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### Matriarch Roles in *The Accidental Tourist*

Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist* explores themes of relationship dynamics through the character of Macon Leary and his relationships with both his ex-wife Sarah and his new love interest Muriel Pritchett. Macon is the standard masculine father figure preset in depictions of the nuclear family except for his fatal flaw of being anxious. He displays excessive behavior meant to extricate himself from associating with the wider world after the murder of his son Ethan. This eventually leads to his divorce from Sarah. In a misadventure with his Welsh corgi Edward, Macon meets Muriel, who discreetly forces her way into his life. Much of Macon's personality is crafted and amended by the interactions he has with the women in his life. Tyler's novel illustrates the impact of conflict between gender role perceptions, mental illness, grief, and trauma.

Macon's mother Alicia is the foundation upon which the anxious nature of the Leary children is built. She is far from the traditional depiction of motherhood, as she is a partier, goes out with numerous men, and disparages her children from time to time for what she perceives as stiffness and criticism rather than their desire for stability (Tyler 59-61). Macon and his siblings grow up to have a strong bond, but also an absurd sense of order and stability. Parental neglect, especially that of the mother, has been shown in studies to be linked to generalized anxiety disorders in children. These disorders tend to carry over into adulthood. Macon and his siblings

exhibit tell-tale signs of childhood maltreatment in that they are unreasonably critical of others and of themselves to the point that their patterns of behavior are recognized by others in the story as being odd (Fitzgerald & Gallus 2). Thanks to Alicia, Macon becomes a firm believer that “life was so full of things you couldn’t do anything about; you had to avert what you could” (Tyler 15). This would carry over into his personal life and be affected by the grieving process after the death of his son.

All of the Leary men have trouble in their relationships. When Macon meets Sarah, he withholds his emotions for her. In their young adult years, Macon “felt a constant hollowness” at being apart from Sarah, but rather than return her affections in her letter, he preferred to remain vague and detached. As Tyler writes “She signed her letter *I love you* and he signed his *Fondly*” (47). Macon attributes his distance to a social necessity, lamenting that this impassive front is necessary in order to get Sarah to love him. However, it works against him, as this lack of expressiveness after their son’s murder is what breaks them apart. While Sarah does not appear to adhere to the traditional gender role of wife in a marriage, Macon feels that he must: he is handy, stoic, withdrawn, and focused. The establishment of gender roles in a marriage can be deleterious if the woman defies the concept of the gender role but continues to expect the role to be performed by her husband, leading to dissatisfaction within the marriage and, eventually, divorce (Casad et al. 121-122). Sarah is the comforter of the marriage, as it is to her that Macon brings his issues near the beginning of the book (Alias & Taher 24). Sarah permits this up until Ethan’s death, in which she turns to Macon for a break in this usual behavior and becomes appalled by his failure to emote. She instead uses him as a mental goalpost for her own slipping grasp of how to perceive the world (Tyler 20, 127). To Macon, though, she becomes a symbol of familiarity and expectation, just another predictable individual who accepted even the flaws that

inhibited them both. She is his safe haven from Muriel, who threatens him with her unpredictability and implications of change. During their final fight, Sarah preys upon Macon's insecurities one last time by addressing potential perceptions of Macon's relationship with Muriel and how he would be judged for being with her, but by this time, Muriel's influence has taken hold, and Macon makes his decision (327).

Muriel Pritchett is the catalyst for Macon's observation of his behavior and insight into the potential that can come from stepping out of his fears. She enters his life by way of offering her services as a dog-trainer and becomes not only a fixture but a pillar. In her essay "Redeemed by Muriel," Frances Donnelly remarks that "it is a daring and playful act on the part of Anne Tyler to offer us a heroine as challenging as Muriel" (29). She is skinny, young, flashy, talkative, and dramatic. At twenty-five years old, she is also the single mother of a seven-year-old boy who is allergic to almost everything. In dealing with her previous marriage and subsequent messy divorce and her son's illness, Muriel has had no time to consider nor adhere to gender expectations of the time. She is direct, offering long anecdotes and opinions, most of which appear to be unprompted and meant to fill space during their dog training lessons. Most importantly, she understands Macon's pain deep down and empathizes with it. Muriel has a number of insecurities, from the natural change in the color of her hair from bright blond to black and change in the color of her eyes to her parents' attention having shifted from her to her younger sister Claire. Muriel is also finding methods to survive, though in a more logical and efficient way than Macon. Though he balks at her behavior at several points and even commands her to stay away from him after a notably concerning training session with Edward, he is drawn to her because of her strength and independence (Alias & Taher 31). It is she, rather than Sarah, that Macon calls to talk him out of his panic attack in the restaurant (Tyler 149-150); Muriel is

able to calm him again when he is in the midst of another panic attack when pondering her dinner invitation (182). Muriel leads by example, taking the lead and pulling Macon out of his comfort zone. Even when Macon returns to Sarah, it is Muriel that he credits for his transformation into the functional human being he is at the end of the book, and it is with Muriel that he chooses to stay.

Macon is truly the accidental tourist of the book. He finds himself inadvertently being taken from the comfort and safety of his own familiar fears and behaviors and into a new, fearless territory that, coincidentally, does not seem so alien. Merna Thaer Alias and Isra Hashim Taher in their “The Father Figure in Anne Tyler’s *The Accidental Tourist*” affirm that “the changes that occur to Tyler’s male characters are usually made through the women they meet in their life” and that “these women alter their view about life by showing them what they have been missing” (23-24). We see the foundation for change laid in Sarah’s dependence and criticism, but the real change does not occur until the advent of Muriel. Although Macon finds familiarity in the acquiescence of Sarah, he finds value and empowerment through the proximity to Muriel. Because of her position as a single mother and her experiences, she developed a drive to keep going that he needed and the empathy to help him achieve that even with her own circumstances. She taught him to reconcile with and to acknowledge the possibility of chaos even in the best of plans, allowing the book to end on a hopeful note.

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