A steady and prolific writer since the 1960s, Anne Tyler has published nineteen novels, over fifty short stories, and an impressive number of book reviews and occasional pieces, all of which have gained popular and critical renown. Noted as a writer of finely crafted fiction which is straightforward and realistic, yet lyrical, Anne Tyler achieves subtle, sometimes somber effects of pathos or comedy through her precise choice of words. Tyler is especially adept at depicting tense family situations that result in lonely, confused members who long for meaning and understanding. Critics point out that she is a representative of a new generation of southern writers. Tyler is compared to such iconic Southern authors as Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor.

Anne Tyler has achieved a record of publications that is little short of extraordinary. Her literary career up to now spans four important decades of American socio-cultural history. Anne Tyler's eleventh novel, Breathing Lessons, received the Pulitzer Prize in 1989 and The Accidental Tourist won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1985 and was turned into a movie starring William Hurt, Kathleen Turner, and Geena Davis, who won an “Academy Award” as best supporting actress. Three of Tyler's works - Breathing Lessons, Saint Maybe, and Back When We Were Grownups—have been adapted for television presentations on the Hallmark Hall of Fame.

All Tyler's novels draw on a family or a family-like community as a context in which to observe how the characters play out their lives and their relations with one another. A Quaker heritage, a mostly Southern childhood, early marriage and motherhood: these are major facts in Anne Tyler's life and primary influences on her work. On the surface, Anne Tyler's novels could be defined as nothing other than a conglomeration of eccentric family members attempting to survive within an eccentric family structure. When one delves deeper though, it is clear that Tyler examines both traditional and non-traditional families and the plights of the individuals within these families. Alice Hall Petry argues that Anne Tyler examines the dynamics of the individual and the family [and] man's inability or unwillingness to communicate (Understanding Anne Tyler, 23). Tyler, who ignores the latest trends in writing, holds a unique place in contemporary American literature. She concentrates on the values of perception and memory in characters who are seldom evil or good,
although occasionally mistaken. She continues to attract readers who enjoy her wit, handling of detail, and compassionate humour.

The plots of her novels are such that subtle variations, realizations, resolutions and readjustments register greater positive impact than a noticeable change or a radical transition from the starting point. Tyler doesn't wait for an inspiration before she begins writing. She makes writing a routine, reviewing a bit of her previous day's work and then starting again, following the characters through the plots. "It's like playing dolls," she believes. "Writing is a sort of way of disobeying two major rules I heard as a child: stop daydreaming and stop staring into space." To Tyler, tapping her imagination "is really an extension of day dreaming. I just sit around thinking What if? about things." The process of writing for Tyler is one of continual discovery. Maggie Moran, the prototype American middle-aged mother in her late forties with adult children queries, "What are we two going to live for, all the rest of our lives?" (Tyler 1988:326). She finds the answer as the novel concludes as she realizes that tomorrow is a new day and her conjugal life would continue in the same spirit of shared love and understanding. Similarly in Saint Maybe Ian, the non-conformist detached participant, realizes, "Tomorrow he would view this in a whole new light" (Tyler 1991:243).

In response to the family's restrictiveness, many of Tyler's characters dream about escape. They yearn for the freedom that they think they will find out on their own in the world. Yet what usually develops in Tyler's novels is a sort of escape/return paradigm. Her characters run away from home but then return later to their original situations. In Tyler's novel, Ladder of Years, Delia Grinstead walks off down the beach to escape her family only to return at the end of the novel, having realized that she was really running away from herself.

Tyler's greatest theme, her constant interest, is the family. Anne Tyler writes believably about the nature of the family in late twentieth century America. Her novels demonstrate the difficulty of maintaining communication and connection in today's modern family. For Tyler, however, family is a contradictory force in any individual's life. Family nurtures individuals, giving them comfort, sustenance, security, a sense of belonging, and, most important of all, love. It is from the family that an individual also gets his or her most basic sense of identity. Because of its closed-in nature, though, family can also be a destructive force in an individual's life, stripping an individual of his or her freedom and restricting the person's outlook, opportunities, and personality to the point of stagnation. That is why, in many of Tyler's novels, individuals often
escape from their families, if only briefly. Nevertheless, most of these same characters eventually return to their families. Despite the scars that family life inflicts, for the most part, even these individuals recognize their need for their families and return. In Searching for Caleb, for example, Caleb Peck pulls off a sixty-three year escape from the restrictive Peck family. At the end of the novel, Caleb does return home briefly. But even as he leaves once more the stamp of the Pecks is indelibly upon him, for he writes the obligatory Peck thank you note. Escaping from family, therefore, is not really possible. Families stamp their members with lifelong marks that neither time nor distance can completely erase.

Tyler frequently explores in her fiction the desire of an individual to belong to a family group, as well as the restrictions that such belonging engenders. Although she most often presents the positive side of family structures, she never sentimentalizes family life. Indeed, some families, such as the Leary’s in The Accidental Tourist, is so tightly knit that members cannot leave.

The purpose of the study to deal with the dynamics of familial relationships; family communication, or the lack of it, as an essential element in her fiction. Family disintegration and reformation are the central focuses of Anne Tyler novels—families change, but the bonds of common humanity endure, no matter what.

The wider scope of the present study is to offer specific analyses of Anne Tyler selected novels—Searching for Caleb, Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, The Accidental Tourist, Breathing Lessons, Saint Maybe and Ladder of Years—with a sense of possibilities that they offer for reading and interpretation. The thesis is in eight chapters. The introductory chapter brings together the literary biography of Anne Tyler. It offers an overview of her writing in order to place the novels discussed in the subsequent chapters in the right context of value and meaning. The chapter also attempts a brief study of the various influences that have shaped her imagination, her art and her credo as a writer and the setting of her novels. Tyler’s books are all rooted firmly, securely, insistently in the real world. That world is of course Baltimore, which in Tyler’s fiction, as indeed in actuality, is both a place and a state of mind. By now Baltimore belongs to Tyler in the same way that Asheville belongs to Thomas Wolfe, Chicago to James T. Farrell, Memphis to Peter Taylor, Albany to William Kennedy; like these writers, she at once gives us the city as it really exists and redefines it through the realm of the imagination. When the protagonist of The Accidental Tourist, Macon Leary, for example, drives along North Charles Street, he is on the map;
when he arrives at Singleton Street, he is in uncharted territory. But there is no question that Singleton Street, though fictitious, is real.

For Tyler, as with Eudora Welty, place is the repository of the characters’ “visible past” while being the stage for the ephemeral present (Welty, “Place in Fiction,” 128-29). Since Tyler’s art has a similar emphasis, it is not surprising that she has been praised for her sense of place—and sometimes defined by it. For example, Sandra Gilbert identifies one of the major attributes of Tyler’s Southernness as her heavy reliance upon the same setting in novel after novel and John Updike has written that “she is at peace in the semi-countrified, semi-plasticized, Northern-Southern America where she and her characters live. Out of this peace flow her unmistakable strengths” (“Loosened Roots” 88). While Tyler’s use of place gives her fiction a solid base of reference and a Southern flavour, it also has a persistent tenuousness which counterpoints, or at least qualifies, the “peace” Updike projects upon her. Undoubtedly, this uncertainty is rooted in Tyler’s own life. Most of Tyler’s novels have been set in Baltimore, Maryland, where she lives. Baltimore’s Roland Park is also one of the places where her characters live, including Macon Leary of The Accidental Tourist, Delia Grinstead from Ladder of Years, and the Peck Family in Searching for Caleb, Muriel Pritchett from The Accidental Tourist, the Tull family in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant and Rebecca Davitch in Back When We Were Grownups reside in Chares Village. The opening scene of Ladder of Years takes place in Roland Park, an epitome of “upper-middle-class wisdom in all its glory”. As Larry McMurty has rightly observed, “indeed in Baltimore all classes appeared to settle in groves of neighbourhood and habit so deep as to render them impervious to everything” (1985:1). “From this dust of custom” Miss Tyler has steadily raised a body of fiction of major dimensions. One of the persistent concerns of her work is the ambiguity of family happiness and unhappiness. Miss Tyler has probed this ambiguity in several of her novels of increasing depth and power, working numerous changes on a consistent set of themes.

The second chapter of the dissertation is a focus on Searching for Caleb addressing the Bedloe’s family. Updike recommended the novel to readers of the New Yorker (29 March 1976) as “a lovely novel, funny and lyrical and true-seeming, exquisite in its details and ambitious in its design,” and he dubbed Anne Tyler as being “wickedly good.” Searching for Caleb marked a turning point in Tyler’s career. It was her first novel to receive national recognition, and its publication coincided with the time when Tyler’s own reviews began to appear in national publications. As
Walter Sullivan commended in 1977, when reviewing Searching for Caleb for the Sewanee Review, Tyler “retained” in her work “a kind of innocence, a sense of wonder at all the crazy things in the world and an abiding affection for her own flaky characters.” Searching for Caleb was also evidence that Tyler had retained her southern literary roots and her delight in huge families and the range of human characters those families produce. Something of a combined family history and detective story, the novel is one of Tyler’s most ambitious works, tracing five generations of one large, dichotomous, and extremely long-lived clan, the Pecks of Baltimore, from the 1880s through 1973. As in her earlier novels The Clock Winder and Celestial Navigation, Tyler shows her strong fascination with urban life, a result perhaps of her own early life in remote areas. She also returns to Roland Park, one of Baltimore’s oldest residential neighborhoods and the main setting of The Clock Winder.

In Searching for Caleb, Anne Tyler emphasizes more consistently and more centrally different kinds of houses. Tyler clearly has a good deal of fun describing the Peck family houses in Roland Park. She explores the background of the Peck family in more detail than the Emersons; the first Peck to make money chose to build in Roland Park because of the respectability of the neighbourhood, and he requires all his children to live in houses right next to him. The area is described as “staid chilly Roland Park with its damp trees and gloomy houses” (148).

In Searching for Caleb, Tyler has created a family who habitually turn inward in a delusion of self-sufficiency. The family in Searching for Caleb covers several generations of the descendants of a Baltimore merchant, Justin Peck. In this novel of broken relationships and unbreakable love, Daniel Peck goes looking, with the help of his granddaughter, Justine, for the half-brother he hasn’t seen in more than half a century. Caleb is found and leaves again. Justine is married to her first cousin Duncan Peck, in their generation the chief run away. The Peck family in Searching for Caleb deals with the progression of the family that is stifled by the inability of its members to interact with each other pragmatically. Like all Tyler’s families, the Pecks live to themselves: For years, the first Peck is shut up inside, immobilized by a stroke. The Pecks are out of the currents of history, a family whom history washes over without touching them, unaware of wars or social changes, stranded in time, anachronisms like their predecessors.

As the title suggests, Searching for Caleb involves a quest for the vanished Caleb, the great-uncle of the novel’s protagonists, the married first cousins Duncan and Justine Peck, and the half brother of their
grandfather, Daniel Peck. Representing one side of the family, Caleb, Justine, and Duncan are outcasts of a sort: talented, imaginative, and free-spirited individuals unable or unwilling to live as typical family rules dictate. Caleb becomes a musician, Justine a fortune-teller, Duncan leads an unsettled life as a mechanic and jack-of-all-trades, foreshadowing Morgan Gower, the hero of Morgan’s Passing. Like Morgan and, later, Barnaby Gaitlin of A Patchwork Planet, Duncan dismayed his family.

The other side of the family, the Pecks of Roland Park, headed by Daniel, are uniformly humourless and restricted. The women, though educated, are unthreatening; the men, all attorneys educated at Johns Hopkins University, drive black Fords and dress in Brooks Brothers suits. They are, above all, clannish, living side by side in similar Roland Park houses. For them, family tradition and training—in effect, the past—are inescapable. Even Daniel’s late-life quest for his half brother evolves from his ties to family and an unsettled conflict. It represents a delayed response to the question frequently asked in his childhood: “Daniel, have you seen Caleb?” Searching for Caleb, like Tyler’s earlier novels, also illustrates the author’s belief in the need for human adaptability, tolerance, and love. Justine epitomizes this philosophy. She weathered a dark and uncertain childhood with a depressive mother, frequent moves with her restless husband, the death of both parents and her grandfather, and the loss of her one daughter, who married a milquetoast minister, yet Justine remained spirited and continued to love her family, embracing change more than stability. She insists on visiting Roland Park, a longing Duncan cannot understand, and she is committed to finding Caleb, not only out of a love of travel and adventure but also to share the experiences with her grandfather and to find her own roots. With its focus on community and family and its delineation of the impacts on the present of the unsettled conflicts of the past, Searching for Caleb indicates Tyler’s own roots in the family of southern literature.

Chapter three deals with her most successful novel, Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant. As John Updike has rightly put it “with Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant Tyler had reached a new level of power, giving us a lucid and delightful, yet complex and somber improvisation on her favourite theme, family life.” One of the principal strengths of Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant is that it is told from so many different points of view, so effectively. The setting for Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant predominantly takes place in Baltimore, Maryland. The time frame of the novel covers roughly fifty-five years, from the middle 1920s—the time of Pearl’s marriage—to 1979, the year of her death. Each chapter is told from
the perspective of a different family member of the Tull family; the character speaking, whether Cody Tull or Jenny Tull, uncovers memories they have of the past, and how the events they were part of led to the type of person they became. Each chapter reveals some interesting event that further explains the conflicts between the members of the Tull family. The point of view that the chapter is told in is a reflection of the character whose life is most affected by events or secrets that unfold in the chapter. As a result of the alternating narration, the reader is able to understand the main characters better and the events that spur the family's conflicts.

Throughout Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, each character tries to construct a family for him or herself, the original families being, as are many families, profoundly unsatisfying to its members. This reconstruction is not just a way of escaping from reality; the functionality of the various family structures becomes what is valuable and sustaining to each member. It is this ability to creatively imagine a family, to give voice to their particular visions of the family, and not to submit to an artificially imposed family structure, which empowers the characters (Caren J. Town, 1992:14). Unless they can create fictional ideal families and tell others about them, Tyler seems to be saying, her characters cannot escape either the psychological restrictions of their personal family or the ideological restrictions of the traditional patriarchal family.

Of all Tyler's novels, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* most inspires comparison with the work of Flannery O'Connor. The title is reminiscent of O'Connor's wit and irony, and the mood of the novel, as one reviewer noted, is that of "O'Connor's Gothic South," with its "sullen, psychic menace." At her best, as in *Celestial Navigation*, Tyler captures the pain, anxiety, and isolation beneath the surface of ordinary lives. *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, representing what John Updike called a "darkening" of Tyler's art, presents the other side of the coin from Morgan's *Passing*, not only in mood but also in storyline. Its focus is not the husband who abandons his family to find a new life but the family he leaves behind. It is a stunning psychological portrait of the Tulls, Pearl and her three children, and the anger, guilt, hurt, and anxiety they feel growing up in an uncertain world without a father. All carry their pain through life, illustrating more profoundly than any of Tyler's earlier books the past's haunting influence on the present.

Covering thirty-five years and three generations of Tulls, the novel opens with Pearl on her deathbed. This first chapter, reminiscent of Katherine Anne Porter's short story "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall"
(1930), depicts Pearl as a stoic, frightened woman who has weathered a youth filled with dread of being an old maid, a quick marriage, and a lonely struggle to rear three “flawed” children: Cody, the oldest boy, a troublemaker from childhood, “prone to unreasonable rages”; Jenny, the only girl, “flippant” and “opaque”; and Ezra, his mother’s favourite, a gentle man who has not “lived up to his potential” but instead has become the ambitionless owner of the Homesick Restaurant. Not one of Pearl’s children has turned out as she wished. Consequently, she, like other Tyler characters, feels “closed off” from her family, the very children to whom she has devoted her life. Later chapters reveal why, focusing on each of the children in turn and tracing the evolution of their lives as well as their fear of their mother’s rages. All, like their mother, end up in some way “destroyed by love.”

Tyler’s compassionate portrayal of her characters and her distinctive humour help to mitigate the darkness of this novel. Although Pearl, her forehead permanently creased from worry, verbally and physically abuses her children, Tyler lets the reader understand the reasons for Pearl’s behaviour, even though one may not forgive her, and shows a far mellower Pearl in old age. Jenny, after struggling through medical school, two marriages, and a nervous breakdown, is nursed back to health by her mother. Cody spares no expense in caring for his family, even though he is unable to forgive Pearl for mistreating him as a child. The teenager Cody plays cruel but funny tricks on his brother Ezra—partly out of resentment at Ezra’s being the favourite, but also because of Cody’s own pain and sense of rejection. Taking slats from Ezra’s bed, Cody strews the floor with pornographic magazines so Pearl will think Ezra the kind of disappointment she finds Cody to be. Later, after stealing Ezra’s sweetheart, Cody recognizes not only his guilt but also his love for his brother. These tales fill in the dark psychological portrait Tyler draws, making Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, like many of Tyler’s earlier books, a confirmation of life’s difficulties as well as of the value of love.

Tyler tells the story of the Tull family and how finally come together in a delicate but perhaps lasting harmony. By focusing on different pieces of the past Tyler enable her characters to perceive realities of themselves and each other. By showing these different perspectives, she illustrates a fundamental truth inherent in most families: although children grow up together in the same household, they have very different experiences within the family. Although they are exposed to much of the same family history, dynamics, and conflicts, they are shaped differently by these influences. Cody, Ezra, Jenny Tull certainly prove this to be true.
The pieces of the past they chose to remember are like parts of a torn photograph. However, Tyler fits these pieces together to create a unified but complex portrait of individuals who are torn apart by the past and alienated by conflict, but who are a family nevertheless. Through the Tull family, Tyler shows that while families can be a source of anguish and pain, they also can provide a touchstone for remembering common past and for finding a sense of place, belonging, and ultimately, oneself.

The fourth chapter deals with Tyler’s *The Accidental Tourist*. A heart breaking and exhilarating book, *The Accidental Tourist* is preoccupied with questions of family, as indeed all of Tyler’s fiction, but there is not an ounce of sentimentality to be found in what it says about how families stick together or fall apart. The protagonist of the novel, Macon Leary, by no means wealthy, belongs to that part of Baltimore, north of downtown where houses are detached, have yards, are shaded by trees; this is the world in which he grew up and in which until quite recently he lived all his life. But now, at the age of 43, he is finding that world come apart on him. A year ago something unspeakably awful happened; his 12-year-old son, Ethan, off at summer camp, was murdered in a fast-food restaurant.

Critic Jessica Sitton recognizes in *The Accidental Tourist*, “the signature element” of all Tyler’s work: “lovingly drawn, eccentric characters who come into conflict with themselves and each other as they either slip or jostle their way through life, simultaneously nurtured and stifled by their families and their past” (“Anne Tyler” 320).

*The Accidental Tourist* is the title not only of Anne Tyler’s new novel but also of a series of guide books for business travelers written by the book’s hero, Macon Leary. These guides enable his readers to deny the difference of other places by reproducing the patterns of their lives at home. Not long after we meet him, Macon is left to himself. Sarah, his wife of twenty years, leaves him. Macon and Sarah have had a tragedy: the death of his son Ethan an accidental byproduct of a holdup. Though Macon is as grieved by this loss as Sarah, he is, as she points out, "not a comfort." With the ballast of his marriage removed, Macon immediately tips into serious eccentricity. His little systems multiply, and his remaining companions, a Welsh corgi named Edward and a cat named Helen, fail to adapt to them. Eventually the systems overwhelm Macon himself, causing him to break a leg. Not long after, he finds himself where almost all of Miss Tyler's characters end up sooner or later—back in the grandparental seat. There he is tended to by his sister. His brothers, Porter and Charles, both divorced, are also there, repeating, like Macon, a
motion that seems all but inevitable in Anne Tyler’s fiction—a return to the sibling unit.

Muriel, a dog trainer steps into the picture when Macon’s dog, Edward seems to have a nervous breakdown. Muriel is not only younger, but Macon’s opposite in almost every way: brash, embarrassingly predictable, full of life, fun and energy, where he is solemn, withdrawn and such a bizarre creature of routine that he is barely alive. It is Muriel who brings Macon back to life; it is at her house on Singleton Street, a place he learns to find without direction, that he is brought to be a self he would rather be. When Sarah reappears in Macon’s life, suggesting reconciliation, the plot resolves itself into a comfortable triangle, with Macon torn between Sarah’s comfortable but paralyzing domesticity and the much more uncertain but adventurous possibilities that Muriel offers.

Told from a limited third-person point of view, The Accidental Tourist displays Tyler’s art at its best: her eye for idiosyncratic behaviour and the accidental quality of reality, as well as her focus on family as the centre of life’s triumphs and tragedies. The family here is not only Macon and Sarah but also Macon’s siblings, all marred somewhat by their mother’s carefree abandonment of them. Both Charles and Porter are divorced, and Rose maintains her grandparents’ home for her brothers. What is striking about the house is its orderliness—every item in the kitchen is shelved in alphabetical order—and its changelessness. The characteristics of families, Tyler suggests, are permanently etched; only the occurrences of life constantly shift.

Chapter five dealing with Anne Tyler’s prize-winning novel, Breathing Lessons, explores the joys and tribulations of marriage as Maggie and Ira travel from Baltimore to a funeral in Pennsylvania and home again in one day. In The Accidental Tourist, Tyler depicts the dissolution of a twenty-year marriage following the violent death of the Learys’ son. In Breathing Lessons, she presents the opposite: the duration of Ira and Maggie Moran’s marriage for twenty-eight years despite challenges. Told primarily through flashbacks as the couple journeys to the funeral of a friend, the novel covers nearly thirty years in one September day and contrasts the Morans’ courtship and marriage with the relationship of their son, Jesse, and his former wife, Fiona. From its beginning, Breathing Lessons concerns not only Ira and Maggie’s bickering love, and tolerance for each other but also Maggie’s struggle to reconcile Jesse and Fiona.

Set in Pennsylvania and Baltimore, the novel has three principal divisions, each told from a restricted third-person point of view. The first
and third sections focus on Maggie’s consciousness, while the middle section, which constitutes something of an interlude, centres on Ira’s thoughts. The first section wittily depicts the music and mores of the 1950’s. The second part delineates a side trip in which Ira and Maggie temporarily become concerned with an elderly black man who has separated from his wife of more than fifty years. This section also provides Ira’s family history and his response to his wife and children. Tyler reveals here a masterful handling of exposition through internal thought sequences and flashbacks. The novel’s third section, which introduces the characters of Fiona and Leroy, Jesse and Fiona’s daughter, returns to Maggie’s thoughts and her memories of Jesse and Fiona’s relationship. A return to Baltimore with Fiona and Leroy completes the section, suggesting the cyclical nature of experience, a central theme in the novel.

In *Breathing Lessons*, Tyler continues to balance a lighthearted view of human nature with a depth of insight into the darker side of marriage. Maggie and Ira’s marriage, while offering a sound balance of two contrasting personality types who can bicker and then reconcile, has its dark side also: a “helpless, angry, confined feeling” that Maggie experiences “from time to time.” Ira, too, realizes that marriage involves “the same old arguments, the same old resentments dragged up year after year.” The joyful side of Tyler’s fiction is her fondness for zany characters, her keen eye for the bizarre in human behaviour, which she observes with amused detachment, and her finely tuned ear for human speech. Maggie herself belongs to a long line of lively, unpredictable Tyler heroines—most of whom are expert caretakers—beginning with Granny Hawkes in *If Morning Ever Comes*. In fact, in both her acute observations of others and her repeated attempts “to alter people’s lives,” Maggie resembles her creator, the fiction writer who manipulates the lives of her characters to fill her plot.

Although Tyler’s narrative gives us an overview of a long marriage, the actual action of the story takes place in the course of one day. Tyler manages to convey the depth and length of her characters’ lives via the use of numerous literary techniques, including the flashback. This device allows Tyler to disrupt the chronology of the day with episodes of reminiscence on the parts of Maggie or Ira.

*Saint Maybe*, dealt with in *chapter six*, 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. In this novel, 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.

The myth of the perfect family is 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." This family of likable eccentrics lives, of course, in Baltimore, and to outside eyes, it comes across as the neighbourhood's "version of the ideal, apple-pie household: two amiable parents, three good-looking children, a dog, a cat, a scattering of goldfish." Claudia, the oldest of the children, has recently married and started a family of her own. Danny has just announced his engagement to a pretty young woman named Lucy. And Ian, the youngest, has "crowds of loyal friends" and "the prettiest girl in the junior class" as his sweetheart. "There was this about the Bedloes," writes Ms. Tyler: "They believed that every part of their lives was absolutely wonderful. It wasn't just an act, either. They really did believe it. Or at least Ian's mother did, and she was the one who set the tone. Her marriage was a great joy to her, her house made her happy every time she walked into it, and her children were attractive and kind and universally liked."

Yet as in such earlier Tyler novels as The Tin Can Tree and The Accidental Tourist the placid course of everyday life is brutally interrupted by a violent death that will reverberate through all the characters' lives: when Ian tells Danny that he suspects Danny's wife of infidelity, Danny drives his car headlong into a stone wall, killing himself instantly. It's not long before a distraught Lucy sinks into a pill-induced stupor; one day she takes an overdose and never wakes up. Her two children from a former marriage and her infant daughter are suddenly left without parents or a home.

Ian, of course, feels enormous guilt over these events. If he hadn't said anything to Danny, he thinks, Danny might still be alive, Lucy would not have overdosed, and their children would have had normal, happy lives. He tries to help his aging, frail parents take care of the youngsters -- all three of them, Agatha, Thomas and baby Daphne seem to adore him—but finds himself feeling increasingly irritated and bored, stuck on a treadmill "with these querulous children night after night after night." Then one day, depressed and repentant, Ian wanders into a service at the Church of the Second Chance, a church that preaches "concrete, practical reparation" as a means toward salvation. The minister, a prissy man
known as Reverend Emmett, listens to Ian's story and tells him he must begin his repentance by taking care of Danny's children. Ian promptly drops out of school and decides, like so many earlier Tyler characters, to move back to his parents home for good. Soon he has fashioned an abstemious new existence for himself: he takes a job as a cabinet-maker's assistant, becomes a devout member of the Church of the Second Chance and spends all his free time bringing up Agatha, Thomas and Daphne. He renounces liquor, sex and sugar (regarded as a self-indulgence by Reverend Emmett) and proselytizes about the church to anyone who will listen. As the children grow up, Ian finds himself torn between a martyr-like devotion to his family and vague yearnings for freedom, between the safety of routine and the dangerous intrigues of the outside world. Gradually he is forced to reassess the direction and stalled velocity of his own life.

Moving back and forth among the points of view of various characters, Ms. Tyler traces two decades in the lives of the Bedloes, showing us the large and small events that shape family members' lives and the almost imperceptible ways in which feelings of familial love and obligation mutate over the years. Ian was clearly a more interesting character before his feelings of guilt were muffled by prayer and self-abnegation, and his career as a pseudo saint is described in somewhat cliché'd terms. The conflict he feels is between self-sacrifice and independence—the tension in American life between community and freedom, familial responsibility and autonomous self-definition. Indeed, this is a dialectic that every member of the Bedloe family must come to terms with by the end of the novel.

Each character in Saint Maybe has been fully rendered, fleshed out with a palpable interior life, and each has been fit, like a hand-sawed jigsaw-puzzle piece, into the matrix of family life. The result is a warm and generous novel, a novel that attests once again to Ms. Tyler's enormous gifts as a writer and her innate understanding of the mysteries of kinship and blood.

Ladder of Years, dealt with in the seventh chapter, tells the story of forty-year-old Cordelia Grinstead's circular flight from her upper-middle-class life in Baltimore. Until she simply walks away from her husband and teenage children during a vacation, Delia has never left home. Having passively married her father's assistant, who chose her as a helpmate in assuming the family medical practice, Delia lives her married life in her girlhood home, where she suffocates under the weight of domesticity. Her presence is defined by the demands of the family she
nurtures, yet her children’s increasing self-sufficiency threatens her with obsolescence. Fleeing home, Delia embarks on a journey toward self-discovery, a quest reminiscent of Charlotte Emory’s in *Earthly Possessions*. She initially revels in her spare new existence in a small Maryland town, but, like others among Tyler’s would-be renegades from the hearth, she finds that her caregiver’s habits of heart and mind reassert themselves. Realizing that she has re-created the very role she believed she had shed, Delia embraces her identity as a nurturer and returns home, aware finally of her family’s genuine, though unvoiced, appreciation.

Estimating the value of Tyler’s contribution to contemporary times, the last chapter of this thesis offers an overview of her thematic concerns in as much as they offer a scale of values and a view of life.

Critics view Tyler as one of America’s most talented novelists. They praise her wit, her deft use of detail, and her understated, seamless prose. While some reviewers complain that her characters are implausible, even bizarre, others assert that she presents them with such compassion that their oddities become simply human. Many commentators point out the connection between tragedy and comedy in Tyler’s fiction, and they commend her talent at depicting both. However, some critics deride the lack of a moral dimension as well as historical and social context in Tyler’s novels. Many reviewers have underscored the role of family in her work and have examined her depiction of dysfunctional parent-child and husband-wife relationships. Feminist critics have investigated Tyler’s portrayal of changing gender roles in the American family in her fiction; some have censured her for ignoring the progress women have made since the feminist movement began and for falling back on traditional gender expectations. As her works began to receive nominations for major literary awards, however, Tyler came under more intense scrutiny from critics, some of whom argued that she too glibly mixed comedy with seriousness. After *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, though, few critics would deny her importance in contemporary fiction.

Anne Tyler’s work is important for through her fictive world she emphasizes the need for a sense of harmony absent in the fragmented lives of her intrinsically good, average characters belonging primarily to the middle middle-class. This need is what her protagonists feel and this urge for accommodation and harmony can be identified as a positive step towards a more integrated self and society. Her domestic-psychological novels are primarily patterned exposures of some of the common complexities that oppress post-modern American society. The conflicts Tyler identifies are graphically represented on a personal level but have
wider, impersonal implications. Her focus of attention is the average middle-class American family and its members, but simultaneously the focus is on the American social culture that such families typify.

In her nineteen novels, published between 1964 and 2012, Tyler has created a cast of memorable characters rife with weaknesses common to the human race. But she is not just a weaver of tales full of quirky characters. Her novels transcend the ordinary plots and characters found in so many popular writers’ works, and in her humour we see more than comic situations designed merely to make us laugh. Tyler’s humour accomplishes what George Meredith specifies as the goal of true comedy: it awakens “thoughtful laughter,” forcing us to take a closer look at ourselves and our relationships with others.

Tyler’s own description of her writing as a "blend of laughter and tears" seems especially appropriate, as tragedy and comedy are indisputably linked in her stories. She also comments: "I can’t think of any tragic situation in real life that hasn’t shown a glimmer of comedy too," and Louis D. Rubin, Jr. remarks in his study, The Comic Imagination in American Literature, that the "American literary imagination has from its earliest days been at least as much comic in nature as tragic" (Bennet, 1995:58). Tyler treats every one—character and reader alike—as family, as those who have been “born into situations”: the mode of interaction is familial humour, which provides a connection among even disparate family members.

Like Faulkner and McCullers, Tyler demonstrates how the past is inextricably linked to the present and how family and community as a natural extension of the family, are centres for the ironies of life—love and rejection, growth and entrapment, stability and comfort. Tyler resists the temptation to indict parents, particularly mothers, for the transgression of the past and for the ultimate shaping of offspring. Maternal ambivalence is a not uncommon thread in the fabric of human experience. However, as Tyler knows, it is just one factor in the development of the individual. Family and community also exert important influences that shape, direct, and complicate human existence.

Tyler has established a network of appealing characters, she looks on her characters as if they were next door neighbours she cherished. Ordinary life. Ordinary people. Tyler has a way of portraying them at their best—and worst. She shows people with basic human faults, struggling to endure in a sometimes unfair, sometimes insane world, attempting to work out the problems in relationships and communication. However bizarre or eccentric readers sometimes find her characters,
Tyler knows that ordinary people often have within them unique characteristics that set them apart from other “ordinary” people. Most of all, Tyler likes her characters. “I like to think”, she has written, “that I might meet up with one of my past characters at the very next street corner. The odd thing is, sometimes I have. And if I were remotely religious I’d believe that a little gathering of my characters would be waiting for me in heaven when I died then ‘what happened’? I’d ask them. ‘How have things worked out, since the last time I saw you?’”. To Anne Tyler, “a serious book is one that removes me to another life as I am reading it. It has to have layers and layers and layers, like life does.” Judged by her own definition, she is a serious writer. As she continues to put her thoughts into books, her characters will continue to “shine through” giving her readers, as well as herself, chances to lead other lives.