike although she is really criticizing a society which is not able to concede a balance between the male and the female. She has praised Bobbie Ann Mason's mastery in creating simple characters apart from valuing how male characters are "portrayed sympathetically with an appreciation for the fact that they can feel as confused and hurt and lonely as the female characters" ("Kentucky Cameos" 37). With these words she is revealing how important it is for her to depict credible male characters that are able to show their feelings. Hence, she clearly rejects all type of feminist thoughts that suggest the suppression of the male in literature such as those characteristic of second wave feminist literary criticism. She advocates for a society where equity and balance between men and women is possible, although there are still a lot of barriers to break. As a way to break these barriers and to show the equilibrium between the male and the female she is able to conjoin stories whose protagonists could be men or women. Tyler promotes androgyny in characters like Ezra or Ian in order to create people with advantageous male and female features. Another way of transgression of the gender stereotypes is her ability to use female and male voices to narrate her stories, hence she goes beyond the idea of the female author using only female protagonists and narrators.

After reading all her novels we can also conclude that her families are, after all, happy. I do not agree with López Berho when he states: "la narrativa de Anne Tyler nos

sitúa frente a una institución familiar enferma que, por ende, genera enfermos" (8). [30] Since it is true that Tyler's characters are unable to live completely apart from their families, I do not consider that a family can absorb its own members as an entity that makes them lack autonomy. In spite of the fact that all of them have to face difficult situations such as jealousies and resentments, divorces or deaths, after closing the book one feels that the family has a lot of reasons to be joyful. We mentioned how Tyler usually portraits dysfunctional families where the lack of communication is the reason for their problems, but there are other reasons why dysfunctionality appears, such as the insecurities and the selfishness of some of her characters. Therefore, some parents abdicate their parental duties and leave their families in search for a better life that they are not able to find outside either. These desertions provoke resentment and bitterness which do not break the family but make it even stronger to endure despite the passage of time. We have also analyzed how Tyler includes different familial structures which depart from the traditional idea of a perfect family.

Her detractors have argued that her families are very similar because they belong to the white middle-class American lifestyle. While recognizing that it is true that race or class is not a major issue in her writings, we must not forget that she does not follow a unique pattern in her families. That is why it is better to talk about the different Tylerian clans where parents can separate or die and the family can incorporate non-biological children and other members of the extended family such as grandparents or aunts and uncles. Apart from the blood relatives, Tyler also includes in her clans third characters as "healers" of the family such as Elizabeth, Muriel and Rita. [31] Although

[30] "Anne Tyler's narrative makes us see the family as a sick institution that produces sick people" (my translation).

[31] "Healers" is a term used by López Berho (420).

they are not initially part of the clan at the beginning they become part of them as they exert a positive influence on the family members to an extent that the main characters, (i.e. Matthew and his mother, Jeremy and Macon), cannot live without them anymore. Following the classical and mythical approach to the hero, López Berho labels these characters as "hierophants" because they are able to transform the heroes to a certain extent. According to him they are all perfectly competent when dealing with reality (420) although they are not particularly attractive and they are usually careless, being what we have called ex-centric. Furthermore, the tensions that she narrates give us plenty of information of a larger familial history which goes back to the origins of the clan. Consequently, we can consider Tyler as a postmodern author who depicts a modern idea of white middle-class families with different structures.

Another element which illustrates her postmodern view is related to her idea of marriage. Although at first glance it may seem that Tyler presents happy couples following the conventions of the fairy tales, we have explored how her novels describe the worries that her couples undergo and how they are able to endure despite the adversities. Furthermore, we have seen how her male and female characters enter marriage in an amateur way with little or no experience in love or sex. Thus, most of her couples are dysfunctional as the husband and the wife seem to have completely opposed views and behaviors. These marriages of opposites that Tyler creates serve the author to expose two ideas: the conventionality and the necessity of marriage. On the one hand, she presents marriage as one more convention of society, one more step that her female characters have to take if they do not want to be labelled as spinsters. On the other hand, both her male and female characters feel that they want somebody to cover some basic needs such as love, security, a house, a status, money, children, etc. that allow them the life that they had always dreamed of. The problem is that most of her couples,

especially the husbands, are trapped by the monotony of the daily life, something that provokes a certain frustration that makes the marriage to debilitate and even break. Therefore, some are unable to cope with the situation and run away from their families for a short period of time or in a complete way.

The title of Tyler's seventh novel, *Earthly Possessions*, is a good example of what life means for Tyler: "acquiring a husband, an occupation, children, boarders, brothers-in-law, and all the inevitable possessions" (Levy 126). Thus, everything that surrounds us, even people, is a possession that is aimed at making us feel happier. When the possessions no longer function as a positive element in our life that is when we start to consider discarding them, including the husband or wife. This idea can sound striking but by the way the author narrates her stories we can see how we sometimes take life as a series of events and objects that are expected from us and those who depart these predictable stages are labelled as eccentric or queer. For this reason, she presents eccentric and ex-centric characters which defy the standards with a behavior that makes them different at the eyes of society. Tyler's use of the eccentric is one of the tools the writer uses to hide her criticisms to society. Nevertheless, she has been labelled as a humorous writer, but her use of the comic is not mere coincidence or just to entertain, since it is a way of illustrating how the social order is still very much influenced by the patriarchal standards in Western societies. With her ex-centric mothers and abdicating fathers Tyler is trying to challenge the institution of motherhood as a way to vindicate the equity between the male and the female when it comes to taking care of the housework and the children. Thus, following Butler's gender performativity theory, she swaps the stereotyped gender roles in some of her novels as a way to illustrate that everything is possible and that men and women have agency (consciously and unconsciously) for breaking stereotyped gender expectations and behaviors.

Another surprising fact is the way the writer is able to present the changes throughout time experienced in the South. The publishing of her last novel entitled *A Spool of Blue Thread* did not alter the organization of this dissertation despite the fact that it was published only some months before its conclusion (February 2015). Although I have not had the time to analyze it in depth it has helped me to consider how her narrative has changed with the passage of time. She still uses the elements that make of her an important exponent of contemporary American literature such as the use of humor and the eccentric as well as the use of different points of view to tell the story of one Southern family. Although her major topics such as family and marriage are still present in this novel, we can clearly appreciate how the setting has indeed developed into a modern Baltimore where her characters use a mobile phone or connect to the Internet and, at the same time, use an ancient porch swing that had been built decades ago for the ancestral house. If we compare her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964), with the last one, *Spool* (2015), the scenario has evolved as the years have passed. We are presented to two Southern families, the Hawkes and the Whitshanks, who inhabit a magnificent familiar house which is decaying since it mirrors the development of their families. Whereas the Hawkes live in a Southern village with little connections with the outside except for Ben Joe's train trips to college, the Whitshanks live in Baltimore and through the new technologies, the radio and the television, they witness the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 and the Hurricane Sandy in 2012, both of them major events in modern American and worldwide history. For detractors of Tyler as a writer whose settings lack historical or sociological details, we have demonstrated how she is able to evolve through time in order to depict a new South which is no longer agrarian but an urban territory where Baltimore is still the preferred location.

Tyler has been criticized by her lack of connection to important historical events but I think that she is not so much interested in big changes as in the small alterations that each one of her families undergo. I believe Tyler depicts in her novels the things she knows about and the things she has experienced. Although she does not write about her own life she includes bits of her experience in each one of her stories. That is why her characters live in the familial houses of different neighborhoods of Baltimore, where we find from Iranian characters, widows, busy husbands, or laughable priests, to old ladies with cluttered houses. Furthermore, the writer includes references to pop culture such as songs and books that were popular at the time the stories take place. Doubtless, she does not treat major historical events; on the contrary, she works with minor details that affect the lives of the common people.

The research and the analysis that I have carried out in this thesis shows that, as I wanted to demonstrate at the beginning, Tyler's fiction sails around daily topics that affect both her male and her female characters. Thus, I have explored how the writer reflects family and marriage in her fiction and how by means of using eccentric characters and humor she mocks at the traditional structures. I have also shown how her work presents an equilibrium between the male and the female with the aim of foregrounding and criticizing gender stereotypes.

Writing this dissertation has been a long process in which my own life has also changed. Before undertaking this project I did not see in Tyler's narrative anything special beyond her particular way of using humor. But as I finished reading all her novels and the research went deeper, I realized that Tyler's themes clearly mark a particular way of approaching gender issues in female literature which I wanted to portray in my dissertation. Consequently, I believe that with this study I present a feminist trend about the author which no other scholar has previously analyzed.

I haven't analyzed the narrative techniques that Tyler uses in her novels given that it is not object of this dissertation. Yet, it is worth mentioning that her mastery in the use of different perspectives to narrate the story or the intermingling of the past with the present as well as the use of different narrators are one of her most notorious qualities. This dissertation would be of interest to those readers or researchers of Tyler who want an updated approach to her writings for it includes a comprehensive study of all her novels, including her last published one in 2015. Furthermore, no other work has been able to analyze all her work so far, let alone the complete lack of studies in Spain except for the only existent dissertation published in 1994. Actually, after completing the dissertation I still wonder why all the research on Anne Tyler dates from the 1990s and there is no critical material for her work from 2000 on. I tend to think that it is related to her popularity with the Pulitzer Award together with the films and the TV series based on some of her novels. Nevertheless, she has published a lot of novels afterwards and nowadays she also gives in person interviews, something that she has not done in previous decades. For this reason, I would like to devote these last lines of the dissertation to ask the Spanish academic institutions to include Anne Tyler in the syllabus of contemporary American literature courses given her importance as one of the most relevant writers of current American fiction in Southern literature. It would be the first step for a deeper understanding of her style and recognition of the relevance of her work.

After analyzing all her novels I feel that I have known Anne Tyler for a long time. If I ever have the chance to see her I would speak with her as if she were a relative. Well, why not, she would probably know me already since I am like one of her female characters whose compass is still pointing to happiness.

CHAPTER 7

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If I could have written the last sentence in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, I'd have been happy for the rest of my life.

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ANNEX I: LIST OF NOVELS BY ANNE TYLER

Quotations from the novels of Anne Tyler are given in the body of the text with the following abbreviations[32]. I have also included here the bibliographical references of the novels following the chronological order in which they were originally published:[33]

If Morning Ever Comes (IMC). London: Vintage, 1991.
The Tin Can Tree (TCT). London: Vintage, 1990.
A Slipping-Down Life (SDL). London: Vintage, 1990.
The Clock Winder (CW). London: Vintage, 1990.
Celestial Navigation (CN). London: Vintage, 1996.
Searching for Caleb (SC). New York: Wings Books, 1991
Earthly Possessions (EP). New York: Fawcett Books, 1996.
Morgan's Passing (MP). London: Vintage, 1991.
Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant (DHR). London: Vintage, 1992.
The Accidental Tourist (AT). New York: Wings Books, 1991
Breathing Lessons (BL). New York: Wings Books, 1991
Saint Maybe (SM). London: Vintage, 1992.
Ladder of Years (LY). London: Vintage, 1996.
A Patchwork Planet (PP). London: Vintage, 1999.
Back When We Were Grownups (BWG). London: Vintage, 2002.
The Amateur Marriage (AM). London: Vintage, 2004.
Digging to America (DA). London: Vintage, 2007.
Noah's Compass (NC). London: Vintage, 2010.
The Beginner's Goodbye (BG). London: Vintage, 2013.
A Spool of Blue Thread (SBT). London: Chatto & Windus, 2015.

[32] The abbreviations for the first eleven novels are the ones given by Ralph C. Stephens.

[33] The bibliographical references from the list correspond to the editions used for this dissertation but they are not the original editions of Knopf Publishers.