

Franzen's Corrections: Shift from Post-Modernism

¹Y.Venkata Rao

Research Scholar

TDR – HUB, Andhra University, Visakapatnam
Lecturer in English, SVLNS Govt. Degree College
Bheemunipathnam, Visakhapatnam.

²Dr. I.Vijayababu

Principal

Dr.V.S.Krishna Govt., Degree and PG College(A), Visakhapatnam

Abstract:

Jonathan Franzen emerged as a distinctive American novelist and essayist with a notable transition in his literary approach. Initially venturing into social novels like "The Twenty Seventh City" and "Strong Motion," Franzen later shifted away from the condescension often associated with the genre. His pivotal work, "The Corrections" (2001), marked a turning point in his career, earning acclaim for its departure from postmodernism to realism.

In "The Corrections," Franzen narrates the intricate story of the Lambert family, a traditional Midwestern household. As Franzen veered towards realism, character depth and readability became paramount, distinguishing this work from his earlier postmodern references.

Franzen's evolution as a writer is evident in his shift from isolation to openness, rejecting condescension for reader engagement. "The Corrections" reflects not only a literary transformation but also a personal one, with Franzen's embrace of the role of entertainer and a newfound passion for his characters. This journey, coupled with the novel's critical success, solidifies Franzen's place in contemporary American literature.

Keywords: Franzen, Corrections, Post-Modernism, Realism.

Jonathan Franzen, born on August 17, 1959, in Western Springs, Illinois, is a prominent American novelist and essayist. His literary journey began with the debut novel "The Twenty Seventh City" in 1988, a gripping thriller centered around a political conspiracy and financial crisis in a dystopian city. The narrative delves into themes of police abuse of power, creating a thought-provoking exploration of societal issues.

Following this, Franzen released his second work of fiction, "Strong Motion," in 1992. This controversial novel revolves around a dysfunctional family, addressing themes such as love, environmental catastrophe, abortion, feminism, and exploitative capitalism. Franzen aimed to use his novels as a platform for social satire, hoping to influence and critique societal issues with the intent of bringing about change. Despite receiving positive acclaim, both novels did not achieve significant financial success upon their initial publication.

Franzen's early experiences and a realization that social novels, perceived by some as condescending, may not align with his goals prompted a shift in his approach. This realization led him to reconsider his narrative direction, steering away from creating literature that could be perceived as condescending, and evolving his perspective on the role of fiction in the world.

Opting to move away from the social novel genre, Jonathan Franzen sought to create works that resonated more easily with his readership and aligned with his evolving vision. This transition involved a lengthy and challenging process of self-discovery and understanding

how he should approach his writing. After eight years of contemplation, Franzen released his third novel in 2001, marking a significant turning point in his career.

"The Corrections" emerged as a triumph, garnering widespread acclaim from critics and solidifying its status as a crucial piece of contemporary American literature. The novel achieved notable recognition by winning the 2001 National Book Award for Fiction, one of the most prestigious literary honors in the United States, and the 2002 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction, one of Britain's oldest literary awards. It further secured its place among the literary elite as a finalist for the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the 2002 PEN/Faulkner Award, an annual acknowledgment for the best American work of fiction.

Despite Franzen's struggle to find a balance that would satisfy both himself and his readers, "The Corrections" proved to be a resounding success, contributing significantly to both his financial success and his standing in the literary world. In 1996, Jonathan Franzen penned an essay for Harper's magazine titled "Perchance to Dream," subtitled "In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels." This essay holds significant relevance to the understanding of Franzen's later work, particularly "The Corrections," as many critics argue that the ideas he presents in this essay find realization in the novel. Later included in Franzen's essay collection "How to Be Alone," the essay was retitled "Why Bother?" and has become colloquially known as 'The Harper's essay.'

Within the essay, Franzen articulates the challenges he faced as a novelist amid the cultural landscape of contemporary America, where the pervasive influence of television was overshadowing the importance of great literature and its authors. He expresses his

frustrations with what he perceives as the diminishing significance of literary works and writers in a society dominated by what he terms "the banal ascendancy of television." This exploration of cultural dynamics and the role of literature foreshadows themes that are later seen in "The Corrections."

Jonathan Franzen posits that serious fiction operates as a counterforce to the prevalent "rhetoric of optimism" ingrained in our culture. In his argument, he contends that each triumphant ideology carries with it a deceptive promise of bettering the world. Franzen terms the perspective he champions as "the tragic realism" of literature, presenting it as an antidote to this superficial optimism.

This literary perspective imparts a pragmatic understanding that progress comes at a cost, nothing is eternal, and the reality beneath the surface may not be as aesthetically pleasing as it appears — a stark contrast to the prevailing belief forced upon Americans. According to Franzen, embracing this "tragic realism" can instill courage by dispelling the illusion of perpetual beauty and prompting a sober acknowledgment of the complexities inherent in societal improvement.

At a certain juncture, he made a conscious decision to write for enjoyment rather than with the intention to instruct or enlighten. Franzen contends that the unique human capacity to engage in activities without a specific purpose sets human apart from other species. This viewpoint sharply contrasts with his upbringing in the Midwest, where his family valued social utility and employed it as a standard for evaluating one's actions.

Despite these early influences, when working on "The Corrections," Franzen did not perceive a compelling need to impart a significant message to the world, especially in the

traditional sense of addressing its problems, as often expected in a social novel. He moved away from what he labelled "the idea of the novel as a remedy for societal issues, resulting in cumbersome reporting and tackling problems for which solutions were already known."

Jonathan Franzen not only abandoned the social novel but also underwent a shift from postmodernism to realism. "The Corrections" serves as a testament to "Franzen's departure from his earlier postmodern influences," evident through the heightened significance and presence of characters, along with an enhanced "readability" compared to his prior works.

The publication of "The Corrections" and the collection of essays released between 1996 and 2002 collectively demonstrate Franzen's deliberate move away from postmodernism, aligning himself with the literary tradition of realism. This places him in the company of acclaimed writers such as Alice Munro, John Updike, and Saul Bellow. While some critics applauded this evolution as a sign of Franzen's maturation as a writer, others criticized him, accusing him of altering his approach solely for financial gain and fame.

In the process of crafting "The Corrections," Jonathan Franzen underwent not just a shift in literary focus from the social postmodern novel but also a personal transformation as a writer. He transitioned from a state of isolation and reluctance to engage in interviews to becoming a novelist who willingly discusses his work and actively meets with his readers. This marked a notable change from a writer who previously held a disdainful view towards those with a childlike desire for entertainment from novels to one who happily embraced the role of an entertainer.

Furthermore, Franzen's perspective on the importance of characters underwent a significant shift. Formerly viewing them as unimportant, he evolved into an author who

now speaks about the protagonists of his novel with genuine passion and affection, almost as if they were real individuals. This dual transformation, both in his literary approach and personal engagement, reflects the dynamic evolution of Jonathan Franzen as a writer during the creation of "The Corrections."

In an interview about "The Corrections," Jonathan Franzen expresses his belief that novels, from a utilitarian perspective, are essentially useless in serving societal purposes beyond entertainment. He emphasizes the importance of finding joy in both reading and writing. While he hopes his novels offer readers meaningful experiences and engagement, Franzen asserts that conveying a specific message is not his primary goal; rather, he aims to share his own experience of the world.

Franzen acknowledges that novels can connect lonely individuals and views this as a pleasurable rather than a utilitarian outcome. He aligns with I.B. Singer's perspective that the primary responsibility of a novelist is to tell a compelling story. Regarding "The Corrections," interviewers suggest that Franzen may be commenting on the dysfunctionality of the modern family and relationships. Franzen, however, emphasizes his interest in creating interesting characters and engaging the reader.

In another interview, Franzen explains his choice of the family as a central theme in "The Corrections." He sees the family as a practical tool for creating immediate, emotionally charged situations, simplifying character relationships. Writing about the family with humor and irony, according to Franzen, was his way of coping with his own intense family background.

A different perspective, presented in "The Romance of Community" by Hidalgo suggests that with "The Corrections," Franzen retreats from the intractable public sphere into the family community. The novel, in this view, portrays self-amelioration as an alternative to socio-political reform and suggests that reconciliation is achievable within the intimate sphere, even when the public sphere remains marked by antagonism.

The title of *The Corrections* refers to several themes from the novel, where the word correction is used in various forms thirteen times. Most literally it refers to the decline of the economic boom of the late 1990s. It is made clear at the beginning of the novel's last chapter, which is also titled "The Corrections":

“The Correction, when it finally came was not an overnight bursting of a bubble but a much more gentle let-down, a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets.” (*The Corrections*, 573)

"*The Corrections*" by Jonathan Franzen is a multi-layered novel that unfolds the complex dynamics within the Lambert family, a traditional Midwestern household residing in the fictional town of St. Jude, inspired by St. Louis, Missouri. The narrative spans various decades, delving into the personal stories of each family member against the backdrop of the turn of the 21st century.

The central figures are the parents, Alfred and Enid Lambert, who continue to inhabit an aged, dilapidated house in an unnamed suburb of St. Jude. Their three adult children – Gary, Chip, and Denise – have relocated to the East Coast, aiming to establish new lives distinct from the influence of their parents. Despite their pursuit of success, the shadows of their parents' unhappy and repressed lives seem to linger.

Alfred, a dominant and authoritative figure who spent 40 years as a railroad engineer at Orfic Midland, faces a challenging retirement marked by a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease and dementia. This transition fractures his once-ordered personality, plunging him into despair. Enid, his devoted wife, grapples not only with his declining health but also with the perceived questionable life choices of their children, who have abandoned traditional values.

The novel weaves through the lives of the Lambert children. Gary, the eldest, is a successful Philadelphia banker with a family, but he struggles with suspected alcoholism and depression, fearing he might follow in his father's depressed footsteps. Chip, the middle child, is a failed writer and Marxist academic entangled in a disastrous affair, losing his teaching position in Connecticut and later becoming involved in dubious dealings in Lithuania. The youngest, Denise, finds success as a chef in Philadelphia but loses her job due to extramarital affairs.

The family is reluctantly drawn together for what may be the last Christmas, as Enid desperately hopes to reunite her fractured family. However, the siblings resist returning to St. Jude, each harboring unique reasons for their avoidance.

A noteworthy aspect of the novel is Franzen's departure from postmodernism to realism, evident in the heightened emphasis on characters and improved readability. The Corrections garnered critical acclaim, winning the 2001 National Book Award for Fiction and the 2002 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction.

Within the intricate narrative, Franzen explores various personal conspiracies that haunt the characters' minds. Alfred's body seemingly conspires against him as Parkinsonism and

mental decline take hold. Gary becomes paranoid, suspecting his family of conspiring to brand him as depressed, while also fearing he may inherit his father's perpetual sadness. Personal theories of conspiracy and the pervasive interconnectedness of events replace large-scale conspiracies typical of postmodern novels.

The novel skillfully navigates themes of family, mental health, and the consequences of abandoning traditional values. Franzen's shift from postmodernism to realism enriches the narrative, making "The Corrections" a significant contribution to contemporary American literature.

The popularity of "The Corrections" in America is attributed to its emphasis on the human experience, according to a commentator. Despite the overall somber tone, Jonathan Franzen's literary skills infuse warmth and humor into the novel, making it a compelling and, at times, comical read.

References:

- Blanco Hidalgo, Jesús. "Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community".
- Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- Franzen, Jonathan. "Perchance to Dream" *Haper's Magazine*, April 1996.
- Mrs. Jyothi Katari¹, P. Rajendra Karmarkar, *Strained Family Relationships and Botched Careers in Jonathan Franzen's Novels - Corrections and Purity International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*.
- 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.
- T. Nandhini, Dr. A. Saburunnisab Study on The Socio-Cultural Aspects in Jonathan Franzen's The Corrections, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(4), 3339-3343; 2021s