



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## A STUDY OF MANNERS IN ANNE TYLER'S "BREATHING LESSONS"

Shivani Dubey  
Research Scholar  
Ranchi University, Ranchi  
Jharkhand, India

### Abstract

This study focuses on the renowned American writer Anne Tyler (born in 1941), who has established herself as an exceptionally productive author. One of her notable works is the novel "Breathing Lessons," which was published in 1988 and received the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 1989. The aim of this paper is to examine the utilization of the novel of manners in Tyler's "Breathing Lessons." Unlike typical thrilling movies, this novel presents a highly dramatic plot.

The significance of "Breathing Lessons" lies in its portrayal of the lives of Maggie and her husband, Ira, an American couple in their middle age. Throughout their twenty-eight-year marriage, they navigate a complex relationship while maintaining their distinct individual personalities. The central theme of the novel revolves around the dynamics of the modern American family. Within the scope of this theme, Anne Tyler underscores the idea that an individual's identity and initial sense of self stem from their familial relationships.

### Keywords

Family, Identity, Manners, Isolation, Southern Writer, Comedy of Manners

### Introduction

During the 18th century and its later years, a fresh literary genre emerged, attracting women writers who delved into the realm of novels. These works centered on social intricacies, everyday life, and familial issues. Termed as "novels of manners," this genre gained popularity. Among the notable American writers of the 20th century, Anne Tyler stands out as a prominent figure known for her expertise in crafting novels of manners. Critically acclaimed, Tyler has often been categorized as a Southern writer. Tyler's profound interest and focus on the contemporary family dynamics and their distinct relationships contribute to her distinctive style as a writer. Particularly in her novel "Breathing Lessons," she showcases her skill in portraying fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, and children who are constantly navigating their roles within the family unit. This thematic exploration extends to other aspects related to family, identity, and the concept of home

in her later works. The significance of these themes can be attributed to the writer's genuine passion for capturing authentic individuals and scenes with utmost accuracy and honesty.

### **Manners in Breathing Lessons**

In "Breathing Lessons," the primary focus revolves around the character of Maggie. Following Jesse's divorce from Fiona and their subsequent separation, Maggie endeavors to rebuild her connection with her granddaughter, who she hasn't seen in years. Maggie's plan involves reconciling Jesse with his wife Fiona so that she can ultimately reunite with her granddaughter. This serves as the central motivation that drives the narrative of the novel, while the story itself continues to revolve around the relationship between Maggie and her husband, Ira. Maggie is depicted as a sentimental character, contrasting with Ira, who is portrayed as realistic and stubborn. The novel incorporates numerous comedic conflicts that arise between Ira and Maggie throughout its progression. Anne Tyler's novels stand out from others in the realm of social comedy and novels of manners by posing inquiries about the nature of reality, the essence of life, and the concept of time. Her works raise significant questions about the freedom versus determinism of human behavior, exploring the consequences of coexisting with this mystery in a dramatic fashion.

Critics commonly approach Anne Tyler's literature through the lens of studying the American family. John Updike notes her fascination with familial dynamics, while Doris Betts views chaos within the family as a recurring metaphor in her work. Ann Romines examines Tyler's use of the home as a central plot element, and Jessica Sitton highlights the presence of lovingly drawn and eccentric characters in her novel "The Accidental Tourist" who navigate life's complexities in parallel with psychological and social research.

Tyler's exploration extends to various aspects of dysfunction and failed relationships, addressing themes of broken marriages, child abuse, and failed connections. Some critics argue that her novels fail to depict contemporary family reality, while others appreciate her literature as belonging to the comedy of manners tradition. There are also discussions about the masculine qualities found in Tyler's writing, particularly her profound exploration of parenting experiences.

In "Breathing Lessons," Tyler's mastery of comic elements shines through. Comedy is derived from inner monologues, descriptions, and events throughout the novel. One example of comedic effect is the opening incident where Maggie, the protagonist, gets into a live accident while picking up her car from the auto shop. The writer employs caricature-like elements, depicting Maggie's extraordinary position in the car and her husband's amusing reaction to the situation.

Mary F. Robertson emphasizes that Tyler's novels intricately delve into family relationships and internal conflicts. Family communication, both present and absent, is a significant element in Tyler's literature. Updike suggests that destiny and the themes of abandonment or reunification are recurrent in her novels, with those who flee carrying memories and their pasts, while those who remain often experience negative consequences.

While Tyler's work has garnered praise, some critics have also exaggerated her experiences of parenting, highlighting her ability to authentically portray masculine perspectives. Anne Tyler's works have often been scrutinized in terms of parental figures, showcasing predominantly positive examples even in instances of severity. The complexity of fatherhood is explored through characters like Ian

Bedlow in "Saint Maybe" (1991), Jeremy Pauling in "A Celestial Navigation" (1974), and Macon Leary in "The Accidental Tourist" (1985). This signifies that Tyler's novels imbue parenthood with a positive and profound meaning.

In "Breathing Lessons," the central character is Maggie, whose experiences shape the events of the novel. The story begins with Maggie being involved in a car accident, which occurs as she becomes distracted by hearing her daughter-in-law's voice on a radio show. Throughout the narrative, the reader gains insight into Maggie's scattered nature and the gentle teasing from her husband, Ira.

Maggie and Ira embark on a journey from Baltimore to the town of Deer Lick to attend the funeral of Serena's husband, Max. Along the way, Maggie plans to visit Fiona, her daughter-in-law, in the hopes of gaining approval for her daughter, Leroy, to accompany them to Baltimore. However, Maggie's plans quickly become complicated and unpredictable.

The plot unfolds with various events, such as Serena catching Maggie and Ira engaged in an intimate moment in Max's bedroom during the funeral, leading to Serena kicking them out due to their inappropriate behavior. The tension escalates further as Maggie attempts to reconcile Jesse and Fiona, resulting in confrontations between Jesse, Fiona, Ira, and Maggie. Fiona abruptly leaves the house without saying goodbye, leaving Maggie's plans in shambles.

The author skillfully presents a captivating and delightful portrayal of the parent-child relationship in adulthood. By empathizing with her fictional characters, the writer effectively captures the growth and development of children into adults, offering a unique perspective that diverges from traditional character portrayals. Anne Tyler's works explore the intricate dynamics of subjective beings, particularly in later stages of life, and raise thought-provoking hypotheses about family formation and the exchange of perceptions between parents and children. She delves into the themes of family members distancing themselves from each other, struggling to break free from destructive patterns, and dealing with the symbolic or real loss of their children.

Anne Tyler's storytelling revolves around ordinary middle-class individuals and their struggles within their communities and families. In "Breathing Lessons," Tyler delves into family problems, depicting characters who detach themselves from their families in search of personal identity. This intentional detachment challenges the traditional notion of strong family ties, which is a significant aspect of postmodernism and is evident in this novel. The story of Jesse and Fiona showcases how their separation leads to a decline in family compatibility and bonds. Fiona leaves her husband, Jesse, along with their one-year-old daughter, Leroy. The situation becomes poignant as Leroy grows up without recognizing her father due to their long separation.

"Breathing Lessons" is divided into three parts. The first part follows Maggie and Ira on their journey to Serena's husband's funeral, evoking many memories from the past. The second part focuses on Ira and Maggie's encounter with Mr. Otis, while the third part revolves around an encounter between Serena and Leroy. Throughout the novel, certain events recur, emphasizing their significance. For instance, Maggie buys a cat for Leroy, despite Ira's suggestion that it's not a genuine attempt to bond with their granddaughter, as Leroy is allergic to cats. The cat's presence is later revisited from Leroy's perspective.

Readers of Anne Tyler's works directly connect with her literary world, gaining insights into their own lives. Judith Caesar highlights Tyler's unique voice in American writing and her ability to create sympathetic characters within the vivid setting of Baltimore, which holds significance for many Americans. Critics acknowledge Tyler's exploration of American family life and the chaos that often accompanies it. Brooke Allen notes that Tyler embraces and celebrates the chaos inherent in family dynamics. However, despite the local

scenes, many of Tyler's characters find themselves at home even when physically distant. The writer demonstrates that her characters either accept their reality or display patience and tolerance toward it.

The main characters in "Breathing Lessons" are Maggie and Ira, who are presented as contrasting individuals. Ira remains constant and controlled due to Maggie's dominant influence, while Maggie possesses the ability to understand Ira's thoughts and often causes distress and instability for him by sharing her dreams. Maggie's character tends to meddle in her children's lives, which contrasts with the author's usual stance against interference. Nevertheless, the reader develops a soft spot for Maggie's character. Eventually, Maggie faces consequences when Fiona leaves her.

Many critics argue that Southern women writers, including Anne Tyler, play a significant role in maintaining family unity. Susan Gilbert emphasizes the responsibility that women writers, including Tyler, undertake in their portrayals of male characters and their contribution to literature as a whole. Doris Betts notes in the introduction to "Southern Women" that women writers have excelled in depicting male characters compared to their male counterparts.

The characters of Daisy and Jesse, Ira and Maggie's children, reflect the contrasting traits of their parents. Daisy shares Ira's desire for organization and perfection, while Jesse resembles his mother with his dreamy nature. Ira sees his children as mirrors of himself, perceiving Daisy as responsible and fearing that she will lose her youth prematurely. Tyler presents a reassuring message that success, prosperity, and a stable life are not the sole indicators of fulfillment for her characters, who are willing to embrace change and uncertainty. They find self-respect, adventure, love, and growth outside of societal expectations.

The events in the novel are portrayed from various perspectives and are not presented in a linear sequence. The characters repeat their mistakes, as revealed through flashbacks. Ira becomes the cause of Jesse's separation from his wife Fiona when he interferes in their relationship by informing Fiona about Jesse's involvement with another woman. Ira regrets his interference and misses an opportunity for reconciliation when he informs Fiona again at the end of the novel.

In "Breathing Lessons," Tyler employs indirect narration and a comedic tone reminiscent of novels of manners. She uses humor to expose characters' inappropriate behaviors, such as Maggie and Ira's intimate encounter in Serena's bedroom during a funeral. The novel delves into family dynamics and interactions, highlighting both joyous and tragic moments. Through "Breathing Lessons," Tyler demonstrates her growth and maturity as a writer.

Tyler addresses the importance of family dynamics and the curiosity they evoke. The title "Breathing Lessons" refers to the exercises pregnant women perform to prepare for childbirth. The novel encompasses a range of events filled with chance, joy, and irrationality, blending pleasures and tragic memories as Tyler reaches a new level of maturity.

Loneliness and isolation are prevalent themes in "Breathing Lessons." Ira is portrayed as a solitary character who dislikes socializing, even within his own family. His brothers and father also exhibit a sense of solitude, relying on Ira to connect with the outside world. Maggie and Ira, despite living under the same roof, consistently hold differing opinions, leading to instability and conflicts. Mr. Otis, whom Maggie and Ira encounter, is another isolated character due to his failed marriage.

The novel emphasizes that marriage is not always a positive state. Maggie and Ira frequently disagree and make different decisions, causing strife and discomfort in their relationship. Jesse's marriage with Fiona ends in separation, with Fiona leaving with their daughter, Leroy, due to Jesse's irresponsibility and poor treatment. Maggie, although concerned for Jesse's well-being, is unable to solve his problems or prevent the breakdown of his marriage.

The novel "Breathing Lessons" by Anne Tyler, published in 1988, explores the theme of change and the complexities of marriage. The story revolves around a day in the lives of Ira and Maggie, a married couple from Baltimore. They embark on a journey to attend a funeral and visit their estranged daughter-in-law and granddaughter. Throughout the day, Maggie contemplates her family, herself, and the coincidences that have shaped their lives.

Maggie embraces the idea that change is inevitable but believes that true change is elusive. While individuals can change partners, the underlying situation remains the same. She finds comfort in determinism, the belief that we can attain what we desire, but often our desires are not aligned with what we truly want. She sees our desires as of the second degree, while the desires of the first degree are influenced by external forces beyond our control. Maggie ultimately resigns herself to the idea that change is severe and inevitable.

The novel employs a narrative structure that alternates between Ira and Maggie's perspectives, mirroring their intertwined lives. The story delves into their marriage, which initially resembled Max and Serena's marriage but later evolved into two distinct individuals sharing a home. Maggie is taken aback when Fiona, their daughter-in-law, perceives her and Ira as incompatible. Maggie had always believed that outsiders envied her marriage, but Fiona's opinion shatters that perception. Despite their differences, Maggie sees their arguments as discussions aimed at understanding each other's viewpoints.

"Breathing Lessons" explores the historical significance of marriage and its cultural impact on the characters. It depicts a generation that grew up adhering to certain societal rules, only to witness those rules being discarded by their children. The novel reflects on the grief and challenges faced by this generation. Maggie, along with her classmates, is astonished by Serena's frankness and freedom, which contrasts with their own upbringing. Maggie, who is approaching menopause, finds herself exhausted by various concerns, such as her daughter leaving for college and the potential layoffs at a nursing home. She also struggles with body image and experiences menopausal symptoms. Despite her efforts to maintain a strict diet, she gives in to her cravings for fried chicken and chips.

Tyler emphasizes the notion that the past continues to exert influence in the present. Memory shapes the characters' lives, even as time progresses. Ira, for example, reminisces about his granddaughter and reflects on their familial ties. The novel concludes with Maggie going to bed, preparing for a long car ride and seeking solace. Tyler suggests that the connections we value are more significant than memory alone. While memories can be painful, the characters must move forward and embrace life.

The novel contrasts Maggie and Ira's evolving marriage with the troubled marriage of Fiona and Jesse. Maggie attempts to reconcile the couple by bringing Fiona to Baltimore, hoping to resolve their disputes. However, her efforts are in vain, and Maggie realizes that some things cannot be changed by her intervention. She believes that correcting mistakes will lead to a transformation.

"Breathing Lessons" marks a breakthrough in Tyler's writing. The novel portrays a mother's commitment to documenting and strengthening the bonds within her family, despite her flaws and the challenges she faces. While the book received awards, some critics found Maggie's character amusing, as she attempts to change her irresponsible son's behavior. The lack of focus on Maggie's relationship with her daughter, Daisy, and her feelings toward her is also a notable aspect.

Many commentators have praised Tyler's ability to present fresh perspectives on ordinary life. The writer aims to enlighten readers about themselves through her storytelling. Tyler's Quaker background has been noted by some as influencing her works, with her novels often characterized by humor and kindness. Critics who view Tyler's writing as comedic

## Conclusion

In this novel, Anne Tyler incorporates a comedy of manners to not only provide amusement but also to satirize the characters' actions. She portrays her characters with intelligence and subtlety, highlighting their struggles to maintain relationships despite their perceived incompatibilities. The comedy of manners, like other forms of comedy, aims to impart a lesson to readers by presenting various situations and events. This is evident when Ira and Maggie engage in a sexual encounter in Serena's room during a funeral, which is considered inappropriate and disrespectful. Serena reacts by kicking them out of her house. Through this novel, Tyler explores the characters' resilience in holding onto relationships despite their differences and conflicting ideas. Maggie makes efforts to reconcile her son and daughter-in-law, although she ultimately fails to bring them together. Nevertheless, she persists until the end. Despite their divergent beliefs and inclinations, Ira and Maggie manage to remain together. Tyler seeks to depict numerous social situations, individual behavior, and family-related problems to help readers understand the characters' mistakes.

## References

- 1.Adams, Susan S. "A Patchwork Planet and the "Slipping-Down Life" of Anne Tyler's Fiction." *Studies in Popular Culture* 24.2 (2001): 1-16.
- 2.Bail, Paul. *Anne Tyler: A Critical Companion*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998.
- 3.Carroll, Virginia Schaefer. "Wrestling with change: Discourse strategies in Anne Tyler." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (1998): 86-109.
- 4.Carson, Barbara Harrell. "Endlessly Branching and Dividing" : Anne Tyler's Dynamic Causality." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 85.3/4 (2002): 301-321.
- 5.Durham, Joyce R. "Anne Tyler's Vision of Gender in" Saint Maybe"." *The Southern Literary Journal* 31.1 (1998): 143-152.
- 6.Flower, Dean. "Barbaric Yawps and Breathing Lessons." *The Hudson Review* 42.1 (1989): 133-140.
- 7.Gale, Cengage Learning. *A Study Guide for Anne Tyler's "Breathing lessons "*.2001. Tyler's 'Breathing Lessons'.2021 .
- 9.Herrera, Andrea O'Reilly, Elizabeth Mahn Nollen, and Sheila Reitzel Foor. *Family matters in the British and American novel*. Popular Press,1997. 10.Kondapally,Sunalini."Women Journey of life in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Ann Tyler". K L University Press,2011.
- 11.Leeds, Lilo, Gerard Leeds, and Terrence Real. *Wonderful marriage: A guide to building a great relationship that will last a lifetime*. BenBella Books, 2008.

12.Lindhe, Anna. Appropriations of Shakespeare's King Lear in Three Modern North American Novels. Lund University, 2013.

13.Rainwater, Catherine, and William J. Scheick, eds. Contemporary American women writers: narrative strategies. University Press of Kentucky, 1985.

14.Rich, Barbara. Review of Brookner's "A friend from England". The Women's

15.Schneiderman, Leo. "Anne Tyler: The American family fights for its halflife." American journal of psychoanalysis 56.1 (1996): 65-81.

16.Salwak, Dale, ed. Anne Tyler as novelist. University of Iowa Press, 1994. 17.Stephens, Charles Ralph, ed. The Fiction of Anne Tyler. University Press of Mississippi, 1990.

18.Voelker, Joseph. Art and the Accidental in Anne Tyler. No. 34. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989 .

19.Willrich, Patricia Rowe. "Watching Through Windows: A Perspective on Anne Tyler." The Virginia Quarterly Review 68.3 (1992): 497-516.

