



Unveiling the Structures of Feeling in Ann Patchett's *Tom Lake*

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Abstract. This thesis explores how Ann Patchett's *Tom Lake* captures and expresses the unspoken emotional atmosphere of rural American life during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Raymond Williams's theory of the "structure of feeling." Focusing on the novel's portrayal of small-town community, familial labor, and generational memory, the research examines how emotions like longing, resignation, care, and quiet agency shape character identity and social relationships. Using Williams's cultural materialism as a theoretical foundation, the study reveals how *Tom Lake* reflects the lived experiences of individuals whose emotions are deeply entangled with historical and socio-economic change, yet often remain unarticulated. The cherry farm, as both a physical and emotional space, becomes the central site where the past and present converge, offering a poignant setting in which Lara and her daughters navigate memory, loss, and continuity. Through narrative analysis, this thesis argues that Patchett's use of everyday life, particularly under crisis conditions, mirrors the emotional undercurrents of a transitional era. The novel does not dramatize suffering but instead reveals the quiet persistence of meaning and feeling in ordinary routines. The result of this study demonstrates literature's capacity to render the emotional truth of a historical moment visible through subtle, shared, and deeply human experiences.

Keywords: COVID-19, Cultural Materialism, Rural Life, Structure of Feeling

INTRODUCTION/PENDAHULUAN

Raymond Williams's (1977) concept of Structure of Feeling, which refers to the shared but often unspoken emotional experiences of people living through a particular historical moment. These feelings are not only personal but emerge from cultural and socio-economic contexts, forming a lived structure that literature can uniquely express. Williams' Structure of Feeling connect to Ann Patchett's novel *Tom Lake* because it shows the quiet emotions and shared experiences people go through during times of change (Highmore, 2017:22-30). The novel does not focus on big events or news headlines.

The study focuses on how the novel illustrates changes in identity, relationships, and community under socio-economic pressure, offering insight into how literature can document and critique emotional life beyond official history or dominant ideologies. Using a literary analysis approach rooted in cultural materialism, the research contributes to broader discussions of how fiction mirrors emotional realities shaped by societal structures, particularly in times of crisis.

Structure of Feeling was chosen because it offers a powerful framework for understanding how literature captures the emotional undercurrents of a historical moment. Unlike more rigid theories that focus only on ideology or formal structures, Raymond Williams's concept allows us to explore the subtle, shared feelings and lived experiences that often go unspoken but shape everyday life. This is especially relevant in the context of *Tom Lake*, a novel that deals with memory, loss, and family during the COVID-19 pandemic a period marked by emotional uncertainty and social transformation.

The reason for choosing this novel as a data source is because it shows the quiet emotions people feel during a time of change, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel focuses not on major public events but on the quiet, intimate experiences of a family in a rural small-town setting. This makes it especially suitable for exploring Raymond Williams's concept of Structure of Feeling, which emphasizes the shared, often unspoken emotions that define a particular historical moment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study uses Raymond Williams's theory of cultural materialism, with a particular focus on his idea of structure of feeling, to analyze themes of community, identity, and individual agency in *Tom Lake*. Cultural materialism views literature as a product of material and historical contexts, not separate from real-life power dynamics, values, and economic forces. Through this approach, the research explores how Ann Patchett portrays tensions between personal freedom and social expectations in a small-town American setting, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. By grounding the analysis in lived experience, this framework highlights how cultural identity is both constructed and felt through everyday life. Several core concepts are central to the analysis:

- **Community** is understood not merely as a location but as an affective formation, shaped by shared practices and emotional ties. In *Tom Lake*, small-town routines like cherry picking and storytelling create a collective emotional atmosphere that aligns with Williams's idea of lived culture.
- **Identity** is viewed as a product of ongoing negotiation between residual, dominant, and emergent cultural forces (Moran, 2018). Lara's personal journey reflects these dynamics, shaped by social expectations and shifting emotional realities (Orsini, 2021).
- **Individual Agency** in cultural materialism is both constrained and enabled by structure. Williams (1977) emphasizes that personal decisions often emerge from deeply felt emotional contexts rather than overt ideology. Lara's quiet choices, such as remaining on the farm, exemplify this nuanced form of agency.
- **Cultural Materialism** positions literature within the historical and material conditions of its production. Scholars such as Prendergast (1995), Soqandi & Basirizadeh (2020), and Alcala (2010) highlight how Williams's framework restores attention to class, power, and lived experience. In *Tom Lake*, characters' decisions are shaped by socio-economic pressures, gender roles, and community values.
- **Structure** refers to the ingrained norms and everyday systems that define what is acceptable or valuable. In the novel, rural life, gender roles, and generational expectations form the structure within which characters operate.
- **Feeling** reflects social moods and emotions embedded in daily life, rather than isolated personal states (Morrow, 2012). Literature captures these affective undercurrents through subtle atmospheres and character dynamics.

- **Structure of Feeling** itself serves as the core concept, representing collective, pre-articulated emotional responses to socio-historical change (Flatley, 2019). In *Tom Lake*, these are seen in the characters' ambivalence about rural life, their restrained expressions, and their navigation of past and present during the pandemic.

METHOD

This study adopts a structuralism approach informed by Raymond Williams' cultural materialism, particularly his concept of the structure of feeling the lived, often unspoken emotional experiences of a historical moment. Using qualitative analysis, the research examines Ann Patchett's *Tom Lake* to explore how themes of identity, community, and socio-economic tension are expressed within the narrative. The data are taken from the novel, therefore the novel that entitled *Tom Lake* by Ann Patchett. It consists of 256 pages. The data are drawn directly from both the print and digital versions of *Tom Lake*, with particular attention to passages that reflect underlying emotional currents and socio-cultural conditions. The researcher functions as the primary instrument, conducting close textual analysis through processes of reading, highlighting, categorizing, and interpreting. Data collection involves identifying key themes and expressions of social experience, while analysis involves connecting these textual instances to broader theoretical constructs. The researcher serves as the primary instrument, conducting close readings and thematic categorizations to interpret the novel's socio-cultural dimensions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings and interpretative discussion on how Ann Patchett's *Tom Lake* illustrates Raymond Williams's concept of the "structure of feeling." The novel offers a compelling narrative about emotional undercurrents in rural small-town life during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis reveals that Patchett captures shared, often unspoken emotions that reflect broader socio-economic changes, intergenerational bonds, and the negotiation of identity through art and memory.

The Pandemic and the Cherry Farm as Personal Community Landscape

The cherry farm in *Tom Lake* becomes more than a setting it is an emotional landscape shaped by collective experience. During the lockdown, Lara and her daughters return to labor-intensive routines, replacing absent seasonal workers. This shared labor expresses a structure of feeling rooted in care, quiet resilience, and interdependence. Rather than dramatizing crisis, Patchett centers daily life and repetition as spaces of meaning-making. Lara reflects,

She was telling me how sick she was of us, that she hated being a teenager, hated her body, didn't want to be stuck on a cherry orchard, that she had bigger ideas of the world. But she didn't have words for any of that, not even words she could say to herself. She could only experience the wracking pain of her circumstances, inflict it on us, and then demand that Duke was that pain's only solution. (Patchett, 2023:28)

Collective Emotion and Cultural Memory in Our Town

The recurring motif of *Our Town* serves as a cultural and emotional anchor, connecting Lara's past to the present. The play becomes a medium through which Lara processes memory and shares collective emotion with her daughters. Community theater, once a space of youthful discovery, now functions as a symbol of emotional continuity. Through

performance, Lara navigates not only stage roles but her identity in a broader cultural structure. Williams's theory helps reveal how such artistic expressions sustain the emotional memory of a community and reflect the values of an era in flux.

Emily showed us that, all those moments in life we had missed and would never get back again. ... When she went back to her mother's kitchen I cried like I had never seen the play before. I cried because she was that good. I cried because I would never play Emily again. I cried because I had loved that world so much. (Patchett, 2023:192)

Lara's Aspirations as Expressions of Generational Expectation

In *Tom Lake*, Lara's youthful dream of becoming an actress is not merely personal ambition it reflects broader generational expectations about success, freedom, and self-discovery. Through the lens of Raymond Williams's structure of feeling, her aspirations can be seen as emotionally shaped by the cultural values of her time: the desire for individuality, achievement, and escape from small-town life.

When Lara leaves college for Los Angeles and embraces the stage, she is following an emotional script shaped by her generation's idealism. This emergent emotional tone—hopeful, bold, and uncertain is captured in her confidence despite inexperience.

"It wasn't that I wanted to be an actress, it was that I knew that I could do a better job." (Patchett, 2023:10)

Character Identity

In *Tom Lake*, Ann Patchett subtly explores the transformation of identity through the symbolic act of renaming from "Laura" to "Lara." This shift marks a pivotal moment in the protagonist's personal and emotional development. Within the framework of Raymond Williams's theory of structure of feeling, Lara's renaming reflects more than a superficial change; it reveals an emerging consciousness shaped by desire, aspiration, and quiet resistance to social expectations.

Williams (1977) argues that identity is not formed in isolation but emerges within the cultural and emotional structures of a particular time. Lara's decision to drop the "u" from her birth name symbolizes a break from inherited identity and the beginning of self-authorship. In her youth, as she enters the emotionally charged space of community theater and encounters new possibilities, she redefines herself. The renaming coincides with her growing sense of agency and the emotional energies of adolescence, filled with longing, uncertainty, and the desire to be seen differently.

I printed my name: Laura Kenison. Other than my address, phone number, date of birth, I had nothing to offer, no way to turn my after-school job at Stitch-It into theatrical experience ... "Well, UP unTIL a YEAR ago I USED to like YOU a LOT," Emily sang ... This time I spelled my name L- A- R- A, tossing out the "u" my parents had given me at birth because I believed this new spelling to be Russian and worldly. (Patchett, 2023:11)

How the COVID-19 Lockdown Shapes How Lara Interprets Her Own Past Choices and Who She Has Become

In *Tom Lake*, the COVID-19 lockdown becomes a space for Lara to quietly reflect on her past choices. Living and working again with her daughters on the cherry farm, Lara begins to see her younger self, past relationships, and career decisions with renewed clarity. This period of stillness creates the emotional conditions for re-evaluating who she has become.

Raymond Williams's *structure of feeling* helps explain how these emotions emerge not as private sentiment, but as part of a shared mood shaped by the crisis. Lara's reassessment is not dramatic, but subtle and deeply felt. She acknowledges both joy and regret, but finds meaning in her current life.

"The past... would look like a disaster, but regardless of how it ended we all had many good days... this unparalleled disaster is the happiest time of my life." (Patchett, 2023:206–207)

CONCLUSION

This study shows that *Tom Lake* by Ann Patchett captures the quiet emotional life of a family during the COVID-19 pandemic. By using Raymond Williams's idea of the "structure of feeling," the novel helps readers understand emotions like regret, longing, and quiet joy. These feelings are not shown in dramatic ways, but through small, everyday moments like talking, working on the farm, and remembering the past. The cherry farm becomes a place where the characters share their stories and grow closer.

Lara's memories of her youth, including her time as an actress and her relationship with a famous actor, show how her identity changes over time. Her decision to go by "Lara" instead of "Laura" shows how even small choices can reflect deeper emotional shifts. The return of her daughters during the pandemic brings the family together, and their shared work helps them find peace and meaning during a difficult time. The play *Our Town*, which appears in the novel, also reminds us to appreciate simple moments in everyday life.

The novel also shows how social and economic changes affect emotions. With no outside workers, the family must rely on each other, and this creates both closeness and pressure especially for Lara, who quietly carries much of the emotional responsibility. In the end, *Tom Lake* teaches us that deep emotions are often not spoken out loud, but they still shape our lives. Through its gentle and quiet style, the novel becomes a reflection of how many people felt and coped during a time of crisis.

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