

# Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant: Anne Tyler and the Faulkner Connection

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## ABSTRACT

The structure of Anne Tyler's novel, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is interestingly reminiscent of that of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*; an investigation of the similarities reveals an underlying connection between the two works, a common concern with family dynamics and destinies.

Both novelists examine the bonds between people, mysterious bonds beyond or beneath articulation. *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is not, however, a pale imitation or a contemporary retelling of the Bundren novel. It is a participant in a tradition. The parallels between the two novels are suggestive rather than exact. Despite a certain sharing of Faulkner's fatalism, Tyler gives us characters a bit less passive and events a bit less inexorable. The echoes from Faulkner deepen and intensify the themes of Tyler, but in her novel, for one character at least, obsession ultimately gives way to perspective. The ending is not Faulknerian but Tyler's own; the optimism is limited but unmistakable.

Anne Tyler's latest novel, *Dinner to the Homesick Restaurant*, begins with this sentence, "While Pearl Tull was dying, a funny thought occurred to her."<sup>1</sup> Pearl does not actually die until the beginning of the last chapter; she "lies dying" throughout the novel. Tyler may be intending an evocation of *As I Lay Dying*, a novel by William Faulkner, in which, as in this book, a mother's death brings together her family to participate in a ritual act: a funeral journey in one, a funeral dinner in the other. In fact, Tyler seems to be throwing out hints that she wants the reader to suspect a connection between the two; the neighbors in Faulkner's novel are

also named Tull.<sup>2</sup> A close look suggests that the similarities are not limited to names and surface appearances. The structure of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is reminiscent of that of *As I Lay Dying*. In Faulkner's novel, each chapter is given over to one character's voice, one character's description of and reactions to the events taking place; the individual chapters contain conflicting viewpoints and philosophies, differing attitudes towards the mother, the other members of the family, and the task the family has taken on.

The alternation of first person narration which characterizes *As I Lay Dying* is not the narrative device at work in Tyler's novel, but the principle is the same. In each chapter, the reader sees the events described with limited omniscience, revealing the consciousness of one character at a time. Consciousness shifts only with the beginning of each new chapter. The first and sixth chapters belong to Pearl, the second, fifth and tenth or last to her older son, Cody, the third and seventh to her daughter Jenny, the fourth and ninth to the second son, Ezra, and the eighth to Cody's son, Luke. Each of these chapters reveals a characteristic attitude toward the world unique to the consciousness indicated. Each of these chapters also furthers the action, moving along for the most part chronologically, very much as the individual chapters of *As I Lay Dying* do.

Moreover, there exist interesting similarities of characterization in these two novels. Addie Bundren is a fierce, angry woman described by her neighbor Cora Tull as "a lonely woman, lonely with her pride." (21) Pearl is, by her own admission, "an angry sort of mother" (19) given to wild temper tantrums, physical and verbal assaults on her children, and isolated from her neighbors. Cody remembers "that she'd never shown the faintest interest in her community but dwelt in it like a visitor from a superior neighborhood, always wearing her hat when out walking, keeping her doors shut tightly when at home." (285) Both are women who withhold themselves from the men they marry, keeping themselves, psychologically at least, intact. Both find children the experience that violates them and makes them vulnerable. Addie says,

And when I knew that I had Cash, I knew that living was terrible and that this was not the answer to it...I knew that it had been, not that my aloneness has to be violated over and over each day, but that it had never been violated until Cash came. Not even by Anse in the nights.(163-164)

For Pearl, Cody's childhood croup makes her change her mind about having no more children; she thinks, "If Cody died, what would she have left?" (4) But more children only increase the vulnerability. With Ezra "she was more endangered than ever." (4) These reactions to their children are not to be equated, but what is to be noted is that both women are radically changed, moved to passion and anger, by children rather than by marriage.

There are similarities in the characterizations of the children as well, particularly the sons. Ezra Tull, Pearl's second son, is an "innocent," patient and guileless; one reviewer of the novel compared him with Dostoevsky's Idiot, both in his own purity and in the effect he has on less innocent characters.<sup>3</sup> Actually, readers of Tyler's other novels have met Ezra Tull's spiritual relatives before, but so have readers of Faulkner. Ezra is not an idiot; he is slow and mild, quite a bit like Cash Bundren in his uncomplaining acceptance of whatever must be. Cash works outside his mother's window, building his mother's coffin. Ezra sits by his mother's deathbed, solid and dependable, just as he sat beside the deathbed of Mrs. Scarlatti, his surrogate mother. While Mrs. Scarlatti lies dying, Ezra does his carpentry work, tearing down walls and rebuilding her restaurant.

Ezra is also his mother's favorite child, as Jewel Bundren is his mother's favorite. But there are few, if any, character traits shared by Ezra and Jewel. Jewel is more like Cody Tull, wild and sharing in his mother's frustrations and anger. Cody is also somewhat like Darl Bundren, the highly sensitive troublemaker of the Bundren family. Like Darl, he is jealous of his brother and is untiring in his efforts to make his life miserable.

Finally, each of these families has a shiftless father. Anse Bundren is a man who believes that he will die if he sweats; he is criminally careless of his children's well-being, setting Cash's leg in cement and stealing his daughter's money. He

uses others' misfortunes to his own advantage and insists on the respect he feels a family owes to its father. Beck Tull deserts his wife and abandons his children ("I won't be visiting the children," he says in response to Pearl's plea—10) and then returns for her funeral, full of himself, claiming his family and telling his grandchildren as he "moved down the line beaming," "I'm your long lost grandpa." (289) Both women married men who were not their social equals. Now that he is "free," Beck Tull is thinking about remarriage just as Anse has. The echoes of Anse are everywhere; the reader waits for Beck to say, "God's will be done...Now I can get them teeth." (51)

He does not say this, of course, and *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is not *As I Lay Dying*. Pearl is not Addie. She is much softer, much less perverse. She is given more opportunity to speak, allowed to live and change throughout the novel; Addie, we recall, is central to her novel, but she speaks (from beyond the grave?) only once and becomes, rather than a fully realized character, more of a narrative focal point. Pearl's anger is more specific, tied to her having been abandoned by her husband, left to support her children alone. She tells her son Cody that she was once "special," and asks "Do you really suppose I was always this difficult old woman?" (141) She sees herself trapped in the consequences of her one great mistake. Although her anger affects the children and leaves them scared, she does not have the power that Addie has nor the malice to use it. The ritual act here, the funeral dinner, is not something which she has consciously imposed on her family and not something which requires from them sacrifices on a par with those made by the Bundrens. Nor are her children duplicates of the Bundrens.

The structure, too, is different. Pearl's death, announced in the opening words and accomplished in the final chapter, surrounds and encloses the action of the novel. Addie is at the center of

her novel. All the characters revolve around her; their words seem to emanate from her. The duration of the action is more compressed in *As I Lay Dying*; the organization is tighter, the center more narrow and defined. Although as one critic has suggested, the reader cannot be sure to whom the title of Faulkner's novel refers, who the "I" is<sup>4</sup>, the title of Tyler's novel clearly points out from Pearl Tull, away from death, and toward the healing family dinner.

*Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is not, then, a contemporary retelling of the Bundren story. The parallels between the two are suggestive rather than exact, and they call attention to the deeper thematic resemblances and dissimilarities of the two novels.

Both are unsentimental portraits of family and the bonds which join people, bonds which seem to have little to do with affection. Even need is an inadequate explanation, although it plays a role in the reliance of members of both families on each other. In each case, the author seems to suggest that the bonds are mysterious, beyond or beneath articulation (at least by these people, although Darl and Cody are sensitive to and comment on the relationships within their respective families). Forces stronger than individuals keep them together. Cody, thinking over the many unsuccessful attempts Ezra has made at "family dinners" at his restaurant, wonders why they all go every time, knowing it will not work out. Their going is as inevitable and irresistible as the Bundren's incredible trip to Jefferson; reasonableness is never at issue.

The Tull children all from time to time wish for a different sort of life, wish in fact to be members of some other more normal family. Cody compares himself with his friends:

Look at his two best friends: their parents went to the movies together; their mothers talked on the telephone. *His* mother...He kicked a signpost. What he wouldn't give

to have a mother who acted like other mothers! He longed to see her gossiping with a little gang of women in the kitchen, letting them roll her hair up in pincurls, trading beauty secrets, playing cards, losing track of time. — “Oh goodness, look at the clock! And supper not even started; my husband will kill me. Run along girls.” (59)

This women’s-magazine-mother and idyllic dream of family life repeat themselves in several versions throughout the novel. Jenny, having supper with her brother Ezra’s friend, Josiah, and his mother, thinks of it as “a fairy tale existence,” and the narrator tells us that “she ached, with something like nostalgia, for a contented life with his mother in her snug house, for an innocent protective marriage” (79). Even Pearl shares this longing for a better family life; when she hears a neighbor talking about a picnic her family is planning for which each adult member will bring a dish that is his or her specialty, Pearl feels “such a wave of longing that her knees went weak.” (186)

All of this wishing and dreaming takes place within the context of their actual family life, filled as it is with maternal “rampages,” brotherly malice and loneliness. Nevertheless, the reality is an inexplicable family bond with “mother” at the center, not the women’s magazine mother but the real thing, complete with terrors and terrorizing. When Jenny, whose dreams are full of her mother as a witch who hands her over to Nazis, experiences unhappy marriages, she comes home to her mother. Although she has always felt suffocated in her old family house and although she cannot understand how Ezra can bear to live at home, on these occasions, the house seems “restful” (101), and she feels “safe at last.” (102)

The inevitability of all this returning home seems clearly connected to Faulkner and the sense of fatalism so often conveyed by the events

of his novels. One critic, speaking specifically of *As I Lay Dying*, says “In the imagery of the novel...a sense of fatality is frequently conveyed through images of circular movement: repetitious, preordained and circumscribed.”<sup>5</sup> If it is true that the movement of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is somewhat less “inexorable” than this, it is not too distantly related. The Tulls are not poor and uneducated as the Bundrens are; nor do they give voice to such baldly deterministic statements as Dewey Dell Bundren’s “if it don’t mean for me to do it the sack will not be full and I will turn up the next row but if the sack is full I cannot help it” (26) or even Cash’s

But I ain’t so sho that ere a man has the right to say what is crazy and what ain’t. It’s like there was a fellow in every man that’s done a past the sanity or the insanity, that watches the sane and insane doings of that man with the same horror and the same astonishment.(228)

But if the Tulls are not constantly saying, “God’s will be done,” they all, as they grow into adulthood, experience moments in which they seem doomed to repeat the past, to move in circles. The determinism here is of a somewhat different order. John Updike comments,

Both novels [*Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and an earlier Tyler novel, *Searching for Caleb*] play with the topic (a mighty one, and not often approached in fiction) of heredity—the patterns of eye color and temperamental tic as they speckle the generations. But genetic comedy in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* deepens into the tragedy of closeness, of familial limitations that work upon us like Greek fates and condemn us to lives of surrender and secret fury.<sup>6</sup>

Jenny Tull seems to be the child who has suffered most, or at least with less justice, from her

mother's rampages and also, as we have seen, to have the greatest need of mothering. The narrator tells us that even when her mother is peaceful and serene, Jenny is on edge: "Jenny knew that in reality her mother was a dangerous person—hot breasted and full of rage and unpredictable." (70) She has felt the slaps and heard herself called "cockroach" and "hideous little sniveling guttersnipe" (70); she knows she is in the presence of an unstable witch. Years later, abandoned with a child by her second husband, Jenny finds herself slapping the child and screaming at her, "Guttersnipe! Ugly little rodent!" (209) She thinks to herself, "Was this what it came to—that you never could escape? That certain things were doomed to continue, generation after generation?" (209)

In the midst of this breakdown, Pearl arrives to care for her and her child (a solace never enjoyed by Pearl herself); she reads to Becky a book from Jenny's childhood, and Jenny moves to a different level of circling:

Why she had loved that book! She'd requested it every evening she remembered now. She'd sat on that homely old sofa and listened while her mother, with endless patience, read it three times, four times, five...Now Becky said "Read it again," and Pearl returned to page one and Jenny listened just as closely as Becky did.(210-211)

Cody, too as an adult, continues to go over and over the same ground. As a child, he played Monopoly; he played it ruthlessly with a competitiveness neither of his siblings shared, cheating if necessary. Now he plays with his son Luke who takes on Ezra's role in the contest, giving up as soon as he perceives that "It's only a matter of time" before he loses. The effect on Cody is the same as the effect that Ezra always had on him. He tells Luke,

"Ezra would do that...Your Uncle Ezra. It was no fun beating him at all. He'd never

take a loan and he wouldn't mortgage the least little thing, not even a railroad or the waterworks. He'd just cave right in and give up." (224)

The same demons are haunting Cody. All his problems remain unresolved. He has transferred his self-destructive jealousy from his brother to his son, or more accurately from his brother alone to his brother and his son.

Even the dreams of the Tull family tend to be recurring dreams, inescapable. Jenny "dreamed what she had always dreamed" (70) that her mother "was raising Jenny to eat her." Cody's dream about his father and his own attempts to interest this man in a "salesman suit" come and go and always leave him asking "Was it something I said? Was it something I did? Was it something I didn't do that made you go away?" (47)

None of these characters is oblivious to these hereditary patterns, but none of them passively accepts his or her fate either. However, sometimes the attempt to escape "fate" become appointments in Samarra, ironic and unpleasant surprises for the character involved. The best example of this involves Cody's obsession with his idea that his brother has always, and without visible effort, stolen his girlfriends. For once he seems to be successful in challenging that pattern, eradicating it by stealing Ezra's fiancé. If he succeeds in this endeavour, he will never again have to see the pattern repeat itself in their lives. His triumph is immediately spoiled by a conversation with a girl from his past, one he believed a conquest of Ezra's. She remembers her infatuation with Cody, but when he reminds her of a game she played with Ezra, she says, "I'd forgotten you had a brother." (165)

Cody is left with ashes and a partial realization of what has happened. He has not defeated the pattern at all; he has only misread it and by doing that he has played into the hands of the

fates. The pattern is not that Ezra has always stolen his girlfriends but that he has always been only half conscious of his relationship with his brother. Because of imperfect understanding, he has always been a victim of his own attacks on his brother and now he is trapped in a marriage which rather than lessens his jealousy of his brother aggravates and intensifies it. Each time he wounds his brother, he becomes more thoroughly enslaved.

In a deterministic world, whether Faulkner's or Tyler's, the past dominates the present, quite often exercising a "malign influence on the present."<sup>7</sup> Addie Bundren's adulterous affair determines the relationships of her children, and the promise she exacts from her husband as a form of revenge sends them on this unbelievably difficult journey. The past event which broods over the the novel, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, determining the events and behaviour, is Beck Tull's abandonment of his family. Every one in the family is affected by it and everyone's life constitutes a response to this act.

Jenny Tull abandons her first husband and is abandoned by her second. Her third marriage is almost a comic parody of the abandonment theme; she marries a man who has been most thoroughly abandoned. Joe, her third husband, describes his predicament:

"Left me flat," Joe said cheerfully. "Cleared clean out of Baltimore. Parked the kids with a neighbor one day, while I was off at work. Hired an Allied van and departed with all we owned, everything but the children's clothes in neat little piles on the floor...Firs thing I had to do when I got home that night was go out and buy a fleet of beds from Sears. They must've thought I was opening a motel." (188)

Jenny marries him "with his flanks of children" because they are all "in urgent need of her brisk and competent attention" (213) and because the

noise and confusion preclude conversation, particularly the "heartfelt" conversations of courtship which she has given up in psychic exhaustion.

In some ways, all three Tull children try to cancel out the father's act of abandonment. Jenny rescues this deserted soul; Ezra remains in his mother's house instead of moving to a room over his restaurant. Cody, the character most conscious of the wrong their father has done, loves his own son and the narrator tells us,

(He would rather die than desert a child of his. He had promised himself when he was a boy: anything but that.)(299)

But, of course Cody participates in, is in fact the prime mover of, the abandonment of Ezra by his fiancé. The efforts of the other two to eliminate the "family curse" are also less than fully successful, as we shall see.

Neither Faulkner nor Tyler is concerned exclusively with the depiction of a determined or fatalistic world. Both are interested in human struggle and in the implications of such a world view for the human drama; in other words, given such a world, what are the prerequisites for survival, even success?

In both Faulkner and Tyler, survival and success are directly related to time and to the individual character's perception of and ability to handle the passage of time, and more specifically the relation of past to present. This paper does not attempt to take on the large question of Faulkner's use of time nor the equally large body of critical work done on the question. Rather the point is a truism: Faulkner's novels revolve around the questions of time. As one critic puts it, "The presentness of past events and emotions" is characteristic of most of his novels.<sup>8</sup> As mentioned before, the existence of a largely deterministic novelistic world requires a percep-

tion of time which stresses the irresistible power of the past.

The second significant aspect of time to be considered here is "natural" time or acquiescence to the temporal rhythms of nature. Acquiescence is the key word here. Characters such as Darl who try to interfere with the inevitable (getting the body to Jefferson) fail and usually fail spectacularly. Dewey Dell must also stop resisting her pregnancy and give herself over to nature's time. In an interesting article, Leon Seltzer and Jan Viscomi consider Anse Bundren as a good example of one character who not only does not resist the inevitable but ultimately triumphs because he is able to use it to his own advantage (his new teeth, his new wife). Seltzer and Viscomi see this as a typical quality of Faulkner's survivors:

...spiritual triumph over the eternal forces of destruction requires a curiously static movement synchronous with nature's...Faulkner suggests his approval of those characters who accept the spatial and temporal rhythms of nature (often construed by them as manifestations of God's will) by delineating their success in coping with life's manifold difficulties.<sup>9</sup>

"Approval" may be too strong a word here at least in the case of Anse Bundren who lacks the quiet dignity of many of the other Faulkner characters who "endure," with whom he seems to be being grouped. Nevertheless, the point is well taken.

The two ideas together, the presence of the past in the present and survival through adaptation and not rebellion, suggest a third idea, the devaluation of chronology. Time best understood in Faulkner's terms, even in this most apparently orderly and chronological novel, is not straightforward; time is flux, a movement forward, backward, sideways and circular, with no clear cut beginnings or endings.

The presentation of time and its effects on characters is of central importance in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and is directly related to the survival decisions made by the characters.

Pearl Tull at eighty-five is clearly not the same woman she was when her children were younger. She is no longer fierce and angry, at least not so much as she was. More important, she has changed her approach to time. The reader learns that the younger Pearl was extremely orderly. The bureau drawers, as Cody remembers, were highly organized: "the clothing organized by type and color, whites grading into pastels and then to darks; comb and brush parallel; gloves paired and folded like a row of clenched fists." (42) This order intensifies upon her husband's departure as if her strategy for living through her ordeal is to keep everything else she has under tight control. Her management of time fits too under this heading: she has plans for her children, particularly Ezra, schedules for his life. In a telling incident, the old Pearl remembers with regret her younger response to Ezra's question while still in elementary school, "Mother...if it turned out that money grew on trees just for one day and never again, would you let me stay home from school and pick it?" She refuses saying that his education is more important. Ezra reminds her that it is just for one day, and she has a suggestion:

Pick it *after* school. Or before. Wake up extra early; set your alarm clock ahead an hour."

"An hour!" he said "One little hour for something that happens only once in all the world." (19)

Although Ezra never adopts her ideas about school and schedules, and never does accept her "plans" for him, the other two children are more influenced by her husbanding of time and her powerful sense of orderliness, at least temporarily.

Jenny begins her adulthood with the same intense orderliness that her mother had. Her college roommate is “exasperated with the finicky way she aligned her materials on her desk.” (82) This leads her to marriage with a person whose orderliness puts her mother’s to shame; they marry on a timetable; his plan is “that we might become better acquainted over the summer and marry in the fall.” (88) This schedule is important since it will allow them to share an apartment at the university in the fall and cut down on expenses. Jenny finds that, like her brother Cody, she has married believing she was acting freely and then has found herself trapped:

Having got what she was after, she found it was she who’d been got. Talk about calculating! He was going to run her life, arrange it perfectly by height and color. (104)

After leaving him, Jenny abandons order and schedules for good; the new Jenny leaves her brother Ezra in her waiting room, forgetting a lunch date with him. Her home is “warrenlike” filled with children and clutter; she trips over things and never cleans up. Her pediatric practice is hectic and disorderly too. She is totally changed. What has most effectively brought this change about is the failure of her second marriage. Left by a man she loved (reliving her mother’s life), she found that her control was no defense against life, and she chose a new style. The narrator says, “she was learning how to make it through life on a slant. She was trying to lose her intensity.” (212) She begins to take life as a joke, a hopelessly silly business. And she believes that “you make your own luck.” She criticizes Cody for thinking otherwise and for cataloguing the little “harmless” memories from their childhood. (199)

Ezra, too, tries to offer no resistance to life, to eliminate intensity. He tells his mother when she questions his not standing up to a bully, “I’m trying to get through life as a liquid.” (166) He

tries to liquify life for others also; his restaurant is a place for him to mother people, to fill them with garlicky soups “made with love” (119), to advise them on what to eat to ease their various complaints. At his restaurant he does not serve fruits and vegetables out of season. He is the one who organizes the ritual family dinners and tries to feed them all with love. He would seem thoroughly in tune with natural temporal rhythms, the earth mother.

These two responses to life, Jenny’s and Ezra’s, are not without their drawbacks. Ezra’s restaurant is a substitution for reality; it is in a sense a creation of a home for himself with all the elements of the women’s-magazine-mothering we have mentioned before. There is no trace of Ezra’s real mother here. Pearl never eats anything here, and Cody remembers her cooking:

He remembered her coming home from work in the evening and tearing irritably around the kitchen. Tins toppled out of the cupboards and fell all over her—pork ‘n beans, Spam, oily tuna fish, peas canned olive-drab...She burned things you would not imagine it possible to burn and served others half-raw, adding jarring extras of her own design, such as crushed pineapple in the mashed potatoes (Anything as long as it was a leftover, might as well be dumped in the pan with anything else). Her only seasonings were salt and pepper. Her only gravy was Campbell’s cream of mushroom soup, undiluted.

Like his brother and sister, Ezra is homesick for a home he never had.

The restaurant is just one of several homes that Ezra takes in place of, or to supplement, his family home. His friend, Josiah’s mother tells Jenny that Ezra “has been like a son to me, always in and out of the house,” (77) and Jenny learns for the first time that Ezra eats supper there regularly. Mrs. Scarlatti, who sells Ezra a



share in her restaurant for one dollar and then leaves him the rest in her will, calls Ezra "my boy here." (93) Ezra sits at her deathbed just as he sits at his mother's. In other words, Ezra's approach to his home life is, like Jenny's, on a slant. He is discharged from the army for sleepwalking, something he knew he was doing, and could have probably stopped, but did not. He is doing something similar through all his life. This may be the reason that, on her deathbed, Pearl tells Ezra and Jenny that "You were always duckers and dodgers." (33)

Jenny has certainly chosen a life of ducking and dodging. She, by changing herself into someone who is at a distance from life, has effectively cut herself off from her past. Ezra gives her some photographs of herself as a child which she shows to her stepson. He says, "It's someone else, Not you; you're always laughing and having fun." (203) To him the girl in the picture looks like Anne Frank. Jenny's response to this is indifference. Later, watching a showing of the film, "A Taste of Honey," Jenny remembers having loved it when she first saw it, but she cannot remember why; she cannot remember who she was then.

The price for rejection of the past and the choice of a distant life is a kind of hysteria. She is unable to be serious and unable to help, or even to recognize the need for help, when her stepson's problems are pointed out to her by a priest, a teacher, and even her mother:

"Oh Jenny," her mother said sadly. "Do you have to see everything as a joke?"

"It's not *my* fault if funny things happen," Jenny said.

"It most certainly is," said her mother.(205)

Jenny and Ezra may have escaped from some of the pain but they have both crippled themselves

in the process. There is no escape, at least not in trying to circumvent one's fate.

The Tull child who cannot escape intensity (and who is not accused of "ducking and dodging"), who is unable to get some distance or to take life on the slant is, who of course, Cody. Cody is in many ways the central consciousness of this novel (somewhat as Darl is); his observations are the most acute, and he is the one who undergoes a crucial change by the end of the novel. He is also the one most like Pearl herself, something Pearl does not recognize; she feels only his "unreasonable rages" and his withholding. (22) She thinks that "none of her children possessed a shred of curiosity," (24) but she does not know about Cody and his father's letters. Beck writes a short note to Pearl every few months, enclosing a little money. Before she ever sees these letters, Cody steams them open, reads them and re-seals them. Pearl never knows this, and neither of the other children is aware of the existence of the letters.

Pearl and Cody are the two who think about Beck, who see him as the "absent Presence," an audience for any and all achievements. In Cody's dreams, Cody is a toddler, trying to impress his father. When they finally meet at the funeral, Cody's reaction is one of deflation:

Cody had a sudden intimation that tomorrow, it would be more than he could manage to drag himself off to work. His success had finally filled its purpose. Was this all he had been striving for—the one brief moment of respect flitting across his father's face?(291)

The sense of abandonment, of having been wronged, is most acute in Pearl and Cody. He shares with his mother, too, her sense of time. Like her he is always "running on schedule": (90) he has, in fact, taken it beyond the standard set for him by his mother. He is on schedule with

a vengeance; he has become a very successful efficiency expert, and he tells his son,

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, I always think. If I could pass it back and forth and sideways, you know? If only Einstein were right and time were a kind of river you could choose to step into at any place along the shore.(223)

All of the emphasis in this passage is on control: holding on to time, collecting it, passing it back and forth. Although Cody does not actually say what would happen "if I could just" or "if only," the implication seems to be that if one could manage time, one could step into anywhere necessary and fix whatever had gone wrong. The repetition of "ifs" in this passage suggests the hopelessness of the attempt and the frustrations implicit in the life of such an efficiency expert. His attitude is the exact opposite of his brother's; rather than blending in with whatever is in season, Cody is constantly trying to change the season. He tells Luke, "If they had a time machine, I'd go on it...It wouldn't matter to me where. Past or future: just out of my time. Just someplace else." (223)

But, in fact, it does matter where. Most of the time, his unhappiness is much more clearly focused than this as he suggests later in this passage:

"Everything," his father said, "comes down to time in the end—to the passing of time, to changing. Ever thought of that? Anything that makes you happy or sad, isn't it all based on minutes going by? Isn't happiness expecting something time is going to bring you? Isn't sadness wishing time back again? Even *big* things—even mourning a death: aren't you really just wishing to have the time back when that person was alive?

Or photos—ever notice old photographs? How wistful they make you feel? Long-ago people smiling, a child who would be an old lady now, a cat that died, a flowering plant that's long since withered away and the pot itself broken or misplaced...Isn't it just that time for once is stopped that makes you wistful? 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." (256)

Here again are the "if only's"; here, Cody associates happiness with anticipation, with looking forward, and unhappiness with the past. When Cody says, "Time is my obsession," he means the past is his obsession. He never looks forward; he relives and replays the past telling the same stories over and over again to his son, recalling the same unhappy memories for his sister and brother. Even his marriage is a step backward, an attempt to "roll the minutes the other way for once."

The structure of the novel reveals this concern. Some details are repeated in various sections of the book, in the minds and memories of different speakers and in different contexts. One of the most important of these is the archery incident. The facts of the case, Pearl's having been the accidental victim of an arrow shot by Cody while roughhousing with Ezra, are reported four different times in the novel. In the three other versions,

While Cody's father nailed the target to the tree trunk, Cody rested the bow. He drew the string back, laid his cheek against it, and narrowed his eyes at the target.(35)

The straightforward sentence structure gives intensity and adds to the general foregrounding of the incident. In the first sentence, as through the entire account, Cody dominates. His father appears in the subordinate clause and is referred to as "Cody's father." The gist of the story is

“Cody’s father’s foolish irresponsibility, his mother’s favouring of Ezra, and his own victimage. Pearl is wounded and Cody says to Ezra, “See what you’ve gone and done?...Gone and done it to me again.” (39) For Cody this incident is important because it is a perfect example of his having been victimized by his brother. Appropriately, it has no context here. There is no mention of the penicillin reaction, and it is not until the end of the novel that Cody, and the reader, learn that this incident precipitated the father’s departure. Cody is unable to see it any other way.

Later in the novel, he tells his son another story of his mother’s favoring of Ezra at his expense, and when Luke tries to suggest a different interpretation of the “facts,” Cody willfully misunderstands his point and responds, “Oh I don’t know why I bother talking to you. You’re an only child, that’s your trouble. You haven’t the faintest idea what I’m trying to get across.” (220) All of Cody’s memories are suspect, for this reason, and as the novel moves toward its final conclusion, more and more characters suggest to him the narrowness of his vision. At one point Luke wakes up his mother to get her to contradict one of Cody’s memories, and at the funeral, Ezra interrupts a harangue to say “It wasn’t like that.” (295)

What happens to Cody and his approach to the past has its parallels in his mother’s life and death. Aging and dying have brought about changes in her attitude. Remembering the incident of the money growing on trees, she thinks, “If money decided to grow on trees one day, let him pick all he like!” she should have said. What difference would it have made? (19) On her deathbed, Pearl moves back and forth in time between the present and memory; she seems equally at home in either, and the structure of the novel reveals this flux. Time shifts continually, the past and present sliding into each other with Pearl “skidding through time” (32) and constantly “mislaying her place in time” (34) and not minding. She is able to see the connec-

tions. Her attitude toward the past now is not one of regret; she does not wish to go back and fix things, but simply to take it all in. She says, “It was such a relief to drift, finally. Why had she spent so long learning how?” (34) Her attitude toward movement through time has had to be learned. She does not try to manage it as she once did; neither does she duck and dodge as Ezra and Jenny do.

The only other chapter set in Pearl’s consciousness is the sixth chapter, “Beaches on the Moon,” located at the center of the novel, immediately following Cody’s disastrous courtship. In this chapter, the movement is similar to that of the first chapter (and dissimilar to all the others in which the movement is relatively straightforward). The sixth chapter begins with a flashback to Pearl and Ezra on a cleaning expedition to Cody’s farm, not a one time occurrence. The opening sentence is suggestive:

Twice or maybe three times a year, she goes out to the farm to make sure things are in order. She has her son Ezra drive her there, and she takes along a broom, a dustpan, rags, a grocery bag for trash and a bucket, and a box of cleanser.(167)

Several factors are at work here which give a sense of timelessness. The non-specific reference “twice or maybe three times a year,” and the use of the present tense work together to lift this incident out of the everyday past and to give it a repetitive, almost ritualistic quality. She does this time after time, year after year, in the same way and with the same materials. She is moving beyond chronological time. The conclusion of the chapter reinforces this impression:

Next season she will come again, and the season after, and the season after that, and Ezra will go on bringing her—the two of them bumping down the driveway, loyal and responsible, together forever.(186)

Between the beginning and end of this chapter, contained within this timelessness, are her memories of Cody's marriage, almost all of them unhappy, none of them overwhelming or obsessive.

Pearl spends her last days with Ezra, listening to him as he describes to her the photographs and diaries from her youth. The photographs are very important in this novel; they are, of course, the perfect image of the presentness of the past. As Cody recognized, they stop time for a moment; the past exists in those photographs just as the photographs exist in the present. What Cody has not recognized is that the past and present are equally alive in them (the girl with the Anne Frank face is Jenny, duck and dodge though she may); the key is to find the connection. It is to find the connection that Pearl goes over and over them, and for that she does not need her eyesight. She sees in them and hears in the words from the diaries what Ezra who reads them cannot hear. Ezra sees that her life as a girl was full of possibility but he can only conclude that "nothing has come of it." (268) The knowledge makes him too tired to read further. Pearl, however, knows better. Later, Ezra reads her the following entry:

The Bedloe girl's piano scales were floating out her window...and a bottle fly was buzzing in the grass, and I saw that I was kneeling on such a beautiful green little planet. I don't care what else might come about, I have had this moment. It belongs to me. (227)

Pearl requires no further reading. She understands what Ezra does not, that life is a reverberating moment and not a plot unfolding and leading to a happy or unhappy ending.

It is to Tyler's great credit that the novel is hers and not merely a pale imitation or reworking of Faulkner's novel. The homage to Faulkner is there, of course; Tyler locates her novel in a tradi-

tion of fiction which probes the psychological dynamics of a family, goes beneath the surface pieties to the underlying mysteries. Like Faulkner, she sees and shows the damages done as well as the loyalties created, the ways in which family members use their privileged positions and intimate knowledge of each other to their own benefit.

Like Faulkner, she understands the complications and the human impulse to gloss them over. Cody, listening to the minister at his mother's funeral offering the obligatory clichés and consolations ("a devoted wife and a loving mother and a pillar of the community," 285), suggests to himself a different version of her "long full life":

...[that] she'd been a frantic, angry, sometimes terrifying mother and that she'd never shown the faintest interest in her community but dwelt in it like a visitor from a superior neighborhood, always wearing her hat when out walking, keeping her doors shut tightly when at home. (285)

Tyler dramatizes the inadequacies of both of these perceptions of "family life"—Cody's as well as the minister's. Throughout the novel, the family structure shifts, regroupes, and emerges altered but intact. At the end of the novel Cody's unkind revelations to his father have driven the old man from the funeral dinner. Cody is shamed into joining the others in trying to find him. He sees a man who he thinks is his son, but who in fact is his father. This is an odd mistake to make since Luke is said to resemble Ezra and Beck and Cody share a resemblance; the four male characters blend for a moment into one, long enough to allow the father his moment, his version of the desertion. At the end of the explanation he says:

I do believe that all these years, anytime I had any success, I've kind of, like, held it up in my imagination for your mother to admire. Just take a look at *this*, Pearl, I'd be

thinking. Oh, what will I do now she's gone?(302)

The connection here is striking. For Beck, Pearl was the "absent Presence" as he was for her and Cody; this allows Cody to see things at least for a moment from another perspective than his own and to see his mother clothed in something other than witch's garb. The novel ends with Cody's revised memory of the archery incident:

He remembered the archery trip and it seemed to him now that he even remembered that arrow sailing in its graceful, fluttering path. He remembered his mother's upright form along the grasses, her hair lit gold, her small hands smoothing her bouquet while the arrow journeyed on. And high above he seemed to recall, there had been a little brown airplane, almost motionless, droning through the sunshine like a bumblebee. (303)

Not only has the vista widened here; Cody finally looks up to the sky and lets in some light. Here, Cody's mother is the young girl of her own memories. The language of this impressionistic idyllic description recalls Pearl's moment in time with the green grass, the floating music, and the buzzing of the bottle fly. Cody has finally managed to step into the river of time at some other moment; past becomes present. Obsession gives way to perspective.

The ending is not Faulknerian: the determinism is downplayed, the optimism is limited but unmistakable. The family may even enjoy, at last, a dinner together (although Beck is threatening to leave before the dessert wine). The Tull family members are not so isolated from each other as the Bundrens. They understand a bit more fully that making it through life—even as a liquid—is something of a joint venture in substance as well as in form. The ghost of Anse Bundren may be sitting at this table waiting for a chance to try out his new teeth, but he has no use

for them here at the Homesick Restaurant where the specialities of the house, made with love and a secret ingredient ("that you'd only share with blood kin" — 293), are soups: steamy, garlicky, improbable but nourishing, homemade soups.

#### NOTES

1. Anne Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982), p. 3. All further quotations from this novel will be identified in the text by page number.
2. William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Random House New Edition, 1964). All quotations from this novel will be identified in the text by page number.
3. Benjamin DeMott, "Funny, Wise and True," rev. of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* by Anne Tyler, *New York Times Book Review*, 14 March 1982, p. 14.
4. Stephen Ross, "Voice in Narrative Texts: the Example of *As I Lay Dying*," *PMLA* 94 (1979), p. 308.
5. Charles Palliser, "Fate and Madness: The Determinist Vision of Darl Bundren," *American Literature* 49 (1977/78), p. 625.
6. John Updike, "On Such a Beautiful Green Little Planet," rev. of *Oh, What a Paradise It Seems* by John Cheever and *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* by Anne Tyler, *The New Yorker*, 5 April, 1982, p. 194.
7. Palliser, p. 632.
8. James H. Matlack, "The Voices of Time: Narrative Structures in *Absalom, Absalom!*," *Southern Review* 15 (1979), p. 341.
9. Leon F. Seltzer and Jan Viscomi, "Natural Rhythms and Rebellion: Anse's Role in *As I Lay Dying*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 24 (Winter 1978-79), p. 557.