

## IDENTITY AND EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS IN JONATHAN FRANZEN'S *THE CORRECTIONS*

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In *The Corrections*, Jonathan Franzen introduces the reader to the Lamberts: a dysfunctional family of highly individualistic characters whose goals and ideas never intersect. Throughout the course of the novel, the elderly parents and their three grown-up children further degrade their relationships – both within the family and even with reality. They are utterly, self-consciously alone and incapable of creating a stable connection to one another or with anybody else. In the current paper, I shall try to explain their inability to connect to others by using their intrinsic loneliness as a starting point and the manner in which it helps in forming their identity.

**Key words:** existential loneliness, identity, Jonathan Franzen, Charles Taylor, existentialism

In 2001, after two critically-acclaimed but commercially unsuccessful novels, Jonathan Franzen published *The Corrections* (2001) and became one of the most widely read authors in the US as he managed to capture the Zeitgeist of Americans in a postmodern era. The novel is about an American family and the breakdown of communication between its members. Each of these characters lives a life of accentuated existential loneliness which ultimately plays a key role in the forming of their selves and identity. Here I argue that they cannot share thoughts because their understanding of their own loneliness makes them unable to. This way they end up in a cyclical state where they need to be alone because only they understand themselves, and at the same time feel they are being punished for doing so. This article aims to show how their existential loneliness becomes a source of their identity. I believe such research would also reveal many (still existing) problems of the American family and individuals at the beginning of the 21st century and onward.

In a very crude sense, to exist, or “to be” means “to be alone”. As the Bulgarian philosopher Georgi Fotev puts it, “The birth and death of every human being of flesh and blood is unique, just as existence is unique<sup>1</sup>” (Fotev 2017: 1). It is easy to mistake loneliness with being apart from society, but that is merely social loneliness. The existential loneliness is one of the insurmountable boundaries that come from the Self, which in many ways is impossible to share with the existential Other. The genesis of self-awareness of this state is a simple expression: “I am not you.” As Fotev writes, this realization creates “existential, physical, psychological, and social distances” (*Ibid.*).

Loneliness can directly be associated with the uniqueness of every single human being. We are separate not only in a physical sense, but also in the environment, character, community, and, not in the bit least, experience. If we take John Locke’s empiricist stance from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) that ideas and, eventually, the Self are formed by our experience, then each human being is uniquely separate from the rest as none can have the exact same experience as another. And even if we allow this hypothetical possibility that experiences can be shared, then, as David Foster Wallace—an author who, according to Franzen, has “died, essentially, of loneliness” (qtd. in Weinstein 2016: 18)—writes, “[t]he exact same experience can mean two completely different things to two different people, given those people’s two different belief templates and two different ways of constructing meaning from experience” (Wallace 2009: 8). In that sense, possessing a Self means that your perception varies because one situates oneself as the center of one’s own experience. This is a borderline solipsistic state, but is one we cannot escape from. Wallace continues,

Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness, because it’s so socially repulsive, but [...] [i]t is our default setting, hardwired into our boards at birth. Think about it: There is no experience you’ve had that you were not at the absolute center of.

(Wallace 2009: 8)

Thus, this brings the argument to a full circle—back to Fotev’s suggestion that people’s mode of being is one of separation, because they can never leave this “center” of their own reality. The loneliness that comes out of that reality is a constant part of the human consciousness, whether it is

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<sup>1</sup> The translation is done by the author of the article.

perceived or not. Ultimately, all these reflections about loneliness can be succinctly summarized by Emmanuel Levinas's words: "I am all alone. [...] One can exchange everything between beings except existing. In this sense, to be is to be isolated by existing" (Levinas 1987: 42).

Another problem that Franzen's *The Corrections* encounters is that of identity. It begins with a simple question: Who am I? The problem of answering it is one of self-awareness. Here is where one of the differences between Self and identity lies. While the Self is an existential matter of who you are, identity is *knowing* and *thinking about* who you are. In many ways, identity is a social construct, the face one presents to the outside world, backed up by its "moral or spiritual commitment, belonging to a nation or tradition, a following to what is Good" (Taylor 2001: 27). Charles Taylor, one of the main researchers of modern identity, identifies it as a frame: to be is "to know where you stand" on any given subject—what is "good, or admirable, or of value". It is "the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand" (*Ibid.*). In other words, one's identity is a commitment to the Self and the attained values through the course of one's life. It is not something static—just as morals and values can change within a person, so can personality and attitude, and therefore identity is a fluid thing, which is why answering the question above is not as simple as saying "I am so and so." There is never a simple way to answer who you are. If one's answer pertains to one's role in society, then one falls in the Sartrean bad faith in which one rejects one's own authentic Self and, by extension, one's own identity. Identity is shaped by experience and each personal experience can foster change. In that sense, we can return to John Locke's *Essay* and compare identity with the knowledge one gains. Taylor points out that the crossing point of empiricism and rationalism is the idea that "knowledge isn't genuine unless you develop it yourself: (*Ibid.*: 167)" because, as Locke himself states,

The floating of other men's opinions in our brains, makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true. [...] In the sciences, every one has so much as he really knows and comprehends.

(Locke 1998: 112-3)

Thus, awareness and consciousness of our experiences and actions are key to forming knowledge, identity, and the Self—and this unique experience ultimately isolates the individual from the rest of the world in their existential loneliness. However, awareness of said loneliness also creates a symbiotic process and becomes a building block for the identity one forms,

in that it puts all collected awareness into a different perspective, one of unshareability.

Loneliness is ever a noticeable motif in the works of Jonathan Franzen as his own writing comes from a place of loneliness; this seems to be the *modus operandi* of many authors at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Writers at the time see the entrance of mass media and communication into the lives of people as a depersonalizing experience, an attempt on each individual's identity, in fact on individuality itself. In an essay titled "Imperial Bedroom" Franzen writes about how our loneliness as a choice, usually associated with being left alone, is under attack by the new American way of life. In his own words, "The 'right to be left alone' is far from disappearing, it's exploding. [...] [W]e're flat-out drowning in privacy". (Franzen 2002: 48). He argues that people are trying to disappear into their own privacy, but thanks to mass media, they are also sharing their privacy with everybody else's, thus creating a "mass privacy" that becomes a new identity, an attempt at uniformity. The novels of writers of his time are a reaction to this "attack". Don DeLillo confirms as much in a letter to Franzen: "Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us" (*Ibid.*: 95). Franzen's reaction to the changes in the world then is to further his loneliness to better shelter himself from this depersonalization and this leaves a visible mark in his writing.

The overview of the Lambert family starts with Gary, the oldest son. He is the only Lambert with what seems to be a normal middle-class family—he has a wife, children, a stable job, and a house in the suburbs. However, "his entire life was set up as a correction of his father's life" (Franzen 2017: 207). All his decisions are predetermined as something his father wouldn't do. In that sense, his own identity has no stable foundation, but rather it has a negation: his life revolves around what another person wouldn't do rather than what he himself should do. The result is a loneliness brought by dissociation—a disconnectedness with his feelings and surroundings. He marries a wife who starts manipulating him into thinking he's feeling depressed to better exert control over him. His three sons are "allies" to his wife. A life he felt was perfect because it was different than his father's becomes a prison where he can only experience loneliness. The only thing he has left for himself is grilling—a family thing that eventually becomes an "eternal broiling, broiling of the damned" (*Ibid.*:189) as he ends up the only one enjoying it; it is his own way to be truly alone in a hostile environment. His loneliness reaches its peak when he is alone, his hand is cut open, he has rejected the desires of the rest of

his family and all he wants is to lie down and do nothing more. That is when he surrenders to his wife, finally admitting he is depressed. Whether he is actually depressed or not is beside the point: he only wishes to discard his loneliness, wishes to be a part of something, and thus, he chooses the awareness of his inner loneliness so that he can be among other people; he surrenders his Self.

Chip Lambert is (as the name suggests) the darling of the family, the one the parents have big dreams about and eventually becomes a professional in literary and media studies, and starts work at a renowned university. He is also a person who is fired after having an affair with a female student. He lies to his family about it and barely makes ends meet while trying to finish a screenplay that would serve as a revenge on the student that got him fired. He eventually leaves for Lithuania to work for a mobster (his current girlfriend's ex-husband) as a copywriter for his internet pyramid scheme. His life is one of absurdity, his story one of Samuel Beckett's plays or Albert Camus's novels. His life is a unique experience that nobody else can share and his unique understanding of plots and the mechanics of stories make him self-aware about that fact.

We first meet Chip while he is waiting for his parents at the beginning of the novel and the first thing we learn about him is: "This morning, feeling as if he'd surrendered too much of himself, he'd readjusted his presentation by wearing leather to the airport" (*Ibid.*: 27). Here Chips is presented as someone who does not wish to reveal anything going out of his way to pick out clothes that hide "himself". Franzen never reveals what he means by "himself"—looks, status, current position of unemployment—so the reader is free to choose which part of him the word alludes to. "Himself" may as well refer to his actual Self, meaning that he hides *everything*, thus choosing loneliness the moment the reader is introduced to him. In a retrospective of his life, we understand that Chip has always preferred and chosen loneliness as a way of life. As a child, he chooses not to eat his greens and his father makes him sit at the table until he clears his plate. Chip sits at the table all night and muses that "the taste of self-inflicted suffering brought curious satisfactions... Only you and your refusal remained" (*Ibid.*: 305). This is the inception of his own existential loneliness, the knowledge that he can be alone at will and even if among others, he is still lonely.

He accepts his chosen state of loneliness, but it is not enough for him. In order for the "self-inflicted suffering" to manifest, his loneliness must be acknowledged. So he sits at the table and muses "how eager he'd been to be alone [...]; and now, having finally closeted himself, he sat

hoping that someone would come and disturb him. He wanted this someone to see how much he hurt” (*Ibid.*: 306). Chip, a future playwright, considers that nothing in the world has any meaning unless there is no one there to notice it. If he is to be lonely, then his loneliness must manifest on the outside, and must be witnessed. He becomes a university professor and entertains students—until one of them remarks in a media studies class that “you’re here to teach us to hate the same things you hate” (*Ibid.*: 48). The importance of that statement is that subconsciously Chip has been trying to fight his own loneliness by teaching his ways to other students. It is interesting to note that in that case he might have also been using his loneliness as a show to create a crowd with which to fight it. It all comes down to the question of what Chip actually wants. This is where his struggle for identity comes in and he realizes it. In his mind, “He’d lost track of what he wanted, and since *who a person was was what a person wanted*<sup>2</sup>, you could say that he’d lost track of himself” (*Ibid.*: 620). According to Chip, identity is based on want, but the latter is information he has no access to and thus he is left with empty experiences and a life of solitude. This way he creates the cyclical state he is left in: his lack of goals leaves him without an identity and in a state of loneliness which he subconsciously enjoys and struggles to retain, therefore making it a point to lack goals.

Just as Gary is characterized as “the oldest” in relation to his family and Chip is “the darling”, so can Denise be neatly summarized sometimes as “the daughter” and other times as “the perfectionist”. This dual nature of her identity when it comes to family is fitting as these are also the lives she lives. She is the perfectionist when her father introduces her to his work and she starts sweating with the rest of his crew, doing thrice the work they are. She is the perfectionist when she decides to pick up cooking and becomes one of the best chefs in the US. She is, however, “the daughter” when her family needs her, and she flips the proverbial self-destruct switch of her career and relationships so that she can come help her family.

Denise’s life is an example of a dynamic identity created by loneliness. In either of her states, perfectionist or daughter, she has no true company. Each time she reaches a place of normality, she creates a proverbial self-destruct switch. When she becomes her father’s favorite by working twice as hard as his crew, she sleeps with one of the workers, a man the age of her father. When she becomes a chef, she loses herself in her work—she prefers the kitchen as she compares a kitchen to a family

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<sup>2</sup> The text is italicized by the author of the article.

where “even in the midst of the most sweaty togetherness each family member enjoyed privacy and anonymity” (*Ibid.*: 436). This is a loneliness that suits her as nobody makes her feel bad about it. But even then, she has an affair with the married owner. Later, when she feels secure in the affair, she has one with the owner’s wife as well. Each time her life reaches a state of normality she requires and/or desires, in her own words, “wrongness” (*Ibid.*: 458). Even when dating both the owner and his wife, she thinks about the other and eventually retreats to the loneliness of the Self, the only place where she feels understood.

Eventually, Denise explains to the reader that her own life is a reaction to her family’s hunger—her loneliness is a result of Denise keeping herself alone and available so that when her family calls, she reaches for the self-destruct switch by attempting to share her incommunicable experience and shedding off all normality in her life. And once she is left physically alone as well, she runs off to meet her family’s needs. This ultimately explains many of her conversations and musings. She tells a lover “I’m not anything, I’m just me” and then tells the reader that “she didn’t want to belong to any group” (*Ibid.*: 441). Her refusal to belong is a refusal of socially acceptable identity. If an identity, as Charles Taylor puts it, is “a horizon”, then Denise keeps her own horizons limited to her family, denying herself a life and using existential loneliness as a weapon and an excuse for every time she attempts to build one.

Enid, the mother of House Lambert, plays the victim of the family. Her role is one of indignation. Her husband works a lot and leaves her to deal with their children alone and when he retires, he discovers he has Parkinson’s disease, leaving her with yet one more person to care for. When her children leave to have their own mature lives, she chooses not to understand them, to plan ahead, and wonder how they could ruin her mood if they tried. An example of this is her time on a cruise where she ponders how “Denise would not have found the party elegant at all, that Denise would have picked apart its specialness until there was nothing left but ordinariness. Her daughter’s taste was a dark spot in Enid’s vision” (Franzen 2017: 113). Enid would choose to close herself to the experiences of her daughter. Denise’s presence and opinion, her taste, or, to put it simply, her intruding Self leaves a mark or a scar as it passes her mother’s world, thus Enid is of a mind to reject her from her own world.

Enid’s own life is never a happy one and her loneliness is marked by silent suffering, but never letting her hopes down. She knows what her family *ought to do*, but is always disappointed in their eventual actions

because they never follow her advice. According to Philip Weinstein, she is one of Franzen's tragic mother figures. He writes

[Franzen's mother characters] come to grief through their dual identity as mothers and wives. The neediness deriving from their choked-off spousal identity (their husbands' incapacity to fulfill them) leads to [...] a ceaseless demand that the children give what the husband withheld.

(Weinstein 2016: 19)

Enid starts making demands on her children, eating away at their lives to fill the gap in her own. One could easily identify the seeds of Gary's and Denise's identity crisis in their mother's own neediness as they are the ones who answer her calls. Denise's life self-destructs every time Enid summons her, and Gary creates a rift in his own family every time he tries to meet Enid's needs. At the same time, Enid also lives a life of loneliness, characterized by, as Gary puts it, her choice "to live in the future" (Franzen 2017: 564). As stated above, Enid never lets her hopes down so she chooses to live in inauthenticity: a solitary life in a potential future where everything is already planned, the result is happiness, and her children and spouse's present choices cannot hurt her.

Finally, I turn to Alfred Lambert, who stands out as the source of loneliness in the Lambert family. If *The Corrections* has anything resembling glue that keeps the separate stories together, it is the father figure with Parkinson's disease. The novel, from start to finish (as it starts a few lines before the introduction of Alfred and ends three lines after his death), is the story of Alfred's disintegration into nothingness. Alfred is a lonely figure with an incurable disease, and, unlike many stories of coming to terms with an eventual death where the ill character undergoes a redemption arc, he is unapologetic until the very end. His own existential loneliness, however, starts long before his ailment. In fact, he worships his own loneliness as a source of strength. In his own words, when thinking about his life, Alfred "bowed his head at the thought of how much strength a man would need to survive a life so lonely" (*Ibid.*: 316). In Alfred's retrospective story the reader sees him living his life dedicated to work in a place of solidarity and indignant to everybody around him for refusing to leave him alone. He reads Schopenhauer's works on suffering. His own identity is possessed by the power his solitude gives him. His Self is so bent by an inescapable sense of isolation that he accepts its Robinson Crusoe-esque "islanding" (Weinstein 2016: 18) from any shared experience with the Other not out of necessity but because the behavior of the Other is an injustice he cannot bear.



For example, at one point Alfred is relocated at work and he has to sleep at a motel. While trying to sleep, he can hear a loud couple through the thin walls.

Alfred blamed the girl for taking it easy. He blamed the man for his easygoing confidence. He blamed God for allowing such people to exist. [...] he blamed all of humanity for its insensitivity, and it was so unfair. He refused to weep. He believed that if he heard himself weeping, at two in the morning in a smoke-smelling motel room, the world might end. If nothing else, he had discipline. The power to refuse: he had this.

(Franzen 2017: 283)

That night Alfred feels the full force of his loneliness in the world. Yet, his power to refuse is also a power to react, or rather to deny the world a reaction. He keeps his feelings to himself because he is the only one who matters in this uncaring world. His children keep rejecting his lessons, his wife keeps wanting and needing, his co-workers seek a way to gain money through dodging hard work. Alfred's response is to keep working and refuse to acknowledge other people's needs and shortcuts. When he retires due to his Parkinson's, he feels, both physically and mentally, lost—the state we meet him in the beginning of the novel. Alfred's loneliness is no longer a matter of choice, it is now a result of his condition. His demented mind makes even sentences feel like lonely walks in a dark wood as the reader witnesses in the very first chapter of the novel. The only thing he can keep doing is refusing. He refuses help. He refuses to acknowledge his condition. He refuses his medicine. When his condition worsens, he refuses—through various suicide attempts—to live. And, when he is too weak or disoriented to make any more attempts on his life and the doctors keep telling Enid that his time has come, he refuses to die. With every refusal he delves deeper into his existential loneliness, sinking to a state where none can reach him, or share an experience with him, outside of human solidarity. He is unapologetic about his—apparently infectious—identity, one of a loneliness created before the reader meets him and one that he doesn't change or let up until the last page of the novel.

*The Corrections* is Jonathan Franzen's idea of how the modern American family functions when there is a breakdown of communication. Identity in all its dimensions and forms becomes driven by the separate loneliness of the individual. Each member of the family is initially qualified by their role in the family, thus isolated from the rest. After that their choices, knowledge, and experience drive them to become unique individuals that can never create intersubjectivity among themselves or others.

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