



## Melancholia: A study on Anne Tyler's 'Breathing Lessons'

**Viswapriya P G**

Ph.D Research Scholar, Dr M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute, Chennai.

**Dr V Karpagavadivu**

Research Supervisor, Assoc.Prof., Deputy HOD(Admin)

Department of English

Dr M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute, Chennai.

### Abstract:

Anne Tyler's *Breathing Lessons* is a moving examination of the human condition in the large field of American literature, where the intricacy of interpersonal connections and human emotions frequently take center stage. First published in 1988, *Breathing Lessons* delves deeply into marriage, grief, personal regret, and the inevitable passage of time, with a focus on the subtle melancholy that penetrates daily existence. Tyler's ability to catch the subtleties of daily life sets her storytelling method apart, making her representation of emotional struggles particularly poignant.

Melancholy has been extensively studied as a literary theme in American Literature and as a psychological state. It is commonly used to emphasize feelings of longing, existential skepticism, and a search for meaning in the midst of everyday routine. The protagonists of *Breathing Lessons*, who battle their own forms of inner anguish, unspoken regrets, and an awareness of how fleeting life is, provide a fantastic example of this issue. The narrative should be viewed through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, particularly the ideas of repression and the unconscious, to examine how unresolved grief and past experiences continue to influence the present.

This paper seeks to explore *Breathing Lessons* through the lens of melancholia, highlighting how Anne Tyler uses the theme to probe deeper questions of identity, relationships, and emotional resilience in the context of American society. It examines Tyler's portrayal of melancholia not only contributes to the development of her characters but also serves as a broader commentary on the complexities of modern life in America.

**Keywords:** Nostalgia, Memory, Regret, Emotional dissonance

### Introduction

American literature has long been preoccupied with themes of nostalgia, regret, and the unconscious, reflecting the nation's evolving identity and the complexities of personal memory.



From the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and F. Scott Fitzgerald to contemporary authors like Anne Tyler, American writers have explored how individuals reconstruct the past, struggle with lost opportunities, and navigate the hidden forces shaping their actions. Nostalgia often appears as a double-edged sword both a source of comfort and a means of self-deception, while regret serves as a psychological burden that influences present choices. The unconscious, a concept deeply rooted in psychoanalytic theory, operates beneath the surface, driving behaviour and shaping human relationships in profound ways.

In keeping with the literary tradition, Anne Tyler's 1988 book *Breathing Lessons* provides a sophisticated examination of the subjects via the narrative of Maggie and Ira Moran. The story, which takes place over the course of a single day, shows how regret and nostalgia affect the individuals' perceptions of their lives and disclose the underlying forces behind their behavior. Ira's silent despair contrasts with Maggie's unwavering optimism and determination to "fix" the past, demonstrating how memory and longing warp reality. *Breathing Lessons* carries on the American literary tradition of exploring how the past lingers, influencing identity, relationships, and the pursuit of meaning via Tyler's personal and psychologically complex storytelling.

The book is a very introspective work that examines the complex ways in which regret, nostalgia, and the unconscious shape interpersonal relationships and one's own sense of self. The drama, which takes place over the course of one day, centers on middle-aged couple Maggie and Ira Moran, whose trip to a funeral turns into a contemplative examination of their past. Throughout the book, nostalgia shows itself as a strong yet dishonest force that shapes Maggie's propensity to romanticize the past and look for second chances, especially in her son Jesse's life. She clings to an idealized version of events rather than embracing reality, which is indicative of her unconscious attempt to rewrite history through selective memory. Ira, on the other hand, hides his disappointments behind a façade of practicality and represents placid resignation.

Regret plays a crucial role in the novel, manifesting through the characters differing responses to their disappointments in marriage, parenthood, and life choices. While Maggie's impulsive efforts to fix the past stem from an unconscious guilt and desire for redemption, Ira's restraint hints at his suppressed longing for an alternate path. Tyler subtly employs psychoanalytic elements to illustrate how deeply embedded emotions influence behaviour, revealing the ways in which nostalgia and regret intertwine with the unconscious. By examining the hidden forces that shape memory and decision-making, *Breathing Lessons* offers a poignant meditation on the complexities of human relationships and the enduring impact of the past.

Many critics think that the preservation of family harmony is the responsibility of Southern women writers. In her discussion of literature in general and Anne Tyler's and many other



female authors' works in particular, Susan Gilbert highlights the idea that women writers bear the burden as well. In the introduction of her book *Southern Women*, author and critic Doris Betts highlights that women authors are currently improving their depictions of male characters more quickly than male novelists. Durham (1998, 143–144)

The 1988 book *Breathing Lessons* offers a moving analysis of nostalgia and its significant influence on interpersonal interactions and behavior. In order to deal with the disappointments of the present, the characters in the book—especially Maggie Moran—cling to an idealized past. As it illustrates how the desire for a better past may mold identity, encourage self-deception, and affect interpersonal relationships, Tyler's portrayal of nostalgia is both consoling and troubling.

Nostalgia serves as a psychological refuge from the disappointments of her present life. Her marriage to Ira, while stable, is marked by emotional distance and unfulfilled dreams. By focusing on idealized memories, Maggie shields herself from the dissatisfaction she feels in her current reality. Her yearning to "fix" her son Jesse's failed marriage with Fiona reflects a deeper desire to reclaim a happier version of the past. Through these attempts, Maggie reveals an unconscious belief that revisiting and revising the past can alleviate present regrets. This longing for what once was or what could have been becomes a defining aspect of her character's motivations throughout the novel.

Ignoring the imperfections and conflicts that occurred, Maggie presents an idealized picture of her early marriage and her relationships with Jesse and Fiona. She is able to hold onto optimism that damaged relationships can be repaired because of the selective reconstruction. But because of her romanticized recollections, she frequently misinterprets reality, which makes her attempts to change other people's lives more difficult. Maggie, for instance, thinks that if Jesse and Fiona could just recollect their previous love, their marriage could be saved. Her idealized perception of the past and her unspoken rejection of the difficulties that caused their split are reflected in this belief.

Maggie is the primary subject of the book. Maggie tries to get back in touch with her granddaughter, whom she hasn't seen in years, following Jesse and Fiona's divorce and separation. Restoring the bond between Jesse and his wife Fiona is part of Maggie's strategy in order to connect with her granddaughter. This is the primary motivation behind the action in the book, and it keeps going along the plot of Maggie and Ira's relationship. Ira is serious and unyielding, whereas Maggie is sentimental. Bail (1998, 135–136)



From a psychoanalytic perspective, nostalgia in *Breathing Lessons* represents an unconscious attempt to resolve feelings of loss and regret. Maggie's longing to recreate the past is driven by repressed guilt particularly regarding her perceived failures as a mother and wife. Her constant need to "fix" situations reveals a deeper psychological desire to repair these perceived failures. Ira, on the other hand, suppresses his regrets beneath a facade of stoicism, representing a different form of unconscious coping. Tyler's portrayal of these psychological dynamics suggests that nostalgia is not merely a sentimental longing but a complex emotional response to unresolved conflicts and unmet desires.

The main argument of this paper is that nostalgia is a reflection of everyone's search for significance in the passing of time. In spite of the setbacks of middle age, Maggie's desire for the past is a reflection of her attempt to understand the course of her life and maintain a sense of purpose. Maggie uses nostalgia as a framework to make sense of her experiences and hold onto optimism, despite the difficulties it presents. In the end, Tyler's complex depiction of nostalgia shows how it may have both reassuring and upsetting psychological repercussions. On a deeper level, the novel reveals how nostalgia can serve as a coping mechanism. For Maggie, it allows her to momentarily escape her dissatisfaction with her marriage, her aging, and her son's disappointing life choices. Rather than confronting the present, she retreats into the comforting idea that the past holds the key to future happiness. This aligns with a broader psychological view of nostalgia not simply as a longing for the past but as a subconscious strategy to deal with present anxieties.

Tyler portrays nostalgia as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it fosters hope and keeps Maggie emotionally invested in her family's future. On the other hand, it blinds her to reality, preventing her from truly accepting the present. Ira's contrasting attitude suggests that nostalgia must be tempered with realism, or it risks becoming an unhealthy fixation.

The characters' choices, relationships, and self-perceptions are actively shaped by this feeling, which is not passive. Tyler skillfully demonstrates how the past—whether romanticized or resented—continues to have a significant impact on the present, making it difficult to distinguish between fact, longing, and memory. Nostalgia is not only a passive yearning for the past throughout the book; rather, it is an active force that influences Maggie's thoughts, choices, and emotional conflicts. She romanticizes the past, especially her son Jesse's short marriage to Fiona, and thinks she can change history and improve the present by going back and reliving these memories. But nostalgia is a two-edged sword in the book; although it offers hope, it also keeps readers from accepting reality as it is. The novel's ending is a poignant moment of reckoning. After their exhausting journey, Maggie and Ira return home, and despite all the emotional turbulence of the day, they find themselves falling back into their old routines. Instead of a dramatic transformation, there is a quiet, almost



resigned acceptance of life as it is. Maggie, despite her setbacks, still clings to the belief that things might change, that another opportunity to "fix" things will arise.

Tyler implies that although nostalgia can be consoling, it also keeps people stuck in cycles of disappointment and longing by connecting it to the book's ending. Maggie's struggle to completely let go of the past serves as a reminder that, despite its warmth, nostalgia can stand in the way of true acceptance and growth. Thus, the conclusion reaffirms one of the main points of the book: that no matter how much one wishes for the past, life goes on, and that the only way to find true peace is to learn to accept imperfection rather than attempt to change the past. (Zhang, Qi 2002 (65-80)).

The novel masterfully explores how nostalgia shapes and strains the marriage of Maggie and Ira Moran. Their contrasting attitudes toward the past reflect deeper emotional and psychological differences, influencing the way they communicate, handle disappointments, and navigate their long-term relationship. While nostalgia fuels Maggie's hope and need for intervention, Ira's resistance to nostalgia leads him to embrace a more passive, resigned approach to life. The tension between these perspectives defines much of their marital dynamic, creating both moments of conflict and, paradoxically, a sense of enduring stability.

The tendency frustrates Ira, who views Maggie's nostalgia as unrealistic and even harmful. He recognizes the futility of her efforts and grows impatient with her refusal to accept reality. Throughout the novel, their conversations reveal this fundamental rift: Maggie speaks in hopeful what-ifs, while Ira counters with pragmatic truths. His frustration with her is not just about her nostalgic tendencies but also about how they represent a deeper refusal to acknowledge the imperfections of their life together.

Ira, on the other hand, has avoided nostalgia all his life. He avoids thinking about the past since doing so would force him to face his own regrets, especially the constraints of his marriage and his unfulfilled goals. His hesitancy to engage in nostalgia is a self-defense mechanism as well as a personality characteristic. He has learnt to ignore his desire for a different existence and instead concentrate on the here and now, even if it means accepting a life that is far from ideal.

But beneath Ira's exterior, nostalgia persists despite his denial. By the book's finale, he considers the life he may have led in a different situation. Even while he doesn't publicly apologize, his subdued acceptance of the life he and Maggie have created has a hint of melancholy. This implies that his disengagement is a coping strategy to deal with the setbacks he cannot alter rather than necessarily an indication of contentment.

Nostalgia is an unsaid relationship between Maggie and Ira, despite the strain it causes in their marriage. Ira's weary acceptance and Maggie's unwavering optimism are two different ways that work well together to maintain their partnership. Ira's realism acts as a stabilizing influence



to keep Maggie from losing her illusions, while Maggie's nostalgia keeps their marriage emotionally intact and saves them from completely drifting apart.

There is no spectacular resolution to their conflicts by the book's finale, when they return home from their extremely taxing voyage. Rather, they revert to their old habits, quietly reinforcing the longevity of their union. Ira's tolerance, however tinged with impatience, guarantees that their partnership endures, while Maggie's nostalgia may cause arguments but also serves as the emotional glue that holds them together. Much of the comedy in the novel develops when many situations that are characterized by bad morals occur. (Gale 2001, 18)

In the end, Tyler makes the argument that nostalgia contributes to the maintenance of long-term relationships even though it can also cause conflict. Ira's silent perseverance guarantees family stability, while Maggie's yearning for the past keeps her optimistic. Despite its imperfections, their marriage continues because of the silent concessions made over the course of a lifetime together, as well as feelings of regret and nostalgia. This in-depth analysis looks at the various ways that nostalgia impacts their marriage, including conflict, emotional strain, and ultimate stability.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the book serves as a psychological defense mechanism that exposes the suppressed feelings, unconscious desires, and unresolved conflicts of its main characters, especially Maggie Moran. Psychoanalytic philosophy, particularly Freudian and Lacanian ideas, sheds light on how Maggie's desire for the past stems from unconscious forces, such as her need to change the past, allay guilt, and preserve her sense of self. On the other hand, Ira Moran's opposition to nostalgia may be seen as a kind of repression, a shield against facing his own unconscious regrets.

Maggie romanticizes the past, especially the failed marriage of her son Jesse, because she feels that she missed the chance to build the ideal family. According to Freud's theory of the unconscious, past experiences frequently influence present behavior in ways that people are not entirely aware of. Maggie's deep-seated concern that she was a bad mother is reflected in her struggle to let go of Jesse and Fiona's relationship. She is not only striving to save their marriage by trying to bring them back together, but she is also trying to save herself.

Maggie's recollections of Jesse and Fiona's relationship are romanticized creations with an emotional function rather than true depictions of the situation. She is able to avoid facing the unpleasant reality that Jesse was never the loving husband she fantasizes about or the daughter-in-law she longs for because to this distortion. Ira is a symbol of the opposite psychological reaction, repression, whereas Maggie aggressively clings to nostalgia. He avoids thinking about the past since doing so would compel him to face his own failures, the routes he never followed, the goals he gave up on, and the ways his life did not go as planned.



Lack creates human desire, a yearning for something that is out of reach. Even while Ira doesn't express his regrets out loud, there are hints throughout the book that he is also burdened by the opportunities that have been missed. Even though he represses it better than Maggie, his silent thoughts about how his life may have turned out by the book's finale imply that nostalgia is present in him.

By illustrating how Maggie and Ira are both still engaged in unconsciously repeated patterns of conduct, the novel's conclusion supports the psychoanalytic aspects of nostalgia. Maggie retains her nostalgic impulses and hopes that things will get better even if she has failed to change the past. Freud's theory of repetition compulsion in which people unconsciously recreate prior experiences in an effort to reconcile unresolved conflicts is reflected in this never-ending loop. Since trying to "fix" things is fundamental to Maggie's unconscious personality, she is unable to quit.

Ira interprets the conclusion as a silent acceptance, but not necessarily a resignation. His repression guarantees that his regrets stay hidden, unsaid but always present; his resistance to nostalgia does not imply that he is free from it. According to Tyler's depiction of the marriage, nostalgia is a basic aspect of the psyche that influences how people interact with others, create their sense of self, and deal with the passing of time.

It is a deeply ingrained psychological mechanism that makes unconscious motivations, repressed regrets, and hidden wants visible. Ira's rejection to nostalgia conceals his own suppressed disappointments, but Maggie's concentration on nostalgia serves as a way to keep optimism alive and escape guilt. The novel's examination of these unconscious dynamics implies that nostalgia whether accepted or rejected seems continues to be an unavoidable aspect of the human experience, profoundly and frequently unconsciously influencing relationships and identity.

Themes of memory, longing, and the unseen forces that influence human conduct are at the heart of this essay. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the book shows how regret functions as a psychological force entangled with the unconscious as well as an emotion. The main characters, Maggie and Ira Moran, both feel remorse in different ways. While Ira internalizes his disappointments and hides them behind a façade of rationality and detachment, Maggie externalizes hers through constant attempts to "fix" the past. Their interactions throughout the book show how decisions, relationships, and self-perception are impacted by regret, which is frequently unacknowledged. (Wen, Li 2004, 49–63)

The deep, unconscious remorse that drives Maggie's character is evident in her need to step in and change other people's lives. Her sense of failure toward her family, especially her son Jesse, is at the core of her remorse. She laments that Jesse never fulfilled her romanticized expectations of him after his marriage to Fiona ended and that she hasn't been able to establish the peaceful family life she had hoped for. Maggie, motivated by an underlying urge to make



amends for previous transgressions, adopts a routine of compulsive intervention rather than embracing these truths.

A profound, unspoken remorse that drives Maggie's impulse to get in and change other people's lives dominates her personality. The core of her remorse is her conviction that she has let her family down, especially her son Jesse. She laments that she hasn't been able to establish the peaceful family life she had hoped for and that Jesse never lived up to her romanticized expectation of him after his marriage to Fiona ended. Due to an underlying urge to make up for past transgressions, Maggie resorts to a pattern of compulsive intervention rather than accepting these truths.

Ira's regrets stem from the life he never lived; he had talent, aspirations, and dreams in the past, but they were eventually crushed by the demands of family obligations. Instead of admitting that he wishes he had the ability to make alternative decisions, he reacts to Maggie's optimism with protective cynicism. Small, poignant moments, as when he considers what his life would have been like had he not assumed the position of caregiver for his family, reveal his unconscious sorrow.

To deal with his regrets, Ira uses defensive strategies like detachment and intellectualization. He has a practical, even icy, outlook on life and emotionally separates himself from his disappointments rather than facing them head-on. His failure to express longing or nostalgia, however, does not imply that he is unaffected; rather, it shows that his unconscious is making a concerted effort to suppress these feelings.

The ending of the novel is particularly revealing in terms of how regret and the unconscious shape Maggie and Ira's relationship. After a long day filled with emotional highs and lows, they return home, and instead of experiencing a grand revelation or transformation, they simply fall back into their familiar roles. This reinforces the idea that regret, no matter how deeply felt, does not always lead to change it often becomes woven into the very fabric of a person's existence.

The conclusion implies that Maggie will keep trying even if she has failed several times to change the past. Her regret is still a driving force in her mind, and her unconscious urge to make things right is still unresolved. Meanwhile, Ira doesn't really change. Although his remorse is never completely addressed, the book implies that it lurks beneath the surface and subtly influences how he views the world. The role of Maggie represents the confusion of women in general and not only the role of southern women, as described by Romines, that the Breathing Lessons participate in the plot of the house and it is an explanation and clarification about the value of domestic life and its rituals that are devoted to the danger of not attracting the reader. (Salwak 1994, 163)



Remorse's cyclical nature mirrors the larger Freudian notion that people are frequently stuck in unconscious behavioral patterns and are unable to overcome the emotional factors that motivate them. Regret is not a fleeting emotion in the book; rather, it is an essential component of Maggie and Ira's inner lives, quietly affecting their decisions, feelings, and interpersonal interactions.

### Conclusion

In *Breathing Lessons*, Anne Tyler intricately weaves nostalgia, regret, and the unconscious into the fabric of everyday life, illustrating how these forces shape identity and relationships. Nostalgia fuels Maggie's relentless efforts to reclaim an idealized past, while Ira's regret lingers beneath a surface of stoic detachment. Both characters are trapped in unconscious cycles. Maggie through repetition, Ira through repression demonstrating the human tendency to relive past disappointments in search of resolution. Tyler suggests that nostalgia and regret are not merely emotions but unconscious mechanisms that define how individuals process time, loss, and the inescapable imperfections of life.

The novel portrays nostalgia and regret as powerful forces shaped by the unconscious, influencing how individuals perceive their past and present. Maggie's compulsive attempts to recreate an idealized past and Ira's quiet resignation highlight the ways in which unresolved desires shape human behavior. Tyler suggests that nostalgia is not just about longing for what was, but about the unconscious need to fix what feels broken, even when such repair is impossible. Regret, similarly, does not lead to change but instead becomes part of the fabric of one's existence, subtly guiding emotions, choices, and relationships.

In conclusion, Anne Tyler's *Breathing Lessons* intricately explores the theme of melancholy through the lives of its deeply flawed yet relatable characters. The novel delves into the nuances of regret, nostalgia, and the passage of time, where personal tragedies are often juxtaposed with fleeting moments of joy. Tyler crafts a narrative that reflects the human condition marked by imperfection and longing. The melancholic tone of the novel underscores the universal struggle of reconciling past mistakes with present realities. Tyler suggests that while life's disappointments are inevitable, the human spirit finds ways to cope and endure. This paper is a poignant commentary on the resilience of the heart amidst the complexities of love, loss, and self-acceptance.

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