



The Art of Characterization in Franzen's *The Corrections*

¹ Y.Venkata Rao, ² Dr.I.Vijayababu

¹ Lecturer in English, ²Principal

¹ SVLNS Govt.Degree College, ²DR.V.S.Krishna Govt.Degree and PG College(A).
¹ Visakhapatnam.

Abstract : Jonathan Franzen, born in 1959, is a celebrated American novelist and essayist known for his exploration of intricate family dynamics, societal critiques, and the complexities of modern life. His literary journey began with the publication of "Twenty-Seventh City" in 1988, a satirical thriller delving into family and political turmoil in St. Louis. Subsequent works like "Strong Motion" (1992), "The Corrections" (2001), and "Freedom" (2010) earned him accolades and prizes, with "The Corrections" receiving widespread acclaim for its portrayal of the Lambert family's struggles.

Franzen's writing extends beyond storytelling; it seeks to uncover the intricate web of connections that shape life. His narratives prompt readers to contemplate their own familial and societal relationships. His works delve into family issues, realism, fame, political and economic concerns, feminism, and the challenges facing America.

A recurring theme in Franzen's novels is the contrast between physical and digital connections. While modern technology can isolate his characters, it is through physical interactions that they find true connections and redemption.

Franzen's work has been associated with post-postmodernism, a literary movement seeking to move beyond postmodernism's extensive irony and self-reflection. Franzen contributes to this movement through his exploration of identity, his examination of modern culture, and his use of narrative techniques that transcend traditional postmodernism.

Franzen's commitment to this literary trend is evident in his exploration of various levels of subjectivity. Characters in his works navigate self-realization processes, often facing uncertainty, dispersion, and skepticism.

His characters explore diverse paths of selfhood and alternative ideologies to shield themselves from self-deception, self-sacrifice, or self-doubt induced by social, cultural, and economic forces. Franzen's novels serve as mirrors reflecting our own struggles and triumphs, fostering meaningful discussions about the intricacies of the human condition and the complexities of the modern world.

Keywords: Franzen, Corrections, Characterization, Family relations

IndexTerms - Component,formatting,style,styling,insert.

I. INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Franzen garnered widespread recognition in 2010 when he graced the cover of Time Magazine under the bold headline "Great American Novelist." Born on August 17th, 1959, Jonathan Earl Franzen is an esteemed American novelist and essayist. His journey as a novelist began with the publication of his debut work, "Twenty-Seventh City," in 1988. This complex and partly satirical thriller delves into family dynamics and the political and economic turbulence of St. Louis, Missouri, in 1984.

In 1992, Franzen released his second novel, "Strong Motion," which passionately critiques social issues such as abortion, feminism, and exploitative capitalism. In 2001, his third novel, "The Corrections," achieved immense success, earning him a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction Finalist nomination, along with the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and inclusion in the International Dublin Literary Award. The novel explores the struggles of an elderly Midwestern couple and their three adult children, tracing their lives from the mid-20th century.

Franzen's fourth novel, "Freedom," was published in 2010 and received critical acclaim, ranking among the best books of the year in various publications. His fifth novel, "Purity," emerged on September 1st, 2015, featuring a narrative composed of six sections that delve into diverse characters of varying ages and backgrounds. Franzen's most recent work, "Crossroads," employs his signature multiple-narrator style to unravel the complexities of a family at the heart of the story, the same characters who will form the backdrop of the entire trilogy.

In the 21st century, Franzen has been outspoken about the impact of electronic distractions, including social networking services like Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook. He has raised questions about why people increasingly prefer virtual communication over face-to-face interactions and the growing use of e-books. Franzen's writings often delve into family issues, realism, fame, political and economic concerns, feminism, and the challenges facing America.

POST-POST-MODERNISM

One recurring theme in Franzen's novels is the contrast between physical and digital connections. While modern technology, represented by Facebook, Twitter, and virtual realities, can isolate his characters, it is through physical interactions and the collision of physical desires that they find true connections and redemption.

Franzen's work has been associated with post-postmodernism, a literary movement that seeks to move beyond the extensive irony and self-reflection of postmodernism. Alongside figures like David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, William Vollmann, Dave Eggers, Nicole Krauss, and Jonathan Safran Foer, Franzen has contributed to this movement in his works, such as "Freedom."

As per Franzen's perspective, American fiction has seemingly preserved only one of its many previous societal functions: providing a platform for marginalized individuals to establish their identities in contrast to the prevailing culture. While he once aspired to create novels that offered biting social commentary capable of effecting change—traditionally, a goal of American social novels—Franzen now holds the view that economic forces have eliminated the feasibility of such texts by rendering them obscure.

Jonathan Franzen stands as a prominent figure in contemporary literary discussions, notably contributing to the evolution of the post-postmodernist approach in his literary works. While his initial novels, "The Twenty Seven City" (1988) and "Strong Motion" (1992), bear certain elements of postmodern style and content, his later works, "The Corrections" (2001) and "Freedom" (2010), signify a transition towards a post-postmodern realist approach. In these later novels, Franzen strives to bridge the gap between the evolving human condition and the pre-existing political landscape, aiming to instil a sense of engagement and completeness in the narrative, potentially fostering constructive change beyond the confines of postmodernism.

Franzen's commitment to the tenets of the post-postmodern trend is evident in several ways. First, he delves into philosophical concepts of identity and selfhood, exploring the complexities of these themes in depth within his narratives. Additionally, he engages in intricate discussions that encompass various facets of modern culture, including the social, economic, technological, and ecological aspects. By doing so, he brings a holistic perspective to his storytelling, capturing the multifaceted nature of contemporary society. Furthermore, Franzen reintroduces elements like stylistic omniscience and metafictional discourse, demonstrating a willingness to revive literary techniques that transcend the boundaries of traditional postmodernism.

Franzen explores various layers of subjectivity to illustrate processes of self-realization. Within the post-postmodern context, individuals may grapple with feelings of detachment from reality, yet they actively seek solutions to bridge this gap. Franzen's works delve into situations marked by uncertainty, dispersion, and skepticism, which arise when individuals confront the complexities of self-realization.

Amidst the confusion that often accompanies self-realization, his characters exhibit resilience in preserving their core priorities and values, resisting the temptation to succumb to self-doubt, deception, or skepticism regarding the coherence of their identities. They may choose to merge their sense of self with the prevailing spirit of their era, adopting practices that bolster their self-concept. Alternatively, some characters may opt to surrender to forces beyond their comprehension, striving for a harmonious coexistence with these enigmatic powers.

This exploration of identity formation is a recurring theme in Franzen's works, where characters frequently embark on diverse paths of selfhood or embrace alternative ideologies as a means to shield themselves from the pitfalls of self-deception, self-sacrifice, or self-doubt, which may be induced by the influences of social, cultural, and economic forces.

Franzen's literary journey reflects his commitment to advancing the post-postmodernist approach. Through his exploration of identity, his comprehensive examination of modern culture, and his embrace of narrative techniques, he contributes to the ongoing evolution of contemporary literature, pushing the boundaries of storytelling and fostering a deeper understanding of the complex world we inhabit. He remarks in one of the interviews:

I understand better how much of writing a novel is about self-examination, self-transformation. I spend vastly more time nowadays trying to figure out what's stopping me from doing the work, trying to figure out how I can become the person who can do the work, investigating the shame and fear: the shame of self-exposure, the fear of ridicule or condemnation, the fear of causing pain or harm. That kind of self-analysis was entirely absent with *The Twenty-Seventh City*, and almost entirely absent with *Strong Motion*. It became necessary for the first time with *The Corrections*. And it became the central project with *Freedom*—so much so that the actual writing of pages was almost like a treat I was given after doing the real work.

CHARACTERIZATION IN *THE CORRECTIONS*

"The Corrections" centers on the conflicting desires and ideals of each member of the Lambert family. They grapple with the pursuit of happiness without neglecting their familial responsibilities, and the title itself alludes to the theme of self-correction. The novel portrays characters striving to correct their lives and facing their failures head-on, reflecting the challenges of modern American society.

Franzen's portrayal of 21st-century American society has earned "The Corrections" labels like "the Bleak House of the digital age" and "hysterical realism." The novel explores a wide range of topics, including economic colonization, the pharmaceutical industry, globalization, and the state of central Europe, while simultaneously weaving a tale of the dysfunctional Lambert family's attempts to come together for one final Christmas.

"The Corrections" introduces readers to Alfred and Enid Lambert and their three adult children, Gary, Chip, and Denise, each burdened with conflicting desires and responsibilities. As Alfred's Parkinson's disease worsens, the family must navigate the challenges of caring for him, adding to the complexity of their lives.

In "The Corrections," Jonathan Franzen constructs a theatrical stage where his characters grapple with diverse notions of selfhood, creating internal conflicts as they attempt to make sense of their own identities. Some characters possess a coherent self-awareness, providing transparent insights and analyses of their actions, behaviors, thoughts, and beliefs, offering genuine reflections of their experiences and perspectives on the world. Their reliability ensures that they cannot distort or fabricate their experiences or viewpoints, even if they diverge from societal or cultural norms.

The novel unravels the tensions and challenges within the Lambert family, portraying family as both a burden and a source of purpose. It explores themes of identity, psychological distress, and complex relationships.

Franzen's writing extends beyond storytelling; it seeks to uncover the intricate web of connections that shape life. In "The Corrections," the novel serves as a medium to reveal the depth of these connections, prompting readers to contemplate their own familial and societal relationships.

In the face of his radically changing culture, Alfred turns to solitude as a means of self-empowerment, a response driven by his misconceptions about his deteriorating health. His inclination towards self-isolation deepens when he makes a startling discovery: his supposedly electronic chair is, in reality, constructed from Popsicle sticks. This revelation leads him to contemplate whether a physical space only truly exists in his own mental reconstruction (Franzen, 2001, p. 355).

Alfred's suspicions intensify as he becomes more convinced that his every "authentic" impulse merely bolsters his sense of moral superiority, a concept he considers abstract (Franzen, 2001, p. 355). His belief that the world is indifferent further pushes him towards isolation from both the physical world and others. This isolation becomes a source of self-empowerment for him, a preference for solitude over social connections. He sees these connections as sentimental and weakening to his self-control.

Interestingly, Alfred's loneliness serves as a form of self-empowerment rather than seeking comfort in social familiarity, even though he acknowledges, "I've suffered from depression all my life" (Franzen, 2001, p. 29). His confession isn't a plea for empathy but rather a realization about himself. When a character acknowledges certain aspects of their personality and seeks confirmation from others, even if it's negative, it aligns with Swann's "Self-Verification Theory" (2011). According to this theory, some individuals seek self-verification because it provides them with a sense of coherence and protection (Swann, 2012).

This idea is also evident in Franzen's essay collections, particularly "How to be Alone" (2002). In this work, Franzen suggests that the most significant "corrections" in his novel "The Corrections" are the moments when characters are suddenly confronted with truth or reality, which disrupts their tendencies towards self-deception or denial, affecting the more profound aspects of their selves (p. 80). Alfred's responses to the changing world, his struggles with depression, and his choice of isolation are all deliberate corrections he makes to assert his self-awareness and difference from others.

Alfred Lambert is far from being a mere dying patriarch or a symbolic representation of the American Dream, just as Enid Lambert is more than a simple emblem of a pitiable creature or a character reminiscent of a madwoman-in-the-attic archetype. Likewise, Chip is not solely defined by his status as a desolate artist. These individuals are, in essence, Midwesterners with multifaceted dimensions that defy concise summarization. For Franzen, the reliance on conventional expectations and generalized portrayals falls short of the mark. He instead emphasizes the necessity for a deeper comprehension, one that stems from engaged contemplation and interpretive introspection, fueled by the revelation of surprises and the disruption of presumed norms.

In a similar vein, Franzen's characters are prompted to undertake revisions in their lives, to engage with individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, to partake in unsuccessful romantic endeavors, and to acknowledge the intricate nature of existence by immersing themselves in both the world outside the Midwest and the dynamics of their family unit. This multifaceted approach to character development reflects Franzen's commitment to portraying authentic complexity, urging both his readers and his characters to delve beyond surface appearances and explore the rich tapestry of human experience.

Conversely, other characters find themselves unable to define their own subjective identities. Franzen's exploration of these varied personal accounts underscores the idea that truth is so multifaceted and individualized that it becomes challenging for others to recognize it, echoing Proust's notion that truth is variable for each of us. In a post-postmodern context, societal validations of an individual's subjective history, actions, and thoughts hold little significance. Instead, what truly matters is the mutual respect these individuals cultivate for one another's unique perspectives and ideologies. In this framework, mutual respect becomes a cornerstone of understanding and coexistence.

Gary, the eldest son, struggles with depression and the pressure to provide for his parents, leading to tension between his wife and mother over Christmas plans. Chip, the middle child, abandons his professorship due to an affair with an undergraduate student and pursues a transgressive lifestyle in New York City, working as a proofreader. Denise, the youngest, is a talented chef whose life takes a tumultuous turn as she navigates her own desires and her mother's expectations.

Surprisingly, it is the seventy-five-year-old Enid Lambert who emerges as a central figure in the novel's resolution. Despite her quirks and anxieties, she remains steadfast in her commitment to her family, even as her husband's condition deteriorates.

In interviews, Franzen has discussed his fascination with family dynamics as a narrative strategy. He draws inspiration from real-life examples, such as his dentist in New York, who has three FBI agent brothers. These unusual family dynamics provide a rich tapestry for his storytelling, allowing him to explore universal conflicts by simply invoking familial relationships like "son" and "father."

There is a suggestion that Franzen aims to steer American literary fiction back to its fundamental roots, emphasizing character-driven narratives and expansive storytelling reminiscent of Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, and George Eliot. It's worth noting that this proclamation tends to resurface periodically (typically by male authors). However, when comparing Franzen's work to examples like Tom Wolfe's "Bonfire of the Vanities" and Kurt Andersen's "Turn of the Century," it becomes evident that the latter works appear somewhat superficial in contrast. Wolfe and Andersen operate as broad-strokes satirists, primarily focused on justifying their own privileged positions and showcasing their intellectual prowess. In stark contrast, Franzen possesses a moral acumen and a remarkable ability to unearth profound significance in ordinary settings and everyday moments.

Franzen primarily depicts various levels of subjectivity to offer redemptive narratives and advocate for fiction's role as a tool for social reform. Franzen provides several "salvational narratives" (Hidalga, 2017, p. 3), which serve as self-legitimizing policies and ideologies. In other words, Franzen achieves personal and literary redemption through these salvational narratives. In his social novels of the twenty-first century, some of his fictional protagonists (like himself) are psychologically secure when they accept ethical commitments while rejecting the twentieth century's sociopolitical practice of self-interest. Franzen emphasizes redemptive plots (e.g., reconciliation and self-development) as the keys for securing the individual from personal and social contradictions.

The structure of "The Corrections" weaves together the individual narratives of the three Lambert children, forming a broad chronological framework that parallels the tangled Christmas lights Alfred grapples with in the novel's later stages. The analogy between Alfred's struggle with the wires and the reader's engagement with the narrative becomes apparent. Just as Alfred attempts to decipher the intricate arrangement of the wires, the reader endeavors to make sense of the interwoven stories of the children. While Alfred initially conceives of his children's lives in a linear sequence—Gary followed by Chip four years later, and Denise another seven years thereafter—Franzen's intricate chronology disrupts this linear progression, presenting the siblings' biographies in a complex and parallel manner, thus obscuring the clear arcs of their lives.

Jonathan Franzen's literary oeuvre is a testament to his versatility as a writer, as he skillfully delves into a myriad of themes and employs a diverse array of narrative techniques. From dissecting intricate family dynamics to offering incisive societal critiques, Franzen's novels are a rich tapestry of human experiences and emotions that resonate with readers on multiple levels.

One of Franzen's defining strengths lies in his ability to explore the complex relationships that underpin his characters' lives. Whether it's the tangled bonds of family members struggling to reconcile their individual desires with their collective responsibilities, or the intricate interplay between individuals navigating the complexities of love and friendship, Franzen's narratives offer a profound insight into the human condition. His characters are multi-dimensional, flawed yet relatable, and their journeys of self-discovery and growth serve as mirrors reflecting our own struggles and triumphs.

Furthermore, Franzen's works serve as a catalyst for introspection, compelling readers to contemplate the connections that shape their own lives. His narratives pose thought-provoking questions about identity, authenticity, and the impact of societal norms and expectations on individuals. Through his characters' trials and tribulations, Franzen invites us to examine our own choices, values, and relationships, ultimately prompting us to seek a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

It's worth noting that Franzen's literary contributions extend beyond mere storytelling; they serve as a vehicle for fostering meaningful discussions about the intricacies of modern society and the human condition. His keen observations and incisive critiques of contemporary issues, whether they be related to technology, politics, or cultural shifts, challenge readers to confront the complexities of the world we inhabit.

In conclusion, Jonathan Franzen's body of work represents a compelling exploration of the human experience, offering readers a profound journey through the intricate web of relationships and societal dynamics that shape our lives. His novels serve as a mirror reflecting our own hopes, fears, and aspirations, while also providing a platform for engaging discussions about the challenges and nuances of the modern world. As Franzen's literary legacy continues to evolve, it remains a source of inspiration and contemplation for generations of readers seeking to navigate the complexities of the human condition.

References

1. "Jonathan Franzen's Freedom in the Post-postmodern Era." *Università Ca' Foscari Venezia*. Accessed 25 Aug. 2023.
2. H. Aljadaani, Mashael, and Laila M. Al-Sharqi. "The Evolution of Post-Postmodernism: Aesthetics of Reality and Trust in Jonathan Franzen's the Corrections and Freedom." *Arab World English Journal for Translation and Literary Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, AWEJ Group, Feb. 2021, pp. 296–323. *Crossref*, doi:10.24093/awejtls/vol5no1.21.
3. Jagoda Dolińska Autofiction and New Realist Prose: Jonathan Franzen's Freedom
4. Hosseini, Sayyede Maryam, et al. "Jonathan Franzen's the Corrections: Ethics of Complexity." *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM Press), Nov. 2018, pp. 186–200. *Crossref*, doi:10.17576/gema-2018-1804-12.
5. Interview at the Forum Book Club: "Jonathan Franzen on autobiographies and whether he's 'more of a Richard or a Walter.'" 7 May 2011. Web.