

Holding on to the Past and the Fallacy of the Traditional Family in Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*

Anthony Salazar

Northern Illinois University, Illinois, USA
asalazar6@niu.edu

Abstract— While many writers during the mid-twentieth-century focused on the ideality of the traditional family, Anne Tyler, in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, challenged such ideality by focusing on a family in which the father abandons his role as the breadwinner. Because the mother must then fulfill the duties assigned to the father and mother, the children grow up reflecting negatively on their childhood. The siblings' perceptions of the past, however, stem from an inability to achieve the traditional family. This essay therefore examines the characters' negotiations with the past and exposes the fallacy of the perfect family, for, as Anne Tyler implies, such family structure is not achievable.

Keywords— memory, time, past, future, homesick, traditional family.

The concept of the traditional family was most relevant during the mid-twentieth-century with media and other mainstream outlets portraying such lifestyle as the expected norm. While living a modest, family-orientated life, the father must provide for the family, while the mother must take care of the house and children. This family, though unrealistic for many Americans, expands across various mediums. But in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Anne Tyler challenges the notion of the ideal household by incorporating a father, Beck, who abandons the household. This then prevents the rest of the family from modeling such ideal structure as the mother, Pearl, must serve as both father and mother by raising the Tull children alone and working a full-time job. Because the novel's structure weaves between time, readers are provided with glimpses into the present (with the siblings as adults) and the past (with the siblings as children). From this structure, the children's differing memories and obsession with the past exposes the flaws of memory. Cody, an angry

and yet ambitious character, reflects poorly on his childhood and strives to avoid the family as an adult. Ezra, an eager and yet complacent character, reflects positively on his childhood and strives to recreate the perfect family as an adult. Jenny, who raises her daughter as a single mother, regrets some of the parental decisions she has made as a single parent and strives to parent better after she marries and has time to co-parent while working. As an aged woman, Pearl also reflects on her time as a mother with regret, for there are many unsettling parental decisions she would have done differently, should she have had more time to parent her children. When examining the Tull family, time and how they negotiate their past can correlate to gendered obligations. While Cody and Ezra focus on a past and present filled without contentment, the issues they grapple with pertain to power and their urge to achieve male authority. Pearl and Jenny, however, grapple with time differently. As single mothers, they are too busy enacting the duties of both father and mother to consider the past as a motivator for their current actions and life choices. These correlations, however, should not be read as a result to their gender. Rather, such reflections should instead correlate to the amount of time they are able to spend reflecting on the past.

Though all characters perceive the past differently, the brothers, especially Cody, consider their past to an obsessive degree, so much that it influences their present lives. "The past," according to David Lowenthal, "is every where. All around us lie features which, like ourselves and our thoughts, have more or less recognizable antecedents" (xv). With features such as past conversations, objects, and locations enticing specific memories, the Tull brothers regard the past not only as a means of escape (for Cody) or ideality (for Ezra), but as a burden on who they are as adults. The novel, which fixates each chapter on a different

member of the family, exposes the unreliability of memory as each sibling remembers the past differently. The issue, however, does not apply to which memories are most authentic to the past, but rather how each character responds to his/her memories. And though Caren Town justifiably argues that Tyler's intentions are not to "celebrate the triumph of the traditional family nor mourn its loss, but instead [to show] how each member of this particular family creates for her/himself a fictional family" (21), she fails to understand that the past does not provide the characters with "nostalgic and nourishing ...satiety" (21). Rather, memory and the siblings' perceptions of the past burden their adult selves. Though most characters are nostalgic to some degree, their fond memories of the past are not productive, for such memories prevent these characters from considering a future exempt from lingering regrets and past differences. Because of their inability to accept the flaws of their family, the siblings and mother are stuck in the past, unable to progress to a more fulfilling future. By centering the novel on the children's and Pearl's inability to accept the flaws of their past, Tyler exposes the fallacies of the traditional family. Looking towards the future therefore entails, as suggested by the novel's ending, the characters' ability to release the haunting and unfulfilling past that they hold during their present lives.

Haunted By the Past

While providing extensive attention on Cody and his inability to accept Pearl's flaws, Tyler portrays Cody as a disturbed heteronormative man. Unable to imitate the expectations required to achieve the perfect household, Cody responds negatively to his childhood. One of the leading issues with his past, however, entails his inability to overshadow Ezra. No matter how many times he attempts to please Pearl during his childhood, he always fails, for "Ezra was [Pearl's] favorite, her pet. The entire family knew it" (Tyler, 37). Mary Louisa Cappelli attests to this, observing, "Cody vies for his mother's love and attention always trying to sabotage his brother Ezra's reputation and place of affection in the family unit" (55). Because Cody's attempts at sabotaging Ezra fail, Ezra then appears even more perfect to Pearl. When Cody attempts to shoot an arrow at a family gathering, he fails miserably and is then overshadowed by Ezra's successful shot. Instead of providing words of encouragement, Beck scolds him, claiming, "This just goes to show that it pays to follow instructions....If you'd listened close like Ezra did, and not gone off half-cocked" (Tyler, 38). Though Beck merely provides Cody with a lesson on listening to instructions, Cody's determination to

excel past Ezra's abilities prohibits him from dismissing Beck's lesson. Cody then passive-aggressively attempts to shoot an arrow at Ezra—as if believing physical threats will provide Cody with the satisfaction of defeating Ezra.

Instead of accepting his flaws and inability to please Pearl, he further attempts at overshadowing Ezra by tarnishing Ezra's reputation in front of Pearl. Hiding magazines that feature "women in nightgowns, in bathing suits, in garter belts and black lace brassieres, in bath towels, in useless wisps of transparent drapery, or in nothing whatsoever" (Tyler, 46) exhibits merely one of Cody's many cynical responses to his anger-driven mentality. Upon finding these illicit magazines, Pearl responds with shock, for she would never suspect that her favorite child could possess such pornographic magazines. "Truly, Ezra," Pearl admits, "I never suspected that you would be such a person" (Tyler, 46). As a result, Cody and Ezra fight, resulting in victory for Cody and defeat for Ezra. No matter how many times Cody attempts to win Pearl's affection, his efforts always result in defeat. As Cody rationalizes, Pearl's love for Ezra will always overshadow her love for her other children. Because Cody never understands this throughout much of his life, he views his relationship with Ezra as a competition. For Ezra, however, such competition does not exist. What Cody perceives as competition is merely Ezra living his own life. Surely then, the competition that Cody always alludes to does not exist, for "one of the contestants didn't even know he *was* a contestant" (Tyler, 152).

Because of his competitive mindset, Cody's mental isolation from the family lingers throughout much of his childhood. Every time the family gets together, he thinks of other places he could be at instead, such as going to the movies with friends. "Cody would have given anything to be with them" (Tyler, 36), rather than his family. Such favoritism from Pearl clearly provides an understanding for Cody's removal from the family. By holding on to the concept of the perfect family, Cody understands Pearl's favoritism for Ezra as a flaw in the traditional family structure. With such flaw, Cody would much rather avoid the family entirely. Cody, like Beck, thus abandons the family when he starts college. And while Jenny also leaves for college a few years later, Cody never quite comes back home mentally throughout the novel. When he does return, he creates excuses that suggest his time could be spent on more pressing matters.

Cody's toxic mentality as a child persists into adulthood, forcing him to hold onto the past. His life,

however, is far from turmoil, for he ultimately claimed victory over Ezra by marrying Ruth, was hired by a successful company that shut down Beck's company, and he was finally able to achieve living a life based on the traditional family with Ruth and Luke. Even with all these accomplishments, Cody's desire to surpass his family, especially Ezra, persists and draws him back to his past. After the terrible work accident, Cody's only thoughts are to seek revenge on the girder that put him in the hospital. "This whole damn business," Cody claims, "has left me mad as hell. I felt that girder hit, you know that? I really felt it hit, and it hurt, and all the time I was flying through the air I wanted to hit it back, punch somebody; and now it seems I'm still waiting for the chance" (Tyler, 219). The machine that hit him cannot be at fault, for Cody was simply positioned in the wrong place at the wrong time. Though much like Pearl's love for Ezra, the accident was situated in a way that prevented Cody from being able to do anything about it. Instead of accepting the accident as a mere accident, he views the accident much like he views Pearl's love for Ezra: intentionally devised to make his life miserable. Though he could accept these issues on the premise of uncontrolled fate, he instead seeks revenge for situations he cannot control. In many ways, Cody's anger derives from an inability to contain power.

Instead of returning home like the other siblings, Cody creates dismal memories (whether intentional or unintentional) that prohibit him from reuniting with his family. Though his son, Luke, yearns for a stronger relationship with Pearl, Ezra, and Jenny, Cody repetitively reminds Luke of the terrible childhood he lived through as a means of keeping Luke away. In one instance, Cody reflects on a past Christmas in which he saved money for a train ticket so Pearl could visit her friend. Pearl's reaction, however, does not please Cody as she tells him that she cannot leave, for the vacation would prevent her from celebrating Ezra's birthday. Luke rationalizes Pearl's response, claiming Pearl would have responded the same way for the other children. That is, should the vacation fall on Cody's or Jenny's birthday, Pearl would have refused Cody's kind gesture so she can stay to celebrate their birthdays. Only, Cody's deep-rooted anger prohibits him from visualizing such scenario. Instead, he argues, "you're missing the point. She wouldn't leave Ezra, her favorite. Me or my sister, she would surely leave" (Tyler, 220). With such negative rationale, Cody can only fathom a scenario that places Ezra as Pearl's sole happiness and purpose in life. As he explains, "Everything I've ever wanted, Ezra got

it. Anything in life I wanted. Even things I thought I had won. Ezra won in the end. And he didn't even seem to be trying; that's the hell of it" (Tyler, 228). To him, nothing that he does can please Pearl, not even a train ticket for Pearl to reunite with a long lost friend. Ultimately, as Cody rationalizes, Ezra will always win in the end.

Despite Cody's supposed sibling rivalry, his understanding of home also draws him away from the family. To him, his childhood home does not only consist of being overshadowed by someone lesser than him, where he was abused by his angry mother, and where he felt disjointed from his siblings, but also where the environment lacked inviting décor. As he observes, "Not a single perfume bottle or china figure sat upon his mother's bureau. No pictures hung on the walls. Even the bedside tables were completely bare; and in all the drawers in this room, he knew, every object would be aligned and squared precisely" (Tyler, 42). By living in an evidently bland environment, Cody's depiction of home juxtaposes the ideal family home. Jenny even attests to these claims. Whenever she returns, "she [is] dampened almost instantly by the atmosphere of the house—by its lack of light, the cramped feeling of its papered rooms, a certain grim sparseness" (Tyler, 83). Their childhood home, therefore, does not resemble an inviting place where memories linger, for the house lacks signs of inviting and homely décor. As Cody questions, "Who *wouldn't* leave such a place?" (Tyler, 42). Though Cody spends his adult years away from home, his memories prohibit him from escaping his past. Instead of associating home with a place one would feel homesick for, Cody associates such uninviting environment in a haunting and burdening way. Although he believes he controls his present life, reflections such as these only attest otherwise. His escape, therefore, is merely physical, rather than mental.

By centering each chapter on a different member of the family, opposing memories emerge. Cody's motives for pursuing Ruth, for example, are written with much envy and jealousy. Instead of courting Ruth as an act of love, he courted her merely for competitive motives. During this time, "Cody had an impression of inertia and fritted lives. He felt charged with energy. It ought to be so easy to win her away from all this" (Tyler, 146-7). To win does not mean to obtain Ruth, but rather to validate his superiority over Ezra. As Cody's past girlfriend notes, "You ask me to the movies and I say yes and then you change your mind and ask me bowling instead and I say yes to that but you say wait, let's make it another night, as if anything you can

have is something it turns out you don't want" (Tyler, 165). Cody realizes too late, however, that he does not actually want to marry Ruth, but instead wants what he cannot control. As one would expect Ruth remembers this moment quite differently. Though she initially approaches Cody's attempts to court her simply as a means of seeking revenge on Ezra, she ultimately believes that Cody married her solely out of love. She utters, "He could have had anyone, any girl he liked, somebody beautiful even. Then I saw he meant it" (Tyler, 217). She even understands his courting as an exhibition of romantic gestures. Instead of understanding Cody's actions as a game, Ruth would rather understand them as responses to falling in love. With these conflicting memories, surely Ruth's memories are tampered through deceit. Though ultimately, these conflicting memories expose the faults of memory.

Cody's memories that differ from the other siblings' memories, however, are meaningless, likewise are the opposing memories exemplified by the other characters. "The fault is not with memory, but with our current balance of past and future" (Maier, 150). While memory should factor into an understanding of Cody's negotiations with the past, the authenticity of his memories fall short to his future as influenced from his past. The importance of memory should therefore pertain to what the characters do as a result of their past memories. Because Cody prefers to reflect so negatively on his childhood, he then uses his memories as a way of depicting his past self as a victim, always overshadowed by Ezra. Living with this mentality surely cannot proceed, for Cody's enjoyment seeing himself as a victim prevents him from moving on in life. By always holding onto the past, Cody's fascination with time exposes its very own contradiction. He claims, "Time is my obsession: not to waste it, not to lose it. It's like ... I don't know, an object, to me; something you can almost take hold of. If I could just collect enough of it in one clump" (Tyler, 223). Though time is unmanageable in terms of how Cody wants to use it, he could have a better grasp of time if he did not reflect so much on the past. He admits, "If they had a time machine, I'd go on it. It wouldn't much matter to me where. Past or future: just out of my time. Just someplace else" (Tyler, 223). Admitting this thus exposes his inability to fully control every situation. Being content therefore entails that which he cannot control. Mary Ellis Gibson even observes that "Cody tries with all his energies to have the world for himself; as an efficiency expert he is obsessed with the control of time" (54). Instead of grasping the present time, he occupies his time running from a past that

persists to haunt him. The time machine, which would provide him the opportunity to escape his past would serve very little purpose, for his fixation on the issues that have been bothering him his whole life persists even when living miles away from his family. During another conversation with Luke, Cody questions, "Isn't it just that time for once is stopped that makes you wistful? If only you could turn it back again, you think. If only you could change this or that, undo what you have done, if only you could roll the minutes the other way, for once" (Tyler, 256). Cody's problem throughout the novel does not pertain to changing the present, but rather the past. Of course, admitting defeat because one cannot change the past provides a much easier solution than facing personal insecurities. Should Cody seek change, he would then have to expand his definition of an ideal family. Because he holds unobtainable expectations of what an ideal family should entail, he cannot accept that his childhood was actually decent, for a decent childhood to him involves being equally loved by Pearl. Should he finally come to this realization, perhaps his present and future life would not be so dismal.

Yearning For the Past

Ezra, like Cody, also considers the past to an excessive degree throughout the novel. But instead of avoiding the past, Ezra embraces a past that never existed, a past that recreates the traditional family. Lowenthal notes, "We may fancy an exotic past that contrasts with a humdrum or unhappy present, but we forge it with modern tools. The past is a foreign country whose features are shaped by today's predilections, its strangeness domesticated by our own preservation of its vestiges" (xvii). Though the remembered past never quite happened, Ezra nonetheless strives to recreate such past. As a means of creating and preserving such a past, Ezra strives to food for and feed his family while sitting around the dinner table. And though he was robbed of the opportunity to marry Ruth—therefore missing the opportunity to have children—his determination to bring the whole family together around the dinner table still exhibits qualities that parallel the perfect, ideal family.

To create the traditional family, Ezra works for Mrs. Scarlatti, an Italian widow who wills him her restaurant before dying. To her, Ezra was practically the son she could not have due to her own son's death. Likewise, to Ezra, Mrs. Scarlatti was practically the mother he could not have due to Pearl's inability to properly raise her children. Even away at war, Ezra only mentions being homesick for the restaurant, rather than his childhood home and family.

He writes, “I think a lot about Scarlatti’s Restaurant and how nice the lettuce smelled when I tore it into the bowl” (Tyler, 71). Unlike Pearl’s dismal house, Ezra associates Mrs. Scarlatti’s restaurant with the fresh smell of food. It is this perfect scent which he wishes to create for his family, rather than the scents and environment associated with his childhood home. When he returns from war, Pearl tries to persuade him to go to college so he can become a teacher. Ezra refuses, for his happiest moments involve working at the restaurant. Therefore, instead of pleasing Pearl, he decides to please himself and Mrs. Scarlatti by continuing to work at her restaurant. Perhaps Mrs. Scarlatti’s favorite trait of Ezra is his yearning for a modest present and future. Together, they both live a life of “standing still” (Tyler, 114). Even Pearl reflects later in the novel that “He will probably never marry. He will never do anything but run that peculiar restaurant of his ... You could say, in a way, that Ezra has suffered a tragedy, although it’s a very small tragedy in the eyes of the world” (Tyler, 178).

While Pearl considers Ezra’s life a failure, Mrs. Scarlatti considers Ezra’s life a success, for she appreciates his ability to seek contentment in the past. Though their aspirations align with each other, their pasts differ in terms of the environment they associate most with the past. The old drapes, the male waiters, the hidden kitchen, all these qualities Mrs. Scarlatti loves about the restaurant pertain to her past. Even though the restaurant is failing, she refuses to adopt to the present times by updating the décor. Giving the restaurant to Ezra therefore comes with the expectation that he will remain “standing still” by not changing her past.

Ezra’s aspirations to create a restaurant that reflects his idea of the perfect family not only differs from Mrs. Scarlatti’s vision of the perfect past but is also not new to Ezra, for it has existed in his mind for quite some time. Josiah claims, “Ezra’s going to have him a place where people come just like to a family dinner. He’ll cook them one thing special each day and dish it out on their plates and everything will be solid and wholesome, really homelike” (Tyler, 75). Because Ezra’s childhood was consumed with low-quality meals due to Pearl’s busy schedule, he strives to create a life that was nonexistent for him, a life where “He’d cook what people felt homesick for” (Tyler, 122). And though eating at Mrs. Scarlatti’s restaurant before remodeling provides “a happy family dinner” (Tyler, 107), it is nonetheless not the type of restaurant he associates most with the past and his understanding of the traditional family.

As Mrs. Scarlatti slowly dies, Ezra creates the perfect past by remodeling the restaurant. To make these changes, he first destroys the wall that separates the kitchen and dining room. Because of this, customers can look into the kitchen while their meals are being prepared. Just like the traditional family setting (with eager children going into the kitchen to watch their mothers finish cooking), customers can also recreate such memories by looking into the restaurant’s kitchen, thus creating an open and friendly atmosphere. In terms of remodeling the restaurant, he then “raced around the windows and dragged down the stiff brocade draperies; he peeled up the carpeting and persuaded a brigade of workmen to sand and polish the floorboards” (Tyler, 126). By doing this, Ezra destroys the past that Mrs. Scarlatti assumed he would hold onto—a past that she dreams would exist after her death. To no surprise, her reaction to these changes is not a positive one. Not only does she refuse to speak to him but she also expresses her reluctant desire for Ezra to finalize the remodeling before she dies by changing the sign outside the restaurant. Replacing the sign— “Scarlatti’s Restaurant”—therefore entails removing the last artifact of the past that Mrs. Scarlatti has spent her whole life preserving. What replaces Mrs. Scarlatti’s sign is not necessarily something new, but rather something old, Ezra’s concept of an ideal family.

Though Ezra eventually achieves at creating the ideal restaurant, his attempts at creating the perfect family dinner fails, for every planned dinner results in arguments. The past he tries to create will therefore never exist, for each dinner consists of someone—mostly Pearl—refusing to stay until the end. For the other Tull siblings, the past that they try to avoid differs from the past that Ezra tries to create. Leaving mid-dinner therefore exposes their lack of empathy for Ezra’s present and future admirations. His determination to create the perfect meal, however, persists throughout the novel despite their stubbornness.

Unlike Cody, whose haunted past prevents him from embracing the family, Ezra’s nostalgic yearning for the past entails embracing the family. And though Ezra’s past never existed (assuming the characters’ memories are, to some degree, authentic representations of the past), a loving family sitting around the dinner table nonetheless represents a past that he strives to create. By associating the concept of the perfect family as sitting around the dinner table, Ezra persistently attempts to create such an event by always inviting his siblings and Pearl to his homesick restaurant. Despite the lack of success with his family, Ezra serves successful meals at the restaurant by providing

customers with “a taste of home, and he is giving himself a nourishing role as provider and an extended family of workers and customers” (Town, 17). Paula Eckard also notes Ezra’s satisfaction as a provider, claiming, “Unable to unite his family, Ezra finds a sense of family and belonging in his community. He has genuine affection and concern for his neighbors and co-workers” (42). Supplementing his family with strangers, however, only goes so far. Because he always invites his family to the restaurant to eat, it seems as though Ezra is unable to find contentment substituting his family with his customers and community. His focus throughout much of the novel therefore centers on creating a past structured around the dinner table, mirroring the traditional family.

Regretting The Past

Unlike Cody and Ezra, Pearl and Jenny have very little time to consider the past as they struggle to provide for their children as single parents. That is not to say that they are exempt from looking into the past. When Pearl nears death, she asks Ezra to help her look through her old diaries and photographs. While doing this, Ezra remarks not knowing Pearl’s younger self, thinking, “Why, that perky young girl was this old woman! This blind old woman sitting next to him! She had once been a whole different person, had a whole different life separate from his” (Tyler, 264). Pearl’s intentions are not to impress Ezra through these artifacts, however, but rather to reflect and consider the life she could have lived. To accomplish this, she asks Ezra to find a specific diary entry, detailing the “moment I am absolutely happy” (Tyler, 277). Reflecting on the past therefore allows Pearl to consider what life could have been, should she have refrained from seeking a traditional family.

Jenny, as well, holds onto past memories, particularly prior to going away to college. With Cody at school and Ezra at war, Jenny’s adolescence is haunted by the memories that the near empty house holds. With only Pearl and Jenny were living in the house at the time, “There were echoes of the others all around—wicked, funny Cody, peaceful Ezra, setting up a loaded silence as Jenny and her mother seated themselves at the table” (Tyler, 69). With the house being so empty, Jenny’s adolescent memories are clearly disturbed by the past. But, unlike Cody or Ezra, Jenny’s past reflects neither negatively nor positively. Instead, the past, as reflected by her adolescent self, merely reflects a past that no longer exists. Such past nonetheless haunts her as she spends her last years at home with only Pearl around. As a mother much later in life, however, she

does not have time to reflect on her adolescent years. Rather, like Pearl, Jenny can only consider the past during her adolescent years and after her most strenuous years of parenting.

Pearl’s inability to focus on the past while parenting alone is first exhibited upon her marriage. At this moment in her life, Pearl transitions from an individual who can focus on the past to an individual who cannot consider anything but ways to stay afloat. After married, “She didn’t have time to show off a single one of her trousseau dresses, or to flash her two gold rings.... Everything seemed so unsatisfying” (Tyler, 7). Instead of having the perfect wedding, honeymoon, and life as a mother, Pearl is instantly forced into the expectations required by mothers at the time. With Beck abandoning the family, her obligations amplify and provide her without any time to consider anything but the present time. “She dropped the effort of continually meeting new neighbors, and she stopped returning (freshly filled) cake tins they brought over when she arrived” (Tyler, 16). Her personality also shifts from a loveable mother to a tyrant caretaker. After returning home from an exhausting day at work, she physically attacks the children, calls them parasites, and claims, “I wish you’d all die, and let me go free. I wish I’d find you dead in your beds” (Tyler, 53). Though she of course does not actually mean this, the burden of caring for children alone hinders her opportunity to unwind and consider a brighter future. Because of Pearl’s vicious responses, the Tull children possess memories that haunt them in the present. Shortly after being abused by Pearl, they hear energetic children playing outside and wish they could also be happy like the outside children. But rather than wishing they could go outside at that particular moment, they instead yearn for a past that allowed them to have fun outside. These children, free from tyrant mothers “were like people from long ago, laughing and calling only in memory, or in one of those eerily lifelike dreams that begin on the edge of sleep” (Tyler, 53). Thus, even as children, they reflect their earlier selves with Beck still providing for them and Pearl more carefree, a past that supposedly allowed them to live like supposed traditional children.

Pearl cannot be entirely blamed for her negligence and abuse, however. Due to the way she was raised, she always expected to raise children with Beck supporting them. “Where she came from, a woman *expected* the men to provide” (Tyler, 21). With Beck gone, Pearl’s maternal expectations shift. Not only does she have to cook, clean, and make sure the children are behaving, but she must also

provide for the family by working many hours at a grocery store. Though her difficulty parenting as both father and mother was not the future she was expecting prior to meeting Beck, she cannot avoid parenthood, like him, for, as she believes, “When you have children, you’re obligated to live” (Tyler, 28). Her life, much like the life she reflects on Ezra, is a failure and a tragedy. Because of these combined obligations, she cannot fully consider the past, for her parental obligations consume her life.

Jenny also goes through a similar experience as she tries to raise her daughter, Becky, alone. Jenny, like Pearl, finds herself in a constant state of fatigue, anger, and frustration while attempting to simultaneously parent and work. At work, “She was so exhausted that the sight of her patients’ white pillows could mesmerize her. Sounds were thick, as if underwater. Words on a chart were meaningless” (Tyler, 209). When she gets off work, one would assume she never left, for she then has to care for Becky. Like Pearl, Jenny’s personality alters to extremes due to minor nuances. Before she knew it, Jenny “slammed Becky’s face into her Peter Rabbit dinner plate and gave her a bloody nose” (Tyler, 209). She then recalls her own childhood upon resorting to such abusive measures and remembers how Pearl acted the same way when confronted with minor problems in the household. “All of her childhood returned to her: her mother’s blows and slaps and curses, her mother’s pointed fingernails digging into Jenny’s arm, her mother shrieking ‘Guttersnipe! Ugly little rodent!’” (Tyler, 209). Jenny further recalls “some scrap of memory—she couldn’t quite place it—Cody catching hold of Pearl’s wrist and fending her off while Jenny shrank against the wall” (Tyler, 209). Lowenthal reminds us, “The past surrounds and saturates us; every scene, every statement, every action retains residual content from earlier times” (185). Because of Jenny’s actions, she cannot help but remember the past and the different, yet strikingly similar, actions that align her parenting to Pearl’s parenting. Even though this short glimpse into the past provides a momentary epiphany, she continues to let the stress and lack of time dictate the ways she nurtures Becky.

While Pearl raises her children during the height of the traditional family and Jenny raises her child during the time in which the traditional family was being questioned, both mothers’ parental actions parallel each other despite the time differences. When Pearl calls Jenny, asking for communication, Jenny considers responding negatively, confessing, “I remember all about you. It’s all come back. Write? Why should I write? You’ve damaged me; you’ve

injured me. Why would I want to write?” (Tyler, 210). Jenny’s resentment, unlike Cody’s resentment, applies strictly to the way she raises Becky. Because of the stress and lack of sleep, she cannot see herself as the issue. Rather, Jenny would much rather find solace in blaming Pearl for how she turned out. Of course, she refrains from actually responding so negatively to Pearl and instead “started ... not crying, exactly, but something worse. She was torn by dry, ragged sobs” (Tyler, 210). As a mother herself who understands the difficulties of raising children alone, Pearl then attends to Jenny and relieves her of her single-parent burdens. After Pearl’s visit, Jenny decides to move closer to Pearl so she can have the support she needs to simultaneously work and raise her daughter. Though Jenny’s ability to juggle multiple expectations remains challenging at times, she nonetheless feels slight relief from the additional help, the help mothers would expect from their husbands when modeling the traditional family.

Though juggling work and raising children singlehandedly prevent these women from considering the past, they seem to do just that before and after parenting. When Ezra considers Pearl’s past, he wonders why she never mentioned her life before she married Beck and raised children. “She had never been the type to gaze backward, had not filled his childhood with ‘When I was your age,’ as so many mothers did” (Tyler, 264). Sure, such admittance can reflect Pearl’s overall personae as an introverted character who would rather keep to herself. Her challenge to raising children and working, however, signify her inability to recover, rather than consider her past. As older Pearl reflects on her life, she concludes that “her family has failed. Neither of her sons is happy, and her daughter can’t seem to stay married. There is no one to accept the blame for this but Pearl herself, who raised these children single-handed and did make mistakes” (Tyler, 185). Jenny also reflects similarly to Pearl. Because she spends so many hours working at the hospital, she does not have time to reminisce and consider the ways she can change the present time. It is not until later, when she marries Joe, that she has the time to actually forego change, as influenced by her past. Thus, the past for these women occurs not at the same time (such as Cody and Ezra), but rather at different times in their lives—times that provide them the opportunity to reflect.

Living Beyond the Past

Though the novel primarily focuses on the Tull siblings and Pearl, the past also plays an important factor for the other characters who appear in brief moments throughout the novel. Slevin, Jenny's stepson, yearns for items that remind him of his mother. He claims, "you never think about a thing, or realize you remember it, and then all at once something will bring it all back" (Tyler, 207). Like Ezra and food, Slevin considers everyday objects, such as Pearl's vacuum, as conduits for the past. One of Mrs. Scarlatti's past customers also seeks his past and is therefore disappointed when learning that Ezra renovated the restaurant. The customer argues, "Used to be there was fine French cuisine, flamed at the tables and all. And chandeliers. And a hat-check girl. And waiters in black tie" (Tyler, 135). Because Ezra remodeled the restaurant, the past that the customer strives to recreate will remain unfulfilled. Luke's adventures carpooling to Baltimore further provide glimpses into the lives of others. From the school teacher (who spends his time looking for old girlfriends) to the mother (who drives away from her abusive daughter), both characters seek a part of the past that they consider to be better than the present. As the mother admits, "It's like I'm driving till I find [my daughter's] past self. You know? And *my* past self" (Tyler, 241). Though not always aligning with the Tull siblings and Pearl, these other characters consider the past as a better time than the present. For them, their purpose in life does not involve looking towards the future, but rather looking for and recreating the past.

By holding onto the past, all characters within the novel are ultimately stuck in time. Cody, who has issues with Pearl and his inability to please her, is haunted by his childhood. Ezra, who strives to replicate the ideal traditional family, attempts to create the perfect dinner for his whole family to enjoy. Pearl and Jenny, who are too busy to consider the past as single parents, reflect their years as mothers after having more free time and are haunted by what they have done wrong. Luke, however, seems to be the only character that rationalizes time and living for the future. Whenever Cody complains about his childhood, Luke always challenges Cody's memories and issues with the past. After hearing Cody's incessant rants, Luke responds to Cody, questioning, "How come you go on hanging on to these things, year after year after year?" (Tyler, 255). Because Cody does not have a clear answer, Luke interrogates Ruth, asking for clarification of the past. As one would expect, Ruth's memories differ from

Cody's dismal memories. If anything, the closest Luke gets to holding onto the past parallels Ezra's past, an unrealistic past consisting of a happy, traditional family. As Luke daydreams about possibly being Ezra's son, he creates an imagined scenario, detailing the perfect relatives who come together—so much so that "the memory homed in" instantly (Tyler, 229).

Because the novel incorporates such an extensive amount of attention to memory and the past, Tyler seems to suggest Americans, as represented by the Tull family and the other characters, are concerned with history, memory, and the past. "Memory," Lowenthal argues, "pervades life. We devote much of the present to getting or keeping in touch with some aspect of the past" (194). As a novel centering on a disrupted family, Tyler's focus on time does not specifically favor one character's negotiation with the past as opposed to another character's past, but rather to relay the different responses of the past that directly respond to the concept of the traditional family. Because these characters believe their lives should reflect the ideal household, they cannot find contentment in being outside the ideal structure. That is not to say that the novel ends with the characters still fully stuck in the past. As Beck notices, the family all together for Pearl's funeral mirrors "One of those great, big, jolly, noisy, rambling...why families" (Tyler, 294). Beck considers the Tull family as a clan, resembling "something on TV" (Tyler, 294). Cody disagrees, claiming, "You think we're a family. You think we're some jolly, situation-comedy family when we're in particles, torn apart, torn all over the place, and our mother was a witch" (Tyler, 295). Ezra, however, retorts to Cody and exposes the dismal memories that haunt him. "She wasn't always angry," claims Ezra. "Really, she was angry very seldom, only a few times, widely spaced, that happened to tick in your mind" (Tyler, 295). After a while, Cody begins to understand that his childhood was actually not as disturbed as he remembered. And though Cody finally learns to negotiate the past, present, and future by accepting the flaws of the past, his refusal to stay for dessert wine implies that his ability to change his mentality of the past will require a lot more work than one dinner with the family. Likewise, while Ezra finally achieves organizing a meal in which everyone stays, he must accept that the perfect dinner will not exist, that someone will always find something problematic and leave before the dinner ends.

Until this realization—that the perfect family is a fallacy—the only solution that they seem to follow involves yearning or escaping from their past. Because they all

conceptualize the perfect family as something they never achieved, they are incapable of accepting the flaws they succumb throughout their childhood (for the Tull siblings) and motherhood (for Pearl and Jenny). By incorporating other characters who also fixate their attention to the past and their inability to move on, Tyler ultimately suggest that the past and how one perceives it through memory will always exist. The only escape therefore entails accepting their past, present, and future lives as imperfect, yet content, deviations from the traditional family.

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