

Neglect and Abandonment in Anne Tyler's Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant

Shaden Adel Nasser, Ain Shams University, Egypt

The European Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Anne Tyler (born 1941) is one of the ingenious twentieth – century American writers. Classified by critics as a Southern writer, Tyler focuses on modern families and their distinctive relationships. She writes with wit and insight about runaway husbands, wives, fathers, mothers and children. Her interest in themes concerning family, home and identity becomes increasingly significant in her later works. This significance stems from her fondness of drawing honest and accurate scenes and people. Tyler's most legendary novel is Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant (1982) was nominated for the National Book Critics circle Award in 1982. This work drew much praise for its psychological insight, rich characterization and well – developed plot structure. It examines many facets of family relationships, particularly as they evolve between mother and child, fester between siblings, and extend into the world beyond. Since this paper is an attempt to bridge the two fields of psychology and literature, Tyler's Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant is examined regarding how the interpersonal trauma of abandonment and neglect experience in childhood had a great impact on the personality in adulthood. The study shows to what extent Anne Tyler, in her novel, succeeds in displaying the psychological difficulties that follow abandonment which leads to disturbed attachment styles, difficulties with trust, diminished social skills and inability to understand social interactions.

Keywords: Anne Tyler, Interpersonal trauma, neglect, abandonment, fatherless families

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Introduction

“By building a child’s social and emotional capabilities we enable children to be happily engaged with others and with society, and learn, to develop fully, to attain and to achieve. In essence, it delivers school ready, life ready, and child ready members of society” (The Allen Report 2011).

The family unit is the basic social unit of any society. This relationship provides balance in a sexual, emotional, intellectual and social way as no other can. From the very ancient times to the present day, family has retained its importance in its role of a primary and vital unit of the social organization. Over the past thirty years, the United States has witnessed a major family transformation – the beginning of the end of the traditional nuclear family. Some important changes have occurred, for example, the divorce rate increased harshly, and some mothers decided to give up marriage, with the result that a large number of children are being raised in single-parent households. It was also observed that the focus of many families shifted away from childcare to the psychological well-being and self-development of their adult members. This is shown in the increasing break up between parents even when they have young children to raise - if the marriage relationship doesn’t meet their psychological and self-fulfillment needs (Popenoe 22).

Anne Tyler is one of the most creative contemporary American authors. Over the past four decades she has written sixteen novels and a number of short stories which are still attracting an increasing amount of critical study in addition to the popular appeal she has long held. Tyler’s Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant is a part of a tradition of fiction that probes the dynamics of family life expressing the common southern themes of the dysfunctional family and the search for self, the desire for shelter, and sense of home. Family problems have emerged as the core of all of her characters issues. She has skillfully chosen the method of placing her characters in familial relationships to show the influences upon them, to explain the motives for their actions, and often to show the effects of their decisions. One of these family problem is the parental abandonment.

Generally speaking, “abandonment” in family context is a relationship dynamic that occurs when an adult voluntarily denies a role that someone expects him/her to fulfill, like parental or maternal obligations. Children need both parents for guidance, protection and love; they not only need to feel secure physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. Accordingly, through the analysis of Anne Tyler’s Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, the present study examines the parental abandonment and its effect on children, focusing on how such an emotional injury becomes a driving force in children’s childhood and adult lives.

Through her novel, she shows the mother, Pearl Tull’s suffering because of her husband’s unexplained abandonment of the family, leading to her desire to protect her children from the world’s evil. The children, on the other hand are always shown in need of protection and support of the absent father by which they are emotionally hurt and for this reason

the atmosphere of the home becomes depressed and bewildered. Tyler's realistic portrayal of Tull's family life makes it evident that for her as well as for the reader that the axis of the psyche and the well-being of the soul are rooted in the domestic origins of the individual.

More generally, young children develop in an environment of relationships. "Early experiences, especially emotionally or affectively charged experiences with other humans, induce and organize the patterns of structural growth that result in the expanding functional capacities of a developing individual" (Malekpour 81). Attachment theories have made important contributions to the notion of early experience.

Based on the attachment theory, the paper examines how the absence of the escaped father in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant makes life difficult for his children. Through the analysis of the oldest son Cody Tull, the paper explores some of the most compelling questions about early psychological development and its later consequences. In what ways do early experiences in relationships contribute to psychological vulnerability and strength? How fatherless families affect the mother and children?

Attachment theory was first proposed by British psychologist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby who described it as a 'lasting psychological connectedness between human beings' (1988). He considered that children needed to develop a secure attachment with their main caregiver in their early years. Attachment can be divided into two main categories: secure and insecure attachments. Secure attachments support mental processes that enable the child to regulate emotions, reduce fear, attune to others, and have self-understanding and insight, empathy for others and appropriate moral reasoning. On the other hand, insecure attachments can have unfortunate consequences. If a child cannot rely on an adult to respond to their needs in times of stress, they are unable to learn how to soothe themselves, manage their emotions and engage in mutual relationships. Among the factors that may present a risk to the quality of attachment between child and parent is the exposure to neglect, domestic violence or other forms of abuse and abandonment. Accordingly, the paper focuses on parental abandonment as a source of the insecure attachments which results in aggressiveness, social maladjustment, affectionless psychopathy and depression.

Discussion

Family relationships portrayed in Tyler's novel are characteristically discomfiting and therefore, become sources of frustration and loneliness for her characters. In most of Anne Tyler's novels, the father is quite often absent. Of all her novels, however, the most moving story of a runaway father is the story of Beck Tull in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant (1982). The action takes the reader from the time when 85-year-old Pearl Tull is dying at her bedside, recalling the history of her marriage and her children's adulthood, then moving to her funeral when her runaway husband, Beck appears that day. The action rotates from her point of view to that of each of her children, chapter by chapter, ending with her funeral. "In journeying through their shared pasts and individual psyches, Cody, Ezra, and Jenny Tull struggle to understand their father's desertion, their mother's love

and anger, and their own responsibility for themselves” (Gibson 49). Beck’s absence “had plunged the family into a quiet swirling darkness that was frequently punctuated by hatred and violence” (Eckard 34).

The traumatic experience of the family starts when Beck abruptly abandons Pearl and their three children. Consequently, she responds by drawing a kind of iron curtain around them. Though the children continue to go to school and she takes a job as a cashier at the corner grocery store, she permits no degree of intimacy or emotional honesty with anyone outside the immediate family. Even her own relatives are kept in the dark about Beck's abandonment. Painfully, Pearl, under the stress of raising them alone, sometimes turns abusive resulting in violent domestic scenes, instances of child mistreatment, and hurtful sibling betrayals. As she recounts the traumatic interpersonal experience of being deserted by her husband, it becomes clear that abandonment is the underlying theme.

Beck’s sudden abandonment is known by psychologists as “actual desertion” in which the deserting partner leaves the relationship, taking his/her belongings and moving into another home without returning. On the other hand, the deserted partner represented by Pearl Tull does not agree with ending the marriage and does not have the opportunity to save the marriage. After left with three young children and forced to become the bread winner, defensively develops a rigid, catastrophic family style. She has no friends, does not visit with the customers at the store where she works, does not even encourage her children to bring friends home. “For years in her stubborn pride, she refuses to admit to her children that their father has left them – the abandonment was simply never mentioned during the time they were growing up” (Rainwater and Scheick 126). Pearl’s unwillingness to tell her children about Beck’s departure originates not only in wanting to protect them, but also in her desire to secure the role that has become so embedded in her identity. Pearl fears telling the children will cause them to turn their backs on her, leaving her empty and without a purpose. Moreover, she sees it as her motherly duty to protect the children from the pain she assumes they will experience if they discover the truth about Beck’s absence.

Trying to deal with her own pain of abandonment, she was sometimes unable to control her frustration and would snap, going on tears brought on by the most innocent and unexpected of circumstances. Although she loved her children, during those moments of fury, she would blow out at them with physical, verbal, and emotional abuse. On the day of her funeral, Ezra’s brother Cody describes Pearl as a “raving, shrieking, unpredictable witch”:

“She slammed us against the wall and called us scum and vipers, said she wished us dead, shook us till our teeth rattled, screamed in our faces. We never knew from one day to the next, was she all right? Was she not? The tiniest thing could set her off. ‘I’m going to throw you through that window,’ she used to tell me. ‘I’ll look out that window and laugh at your brains splashed all over the pavement.’” (294)

This previous extract shows clearly to what extent Beck’s unexplained abandonment leaves Pearl feeling insecure in her position as mother; while not stated outright, Pearl

implies several times that she is an inadequate mother to the children because she must fulfill the roles of both parents. Nonetheless, she realizes that she is all they have and devotes herself to protecting them however she can. Even when her own frustrations emerge in what become frequent attacks on the children, she seems to want to protect them from seeing their only parent and their foundation- in a weak and helpless state. This affects the deserted mother which consequently distresses her attitude towards her children and their memories of childhood.

Cody, the oldest son appears in the third and seventh chapter. According to Mary J. Elkins, Cody is the central consciousness of this novel. His observations are the most acute, and he is the one who suffers a critical change by the end of the novel. Pearl does not seem to realize that Cody secretly wonders whether it was something he did, that made his father leave, nor does she perceive that Cody is conscious of her favoritism toward his younger brother Ezra. These two worries motivate behavior in Cody that Pearl considers difficult and mean. In spite of being handsome, dark-haired, Cody is a hero as well as a villain. Researchers are certain that maltreatment of children results in long-lasting negative effects and more signs of dissociative behavior. This is applied to Cody. He suffers most from his father's abandonment, his mother's verbal and physical abuse, and her preference for his brother Ezra. Obsessively jealous, he is a naughty and troublemaker child. He despises, resents Ezra, and always jealous of him. Therefore, feeling that he must compete with Ezra to win Pearl's affection and approval, Cody exerted all efforts during their childhood to change his mother's passive opinion of him by projecting Ezra in a negative light. After all, Beck is indirectly responsible for Pearl's treatment of the children after his abandonment as well as the behavior of Cody. Paula Gallant Eskard, in "Family and Community" (1990), noted that 'Cody has been similarly hurt by his mother's rejection and his father's abandonment' (41). His experience of his father's leaving is described as follows:

One weekend their father didn't come home, and he didn't come the next weekend either, or the next. Or rather, one morning Cody woke up and saw that it had been a while since their father was around. He couldn't say that he had noticed from the start. His mother offered no excuses. Cody, watchful as a spy, studied her furrowed, distracted expression and the way that her hands plucked at each other. It troubled him to realize that he couldn't picture his father's most recent time with them. Trying to find some scene that would explain Beck's leaving, he could only come up with general scenes, blended from a dozen repetitions: meals shattered by quarrels, other meals disrupted when Ezra spilled his milk, drives in the country where his father lost the way and his mother snapped out pained and exasperated directions (40) .

This powerful account shows how the absence of communication about the father's sudden departure created what some psychologists call "interpersonal trauma". Bowlby (1973) regarded interpersonal trauma as a severe negative effect associated with the exposure and experience of childhood abuse and neglect. Such an experience is considered as interpersonal in nature and is associated with a specific style of attachment, usually an ambivalent, avoidant or disorganized attachment, which is regarded as dysfunctional in nature (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Main & Solomon, 1990). Cody was the only child of his siblings to clearly remember his father's desertion. The sociologist

David Popenoe states that “Fathers are far more than just ‘second adults’ in the home,... involved fathers bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring” (qtd in Rosenberg 11). Beginning from the moment Cody realizes the truth about Beck, he claims all of the guilt for this disappearance. He experiences dreams where he is “not his present self [but instead] he had somehow slid backward and become a toddler again” (47). In his dreams, he becomes “conscious of a desperate need to learn to manage, to take charge of his surroundings” and then imagines himself posturing in front of his father to prove that he could make it on his own without Beck’s presence in his life (47). In other words, Cody longed for appreciation from his absent father and wished he could tell him “Look at what I’ve accomplished”... “Notice where I’ve got to, how far I’ve come without you” (48). This shows how children who grow up without fathers, their behavior is more likely associated to depression and low self-esteem. In addition, Cody is tormented with an obscure sense of guilt that he is to blame for his father’s sudden desertion. “Was it something I said, something I did that made my father go away? (47). One would observe that Cody is not the reason his father’s departure, but because he does not voice his feelings, no one in the family understands the extent of his guilt and inner suffering.

Confronting his mother about his father’s absence, she replies that she does not believe that he is “getting so big”. This remark adds burdens of fear from the implications of the responsibility placed on him by his mother’s statement, trying to prove out that he’s “only” fourteen. He resists his mother’s efforts to depend on him. Psychologists, such as Christiane Sanderson, have identified a number of behaviors and psychological disorders related to the absence of the father. Some of these behaviors and disorders are clear in Cody’s attitude, for example, attention-deficit, hyperactivity disorder, memory disturbance, diminished social skills, personality disorders, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, dissociative disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Regarding his relationship with his mother, Cody is the most disturbed soul of his siblings “who longs for Pearl to be more motherly, both in appearance and personality” (Menon and Hemalatha 34). He remembers “that she’d [his mother] never shown the faintest interest in her community but dwelt in it like a visitor from a superior neighborhood...keeping her door shut tightly when at home.” (284). He once compares his mother to the mothers of his himself friends and was resentful that she had no personal friendships: “Look at his two best friends: their parents went to the movies together; their mothers talked on the telephone” (285). This shows how Cody longs to see his mother acting like other mothers. He wants his mother to have “some outside connection beyond that suffocating house” (59). He yearns to see her gossiping with a little gang of women in the kitchen, letting them roll her hair in pincurls, trading beauty secrets, playing cards” (60). “Cody disapproved of his mother’s disconnection and restraint because it set him apart from his peer group which made him less comfortable with others” (Menon and Hemalatha 35). He both feels as an outsider because of his mother’s continual abuse and never feels “at home” because of his father’s absence. Failure to accomplish the goals in the parent-child relationship due to his father’s abandonment and his mother’s rejection, results in an inadequate attachment relationship which in turn places him on a pathway to relationship difficulties in adulthood.

Cody's jealous towards his brother Ezra culminates in his marriage to the one woman Ezra ever loved, Ruth Spivey. As soon as Cody gets married to Ruth, he moves far away immediately from home because he clearly wants to avoid his mother. This strong desire to escape from his past comes from his traumatic perception of his childhood. He only remembers the bad times, and holds his mother responsible because she causes many of the struggles he recalls so strongly. Pearl physically abuses her children, which Cody remembers all too well, stating his desire to physically remove himself as a natural response to her harm.

Later in the novel, Pearl visits him in Chicago, she notices that although Cody's house is expensive, "with wall-to-wall carpeting and long, low, modern furniture, . . . and outside it was so white-hot, so insufferably hot, that they were confined to the house with its artificial, refrigerated air. They were imprisoned by the house, dependent upon it like spacemen in a spaceship" (179). As for Luke, Cody's son, he is always unfamiliar with his neighborhood and the other children. Cody tries to become the father he always wished he had. Pearl also notices the lack of intimacy between Cody and Ruth but fails to recognize the ironic similarity of her own marriage: "She felt in their house the thin, tight atmosphere of an unhappy marriage. Not a really terrible marriage—no sign of hatred, spitefulness, violence; just a sense of something missing.

Towards the end of the novel, after Pearl's funeral, Cody raises many questions to his father summing up the hurt, the anger, and the injuries of his father abandonment: How could you do that? ...How could you just dump us on our mother's mercy? ...We were kids, we were only kids, we had no way of protecting ourselves. We looked to you for help. We listened for your step at the door so we'd be safe, but you just turned your back on us. You didn't lift a finger to defend us. (Homesick Restaurant 300).

Conclusion

In short, fathers have a powerful and positive impact upon the development and health of children. In fact, fatherless family generally produces lone mothers who are more likely to suffer from stress, depression, and other emotional and psychological problems. In Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, Cody's aggression and hostility to a great extent is attributed to what psychoanalyst's term "father hunger". Many psychological studies show how the intense emotional crisis of abandonment can create a trauma severe enough to leave an emotional imprint on individuals' psychological functioning, affecting their future choices, and responses to rejection, loss, or disconnection. This is clearly evident in Cody's case. Thus, he is driven from early youth by a rage to dominate; he is endlessly cruel not only to his brother, Ezra whom he steals his girl, but to his own wife and son.

Tyler's novel is beautifully crafted. Her unusual and appealing characters are so powerfully real, so carefully developed, they come to life both for her as a writer and for the reader, who suddenly can see a bit of his own mother, father, brother or even oneself in their touching words, their unspoken impulses, their blunders and their moments of weakness. She locates her novel in a tradition of fiction which probes the psychological dynamics of a family, and goes beneath the surface pieties to the underlying mysteries.

Her novel with its insightful illustration of the dysfunction in the twentieth-century American family, has made a great contribution to an understanding of the significant issues concerning the daily lives in the modern American society.

References

Ainsworth, M. S. (1989). Attachments beyond infancy. *American Psychologist*, 44(4), 709–716.

Allen, G. (2011). Early intervention: the next steps: an independent report to HM Government. London: The Cabinet Office.

Angel, R. J., & Angel, J. L. (1996). Physical comorbidity and medical care use in children with emotional problems. *Public Health Records*, 111, 140-145.

Biller, H. B. (1982). *Fatherhood: Implications for child and adult development*.

Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and loss* (2nd ed.). New York: Basic Books. (Original work published 1962)

----- (1988). *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*. London: Routledge.

Demo, D. H., & Acock, A. C. (1996). Family structure, family process, and adolescent Florida International University Atlantis Vol. 10 No. 2 Spring printemps 1985.

Gibson, Mary Ellis. "Family as Fate: The Novels of Anne Tyler." *Southern Literary Journal* 16 (Fall 1983): 47-58.

Malekpour, Mokhtar: Effects of attachment on early and later Development, *The British Journal of Developmental Disabilities* Vol. 53, Part 2, JULY 2007, No. 105, pp. 81-95

Mary J. Elkins, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant: Anne Tyler and the Faulkner Connection*.

Paula Gallant Eckard . *Family and Community in Anne Tyler's Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* by:– *The Southern Literary Journal*. Vol.22, No.2 (Spring, 1992), pp. 33-44 , University of North Carolina Press. Web - Stable URL:

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20077985>

Popenoe, David, "America's Family Problem, The Public Perspective, September/October 1992, 22-24. Prentice-Hall.

Rainwater, Catherine and William J. Scheick, *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, University Press of Kentucky, Feb 5, 2015

Rosenberg, Jeffrey and W. Bradford Wilcox. *The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2006.

Sanderson C., Jessica Kingsley. Introduction to Counselling Survivors of Interpersonal Trauma, London and Philadelphia, 2009.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1993 ed. Washington, D.C.
well-being . Journal of Research on Adolescence, 6, 457-488.

Wolman (Ed.), Handbook of development psychology. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Young, Thomas Daniel. "A Second Generation of Novelists." History of Southern Literature. Ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985. 466-69.