Mapping the Mind and the Community: Dual Perspectives on Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe*

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Abstract

This study is a psycho-sociological exploration of identity and self-concept in Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe* through Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism and the concept of life traps, or early maladaptive schemas (EMS), as established in schema therapy theory by J. E. Young. Adopting a qualitative research approach of close reading and textual analysis, the study examines how characters in the novel navigate their interior and exterior circumstances. Blumer's theory highlights the importance of subjective meanings and ongoing interpretive processes in which people act in their social worlds. Applied to Tyler's narrative, the paradigm illustrates characters' construction and reconstruction of identity through meaning-making in social environments. Meanwhile, Young's life trap explains characters' ingrained maladaptive schema, such as isolation, failure, emotional deprivation, relentless expectations, and self-sacrifice, grounded in early experiences and socially reinforced behavior. The analysis addresses how these patterns shape interactions among characters, decisions, and emotional growth, demonstrating the interplay between internal structures and external social pressures. In general, this analysis highpoints that identity in *Saint Maybe* is not fixed but continuously forged in the context of relational dynamics, perceived responsibilities, and internal strife. By integrating symbolic interactionism and schema therapy, this study distills the complexities in human behavior as well as highlights the profound transformational possibility of self-knowledge and social interactions in establishing self-concept.

Keywords: Early Maladaptive Schemas, Identity, Self-concept, Symbolic Interactionism

INTRODUCTION

This work explores the intersection of literary criticism and psycho-sociological theory, with an emphasis on the dialectical relationship between internal psychological processes and external social interaction as manifested in Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe* (1991). The novel provides rich territory for exploration of the process by which identity is formed through a dialectical tension between the internal realm of cognitive and affective processes and the external realm of social roles and expectations. The study uses J. E. Young's *Schema Therapy* (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003; Bach et al., 2018) in combination with Herbert

Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism Theory* (Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2015) to present a bifocal lens to examining character development and identity formation.

Although literary criticism has for some time now explored character psychology (Hogan, 2011; Zunshine, 2010), few studies have explicitly drawn on schema theory or symbolic interactionism in their analysis of fiction (Canning, 2018; Johnson, 2021; Goodwin, 2020). This leaves a considerable gap in our knowledge of the ways in which fictional characters perform or struggle against psychological life traps in their social worlds. By using Young's schema therapy that discovers early maladaptive schemas such as abandonment, unrelenting standards, and defectiveness/shame (Young et al., 2003), this research uncovers the inner psychological conflicts of Tyler's characters. At the same time, Blumer's symbolic interactionism offers an interpretative mechanism that explains the processes through which these schemas are reaffirmed, negotiated, or transformed in the course of social interactions (Fine, 2012; Dennis & Martin, 2022).

Recent studies have drawn attention to the growing demand for integrating literary fiction with sociological and psychological models in the pursuit of identity construction (Caracciolo, 2014; Keen, 2016; Vermeule, 2020). Koivisto and Laine (2021), for instance, assert that fictional stories serve as cognitive simulators for making inferences regarding oneself and other people. Likewise, Green and Donahue (2023) draw attention to narrative empathy as enabling emotional congruence. *Saint Maybe* provides us with a microcosm of these processes in which the stories of characters are driven by guilt, social responsibility, and religious redemption—forces that are concordant with schema types of self-sacrifice and punitive behavior (Louis et al., 2013; Rafaeli et al., 2016).

The characters that Tyler has built inhabit an elaborate framework of family, religious, and community commitments, which serve as symbolic environments that influence their identity (Geertz, 2017; McAdams & McLean, 2013). The protagonist, Ian Bedloe, assumes a framework characterized by inexorable expectations and self-denial in the wake of a traumatic event, which results in compulsive caregiving activities and chronic guilt. This pattern aligns with Young's (2003) definition of the self-sacrifice schema, which involves prioritizing others' needs to one's own detriment, often to gain approval or avoid guilt. Ian's psychological trajectory exemplifies how early emotional experiences and perceived failures can solidify into maladaptive schemas, influencing life decisions and relationships (Van Genderen et al., 2012; Renner et al., 2020). Blumer's theory contributes an essential sociocultural factor. Symbolic interactionism proposes that individuals form their self-concepts through interpretative social interactions, facilitated by mutually understood symbols like language, ritual, and social roles (Charon, 2010; Snow, 2021). Ian's self-concept of a "redeemed sinner" is formed not only through internal feelings of guilt but also through ongoing social reinforcement from his church, family, and community. They act as symbolic environments that both represent and enhance his internal structures (Stryker & Burke, 2014; Stets & Serpe, 2021). The church, specifically, is a symbolic representation that at once promises salvation while reinforcing his feelings of guilt—a duality that caters to both schema theory and symbolic interactionism.

The primary objective of this study was to analyze the expressions of Young's life traps and Blumer's symbolic interactionism in the lives of Tyler's characters. To achieve this, the research employed a qualitative method marked by close reading and thematic analysis of the text, guided by recent developments in narrative psychology (Adler, 2012; McLean & Syed, 2015; Reese et al., 2017) as well as schema-focused therapeutic research (Bernstein et al., 2020; Roediger et al., 2022). The research demonstrates that symbolic interactionism offers key insights into the ways in which social feedback mechanisms influence the continuity or alteration of psychological structures. As individuals act out their

roles in symbolic environments—whether in family terms, religious organizations, or community memberships—they filter such experiences through known schemas, and these in turn organize their behavior and emotional control (Burke & Stets, 2009; Hitlin & Vaisey, 2013). This circularity demonstrates a cycle of mutual reinforcement between the social self and the psychological self (Stryker, 2008; Callero, 2021).

The convergence of symbolic interactionism and schema therapy is characterized by their common focus on external relational processes. Symbolic interactionism believes that identity is malleable and constructed within the social environment through constant interpretation (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Aksartova, 2021). Schema theory, although originating from cognitive-behavioral therapy, also recognizes that enduring patterns of emotion and thought are constructed in early social contexts and acted out in ongoing interpersonal interactions (Lockwood & Perris, 2012; Shah & Waller, 2020). Both theories discard the notion of an independent, static self and view identity instead as an active dialectic between past emotional patterns and present social contexts.

Cultural subjectivity introduces a further level of complication to these schemata by calling attention to the widespread sociopolitical and historical forces that bear upon identity development (Hall, 1996; Mansfield, 2000; Barker, 2012). Components like gender, class, race, and religious morality are embedded in the cultural schema that provides the basis for schemas and social interactions (Skeggs, 2015; Ahmed, 2017; Crenshaw, 2018). Tyler's story demonstrates this by showing the Bedloe family as being heavily involved in middle-class Protestant American values, which affect their interpretation of responsibility, morality, and personal value. Scholars in cultural studies, including Stuart Hall (1996) and Raymond Williams (1977), contend that individuals learn cultural narratives that structure their emotional and moral frameworks—this viewpoint concurs with the principles of schema theory, which emphasizes essential emotional imperatives, and symbolic interactionism, which underscores meaning creation through shared symbols.

Contemporary interdisciplinary research has highlighted the applicability of literary fiction in illustrating psychological resilience and identity reconstruction processes (Bourne, 2021; Taberner & Vidmar, 2023). The transformations and quests of literary characters are heuristic frameworks in understanding schema activation, interpersonal feedback, and identity negotiation. Ian's ultimate re-appraisal of his role in the church and family, for example, parallels therapeutic strategies such as schema re-scripting and cognitive reframing (Arntz & Jacob, 2013; Rijkeboer & Lobbestael, 2016).

In summary, this inquiry contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that highlights the value of literary analysis for an understanding of human psychological processes and social interaction (Levine, 2020; Hutto & Gallagher, 2022; Miall & Kuiken, 2024). By using schema therapy and symbolic interactionism to interpret the novel *Saint Maybe*, the study enhances our understanding of Tyler's characters while also demonstrating how fictional stories can inform us about real mechanisms of identity formation, emotional development, and societal integration.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Anne Tyler's writings have been subjected to ongoing scholarly examination due to their complex representation of the ordinary life as interconnected with familial, emotional, and psychological intricacies.

Researchers have used interdisciplinary frameworks to investigate the psychological undercurrents, linguistic portrayals, and sociocultural entailments of the interior life and relational involvement of her main characters (Lewis, 2011; Stratton, 2015; Canning, 2018; Huber, 2020; Zink, 2023). A seminal critical perspective in this argument is provided by Stella Nesanovich (1994), who rereads Tyler's earliest novels to highlight their thematic density and narrative depth. She argues that, even as the broad praise for Tyler's later work such as *Breathing Lessons* and *Saint Maybe* continues, the thematic concerns evident in her earlier writing—such as imprisonment within the family, emotional isolation, and searches for self-knowledge—constitute a foundation for the evolution of her more richly textured narrative style.

Nesanovich (1994) theorizes the family as a central, yet frequently alienating, space for psychological exploration. She calls attention to *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964) in which Ben Joe's alienation as the only male in a family of women is presented as a powerful symbol of gender identity crisis and existential displacement. His homecoming from Columbia University is hastened by his sister Joanne's unexpected return home to their hometown, signaling family dysfunction and enhancing his inner conflict (p. 17). Nesanovich analyzes the moment using a psychoanalytic lens, highlighting the complex interplay of emotional attachment and guilt in the family setting—concepts that have been informed by schema-based analysis (Young et al., 2003; Arntz & Jacob, 2013; Louis et al., 2013; Bach et al., 2018). In addition, her reference to the brief story "Nobody Answers the Door" functions as a thematic precursor to Ben Joe's isolation and emotional reserve, indicating the way in which the narrative coherence of Tyler's previous writing carefully cultivates schema-like structures of abandonment, strict expectation, and emotional dearth.

Nesanovich enriches her analysis of the text by incorporating Tyler's observations about familial limitation and strength. She notes that the characters Tyler constructs tend to be enclosed by emotional dependencies that limit as well as inform their psychological growth. Tyler herself commented that families represent "convenient ways of studying how people adapt and endure when forced to stay together. how they endure, and continue loving and adapt to the absurdities of their confinement" (as cited in Nesanovich, 1994, p. 16)—a notion that is also found in today's psychological literature on the ambivalence of familial ties (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2011; Gale, 2016). For instance, Shelley, the woman Ben Joe brings back to New York, represents more than just a romantic interest; she is the potential for emotional give-and-take and empathic witness—qualities Ben Joe lacks in his family setting and needed for schema healing procedures (Rafaeli et al., 2016; Roediger et al., 2022). As a "good listener," Shelley is engaged by Ben Joe as an interlocutor in his developing sense of self—in what narrative identity theorists have described as a 'co-author' in autobiographical meaning-making (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Adler, 2012).

Rose Quiello (1994), in *Breakdowns and Breakthroughs: The Hysterical Use of Language*, builds on this psychological foundation by investigating the linguistic manifestations of emotional repression and psychological breakdown in Tyler's literary works. Applying Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in conjunction with feminist narratology (Butler, 2004; Irigaray, 2011), Quiello positions language—both its presence and absence—as a site wherein internalized pain and resistance are expressed. In A Slipping-Down Life (1970), Evie's abnormal behavior and facial scars are semiotic indicators of nonconformity and self-definition. The insistence on not covering her scars, despite cultural pressure to do so, is an assertion of rejection of the 'defectiveness/shame' model discerned by Young et al. (2003), thereby rendering trauma into a valuable sign of identity (Quiello, 1994, p. 55; Brown, 2012).

Quiello's opinions are also substantiated by more recent linguistically informed studies of trauma fiction that claim that the signs and symptoms of the body are frequently metonymic substitutes for unspoken emotional pain (Vickroy, 2015; Craps, 2021). Her explication of Breathing Lessons demonstrates Maggie Moran's disjointed and disordered speech as indicative of cognitive dissonance and a disjointed narrative self, while Macon Leary in The Accidental Tourist demonstrates linguistic constraint as an emotional vulnerability management strategy—a trend supported by schema theory on emotional inhibition and avoidance (Shah & Waller, 2020). In *Saint Maybe*, Quiello (1994) finds that silence is both a structural and thematic motif, representing guilt, repression, and transformation. Ian Bedloe's increasing silence, after his perceived complicity in the death of his brother, is exemplary of both self-punitive structure and socially inspired response to ethical failure—an interplay that is consistent with Blumer's symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2015).

The relevance of symbolic interactionism is best realized in Kathleen Woodward's (1999) seminal essay *Forgetting and Remembering: In Praise of Tyler's Older Women.* Woodward uses both Blumer's theory and Young's schema model to examine how Tyler's older female characters rebuild selfhood through memory, social feedback, and emotional renegotiation. In The Amateur Marriage, Pauline's contemplative self-analysis engages in a dialogical exchange between her previous selves and contemporary assertions of selfhood—a venture that Giddens (1991) explains as a "reflexive project of the self." Similarly, in *Noah's Compass*, Liam Pennywell's sister negates the earliest narratives of lack and inconsequence by proclaiming autonomy in later life and thereby resisting cultural narratives on women's aging and dependency (Woodward, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011).

Woodward's strategy is substantiated by current research on aging and schema theory in arguing that flexibility in schemas in old age is an indicator of psychological well-being (Klosko & Bernstein, 2021; Gallagher, 2020; Wurm et al., 2022). In emphasizing moments of narrative revision and role redefinition, Woodward encapsulates the fundamental argument of symbolic interactionism: that identity is built interactionally through significant social interaction that takes place over the life course (Stryker & Burke, 2014; Stets & Serpe, 2021).

Camden Hasting's (2023) doctoral dissertation, Suffering and Coping in the Novels of Anne Tyler, extends these approaches in an integrated psycho-sociological examination of suffering and coping. Hasting discovers thematic clusters of grief, insecurity, and relationship dissolution in novels like *The Accidental Tourist*, *Saint Maybe*, The *Beginner's Goodbye, and Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. Based on interactionist sociology and clinical psychology, he maintains that processes of coping like reframing, meaning-making, and emotional resilience form the central concept of Tyler's human resilience definition. Hasting (2023) explains the principles of schema therapy, particularly schema activation, compensation, and re-scripting processes (Roediger et al., 2022), and weaves them together very tightly with Blumer's definition of self-construction through significant symbols and role-taking (p. 137).

Hasting's integration of Blumer and Young enables a broader vision for identity development in explaining how individuals undergo suffering not in isolation but within the socio-symbolic space of kinship networks, social worlds, and memory (Callero, 2021; McLean & Syed, 2015). Furthermore, his work aligns with the present focus in contemporary literary trauma studies on representation ethics, emotional resilience, and relational repair (Buelens, Durrant, & Eaglestone, 2012; Taberner & Vidmar, 2023). In this project, Hasting offers a dense interpretive background for making sense of Tyler's narrative

ethos—an ethos characterized by the intersection of suffering, symbolic significance, and possibility of change.

In total, these important analyses highlight that the fiction of Anne Tyler offers a rich setting in which the study of identity, cognitive schema formation, emotional conflict, and symbolic interaction is facilitated. The ongoing focus on memory, familial relationships, and the subtleties of interpersonal silence across her narratives reflects broader psychological and sociological patterns, thus demonstrating how literature serves as both a mirror surface and an instrument for understanding the complex interplay between internal emotional life and external societal function.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Schema Therapy Theory

This research utilizes a bifocal theoretical framework integrating the psychological theory of Schema Therapy (ST) and the sociological theory of Symbolic Interactionism (SI). This type of interdisciplinary inquiry enables a sophisticated examination of the interplay between firmly entrenched cognitive-emotional patterns (schemas) and newly formed social identities and roles acquired through interpersonal interaction. Their convergence reflects an emerging academic trend towards interdisciplinarity in personality development research, emotional disturbance, and interpersonal relationships (Fonagy et al., 2019; Roediger et al., 2022; Stets & Serpe, 2021).

Within the field of psychotherapy, Schema Therapy has attracted considerable interest due to its efficacy in addressing enduring, characterological, and treatment-resistant disorders, including borderline personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (Arntz et al., 2013; Fassbinder et al., 2016; Bernstein et al., 2020). Schema Therapy was developed by Jeffrey E. Young in the mid-1980s as a reaction to the limitations of standard cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) in changing deep-seated maladaptive behavior patterns that have their roots in early childhood (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003). Young's model combines CBT with attachment theory, Gestalt therapy techniques, and emotion-focused therapy to develop an integrated therapeutic model that has proven highly effective in working with early maladaptive schemas (EMS)—referred to in this research as "life traps."

The schemas in question are defined as emotionally and cognitively self-defeating patterns that arise when fundamental emotional needs are not fulfilled during the process of early developmental phases (Young et al., 2003; Lockwood & Perris, 2012). Such early maladaptive schemas, founded on trauma, neglect, or dysfunctional relationships experiences, persist in shaping behaviors, emotions, as well as interpersonal relationships throughout one's lifespan, frequently outside conscious awareness (Louis et al., 2013; Shah & Waller, 2020). Eighteen core schemas have been described in schema therapy, such as abandonment, mistrust/abuse, emotional deprivation, defectiveness/shame, failure, dependence/incompetence, and unrelenting standards (Young, 1994; Bach et al., 2018). When activated, these schemas yield intense emotional reactions such as shame, anxiety, and anger that are typically disproportionate to the situation available (Rafaeli et al., 2016; Renner et al., 2020).

While the current research does not attempt to apply therapeutic treatment per se, it draws upon the diagnostic potential of schema therapy (ST) to explain deeper psychological mechanisms in fictional

protagonists. Young and Klosko (1993) contend that even individuals who are overtly successful can be affected by dysfunctional life patterns that distort self-concept and interpersonal relationships. These patterns commonly express themselves as perfectionism, people-pleasing, avoidance, or emotional withdrawal—coping mechanisms that embody underlying cognitive-emotional schemas constructed to deal with early relational injuries (Rijkeboer & Lobbestael, 2016; Louis et al., 2022). ST falls under the general umbrella of the cognitive-behavioral therapies, both Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The paramount aim of all these therapies is the reinterpretation of aberrant beliefs and behaviors through the cognitive restructuring and mindfulness-based strategies (Harris, 2013; Dobson, 2019; Hofmann et al., 2022). Schema Therapy enhances this intention by integrating principles of developmental psychology and affective neuroscience and thus delves more into personality structure and complex emotional regulation problems (Fonagy & Allison, 2014; Bamelis et al., 2014). In addition, Schema Therapy aligns with modern trauma-sensitive therapeutic approaches like *Cognitive Processing Therapy* (CPT) and *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing* (EMDR), which emphasize the relational and somatic aspects of trauma recovery (Resick et al., 2017; Parnell, 2021).

Schema Therapy's (ST) flexibility makes it possible to be combined with other therapy modes, such as *Compassion-Focused Therapy* (CFT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and *Emotionally Focused Therapy* (EFT). These modes all share the goal of improving emotional regulation, interpersonal effectiveness, and self-compassion (Gilbert, 2014; Neff & Germer, 2019; Simpson, 2022). The mentioned integrations are especially helpful in dealing with complicated emotional presentations, where clients show concurrent evidence of trauma, attachment trauma, and identity disturbance (Young et al., 2003; Arntz & Jacob, 2013). Although schema therapy concentrates mainly on individual psychopathology, Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) provides a complementary sociological point of view by examining how identity is built, acted, and interpreted within social environments. Symbolic Interactionism posits that individuals develop their self-concepts based on constant interaction with others through language and shared symbols as the central means of making meaning (Charon, 2010; Fine, 2012). The theory stresses the subjective and dynamic character of identity, with the self being a non-static entity but a continually changing structure that is influenced by social feedback and interpretive actions (Stryker, 2008; Carter & Fuller, 2015).

Blumer's three fundamental premises—meaning, language, and thought—offer a theoretical framework for comprehending how individuals interpret their social worlds (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). The premises very closely parallel schema theory, especially due to the fact that they have the same point of origin that internal belief systems and self-conceptions are formed through social interaction (Burke & Stets, 2009; Callero, 2021). For instance, interpersonal relationships and cultural narratives may enhance or dispute the defectiveness schema, whereas the emotional deprivation schema may be internalized through repeated invalidating experiences (Stets & Serpe, 2021; Hitlin & Vaisey, 2013). Modern sociologists and psychologists have investigated the possibility of integrating Social Identity (SI) with psychological theories to understand identity construction, especially in circumstances involving role conflict, self-presentation, and moral decision-making (Gecas & Burke, 1995; McLean & Syed, 2015; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). Contemporary interdisciplinary research confirms the proposition that narrative identity is co-constructed on the basis of cultural narratives and personal lives (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Reese et al., 2017; Caracciolo, 2014). The proposition is also echoed in Young's proposition that schemas are formed in early care-giving environments and extended in current relational patterns.

Also, cultural studies theorists such as Hall (1996), Mansfield (2000), and Skeggs (2015) have emphasized the impact of ideology and institutional power on subjectivity. This overlaps with SI's emphasis on the social meaning held in everyday interaction and with ST's attention to the early socialization experiences that establish maladaptive patterns. Both theories consider the self to be relational in nature and situated in a socio-symbolic world that facilitates or hinders psychological coherence (Ahmed, 2017; Barker, 2012; Gallagher, 2020).

In the field of literary analysis, the intersection of Source Text (ST) and Secondary Information (SI) enables a subtle explanation of character development. Psychological models serve as internal constructions and units that are constantly shaped, challenged, or confirmed by narrative events and symbolic interactions. Literary characters, like real people, engage in a continuous process of negotiating their sense of self in response to social cues, internalized expectations, and shared collective memory (Adler, 2012; Levine, 2020; Taberner & Vidmar, 2023). As such, the two-approach model followed in this research facilitates detailed examination of social identity and character psychology. Schema Therapy offers enlightening information on the emotional structures and cognitive biases of characters, and Symbolic Interactionism accounts for how these internal schemas come to exist and develop in interactional and cultural contexts. In combination, these approaches enhance our understanding of identity as an intrapsychic and social process characterized by its dynamism, complexity, and extensive effects due to the interaction between past traumas and current meanings.

Maladaptive Schemas or Life Traps					
١	Abandonment /Instability	7	Vulnerability to Harm or Illness	13	Self-Sacrifice
٢	Mistrust/ Abuse	8	Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self	14	Approval-Seeking/ Recognition-Seeking
٣	Emotional Deprivation	9	Failure	15	Negativity/Pessimism
٤	Defectiveness/Shame	10	Entitlement/ Grandiosity	16	Emotional Inhibition
٥	Social Isolation/Alienation	11	Insufficient Self-Control/ Self-Discipline	17	Unrelenting Standards / Hyper-Criticalness
6	Dependence/Incompetence	12	Subjugation	18	Punitiveness

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

In order to further investigate the dynamics of self-concept, the present study integrates Symbolic Interactionism (SI), an original sociological theory articulated by Herbert Blumer (1969). SI believes that meaning is not intrinsic but is created and continually renegotiated within the setting of social interaction. Blumer's theory relies on three elementary principles—meaning, language, and thought—combined to

account for the relational and interpretative process of identity formation. The initial principle, which is termed meaning, asserts that individuals behave towards objects, people, and situations based on the meanings that they have for them. The meanings are not static but are constantly being formed and modified through interaction (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). According to Blumer, "People act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them" (p. 8). The second premise, language, serves as the medium through which meaning is established and individuals can reflect upon and negotiate symbolic cues within their social worlds (Blumer, 1969, p. 10; Mead, 1934). This enables the establishment of shared understanding with room for individual interpretation. The third rule, named thought, is concerned with intrapersonal conversations that actors engage in to interpret and make sense of their experiences. The internal conversation enables people to modify meaning-making due to new experiences or shifting attitudes (Blumer, 1969, p. 12; Snow, 2021).

Another basic element of social interactionism (SI) is its perception of society as a constantly altering network of interactions in which meanings are ceaselessly recreated. In this perspective, social reality isn't stable; rather, it's collectively generated through ongoing engagement and shared interpretation (Dennis & Martin, 2022; Stets & Serpe, 2021). This interpretive system is especially handy to use in applying character analysis to literature because characters move through social roles and experience identity concerns in complicated interpersonal environments.

Theoretical Integration and Methodological Framework

The current research employed a qualitative methodology that integrates a number of disciplines, specifically Schema Therapy (ST) and Symbolic Interactionism (SI), in examining identity formation and psychological development processes in Anne Tyler's novel, *Saint Maybe*. Employing these theory lenses enables close reading analysis to incorporate both the internal psychological structures (schemas) that influence character behavior and the external symbolic contexts that shape the process of identity construction.

Schema Therapy, as outlined by Young, Klosko, and Weishaar (2003), offers a comprehensive system of diagnosis of early maladaptive schemas (EMS)—stable cognitive-emotional templates that form in reaction to frustrated basic needs in childhood. In adulthood, the schemas manifest in rigid, self-defeating patterns that distort perception, amplify suffering, and damage relationships. Within the field of fiction, schema theory enables the comprehension of characters' emotional schema and the influence of unresolved early experiences on narrative pathways. Supporting this structure is Symbolic Interactionism, a theory developed by Herbert Blumer in 1969, which rests largely on the work of George Herbert Mead in 1934. According to this perspective, identity is developed through the interpretive negotiation of social roles, symbols, and interpersonal relations. For literary analysis, Symbolic Interactionism allows for an exploration of how characters construct self-concepts through relational involvement, participation in rituals, and symbolic cues embedded within their cultural and social environments. Taken together, these theoretical models provide a dynamic and recursive identity model that arises out of the interaction between intrapsychic structure and interpersonal feedback loops. The research employs these models through the application of in-depth analysis, thematic coding, and contextual interpretation of narrative examples that express large-scale identity changes in the novel.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Drawing on the above theoretical foundations, the following research questions and hypotheses were developed to guide the analytical process in the current study:

> **RQ1.** How are early maladaptive schemas, as delineated by Schema Therapy, manifested in the protagonist Ian Bedloe's behaviors, choices, and emotional patterns throughout *Saint Maybe*?

> **RQ2.** In what ways do symbolic social environments—such as family, religious institutions, and community—reinforce, challenge, or transform the psychological schemas of the characters?

> **RQ3.** How does Ian Bedloe's self-concept evolve over time through the ongoing negotiation of internal schemas and socially mediated role expectations?

> **RQ4.** What narrative mechanisms (e.g., guilt, redemption, caregiving) contribute to the activation, reinforcement, or revision of maladaptive schemas in the novel?

> **RQ5.** How do broader sociocultural narratives (e.g., Protestant morality, normative masculinity, and familial duty) inform the development and expression of EMS in the characters?

> **RQ6.** To what extent does Symbolic Interactionism provide a framework for interpreting the dialectical relationship between Ian's internal self-concept and his external social roles?

The study posited the following hypotheses, informed by existing scholarship in clinical psychology, narrative identity theory, and literary sociology:

> **H1.** The protagonist Ian Bedloe demonstrates sustained activation of specific EMS—particularly *Failure*, *Self-Sacrifice*, *Subjugation*, and *Emotional Deprivation*—which shape his identity development and interpersonal decisions.

> **H2.** The symbolic institutions within *Saint Maybe*, particularly the Church of the Second Chance and the family unit, serve as dual agents of schema reinforcement and schema transformation by mediating Ian's moral and emotional self-concept.

> **H3.** Character transformation in the novel is associated with a shift from rigid EMS to more adaptive self-understandings, reflecting processes akin to schema re-scripting and identity revision found in therapeutic and sociological literature.

> **H4.** Recurrent symbolic interactions—especially those rooted in caregiving, penance, and relational feedback—contribute to a cyclical reinforcement of maladaptive schemas unless interrupted by critical turning points in the character's social or emotional life.

H5. The novel reflects a cultural framework that intensifies schemas related to *Unrelenting Standards*, *Punitiveness*, and *Approval-Seeking*, particularly through the intersection of American Protestant ethics and gendered expectations of self-sacrifice and emotional restraint.

DISCUSSION

The examination of *Saint Maybe* through the integrated lenses of Schema Therapy and Symbolic Interactionism confirms the primary hypotheses of the study and elucidates the complex mechanisms by which psychological schemas and symbolic social worlds collectively influence character identity. The primary protagonist, Ian Bedloe, provides a critical baseline for observing how early maladaptive schemas (EMS) direct emotional experience, interpersonal conduct, and self-concept within a sociocultural framework.

Schema Activation and Character Psychology (H1)

Based on the first hypothesis (H1), Ian Bedloe exhibits chronic activation of several early maladaptive schemas (EMS), specifically the schemas of Failure, Self-Sacrifice, Subjugation, and Emotional Deprivation. Following his perceived role in his brother Danny's death, Ian's inadequacy feelings intensify, which aligns with the Failure schema. He embraces the belief that he does not have the ability for success or moral worth, which later reinforces his self-sacrificing behavior. His willingness to leave his academic career and romantic relationships to care for Danny's kids is an ultimate demonstration of the Self-Sacrifice schema. This action is more than just a moral one, but a passionate psychological construct where the needs of other individuals are put ahead of his own at his own detriment. Ian's refusal to express his own needs or set emotional boundaries shows the Subjugation schema, in which individuals are able to deny their own needs in a bid to avoid guilt or criticism (Young et al., 2003). Ian's need for emotional intimacy, which is met in very small measure by others, also supports the Emotional Deprivation schema—confirming that his emotional needs will always remain unmet.

Social Institutions as Schema Mediators (H2)

The Second Chance Church and the Bedloe family are symbolic environments that both reaffirm and challenge Ian's schemas and therefore validate H2. The church, being a place with an emphasis on atonement, moral sanctity, and caregiving, is a context in which Ian's schemas are both enacted and ritualized. Through caregiving, he enacts his guilt and does penance—symbolically purging himself of his perceived transgressions. However, the church also encourages moments of reflection, providing a structure and a language for the redemptive process. As such, it comes out as a twofold institution: both as an enabler of schema-driven behavior and as a potential catalyst for the revision of schemas. Similarly, Ian's family is a mirror on which his schemas are confirmed or disconfirmed. The children's coolness, combined with intermittent episodes of warmth, creates a complex feedback system that supports both his abandonment anxiety and emotional unfitness while intermittently providing him with glimpses of relational recovery.

Identity Transformation and Schema Flexibility (H3)

In line with H3, Ian's character growth depicts partial schema change, specifically through caregiving and relational persistence. Although his early actions are controlled by rigid EMS, the narrative portrays his eventual progression toward an increasingly integrated sense of self. This is reminiscent of schema re-scripting—a therapeutic process whereby clients become able to dispute unhealthy schemas and replace them with more adaptive beliefs and behaviors. For instance, Ian's adult decisions to approach romantic relationships and be open to vulnerability imply the development of an increased self-compassion capacity and emotional mutuality. These changes in narrative express the reduction of his Emotional Deprivation and Defectiveness/Shame schemas, providing space for development beyond shame and duty experiences. Although his change is not straightforward or fully successful, it demonstrates the recovery process outlined in schema theory (Arntz & Jacob, 2013; Roediger et al., 2022).

Symbolic Interactions and Schema Cycles (H4)

The narrative offers compelling support for hypothesis H4, that recurring symbolic transactions—particularly those involving caregiving and atonement—tend to reinforce maladaptive cognitive schemata unless disrupted by potent transformative experiences. Ian's caregiving activities assume a ritualized form of self-denial. His sacrificial acts, such as foregoing social and career opportunities, are interpreted within a schema-dominated paradigm of guilt, duty, and fear of moral inadequacy. Yet, paradigmatic instances of symbolic interaction—like open-ended discussions with children or dilemmas that challenge his moral absolutism—operate as probable disruptors of chronic schemas. Such interactions provide space for schema flexibility, especially where Ian permits himself to reevaluate his self-worth or moral inflexibility based on relational feedback. The symbolic interactionism theory of "reflexive thought" (Blumer, 1969) becomes operational at this point: it is within internal dialogues instigated by social experience that Ian starts reformulating his narrative identity.

Cultural Scripts and Schema Intensification (H5)

Finally, the story supports H5, which proposes that *Saint Maybe* represents cultural stories that reinforce schemas like Unrelenting Standards, Punitiveness, and Approval-Seeking. Tyler situates Ian in a moral schema infused with middle-class Protestant values, which link worthiness with self-sacrifice, moral integrity, and caretaking behavior. These cultural values strengthen Ian's internal schemas by embedding them in the symbolic structure of his community. Gender expectations also complicate Ian's identity. By portraying a male character who engages in domestic caregiving, Ian disrupts normative masculinity but also continues to bear the psychological weight of portraying a feminized role. His emotional repression and dutifulness are not only psychological responses but culturally inscribed practices that engage with broader discourses of masculine responsibility and moral burden (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2022; Jordan, 2020).

Summary

Cumulatively, these findings substantiate the notion that Ian Bedloe's psychological development is not an isolated endeavor; rather, it is a socially and symbolically influenced process. The novel *Saint Maybe* is

consistent with the existing knowledge base of both Schema Therapy and Symbolic Interactionism in that it demonstrates the development of identity at the nexus of personal belief systems and shared meaning-making. Characters do not simply "possess" schemas; instead, they act out and negotiate them through symbolic action, social reaction, and emotional adaptation. Under this bifocal scrutiny, *Saint Maybe* emerges not only as a story of emotional resilience but also as a literary exploration of schema flexibility, symbolic atonement, and the social construction of identity.

CONCLUSION

The current research illustrates that Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe* constitutes a model case study for examining identity construction processes from the combined perspectives of Schema Therapy (ST) and Symbolic Interactionism (SI). Using the two theories, the research investigated how obstinate psychological schemas engage with symbolic social worlds in modeling characters' self-concept, behavior, and moral reasoning, with a particular focus on the main character, Ian Bedloe. The findings confirm the hypothesis that Ian's psychological development is significantly influenced by common early maladaptive schemas (EMS), namely those related to Failure, Self-Sacrifice, Subjugation, and Emotional Deprivation, thus supporting H1. These schemas, resulting from unresolved early experiences and intensified by an acute experience of moral failure, inform Ian's decisions throughout the narrative. His caregiving tendencies, self-denial, and repression of emotions are perfect examples of these deep-rooted patterns, which offer important insight into how EMS can distort identity and interpersonal functioning.

In line with H2, symbolic institutions like the Church of the Second Chance and the Bedloe family are external expressions of Ian's internal schemata. These social environments not only reinforce maladaptive beliefs but also hold the possibilities of change. The church, especially, is both a ritual space of reconciliation and a source of moral recalibration—underlining the dual role of symbolic environments in the reinforcement and change of schemata.

In support of H3, the novel demonstrates instances of schema flexibility and incremental change, especially in Ian's developing ability for self-reflection, reciprocal relationships, and emotional openness. While his process is not one of full recovery, his incremental shift away from rigid self-denial and shame suggests the potential for schema re-scripting, in line with therapeutic trajectories described in Schema Therapy literature.

As predicted by H4, the study illustrates how symbolic interactions—more specifically, caregiving-, guilt-, and forgiveness-related symbolic interactions—enforce or disrupt schemas through ongoing social feedback. At the heart of this process lies the SI theoretical concept of reflexive self-monitoring: Ian is constantly negotiating his self in relation to others' expectations, judgments, and affective cues, illustrating the performative and fluid nature of self.

Finally, H5 is supported by the narrative's representation of cultural scripts that enhance psychological models, particularly those of Protestant ethics, gendered duties, and the repression of emotions. Ian's identity is shaped not just by personal trauma but also by the ideological models regarding redemption, masculinity, and duty—demonstrating that these models are both personal and culturally based.

In summary, this research demonstrates the relevance of integrating Schema Therapy and Symbolic Interactionism in illuminating the complex relation between social constructionism and psychological determinism in literary fiction. Ian Bedloe's identity does not derive from inward contemplation but rather

from a continuous negotiation between the demands of his inner life and symbolic roles offered by the outside world. In *Saint Maybe*, Tyler shows us how people grapple with moral injury, emotional resilience, and social affiliation—providing readers with not just a story of psychological turmoil, but a template for thinking through how selfhood is co-authored in emotion, interaction, and culture.

This interdisciplinary methodology foregrounds the capacity of literary fiction to demonstrate psychological resilience, identity change, and moral inventiveness. Future research could extend this model to address Tyler's oeuvre in general or other works of literature that address characters who confront trauma, caregiving challenge, and the process of ethical self-rebuilding. In so doing, literature remains not just a mirror of the mind, but a means by which the complexities of the human condition can be more deeply comprehended.

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