

**FAMILY AS A MICROCOSM OF THE ANNE TYLER'S *A SLIPPING-DOWN LIFE***

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ABSTRACT

A *Slipping-Down Life*, by Anne Tyler, tells the story of a plump and rather unpopular high school student, Evie Decker, who develops an intense fascination with a young musician named Bertram "Drumsticks" Casey. At one of his concerts, she emerges from the restroom with his surname carved on her forehead, which begins their odd and affecting relationship. The main character, Evie, makes a decision that sets her on a precarious course, and the book's title suggests that her choice places her on a slippery slope. Behind this plot development is the author's awareness that life presents all of us with key situations, in which we must make decisions that can profoundly affect our lives. Often, one or more of such crossroads appear in a person's youth. If bad judgment is exercised, the effects can be disastrous. Evie allows her infatuation with Drum to overwhelm the more sensible side of her nature, which tells her that she would be better off without him. Instead, she agrees to marry him, becomes pregnant, and then they separate, leaving her at age seventeen without other family, little means of support, and a baby on the way. In *A Slipping-Down Life* (1970), not only Tyler's structure but recurring themes seem clear. Her microcosm in the family, containing its two extremes, the stay at home and the runaway. Dare I call them types of the Classic and Romantic? In Tyler's Family cacophonies one lonely individual verse sounds stronger among other lonely voices, recalling Frank O' Connor's famous study of the short story. *The Lonely Voice*, which identifies the mood of the form. Other persistent Tyler motives are leaving and returning; the desire for dream-parent and individual freedom and duty to others; the pull between private and social life. Often Tyler's novel end with reconciliation (some call it resignation) to a reality which may include drudgery, in homes where possessions threaten to own their occupants.

Keywords: *Family, home, relationships, A Slipping- Down Life*

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The general vision in *A Slipping – Down Life* novel seems to be based on the search for personal identity and success in life. In the figure of Evie and Drumstrings we are given a graphic image of two people who come from dramatically different backgrounds and who finally get married. We are exposed to the deep-seated loyalty of Evie for Casey or Drum as he likes to be called. She never reveals the full truth about how the letters became carved on her forehead until the conclusion. At that stage she has confronted Drum with the alternative about changing his life and moving with her to her family home or staying alone where they live. The ongoing vision in this novel is how selfless her commitment to Drum has been while his has been based on selfishness and egoism. He never makes it as a rock star and fails to change in character. As a result their marriage disintegrates.

A Slipping-Down life evinces Tyler's brave stepping forth in the selection and presentation of themes. Although still clearly evident are the first two novel's interest in the dynamics of the individual and the family, man's incapacity to communicate, his responses to change and passing time and his search for meaningful patterns in life, Tyler seems more willing in this third novel to examine their complexity, their sources, and their inter connectedness. In particular, she takes an uncompromising work at the nature of marriage as an institution, and the capacity of popular culture and marriage either to nurture or to thwart the development of a healthy sense of self. To her credit Tyler is able to probe these complex and problematical issues using a relatively straight forward narration and to conclude her novel with an ending that is affirmative without being either facile or sentimental.

Anne Tyler's *A Slipping- Down Life* is rooted in adolescence. Homely, touching, stylistically conservative its one eccentricity belongs to its heroine, motherless Evie Decker of Pulqua, North Carolina, "a plumb drab girl in brown sweater" who one day cuts into her forehead the last name of Bertram "Drumstrings" Casey a local rock singer of dubious ability. That deed precipitates the main action of the novel in which Evie, a testimonial in scar tissue becomes a publicity feature at Casey's

performances, ultimately marries him, loses her father to a heart attack, gets pregnant, and finally, swallowing her fear of loneliness delivers Casey an ultimatum either they abandon their marginal existence and move into her father's house or she will do so alone. These portraits "outline" Tyler's characters with "darker lines" than even before - an ideal metaphor for a novelist with an affinity for the fine arts, and an apt way of conveying the vividness and substantiality of this novel's characters. (1983-28) Even such minor characters as Clotelia, Mrs. Haison, and Paul Ogle, the photographer for the local newspaper, are shapely etched and far more memorable than, say the sisters of Ben Joe Hawkes. For on the most basic level Drumstrings Casey contrary to the customary practice of the demon lover does not pursue this fat virgin. He is interested in Evie only until he establishes that she is not a "newspaper lady" (48) unlike devils, would be rock stars need publicity and he takes no responsibility for or pleasure in her mutilation. Indeed he is actually annoyed not that she did it but that she carved his last name instead of "Drum ", after all, "There're thousands of Casey's around" (51). In addition, instead of pandemonium he lives in a faded Victorian house with his parents, and he drives the battered family Dodge. With his "bony, scraped" wrists, nicotine stained fingers (123) and richly warranted bouts of professional insecurity, Drumstrings Casey quickly emerges as what he is: a slick looking kid with a shallow gimmick and little talent.

Evie is aware of most of this when she elopes with him, just as he well aware that she has nothing in common with the 1960s' adolescent understanding of what constitutes a desirable girlfriend or wife. This apparent two-fold rejection of the powerful media-based idea of romance points at least on Evie's part, to a spark of originality and individuality, one that will enable her to emerge from her failed marriage unscathed, even empowered by the experience. But before she can reach this state, Evie must endure the painful rite of passage of a marriage that was doomed before it began.

Why people marry whom they do is an issue of continuing fascination to Anne Tyler. Anne G. Jones has argued that Tyler is particularly intrigued by "the



apparently accidental, almost quickly ways in which marriages are made," (1986:3) but in fact the forces underlying the marriage of Drum and Evie are less "accidental" or quirky than they are complex. Barbara A. Bannon in *Publishers Weekly* attributes the match to mutual "propinquity and loneliness" and to be sure Drum does seem as alienated and frustrated as Evie-qualities which, argues Mary Ellen Brooks, are evident in the lack of coherence in his "talking out," a form of non-communication that becomes increasingly incomprehensible as the novel progresses (1979:50). At the same time marriage to Drum fulfills emotional needs in Evie while resolving certain practical difficulties. On the most basic level, she dreads returning to high school in the fall. Marriage gives her the perfect excuse for increasingly frequent absences, while on the days she does attend class, she is a kind of celebrity: "People stared at her and were too polite. She didn't mind. She had known that getting married would set her apart" (149). Further, Drum lets Evie talk as much as she wishes, something that was not indulged in the Decker household, while having a husband means she no longer need fear growing old as a spinster.

Drum's motives for marrying Evie are even more complex and insubstantial than these. Practically speaking he needs some place to live, replete with "coziness" (155,150) and breakfast biscuits, since the Casey's had disowned him after a ruckus at the Parisian. He also needs the kind of emotional support that Evie continues to be willing to provide. She apologizes for having said, in a moment of anger, that he had no talent, and in fact declares, "I could listen all day when you play". "Well then," said Drum. It seemed to be what he had come for" (118). Drum also feels that Evie would bring him good luck at a moment when his career is foundering, while at the same time showing the mother who rejected him that "I'm settled and done with her" (146)

Marriage also would bring him something for which most Tyler characters yearn: change. I feel like things are just petering out all around me and I want to get married to someone I like and have me a house and

change. Make a change. Isn't that enough (reason to marry)? (130)

Apparently so and especially, during a heat wave when people are not known for making intelligent decisions.

Not one of these multiple motives for Drum and Evie's marriage is detected by outsiders. Mr. Decker assumes Drum married his daughter as compensation for her mutilation while Mrs. Casey assumes it is her son's way of showing his appreciation for Evie's support of his career. Of even greater interest, the usual motive attributed to teen elopements, sexual passion, is not an issue. Drum's facade of rock-star sexuality notwithstanding, their courtship is passionless. Though Evie had yearned for normal courtship with "double dates and dances and matching shirts" all she gets is a kiss from Drum's "Cool blank lips" to seal their engagement (131). Once they are married, coitus proves bumbling and tepid:

She had overheard more in the girl's gym than she had yet found out with Drum in the papery bedroom. Their love-making was sudden and awkward complicated by pitch dark and a twisted nightgown and the welter of sheets and blankets that Evie kept covering herself with (149).

In the final analysis it is arguably the pregnancy, far more than the marriage itself, that brings out the best in Evie. In an incisive study published in the *New England Review* and *Bread Loaf Quarterly*, Margant Morganroth Gullette observes that "for most of Tyler's women, the baby, not the husband, is the true sign of entry into responsible adulthood" (1985:328). Thus the importance of the accumulation of chairs, of physical objects and furniture, like tip proof high-chairs, those emblems of the acceptance of the restrictions and responsibilities of the mature individual. Through not speaking directly of *A Slipping – Down Life*, Gullette observes further that in some Tyler novels, motherhood proves to be "a happy instinct, a gift of the life course", (1985: 327) and that certainly appears to be case with Evie. Motherhood seems to be goal for which she had



subconsciously striven from the opening of the novel. She seemed to know just from hearing him on the radio that Drum Casey was to be her mate, and she did on impulse – or was it on instinct? – the one thing guaranteed to get his attention: she carved his name in her forehead. This self-mutilation is, as suggested earlier, a manifestation of the media-cued yoking of teen romance and violence; but it is also, in a distorted way, a kind of marriage. For Evie has done melodramatically what, until recently, all women did automatically upon marriage: they take their mates' names as their own. Or, more precisely they take their last names, rejecting the identity of "daughter" in favour of "wife" in rejecting the father's family name in a kind of symbolic suicide of the daughterly self. Though Drum would have preferred Evie to carve "Drum" (her forehead wasn't broad enough for "Drumstrings") Evie seems to have realized instinctively, that she needed to take as her own was the surname (Casey – that is, the socially accepted proof of the women's marriage and the legitimacy of any children she may have "(Casey) is my name" (212) she retorts as she walks and on her husband, but that identity has less to do with one Bertram "Drumstrings" Casey than with the symbolic roles of wife and mother that come with marriage. In marrying him, both symbolically through the mutilation and legally through the elopement, Evie has announced publicly her decision to accept those roles; and if his childishness and lethargy compel her to abandon the role of wife, she still can immerse herself in the role of mother.

Indeed, without pressing the matter too much, Tyler suggests that the ineffectual Drum had minimal input into the Big Event. The decision to have a child was entirely Evie's: "Flying in the face of all logical objections", she yearns for motherhood, visualizing it as "a shaft of yellow light through her mind, like a door opening" (170). Drum knows nothing of this, falling asleep oblivious to his wife's urges. Significantly, Evie already looks pregnant – as indeed she has looked for her entire life of obesity. Even before she articulates her dream ("she wanted to get pregnant" (170), she instinctively takes a job in the library, an appropriately quiet, sedentary occupation (1980-7) which requires that she wear "a

blue smock" (162) – an outfit curiously reminiscent of maternity clothes. And not long after she secures the ideal job for a mother – to – be, she is, almost as if by her own force of will, decidedly pregnant. When she finally gets around to mentioning the baby to Drum, it is not a happy announcement but a statement of fact which, Evie feels, should be a major impetus in their move to her childhood home, left to her upon the sudden death of her father. When the fact of impending parenthood does not convince Drum to leave the tar paper shoe, Evie walks out on him.

Evie Decker Casey, Protofeminist, has taken what she needed from a husband a socially acceptable married name, some sperm – and marched back to the Decker house to raise her baby alone. What she is doing requires courage and a strong sense of self, qualities which were not evident in the Evie at the opening of the novel. Indeed, she seems to have undergone a complete inversion by the story's end. But that impression is not quite accurate- these admirable qualities had always been within her; but like her oval fingernails and narrow nose, they somehow had been overlooked in a world which posits overweight teens as lacking in character and will power. But the same heaviness that is so undesirable in an adolescent is just fine for a pregnant matron, whom society treats with remarkable respect and deference. Social norms derived from popular culture have shifted far more than Evie herself, and the only real inversion to occur on her perception of herself and the world. In carving Drum's name in reverse, Evie does seem to confirm that, at the stage, she was looking at matters 180° off: as Mary Ellon Books argues, "it is as though she sees people and situations backwards, like the letters on her forehead". (1980:340) But by the end of the novel she sees Fay-Jean, Drum, and the rest of her world rightly, and it enables her to slam the door on her friend and to leave her husband without a moments' hesitation more importantly, Evie sees herself rightly – and that would lend credence to the argument of several critics that the baby she is carrying is the true Evie: in effect, she "gives birth to herself" (1986:4) Almost as it to confirm this, she goes so far as to say that "I didn't cut my forehead.



Some one else did "(220, 212). That "someone else" is not, as she maintains, another teen, but rather her earlier self, now dead. The ending of *A Slipping-Down Life* is thus an affirmative one. Essentially a parable of the evolution of one woman's strong, healthy sense of identity, the novel does not end on an "inconclusive" note, nor is it quite accurate to say that it "underscores the passivity and shallowness of Evie's and Casey's lives" (1980:340) for though Drum admittedly is more passive and shallow than ever at the end of the novel, Evie has moved beyond juvenile angst and "Slipped down into [a] life" of adult responsibility (1973-742). If it is not a flawless vision- and even Tyler herself has subsequently confessed to a desire to know how "Evie Decker's baby turned out (1987-494) -it is nonetheless meant to be a positive one. From this point on, strong women able to raise their families alone and to deal with the crises and impediments of daily life will be a salient feature of Anne Tyler's novels. This character type which ultimately will include such women as Pearl Tull of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and Marid Pritchett of *The Accidental Tourist* is explored in its formative stage in the person of Elizabeth Abbott, the resident handy person of Tyler's next novel, *The Clock winder*.

In Tyler's fiction additional occurrences show how pervasive this presentation of women is. A pivotal moment in *A Slipping- Down Life* occurs during Brother Hopes sermon at the plague Tabernacle when he uses Evie Decker's disfigurement to document the sorry state of contemporary life. When brother Hope uses Evie's gesture as an example of a sacrifice to false Gods, Drumstrings Casey calls that interpretation "a bunch of bull" because, as he argues, Evie had hardly any good looks to lose. In a burst of arrogance he makes his point It'd been a hell of a lot more sacrifice if she'd been prettier to begin with (181). The act of Evie's sacrifice than is minimal simply because she had so little beauty to give up.

Personal failure is centered on the central character Drumstrings or Drum, as he likes to be called. He spends his life in search of fame and success as a rock star, and even though he does not realize it he is totally dependent on Evie to help him

through all his difficulties. Evie in contrast gives her life and efforts selflessly to help Drum and finds fulfillment in doing this. Drum never faces himself and as a result he never grows throughout the story. At the conclusion he is the same small time failure whom we meet at the beginning.

The love of Evie for Drum is one of the most striking aspects of this novel. Hers is a totally selfless and absolute love, and it is only towards the conclusion of this novel that we realize how deep and self-sacrificing her love truly is. The fact that she has hidden the real cause of how she got the letters from Drum in itself reveals her deep-seated loyalty to him no matter what the cost is. On the other hand, Drum is governed by self-love and is unable to move beyond the centre of his own selfish ego. This is revealed at the end of this story when he refuses to take a stance and change his lifestyle preferring instead to stay in his own cocoon of inertia and stagnation. In fact the novel's title could sum up his whole life and career as it is truly a 'slipping down life.'

There are different types of relationships manifested in this novel. The strongest and indeed really true relationship exists between Drum and Evie. Evie is a very heroic character who genuinely loves Drum inspite of all his faults and inspite of the fact that he insults her about her physical appearance at different stages in the story.

In *A Slipping- Down Life*, She decides to thinking with her surface time span. Suddenly it flowers from a fewdays into a full year in the life of Evie Decker, a fat teenager who carves with nail scissors the name of a rock singer on her forehead. Evie is one of many Tyler characters with a longing to be set apart from the rest, at least by a mark, by full bodily escape. But Evie is also more vivid than earlier characters. According to stella Nesanovich, Tyler has described the characters in her first two novels as "blend" (1979 : 7), so in this gloomier novel she not only spreads time but outlines its occupants with darkers lines like Roualt. This time she shrinks again the size of her family unit as it abounding the experiment with mere numbers in favour of experimenting with intense individual portraits, almost to the point of caricature. Critics have called



this her most Gothic novel. Here again are the Tyler themes: escape, kidnapping, non-communication, the final return home although her Evie will enter an empty house to examine the stopped time smiling photograph of her mother whom no one now living remembers.

For her female characters, Tyler frequently employs mirrors and eating disorders viewing mechanisms. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Guber argue that "What she (women) sees in the mirror is usually a male construct"(17). Evie Decker, Charlotte Emory, and Delie Grinstead go through different stages of self-definition that are symbolized through images reflected in the mirror. Like Pearl and Jenny Tull from *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and Olive from *Celestial Navigation*, Evie Decker from *A Slipping- Down Life* and Charlotte and Lacey Emory from *Earthly Possessions* suffer from of eating disorders. Bell hooks contends, feminist struggle to end eating disorders has been an ongoing battle because our nations obsession with judging females of all ages on the bases of how we look was never completely eliminated (33). Tyler explores different eating disorders over eating and anorexia in order to show the different measures that women take in their attempts at seeing themselves clearly.

By no means are Tyler's works strictly "Feminist" works, in fact Tyler herself argues against the idea that is conventional for a feminist. Susan Gilbert argues: "Tyler's work do portray are women trying to define themselves whole trapped within a patriarchal scope of feminine ideas. In the article, "A Re-Awakening: Anne Tyler's Post-feminist Edne Pontelier in *Ladder of Years*" Paul Christian Jones argues that post-feminism should be viewed as "an evolution of feminism" (181) Tyler's women evolve in their own unique minimum living with a traditional patriarchal structure. Many of Tyler's women, while striving for self-actualization, possess feminist qualities that allow them to eventually move past the confines of patriarchy.

Within this patriarchal structure reside the strict, confining, and non-progressive definitions of womanhood. It is within this scope that Tyler's female characters become part of a structure that requires their physical presence in order to help

define the male presence. Laure Mulvey, in visual pleasure and narrative cinema" argues,

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifiers for the male other. Bound by a symbolic order in which men can love at his phenasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of women still tried to her place as barren of meeting, not maker of meaning (586)

Evie, Charlottie, and Delia, during their struggle for individually, become bearers of the gaze. In addition they are bound by the "Silent Image" that defines their roles as good wives.

Tyler's women posses various views on feminist thought. Bell Hooks argues "Life Style feminism ushered in the notion that there could be as many versions of feminism as there were women" (5). While not always conventionally feminist, Tyler presents women who find themselves alone within the world of marriage and motherhood. Stephane Coontz contends,

A woman focuses her self -sacrifice on parent, husband, or child, the simultaneous condition and contrast between nurturing within the family and competition outside it leads to a profound sense of loneliness (58).

In turn, Tyler's women aspire to recover their lost selves. Also not all of their women wish to permanently give up their families but they must "detach" themselves from the very structure that has oppressed them in order to see clearly. Susan Gilbert, in her chapter, "Anne Tyler" argues, "in detachment, they see"(274). It is only through the clarity of detaching themselves from their current lifestyles that their faulty vision begins its process of clarification.

In *A Slipping - Down Life*, Tyler reveals a young girl unable to actualize the self. Although this ailment is a commonality among teenagers, Evie Decker lacks the support of a traditional family. More specifically, she is without a mother and although her father is physically present, he is deficient in parenting skills, Gilbert contents, "Evie's father is colorless, kind, and uncommunicative" (256). Evie's



search for self is complicated by her inability to separate herself from her image of Bertrem "Drumstrings" Casey, a boy she first encounters on the radio and her future husband. By making her false image of Drum part of her own likeness, Evie even further obscures her perception of the self that she desires as a woman. Becoming Drum's wife, Evie takes on the perceived "feminine" roles that she had studied through stereotypes exemplified on soap operas and in magazines. In her attempts at self-actualization, like a character in a movie or a television show, Evie takes on different roles in hopes of defining herself among these roles. Eve is unable to see a lucid image of her own self; thus, she blindly falls into the roles of woman hood that have been provided for her. In addition, Eve's need to be heard by her father and Drum often goes unanswered.

Evie's image is often displayed as a reverse image in a mirror, but this image is ultimately distorted by looking into the mirror. The distorted image in the mirror reflects Evie's inability to clearly see herself and who she can be. Tyler uses mirrors as a means of identification.

Tyler was as much happier with what was to become her third published novel, In *A Slipping-Down Life*. Reportedly she still speaks of it "with great tenderness", and although she acknowledges that this novel is "flawed", she nonetheless feels that it "represents, for me, a certain brave stepping forth" (1979-203). In part, that stepping forth involves technical improvement. As Doris Betts has observed, In *A Slipping - Down Life*, Tyler made a radical departure from the first two novels by expanding her "surface time span" to encompass a full year instead of just a few days. Further, there is a reduction in the number of characters depicted, as if Tyler were "abandoning the experiment with mere numbers in favor of experimenting with intense individual portraits. (1980:340) has weathered the crucial season of adolescence, having discovered an identity within the loneliness of her skin to replace the one engraved upon its surface – has slipping down into life. And because the transformation is made with such authentic hesitation, awkwardness, doubt – is in keeping that is, with the circumstance so her ungainly life – we believe in it and are moved by it.

Though this novel sounds the tone of life, its resonance derives from the observation of a way of life, a way that is tacked upon teenage bulletin boards, sewn to dresses "decorated with poodles on loops of real chain enclosed in high school notebooks containing *Silver Screen Magazines*. All of this gathers toward personification in the guitar obsessed Casey, whose personality hovers at that point of fusion where cool and dull-wittedness are one. And it finds oblique expression in his vaguely evangelical "speaking out" the platform mannerism that is his trade mark.

My girl is at a hymn – Sing

What happened to double ferr's wheels

And at the other end of the electric amplifies, beneath the insect – leaden lights, a congregation of finger – spangled listeners projects upon the sponged and shiny rock groups a glamour of their own imagining. That is the hope that simmers beneath the festive surface to transcend the ordinariness into which they must sink – as Evie sinks, her scarred flesh the emblem of her scarred hope.

On the surface *A Slipping - Down Life*, could be considered a coming of age novel, as Evie faces poverty, pregnancy, infidelity, and the death of her father and develops from a passive teenager who is seeking an identity to an increasingly assertive woman. As Eve becomes increasingly active, Drum reveals more of his own passivity. This role reversal is an extreme example of what commonly happens to couples in Anne Tyler novels-they begin absorbing parts of each others' personalities.

But at a deeper level, the story is a postmodern parable about the role of narrative images in shaping our lives and the manipulation of images by commercial interests.

For example, Evie receives a piece of mail containing a newspaper clipping of her in the hospital after she mutilated her forehead. With a note from sonny Martin, "Pulquo Country's Biggest Real Estate Agent," congratulating her on her "recent achievement"(60). This commercial message is characterized by a sense of missed connection or dislocation. The message doesn't match the reality because of the carelessness of the Person with commercial interests. Evie's cutting her face and



being photographed with Drum Casey is not an “achievement” in the usual sense. Nor is it a “Sacrifice to false gods” (155), as the publicity – seeking revivalist Brother Hope calls it, twisting Evie’s private suffering to serve his own evangelistic ends.

Even in the very beginning the novel starts off with an example of commercialized misconnection. Appearing on a new radio interview show, Drum gets annoyed when it is obvious that the host has never heard his music. Why did he invite him onto the program then? Drum asks. Because the higher ups instructed him to, the interviewer exasperatedly replies. Heavens, boy... Let’s get this over with” (4)

When the news camera man Mr.Ogle tries to get a caption for Evie’s photograph, she is speechless, so he begins putting words in her mouth, making up a quotation for her: “That sound about right?” he asks off-handedly (42). Likewise, the newspaper photograph of her protest at Brother Hope’s revival comes out distorted and strange looking.

Distortion and the failure to connect is also shown, more subtly in the formulaic newspaper reviews of Drum’s music. When Evie gets angry at Drum, she borrows negative phrases from a review and throws them in his face. Although Drum believes in his music and has some inner spark, as revealed by his “speaking out”, his creativity is mixed in with excessive commercial ambitions. The more the characters begin emphasizing the importance of publicity, the more Drum begins to lose faith in his music, until in the end he concludes that the songs he has written are just the same as everyone else's, may be even worse, so why should he want to write more?

Anne Tyler often demonstrates the interplay between fictional texts and the characters narrative constructions of their lives as revealed in their self images. This process of narrative filtering and shaping of one’s “story” of oneself is an everyday occurrence that largely goes unnoticed. In *Celestial Navigation*, Jeremy derives her notions of courtship from antiquated novels and contemporary television programs. And Oliva imagines herself living in a movie about the life of Jermy Paulings artist. In

Ladder of years, Delia, who is addicted to romance novels, invents an alternate identity for herself – Miss Grinstead – and imagines herself in a movie. Charlotte Emory in *Earthly Possessions* sees herself over and over on television where the nightly news shows video footage of her and Jake Simms taken during the bank robbery.

In *A Slipping - Down Life*, movies, television soap operas, and women’s magazines provide prescriptions for the charcters on how to behave. There is a thin tone in the novel between real life and fictional images, real achievement and publicity. The characters demonstrate their confusion about image and reality when watching soap operas. Ciotelia speaks familiarly about the characters as though they were her relatives, and Drum talks back to the television characters on the screen.

Evie walks a narrow line between fantasy and reality, consciously adopting a new romanticized image by putting on a black dress and sitting at Drum’s feet while he performs. She makes it clear that she accepts Drum’s proposal of marriage, one of the arguments he uses to persuade her is that they will get their picture in the newspaper as a human interest story.

On Evie’s wedding day, she feels like “a star in an old movie”(120). The movie motif appears again a few months after. Evie and Drum’s marriage, when it becomes clear that Drum will not move into Evie’s father’s house with her. Evie begins packing her bags; she has seen this scene “rehearsed for her” so many times on television and in the movies that every move seems “prescribed” (183-184)

In the movies, the Drum character would end up changing his mind and coming with Evie, but Evie doesn’t expect this to happen because Drum is ignorant of “things like that”(185).

As Evie is leaving Drum, she tells him that she didn’t cut her forehead but that “someone else did” (185). She tells him that two girls at the unicorn held her down in the bathroom and did it. Some critics have taken this retraction quite literally



(Voelker, 1989) on the other hand, one could interpret Evie's statement symbolically, she could be saying, "The 'I' that did that no longer exists. It feels like "someone else". This would be consistent with Anne Tyler's view of the self in a state of flux, as presented in *Ladder of years*. But in the context of the plot of this novel, Evie's denial that she inscribed herself with Casey's name seems to be just a way of getting back at him. And her denial produces the same sense of uncertainty in Drum as her denunciation of her musical ability during their fight when he got hired at the parision months earlier. "Life is getting two cluttered", he declares, confused by what Evie is telling him (185).

"Clutter" is a multimeaning motif that appears frequently in Anne Tyler's novels. Here it refers to the surplus of meanings, the indeterminacy that ruins the clean, aesthetic lines of Drum's naive sense of certainty about life. In the final paragraphs of the novel, he "speaks out" during his song at the unicorn, calling, "But the letters was cut backwards. Would you explain?" (186)

Drum wonders aloud about the letters being cut backwards because this would be consistent with Evie's cutting them herself while looking in a mirror, rather than someone else's doing it to her. This type of uncertainty and multiple versions of past events is a motif that Anne Tyler explores in other novels, notably *Earthly Possession*, where Charlotte remembers her mother's saying that there had been a mix-up of babies at her birth, though later her mother denies it, and *Saint May be*, where the meaning of Danny's and Lucy's deaths changes and remains uncertain.

The reference to "Circular Stairs" is more puzzling. Circular stairs. Of course, from a spirel without getting overly symbolic, the spirel does represent Anne Tyler's view of time and she has used stairs as a metaphor for the passage of time, both in *Ladder of years*, where it figures in the title, and in *Celestial Navigation*, where Oliva and Jeremy come to view the stars as a symbol of the furtile repetitiveness of life. In *A Slipping - Down Life*, the circular pattern is also present. At the end, Drum is back at the unicorn and Evie is back at her father's house alone, reenacting with her unborn baby the

role of a single parent that her father carried through with her. It is almost a cliché that her father's death so closely concludes with her pregnancy, dramatizing the cycle of the generations as life is renewed through death and birth.

The beginning and end of the circular movement are framed by mirrors. Early in the novel, when Evie looks into the mirror at the unicorn and cuts Casey's name into her forehead, she steps through the looking glass into a different life. At the end of the novel, just before leaving Drum, she looks at her face in the mirror and undoes the writing by saying, "I didn't do it," then steps back through the looking glass to her middle - class home, Alice awakening from her dream of wonderland. In this verbal undoing of her action, Evie is in effect agreeing with her father, who also wanted to undo the damage but through plastic surgery.

Towards the conclusion of the novel, Evie discloses to Drumstrings the full truth about how she got the letters on her forehead, she was attacked in the toilet by a gang of girls who cut the letters on her head out of vindictiveness. Out of love and loyalty for Drumstrings all those years she led everyone to believe she was the one who had carried out the deed. The novel concludes with Evie leaving Drum strings and moving to her father's house.

There are different types of relationships manifested in this novel. The strongest and indeed really true relationship exists between Drum and Evie. Evie is a very heroic character who genuinely loves Drum in spite of all his faults and in spite of the fact that he insults her about her physical appearance at different stages in the story.

Drum is unable to sustain a really deep relationship and abandons the idea of changing his circumstances because in reality he is a weak and selfish character who only thinks of himself. The relationship between Drum and his drummer friend David is also one, which highlights even more Drum's self-centered characteristics.

Drum only thinks about himself. David by contrast is a very sincere character who wants Drum to succeed and who is prepared to sacrifice himself to achieve that end.

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