

The Determined Character of Willa Drake in Anne Tyler's *Clock Dance*

Ms. S. Radha (D21SH517)

Research Scholar, Department of English, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research,
Chennai

Dr. K.Saraswathy

Associate Professor, Department of English, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research,
Chennai.

ABSTRACT

Love, joys, sorrows, caring, and sharing are all aspects of life. Desires, avarice, lust, and negative characteristics such as hatred, dislike, and others contribute to life's complexity. When life takes unexpected turns and changes the course of our destiny, it is also described as complex. This paper explores the character evolution of protagonist Willa Drake in Anne Tyler's novel "Clock Dance". Usually, Willa Drake is a naturally calm person. Her life's defining moments when she was eleven and her mother vanished being proposed to at twenty-one; and the accident that left her a widow at forty-one – were all precipitated by others. We realise Willa has not lived an unhappy life at the age of 61, but rather a bittersweet one, tinged with occasional regrets. Willa leaves everything and files across the country, despite her second husband Peter's displeasure, when she receives a phone call informing her that her son Sean's ex-girlfriend has been shot and needs her help. Willa's rash decision to look after this woman and her grand-daughter, as well as her dog will take her into unknown territory. She is immersed in the rituals that make a community and finds pleasure in the most unexpected things, surrounded by new and surprising neighbours. *Clock Dance* is a bittersweet novel about hope and regret, fulfillment and renewal, it depicts the day-to-day life of a woman who decides it's never too late to change course and forge her own path.

Key words: Willa Drake, complexity, fulfillment, renewal and bittersweet

INTRODUCTION

Anne Tyler's twenty-second novel *Clock Dance* published in 2020. In a career spanning more than fifty years, she has accomplished the rare feat of delighting generations of readers while also receiving literary acclaim. *Breathing Lessons* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1989, and *A Spool of Blue Thread* was nominated for the Man Booker Prize in 2015. Tyler's subject, like that of her contemporaries Alice Munro and Marilynne Robinson, is families and how we use our early experiences. Many of her novels are set in Baltimore, where she has spent years observing her fellow citizens. Typically, they focus on the misfortunes and small victories of inept men (*The Accidental Tourist*, *The Beginner's Goodbye*) and silly, good-hearted woman (*Breathing Lessons*, *A Spool of Blue Thread*). Tyler's accomplishment, like Jane Austen's while working on her 'three or four families in a country village', is to create characters who are instantly familiar and recognizable.

Anne Tyler, a well-known and prolific American novelist, explores how women function in the public and private worlds within a patriarchal framework. Tyler creates vivid images of characters who appear to be real people with open hearts and minds, drawing the reader into their lives. Despite being genuine, Baltimore, the principal setting for Tyler's novels, appears to be a fictional town. Certain personalities appear to have monopolized life here, seemingly unconcerned with the societal system that exists around them. Tyler, a member of the Quaker community, emphasizes the pervasive impact of the "aesthetic of simplicity" and "impulse towards democracy and egalitarianism" in her works (Bail 15). This nuance can be seen in her writings, particularly in the female characters who are linked to the domestic setting and yearn for freedom but trapped in the familiar environment. Her stories are set in the home, where money is rarely spoken and everyday life is depicted in accordance with current reality.

Tyler gently discusses how her oppressed female heroes eventually discover the capacity to break free of the connections and seek a meaning in life that was missing after marriage. These characters adopt the methods of the modern women they meet on their voyage and, for the time being, cluster together shoulder to shoulder to create an environment free of repressive control. The bond may acquire its own strength as the association progresses, or it may be the end consequence of the association and its effects.

In Anne Tyler's fiction, the consequent female unity is an expression of independence from patriarchal conventions. "Women's exploitation is historical", says Beauvoir, "and liberation must be women's activity". It's not about persuading men to grant women their freedom... "it's about women discovering their solidarity..." Burke and Bergoffen.

Tyler exhibits such unity in the novel *Clock Dance* through the protagonist character Willa and her connection with Denise and Cheryl; with Willa engrossed in the routine while overlooking her spouse Peter-emancipating herself from the mundane everyday problems.

THE CHILDHOOD SUFFERINGS OF WILLA DRAKE

Willa Drake is eleven years old. She goes door-to-door with her friend Sonya selling candy bars to neighbours so they can pay to attend on a school orchestra trip. They are, however, too nervous to talk when they reach the first door. The opening session of the novels tells us that Willa belongs to a poor community. Willa returns home to find that her mother has vanished yet again, like she has done in the past. Willa's father does the best he can for her and her younger sister, Elaine, by making grilled cheese sandwiches for them. He is more affectionate than his wife. He takes care of both children instead of his wife. Willa's father acts as if nothing occurred until her mother returns two days later. Willa, on the other hand, refuses to accept her mother's apologies. As she is grown up, she is able to understand her mother's character. She often leaves home, if any misunderstanding comes between her husband. But both the children, Willa and Elaine are psychologically affected by her mother's behaviour.

Many people believe that having a child without a mother has negative consequences. Emily Brone's characters in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), reflecting her own upbringing, are all without a proper caring mother. The ramifications of Cathy and Heathcliff's separation from their mother have piqued psychoanalytical curiosity throughout the narrative. It seems that a younger or a child who does not have proper parental care of the same gender in their life has self-esteem and confidence concerns.

Willa's mother is a turbulent, enraged mother whereas her father is a quiet and submissive person. She and her sister struggle to get proper food and clothes as their father earns a meagre salary. Somehow, her father educates them at college level. As she does not get love and affection from her mother, she affects psychologically and longs for her mother's care.

THE ACCIDENTAL AND UNEXPECTED EVENT OF WILLA'S LIFE

Willa and her lover, Derek, fly from her college in Illinois to Willa's hometown ten years later, when she is twenty-one. Derek wishes to ask Willa's parents for her hand in marriage. Willa returns home to discover that Elaine has no desire to speak with her. Derek confesses his plans to marry Willa, while the family goes out to dinner. Willa's mother becomes enraged, but Derek refuses to back down. Willa happily declares that she and Derek are engaged, and there is nothing her mother can do about it. Her mother's disapproval is all it takes for Willa to decide to marry Derek and move to California before she graduates. She never completes her degree. But both Willa and Derek live happily without their family support.

Willa is forty-one years old. Sean and Ian, her and Derek's two boys, are considering dropping out of high school. Derek died in a car accident on his way to a party with Willa after aggressively cutting off a terrible driver. Despite the fact that Willa knows Derek is to blame for the collision, she is furious at the other driver. Willa's mother died five years prior, according to the reader. Willa searches down Carl, the driver of the other car in the accident that killed Derek, after Sean has moved out.

RE-BLOSSOMING LIFE WITH BITTERSWEET

At 61, when *Clock Dance* launches into its core, we understand Willa has not necessarily lived an unhappy life, just a bittersweet one; a life tinged with occasional regrets she marries a second partner, Peter a lawyer not for her sexual desire but for her life support. She hurts psychologically when he starts to dominate and intrude her life. When she receives a phone call telling her that her son Sean's ex-girlfriend has been shot and needs her help, Willa drops everything and decides to take care of her, despite her second husband Peter's dismay. It's this decision – made entirely herself, uncolored by the opinions of outsiders – that forces Willa to scrutinize her life, and the people in it, and contemplate change.

CONCLUSION

Willa's abilities, like those of many of Tyler's heroines, are revealed gradually. In her fifties, tiny things indicate the lady she has become. 'She liked to dress properly when she travelled', says her carry-on case for the journey to Baltimore, which is the largest allowed. She can be manipulatively helpless: 'In Willa's experience, marriage was often a matter of dexterity'. Peter insists on accompanying Willa to Baltimore, calling her 'little one'. 'Have you ever travelled by yourself?' She has, but Willa grudgingly accepts for the 'comfort' of being looked after. Her five languages and extensive teaching experience barely register. Arriving in foreign settings, however, forces Willa to reflect on her own and her family's behaviour. Peter clings to his laptop and phone, irritated by Willa's enthusiasm for the new community. Willa is disturbed while having supper with her son in Baltimore when he entertains his girlfriend with a delightfully caustic critique of Peter. She realises that she has spent her entire life apologising for men. When families fall apart, friends and neighbours might step in to help.

Willa's interactions with Cheryl and Denise, as well as their gregarious, quirky neighbours, are detailed and often humorous. Willa forms a bond with Cheryl, a chubby, precocious invention of Tyler. Friends bring gifts and counsel; the truth behind Denise's shooting is exposed; and doctor Ben gives out antibiotics and life advice. Some of this could have been cheesy, but it's humorous and engaging in Tyler's talented hands. Willa lively, creative mother, maddened by saintliness, comes into focus as Ben coaxes her towards a more nuanced perspective on her parents' marriage - 'My wife used to remark that her image of hell would be marrying Gandhi,' he thinks - The 'real' subject of serious literature, according to Canadian novelist Carol Shields, is "not continuing wars or political crises, but the search of an individual for his or her own home."

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