



THEMATIC AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ANNE TYLER'S NOVEL "SAINT MAYBE"

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ABSTRACT

Saint Maybe is the rich and engrossing story of a young fellow's blame over his sibling's demise and his battle to make amends for the wrong he believes he has done. In this novel *Saint Maybe*, Tyler embraces a genuine and keen tone about religion. Despite the fact that it makes a religious setting for the issue of control, the novel emphasizes Tyler's proceeding with attestation that one can be pulverized by life blows or proceed onward and recall the delights instead of the torment. In *Saint Maybe* Tyler managed the theme of blame inside a troubled white collar class family. The themes of this novel and the style of composing make it emerge for instance of the well-known fact of the truth of family life. The characters are to such an extent that the reader is locked in with them, needs their joy, and perhaps perceives individuals from his own families in one or other of them. Regardless of what may have been missed, as critics have brought up, this novel stands as an extraordinary bit of writing, basically by the writers capacity to include and draw in and make us companions with Ian and his family individuals who maybe, in the wake of finding out about them, changed other individuals' lives. It concludes that, Sin, expiation, and reclamation are new themes for Anne Tyler, especially as delineated in explicitly religious terms.

Introduction

Good writers often have preoccupations. Sets of characters or pieces of experience repeat themselves in book after book because an idea of life is being obsessed over. If a reader is responsive to the preoccupation, each new book deepens the tale being told. If a reader is not responsive, the writer is silently instructed: "Tell another story, you've told this one already."

Anne Tyler is a writer with a preoccupation. Writing in a time and place that is stimulated by the idea of the separately maturing self, Tyler's novels are relentlessly devoted to the idea of never growing up, never leaving home. Not only do her characters refuse to leave their parents' houses, they inevitably marry surrogate brothers or sisters whom they pull into the house as well—whereupon

they become their parents without even becoming men or women. In Tyler's world there is neither terror nor rapture because there is no sex. Instead, there is an endless child-parent interchange prolonged into listless adulthood: the only refuge is in a kind of acted-out fantasy commonly referred to as making magic.

Tyler has real feeling for the condition she describes, and sympathizes keenly with her characters as they burrow back into childhood. It is this sympathy, above all, that makes her such a fine writer. Her gift for dialogue and narration is prodigious—she skillfully stitches her prose from a single, mysteriously lengthening thread into landscape, densely made, fully peopled—but it is the sympathy that allows her to achieve genuine pathos. Pathos is the dominant color in each of her novels,

woven strongly through the design of her writing—warm, repetitious, predictable, somewhat like the comforting familiarity of an ironic home sampler.

Anne Tyler is concerned with the quality of human existence. She turns her characters loose to live as they will, and the choice that each makes is a testimony to life's infinite variety.... [In addition to profundities,] there is joy in the surface, the remarkable accuracy with which Miss Tyler depicts the world, the unobtrusiveness of her technical skill, and the wit and perception with which she creates her people and establishes her conflicts. Within the boundaries she has set for herself she is almost totally successful.

Anne Tyler, whose twelve novels have illustrated and endorsed the worth and importance of intimacy and concern about relationships, has in her past few novels, taken some care to create male protagonists who are concerned about how they relate to intimacy, family life, and personal relationships well before the midlife points Gilligan refers to. More recently, Tyler has carefully combined these masculine and feminine attributes and invested them in one of her most successful characters to date, Ian Bedloe, of the recent *Saint Maybe*. While Tyler has been reluctant to label herself a southern writer, Alice Petry comments: "Whether it is attributed to her Southern literary background or to her communal upbringing, from the outset of her career as a novelist Tyler has evinced a keen interest in the complicated relationship between the individual and the family" (23). It is no surprise to find this interest culminate in a masterful gender blending in her 1991 novel in which a young male leaves his education behind to assume a parental role usually attributed to the female.

The entire novel *Saint Maybe*, is written in third person, and Ian's thoughts dominate, but as if to demonstrate that the story is more than Ian's alone, the narrator shifts the focus periodically to other characters. For example, after Danny's death, the focus shifts to Agatha, a nine-year-old who watches her mother deteriorate and tries to make sense of the chaos her own life has become. A later shift to Daphne's thoughts reveals how much the children have grown away from Ian and how Ian needs a new center in his life. This shift prepares the way for Ian's relationship with Rita.

Discussion

In this novel *Saint Maybe*, Tyler adopts a serious and thoughtful tone about religion. Although it creates a religious context for the issue of control, the novel reiterates Tyler's continuing assertion that one can choose to be crushed by life's blows or move on and choose to remember the joys rather than the pain. Ian cannot handle the task of dealing with his part in Danny's suicide alone, and he senses that religion may provide some relief. But religion is not an easily accepted solution. Ian acknowledges the embarrassment he once felt at religious phrases, and his family is clearly uncomfortable with his newfound faith. Nevertheless, the power of the church to save Ian from despair is clear. He needs not only God's help but also the pragmatic aid that the Church of the Second Chance provides, particularly help with the children while he is at work and during the summer. Ian's grappling with his sin is a long battle, and the church and Reverend Emmett are there. Agatha and Ian's mother chafe at Ian's religious fervor, but the value of the church is reinforced by Daphne's assertion to Agatha that religion did not ruin *her* life and that she enjoys Good Works and by Rita's easy acceptance of the church when she marries Ian. Reverend Emmett is an unusual character for Tyler. In other novels, clergymen are treated humorously and not admired. Ironically-named Brother Hope in *A Slipping-Down Life* (1970) is a preacher of doom; Reverend Abbott in *The Clock Winder* (1972) inspires regular walks to the front of the church to witness but effects little change in the hearts of his congregation. Reverend Emmett, on the other hand, can laugh at himself and see his foibles. For instance, he acknowledges the mistake of the Sugar Rule. Nevertheless, his guidance is essential for Ian, and Tyler treats him gently, never mocking his principles of faith or discipline.

The characters in *Saint Maybe*, as is typical for all Anne Tyler novels, are wonderfully diverse: the neighborhood characters like the foreigners with all their American gadgets; Claudia Bedloe, who names her children alphabetically; members of the Church of the Second Chance, who grieve for sons or gather for Good Works; and Rita, the clutter counselor, who straightens out lives by clearing out closets and basements. Ian Bedloe undergoes the most change. At the beginning of the novel he is a

seventeen year old described as "handsome and easygoing, quick to make friends, fond of a good time." The good times end abruptly when Danny dies. Ian flounders at college, sick at heart and unsure what to do. When he discovers the Church of the Second Chance, he finds he must accept responsibility for some rash words; and he is forced to grow up very quickly. Hardly more than a child himself, at nineteen he becomes father to his brother's children: Agatha, Thomas, and Daphne. But he becomes the glue that holds the family together, and the children love and want to protect him. When they realize they are growing up and away from him and that he will be left alone, they try to arrange a relationship with Daphne's teacher. Their efforts are a comic failure, but their intentions are kind. When Rita and Ian become mutually interested, the children are willing to accept her. She sees the fine qualities that others often overlook, distracted by his seriousness and religious practices. Although he is a realist about parenthood, Ian can joyfully begin anew as father to Joshua. Parenthood, again, is not entirely by choice, but this time Ian has a partner and no longer has a burden of sin on his shoulders.

The myth of the perfect family is once again exposed in this novel. On the first page, the Bedloes are described as the "ideal, apple-pie household" and their philosophy of life is "Don't worry. Everything will turn out fine," But Danny kills himself; Lucy dies; they are stuck with three children unrelated to them; and Ian takes religion seriously, dropping out of college to take care of the children. The Bedloes are not the perfect family after all, but they have a bedrock closeness and love that keeps them together and helps them overcome their trials. When the children are planning what to do in the event of a nuclear attack, they decide to commandeer a grocery store just for their immediate family. They make a point of including Ian, who is, in fact, not related to them at all, because he is the one that holds them together. The novel reveals that love in a family is more important than the apple-pie image or blood ties. Sin, atonement, and redemption are new themes for Anne Tyler, particularly as depicted in specifically religious terms. Angry at Lucy for making him late for an important date with his girlfriend. Cicely, Ian blurts out what he thinks is the truth, asking Danny

how long Lucy can fool him about the baby's being his and about her afternoon outings. When Danny drives into a wall, killing himself, Ian must face up to his responsibility in the death. He flounders until he discovers the Church of the Second Chance, where Reverend Emmett tells him he must do more than say he is sorry. He must make amends by rearing the children, but this act does not free him from his guilt. He must be redeemed by forgiving Danny and Lucy. At one point Ian thinks he has wasted his youth, and thus lost his life in his years of surrogate parenting. In fact, he has found life in his relationship with the children.

The bulk of *Saint Maybe* focuses on spiritual concerns — sin, atonement, and redemption — but social concerns of suicide, drug abuse, and single parenting appear peripherally. Ian Bedloe's brother, Danny, kills himself rather than confront the possibility that his wife has cheated on him and their new baby is not his. Left alone to rear three children, Danny's wife, Lucy, has no job skills and thus no source of income. She has lived by her looks and wits in the past but has little luck after Danny's death. To escape from her problems, she relies on sleeping pills and accidentally overdoses. Thus, Ian is left with the children, Agatha, Thomas, and Daphne. Even though his parents help out some, he, too, faces the never-ending task of being the single, primary caregiver for the children. Not only must Ian learn to love the children, he must care for them beyond infancy. When Daphne is a somewhat rebellious teenager, he must leave work each day to pick her up from school rather than leave her to her own devices in the afternoon.

The entire novel is written in third person, and Ian's thoughts dominate, but as if to demonstrate that the story is more than Ian's alone, the narrator shifts the focus periodically to other characters. For example, after Danny's death, the focus shifts to Agatha, a nine-year-old who watches her mother deteriorate and tries to make sense of the chaos her own life has become. A later shift to Daphne's thoughts reveals how much the children have grown away from Ian and how Ian needs a new center in his life. This shift prepares the way for Ian's relationship with Rita.

The themes of this novel and the style of writing make it stand out as an example of the universal truth of the reality of family life. The

characters are such that the reader is engaged with them, wants their happiness, and possibly recognizes members of his own families in one or other of them. No matter what might have been missed, as critics have pointed out, this novel stands as a great piece of literature, simply by the writer's ability to involve and engage and make us friends with Ian and his family people who maybe, after reading about them, changed other people's lives (373). Ian's last thoughts at the end of *Saint Maybe* characterize Tyler's viewpoint exactly: "People changed other people's lives every day of the year. There was no call to make such a fuss about it" (373). Indeed people grow, families change, but the bonds of common humanity endure, no matter what.

Criticisms of the novel might include the absence of a wider, historical context. The Vietnam war was hardly touched on, with only minor reference to the draft; the gender roles of the women were given no significance, it was never explained why Claudia wanted to go on having babies in an age when birth control was so available, though Agatha, as a doctor represented something of the changes for women. But in a real family, with growing old, having traumas, dealing with traditions, life and death, what went on in the outside world often took second place. Tyler concentrated on the facts of their inner lives, creating a marvelous picture of ordinary people getting through life. Ian Bedloe started out as an unlikely hero, but Tyler showed how the human spirit and simple humanity could endure and how his moral values upheld him. No matter what happened, he kept on doing what he thought was right. The interactions and demands of living in a family, faced with loss and sorrow, much like any other family, gave a message that is relevant outside the pages of the book. Ian used the support of his parents and sister, father, his church, (a second family, in fact), and took joy from the children's successes, handled their problems and cared for Bee and Doug, while working hard to support everybody.

Many critics believe that it is southern women writers who are primarily responsible for keeping the family unit alive in novels. Susan Gilbert, in speaking of southern literature generally and the novels of Anne Tyler and other women writers specifically, confirms the view that fictional females

bear the responsibility as well: "A distinct mark of Southern life, if not of Southern literature, prominent in Tyler's works is the degree to which families are female affairs" (256). Yet even more relevant here is the commentary of Doris Betts, modern southern fiction writer and critic, who maintains in the introduction to *Southern Women Writers* (1992) that "our [women novelists'] depiction of male characters is improving faster for us than in reverse for today's male novelists" (6). She goes on to point out that the "distinctions of both gender and region are blurring" (7). This "blurring" or blending of gender roles and, in fact, the treatment of how fictional families *can* be male affairs will be the subject of this discussion of Anne Tyler's 1991 novel, *Saint Maybe*.

Conclusion

The conclusion of *Saint Maybe* takes an odd turn, in some ways as if the author has been playing with us all along. Tyler assures her readers that while it may have been apparent that Ian has been head of this household, it has not been without its female influences. Agatha says the reason for the disarray when the grandmother dies can't be because of her, because "Ian's been in charge of the house for ages, hasn't he?" (301). We begin to ask ourselves that question, too. For the story in the end does then belong to the niece Daphne and Ian's new no-nonsense, take-charge wife, Rita the Clutter Counselor, who brings order once again to the household. Tyler gently but significantly tells her readers, "Now it seemed the household was completely taken over by women" (346). And there would be no mistaking that Ian has happily reverted to his male nature when he ruminates about the impending birth of his own child:

Last week he had signed the papers for Rita's hospital stay. She'd be in just overnight, if everything went as it should. On the first day he was liable for one dependent and on the second for two. Two? Then he realized: the baby. One person checks in; two check out. It seemed like sleight of hand.(360-361)

This may be one of Tyler's finer epiphanies for a middle-aged character who is about to launch himself mysteriously and somewhat reluctantly yet

again into parenthood, but it is hardly a sensitive understanding of the birth process.

Saint Maybe explores the ambivalences of family relationships, just as other Tyler novels do. In addition, it moves from sickness to health, imprisonment to freedom, and fragmentation to wholeness as other novels do. Tyler also takes a new tack in this novel, treating sin and redemption for the first time in religious terms and, in addition, resenting a religious character sympathetically. Although characters in other novels commit acts one might consider sins — abusing one's children, for example — the characters themselves never express guilt or a need for forgiveness. And the focus is often on how the abused must make a life in any case and cannot play the victim. In this novel, the focus is on the person who creates the havoc by his unthinking words. He, too, must make a life for himself, but he must also make amends for his wrongdoing. Because the themes of sin and redemption are new for Tyler, they are promising topics for discussion. In particular, one can examine how Tyler approaches these themes, the significance of the religious emphasis, and how this novel's world view compares with that expressed in other works.

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