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Neoliberalism in Contemporary Literature: The Nuclear Family's Decimation in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Neoliberalism in Contemporary Literature:
The Nuclear Family's Decimation in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*

by

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A Thesis
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The University of Southern Mississippi
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of Honors Requirements

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Abstract

Within any text, there is often evidence of the author's own life along with cultural reflections. A specific example of this occurrence is Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections* (2001). Since the novel was written in the early twenty-first century, it is an immediate reflection of post-millennial society, specifically the rise of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism was introduced to America as an economic venture; however, the policy's impact can be frequently seen in relation to the nuclear family. As the idea gained popularity during the 1980s, neoliberalism began seeping into family units by way of one's career and one's home. This invasion has caused a shift when defining the familiar American Dream.

I therefore analyze how Franzen's novel directly reflects neoliberalism's impact on the nuclear family through a framework consisting of labor and domesticity. I also seek to dismantle the American Dream by revealing the negative effects its pursuit has on families. I contend that Franzen's novel, despite being a work of fiction, is an accurate portrayal of the nuclear family's decimation during the era of neoliberalism.

Keywords: American literature, neoliberalism, American Dream, post-millennial fiction, nuclear family, labor

Dedication

To my twenty-eight first cousins:

For proving that family is not as dire as Franzen's novel makes it out to be.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the United States of America was facing a plethora of change. Not only was the country's presidential administration shifting from one political party to another, but the country was also witnessing a major technological uprising. Technology was more accessible than ever and such availability pushed consumers to think in individualistic terms: How can technology help *me*? Such thinking is a byproduct of twentieth-century neoliberalism. Put simply, neoliberalism is an ideal that favors free-market capitalism. The origin of the philosophy dates back to the time of laissez-faire economics, which is the belief that government should be absent from all free-market actions. While the term "laissez-faire" dates back to the nineteenth century, the term "neoliberalism" did not gain mainstream popularity until the 1980s when it became favored by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and the United Kingdom's Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. During the time spanning across the 1970s and the 1980s, a firm definition for the term began to take shape. In his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), David Harvey defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2). This definition may be hard to follow for anyone who is not already conversant with political and economic terms, but put simply, neoliberalism can be understood as the expansion of capitalism into American's social and private sector. With the growth of the term's popularity, many critics have tried to explain neoliberalism in a way that

clarifies its effect on the social sector. Professor Helene Shugart attempts to simplify Harvey's definition in her book, *Heavy: The Obesity Crisis in Cultural Context* (2016):

Neoliberalism ascribes virtually all responsibility for personal and social welfare to the individual, which is further articulated as crucial to individual liberty under the auspices of choice. This individual choice is tightly linked with consumption to the extent that individuals are expected to choose with their dollars... Under this framework the practical role of the government is to facilitate the market; government intervention at any level - in the form of social services, or with respect to regulation of industry - is represented as cultivating and enabling dependence. (10)

This definition places heavier emphasis on the idea of the individual as a consumer. In the era of neoliberalism, one institution that is deeply affected is the nuclear family as it shifts from a unit to a collection of "individuals."

Daniela Cutas and Sarah Chan, authors of *Families Beyond the Nuclear Ideal* (2012) define the nuclear family as "children conceived *naturally*, born to and raised by their two young, heterosexual, married to each other, genetic parents" (1).¹ This typical nuclear vision often comes to many American minds when asked about family.

However, in post-millennial society, consumerist culture has Americans thinking in terms of personal fulfillment and as a result, Americans turn away from the nuclear unit and begin valuing it in terms of how it can advance them towards their personal goals. In her book, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*, author

¹ Even though alternative family structures, such as adoption, surrogacy, and same-sex couples are increasingly accepted and endorsed by society as part of the nuclear unit, this thesis defines the "nuclear family" similarly to Cutas and Chan, as the traditional definition applies to the family presented in Jonathan Franzen's novel.

Jennifer Silva claims that many of the people she interviewed while working on the book said the only way to navigate through such a market “is to become highly elastic and unencumbered by other obligations -- including their own families” (31). Unfortunately, for those who are unwilling to become completely “unencumbered” and are instead seeking to strengthen their families, there is little room for familial flourishing in the company of privatized priorities: priorities such as “choos[ing] with dollars” that have been put in place by new economic policy (Shugart 10). Since the nuclear family has long been woven into the fabric of American culture, it is to be expected that such families are abundant in American literature.

Because of neoliberalism’s presence in American society, it should come as no surprise that popular American literature² reflects neoliberalism’s growing presence within the realm of the nuclear family. Janet Cosbey writes in her essay entitled “Using Contemporary Fiction to Teach Family Issues” (1997) that “contemporary fiction reflects the changing demographics and family configurations in our society. Current novels are frequently focused on timely family issues and, when well-written, they can make the experiences depicted seem ‘real’ to the reader” (227). An example of an author reflecting “the changing demographics and family configurations” in literature is Jonathan Franzen’s novel *The Corrections* (2001).

Franzen’s novel focuses on the five focal members of the middle-class Lambert family: the two parents, Alfred and Enid, and their three children, Gary, Chip, and Denise. While all three children reside in major cities along the east coast, Alfred and

² While this thesis focuses exclusively on Franzen’s novel, other notable pieces of literature possessing similar thematic neoliberal undertones include Lauren Groff’s *Fates and Furies* (2015) and Cynthia D’Aprix Sweeney’s *The Nest* (2016).

Enid remain in the generic midwestern suburbia of St. Jude. Amid the multiple plot lines lies the overarching conflict and the heart of the novel: the Lambert family's dysfunction throughout their lives together. Many literary critics seek the cause of the family's dysfunction. At one point in the article, "Corrections: Contemporary American Melancholy" (2003), author Catherine Toal claims that Franzen presents Chip Lambert "as a victim of the social power of women and minorities" and that "Chip's collapse begins" when he is undermined by a female student (315). Contrary to Toal's claim, I argue that Chip's collapse, along with that of other characters, does not begin at the hands of another character, but is rather predetermined by the characters' own existence in a culture dominated by capitalism. Ultimately, neoliberalism is at fault for the nuclear unit's constant dysfunction. Despite the generational gap between the parents and children in the novel, Franzen points out neoliberalism's reach by showing its effects on *everyone* in the novel, not just those born into it. Part of Franzen's success came from his novel's accurate portrayal of familial dysfunction, but also his eerie foreboding of what was yet to come.

Published in 2001 just ten days before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, *The Corrections* depicts the public's anxiety over the economic landscape. In the book *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction*, authors Manfred Steger and Roy Ravi explain that "the fear factor [of the enemies of democracy] did not come into full play until the traumatic events of 11 September 2001, when radical forces attacked what they considered to be the 'godless' and 'materialistic' symbols of the world's most neoliberal society" (121). Knowing that *The Corrections* was published immediately before an attack on America's government, readers of the novel always sense that something is *about* to happen. While

Franzen had the notion to reflect the increasing tension within the country, he lacked the foresight to predict how soon the bubble would burst. Instead of focusing on the demise of the neoliberal structure, Franzen focuses on the family's dysfunction as a result of neoliberalism. In "Serving the Fruitcake, or Jonathan Franzen's Midwestern Poetics" (2008), author Ralph J. Poole argues that Franzen's writing in *The Corrections* is "invested in documenting a history of deterioration" (270). Franzen captures that deterioration through the scope of three major areas: each character's own labor, the characters' position within the domestic sphere, and the seemingly unattainable American Dream. Even though the term "neoliberalism" is never explicitly mentioned within the pages of Franzen's novel, the term's attributes can be seen through these three areas in the novel, especially when the characters see their own needs as more important than others; as a result, neoliberalism's effects on the family unit become the backdrop for the entire novel.

As previously stated, Franzen uses his text, specifically his characters' labor to imply the presence of neoliberalism in society. In the corresponding section of this thesis, I explore each of the main character's careers and how their relation to their career is not only an imprint of the shifting economic setting but is also a cause of the nuclear family's ultimate demise. In his article, "A Smile and a Shoeshine" (2007), author Ty Hawkins claims that *The Corrections* shows that "hands-on work no longer represents a tenable avenue to wholeness. Instead, wholeness only may be achieved through the combination of a macrocosmic commitment to the creation of community in the ever-shrinking spaces this culture leaves relatively unfettered" (51). The search for "wholeness" creates a barrier between the two generations of the novel. The labor

performed by the older generation is significant to its performer because it leaves an impact on the community. Those who have careers grounded in the overall progress of a community feel more fulfilled, “whole,” than those whose careers are more interested in the progress of the performer. Despite their employment, all characters feel unfulfilled because of the impossible standards for personal success promised by neoliberalism. If one’s personal value only stems from one’s wealth, then it becomes easy to neglect human relationships -- a basic human need that neoliberalism leaves out. Upon neglecting human bonds, the characters immediately yearn for these connections but they experience an inability to cultivate any given the resources of the familial and cultural landscape. As a result, the characters bring their disappointment and frustration into the realm of the home.

For many, the idea of a home represents family life along with physically housing the family. In *The Corrections*, the home becomes its own character by always actively striving to provide order and unity for those living inside of it. However, due to the shortcomings and selfishness exhibited by the characters, homelife manages to always fail at providing sanctuary and in turn becomes a significant place for dysfunction. When the characters find themselves falling short in terms of what they deem “successful” in their career, they become materialistic and begin to view the home as a sort of commodity rather than a place of refuge. As the home becomes a commodity, the landscape grows more competitive in nature and in turn becomes less oriented around the nuclear unit. This systematic shift to self-serving ideals within the household leaves family members feeling more disconnected than ever. Poole claims “All five members of the novel’s principal family are captives of a pursuit of happiness that they believe to be

prescribed, but nevertheless assume to be their own wish. It takes the moment of recognition to understand that they are driven by the internalized compulsion to fulfill an external logic.” Poole then states that a result of such actions is the “total collapse of the family community” (276). Such “external logic” revolves around the idea that material possessions will result in one’s happiness. The characters attempt to fill their home and present their home in a way that suggests they are abiding by this capitalist way of thinking. Even the characters who have little interest in commercial goods begin to see that neoliberalism has already impacted the family unit in ways that reveal a new-found lack of interest in the solidity of the family. As a result, the previous idea of home life becomes synonymous with a dream. As neoliberal culture continues, Americans see the domestic sphere as a testament to their consumer lifestyle rather than a place for familial cohesion. As a result, familial solidarity gets left behind in the wake of consumption and becomes part of the American Dream.

The traditional American Dream is often defined as the opportunity for anyone to achieve upward mobility, typically in a career setting, by way of hard work and perseverance. After years of being called a lie, the Dream’s definition has adjusted to fit the beliefs of the post-millennial generation. In her book, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (1984), author Dolores Hayden claims, “Suburban homes have become inseparable from the American Dream of economic success and upward mobility” (30). While remnants of Hayden’s idea still exist, more recent studies are suggesting a shift away from such individual achievement. According to Pew Research Center, over 70 percent of Americans believe healthy family life is a key component of the American Dream (37). However, the traditional Dream

still casts a shadow on today's society in that people find themselves disappointed when they are unable to achieve the upward mobility the Dream originally promised. In the age of neoliberalism, the expectation for the "American Dream" followed by its deterioration creates a connection between the generations found in Franzen's *The Corrections*. Those belonging to the previous generation, Alfred and Enid, have already experienced the shortcomings of the traditional American Dream and yet they still hope to see their children succeed in the same system that failed them. The younger characters, Gary, Chip, and Denise recognize the myth behind the Dream but are still discouraged by its unattainability. Furthermore, the expansion of the Dream's original definition gives the novel's characters more opportunity to fall short. The characters have potential to achieve the new family-oriented American Dream, and yet, they continue to strive for the profit-oriented Dream that has continuously failed. When they become unsuccessful in their family life, these characters subsequently begin filling the void the Dream has left them.

This thesis takes on a criticism similar to that of Poole in that it seeks to explain the reasoning behind Franzen's characters' shortcomings. However, through careful textual analysis, this thesis goes further to explain that the characters' behavior is more a result of the influential neoliberal constructs adopted by the twenty-first century. The choices of each character in relation to their method of labor, domestic sphere, and the underlying ill-fated American Dream, all reveal Franzen's pessimistic outlook: ties within the nuclear family are subject to weakness in a contemporary culture that suggests profit and commodities are paramount for one's personal progress. Even if characters

long for the strengthening of the family unit, Franzen suggests a fear that the institution has the potential to become a bygone artifact in the wake of neoliberalism's takeover.

Chapter 2: Degeneration of Personal Fulfillment Through Labor

For many American adults, one's labor defines his or her identity. Labor is expected to provide economic stability while also satisfying a personal desire. The characters in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* reflect the mindset that one's labor should not only provide, but it should also provide the laborer with a certain sense of pleasure. Through the agency of the novel's patriarchal figure, seventy-year-old Alfred Lambert, Franzen provides readers with an outlook on labor that differs from the outlook held by Alfred's children. As an engineer, Alfred created and built infrastructure for his community. Alfred created while also providing for his family -- two outcomes that gave Alfred a sense of wholeness. The labor performed by Alfred's children has similar intentions to provide and fulfill, but the labor is set against a contemporary backdrop. While Alfred's labor was rooted in community construction, his children's labor reflects the rise of technology, liberal arts, and culinary craftsmanship. Even though the Lambert children generate pleasure and satisfaction from their jobs, neoliberalism leaves them longing for more. As a result, the nuclear family ideal becomes a commodity pursued by the characters during their search for personal fulfillment. Franzen uses the Lambert children to show that capitalist Americans can never be solely satisfied by their careers.

Prior to Alfred's declining health, he worked as an engineer for a railroad company. His work required him to build and design infrastructure that would serve and benefit his community. Alfred reflects on his previous work:

The more Alfred saw of the Eerie Belt, the more distinctly he felt the Midland Pacific's superior size, strength, and moral vitality in his own limbs and

carriage... By day he felt like a man, and he showed this, you might even say flaunted it, by standing no-handedly on high narrow ledges, and working ten and twelve hours without a break. (244)

This passage reveals Alfred's extreme sense of security in his job. Not only does his job give him financial wealth, but it also gives him "vitality." Feeling "like a man" suggests a certain level of personal satisfaction that Alfred receives from his work -- a satisfaction he does not receive from other areas of his life. Alfred's powerful work ethic is most likely accredited by his upbringing as a child; he frequently cites the economic depression for his value for hard work (22). Along with a depression, Alfred's own mother also causes his grave outlook on labor: When Alfred hears Enid complaining, Franzen writes, "[Alfred's] own mother had driven a team of plow horses around a twenty-acre field when she was eight months pregnant, so [Alfred] was not exactly sympathetic" (249). The labor Alfred's mother executed when Alfred was young gave Alfred a certain set of expectations for how workers should behave. He witnessed his mother perform backbreaking work and because of this, he has adopted a similar work ethic. When Alfred applies that strict work ethic to areas outside of his labor, Alfred quickly becomes unsympathetic to many around him, especially his children.

Oftentimes Alfred was required to travel for work during his children's youth. This separation divides Alfred both physically and mentally from his family. Upon seeing his two sons after arriving home from a trip, "Alfred regarded his two subordinates gravely. Fraternizing had always been a struggle for him" (250). Alfred no longer sees his children as children; instead, he sees them as "subordinates," a term usually used when referring to workers in an organizational setting, not when talking

about one's children. This divide between his children stems from the fact that during his job, Alfred is a solitary figure. While he is "working ten and twelve hours without a break," he is alone. Over time, Alfred has become accustomed to being by himself; he has put in time towards improving at his work while ignoring his duties as a member of the household. When Alfred arrives home, he is no longer in his preferred element of labor and is placed in roles that he has no idea how to fill: being a father and a husband.

When Alfred retires and is removed from his labor, he begins to long for the fatherly labor he previously ignored. Enid claims, "They say [Alfred] was a workaholic and that work was a drug which when he couldn't have it anymore he got depressed" (65). While Alfred is upset that he can no longer work for the railroad, he is also depressed by the divide between himself and his children. When Alfred was working, this divide was less noticeable and less of a concern; but once Alfred is out of work he longs for the relationship he could have had with his children if he had fostered it when given the opportunity. However, instead of attempting to recover a relationship with his children, Alfred, alongside Enid, unintentionally push their children farther away.

The Lambert's youngest son, Chip, worked as a college professor for a significant amount of time during his young adult life. While preparing for this profession, Chip recalls Enid "[begging] Chip to abandon his pursuit of an "impractical" doctorate in the humanities ('I see your old science fair trophies,' she wrote, 'and I think of what an able young man like you could be giving back to society as a medical doctor... Dad and I always hoped we'd raised children who thought of others, not just themselves)" (33). Enid and Alfred's notion that a college professor is not a career that gives back to society disguises their fear of Chip's labor not providing him with money. In reality, Chip's

career is a very important way of giving back to society; Chip wants to influence the minds of the up and coming generation. While Alfred was content with building bridges for society, Chip wants to build education. Ultimately, both careers exist to shape society. Neither labor is more important than the other, but it is key to note that Chip's job *is* meaningful despite his lack of confidence in that fact. Chip has succeeded in finding a career that "gives back to society," but Enid cannot understand because the contemporary setting of Chip's job differs from her original "medical doctor" fantasy.

Chip seems to have always been aware of his parents' disdain for his choice of career, and yet, he pursues a discipline in higher education because he hopes it will bring him happiness. He knows that Alfred and Enid want his labor to yield a profit but Chip admits that he "had believed that it was possible to be successful in America without making lots of money. He'd always been a good student, and from an early age he's proven unfit for any form of economic activity except buying things, and so he'd chosen to pursue a life of the mind" (32). This statement suggests that Chip had known, and was content with the fact that his course of study would not yield a great amount of money. Chip was less concerned with money and more concerned with finding his own sense of purpose -- something at which his father was successful. He believed the amount of happiness rendered from his work would supersede his innate desire for consumption. Eventually, the pressures of twenty-first century capitalism become too great and Chip descends into a state of mind revolving around materialism. It is at this point when Chip begins an affair with one of his students. Near the end of their relationship, he becomes frustrated with her for having a close bond with her parents. During an argument with the girl, Chip says, "Children are not supposed to get along with their parents. Your

parents are not supposed to be your best friends. There's supposed to be some element of rebellion" (59). The "element of rebellion" suggests that Chip wants his recent behavior to be a form of rebellion towards his parents, when in actuality it signals his own weakness as a consumer. Even though Alfred had once told Chip "that he didn't see the point of literary theory" (32), Chip followed his desire to be a college professor. Chip's need for "rebellion" does not present itself in the form of defying his parents. Instead, Chip wishes to rebel against the idea that one's career has to generate profit if one wants to thrive in modern society. However, Chip's termination from his job reinforces the overarching anxiety of his generation: a career rooted in personal passion is not enough in neoliberal society. Since Chip's labor *was* rooted in personal passion, it comes as no surprise when such labor fails to provide Chip with the tools necessary for success in neoliberal society. Through Chip, Franzen suggests that passion, while noble in its concept, is no longer enough to satisfy those who work. In order to reach personal fulfillment, one must additionally make enough money to support the bottomless nature of consumerism.

Even though Chip believed that he could be successful without making lots of money for himself, his desire for temptation becomes too strong. Capitalism urges its population to believe that one's amount of possessions equates to one's level of happiness. Over time, Chip succumbs to this shallow mindset and the reader watches as his need for consumption grows. As his consumption increases, his labor significantly decreases until it completely disappears and Chip loses his job. Once unemployed, the desire to fill the void left by his labor pushes Chip even farther towards the consumption of material things. Chip's younger sister, Denise, attempts to help Chip financially by

lending him ten thousand dollars. Instead of using the money responsibly, “[Chip] hired a lawyer... This was a waste of money, but it felt good... He bought leather clothes and had his ears pierced... He borrowed more money from Denise and decided that she was right, that getting fired was the best thing that had ever happened to him” (87). Chip feels that “getting fired was the best thing that had ever happened to him” because he manages to keep his previous lifestyle without having to work for it -- which reinforces his original idea that one can be successful without making lots of money. In his article, “Mass Society and Mass Depression” (2007), Bruce E. Levine writes, “Many people become dangerously depressed in a culture of consumerism since they are forever trying to buy happiness.” When Chip spends money, he believe he is happy when in reality he is just making his situation worse. Chip’s depression reveals itself through his incessant spending and consuming. Another example of this false joy comes when he attends a party and indulges his material desires without having to provide them himself. Franzen writes, “Drinking their liquor and eating their catered food, [Chip] had a foretaste of a success a hundred times sweeter than tenure. He felt that he was really living” (87). Chip is under the impression that he can be happy as long as he has the things that he wants. Earlier, he had presumed that he could only have those things if he had a salary -- a job; however, in this scene, Chip suspects that the happiness he ties with possession is the same if someone else’s labor provides them.

While Chip is the self-prophesied rebel in the family, his older brother Gary exists as the pragmatic, responsible member of the Lambert family. Gary works as the vice president at the fictitious CenTrust Bank (137). Even though this area of labor forever dooms Gary to be interested in the pursuit of money -- one of neoliberal America’s top

priorities -- Gary takes pride in his work as Alfred did. Gary sees himself as a good worker and boss, claiming that “he demanded honesty and excellence from his workers. In return, he offered patient instruction, absolute loyalty, and the assurance that he would never blame [his employees] for his own mistakes” (192). While Alfred relished in being alone during his work, Gary prides himself on his ability to work with others. While Chip’s actions were fueled by rebellion against his society, Gary believes that his own “intention was simply to avoid his father’s mistakes - to give himself time to enjoy life, cherish his wife, and play with his kids” (192). In order to fulfill these intentions, Gary not only wants to spend more time with his family, but he wants to make more money, something his family, specifically his mother, was denied. Even though his desires often come off as selfish to the other characters in the novel, the reader can see that Gary seeks reparations for his mother. The opportunity to make money and repay Enid manifests itself for Gary in the form of a patent being aggressively ignored by his father.

When it is revealed at the beginning of the novel that a large company wants to buy one of Alfred’s patents, Enid becomes frustrated and confides in Denise. Enid says, “[Alfred] finally has a chance to make some money, and he’s not interested. Gary talked to him on the phone last month and tried to get him to be a little more aggressive, but Dad blew up” (71). Not only is Gary driven by making money, but he is enticed by the idea of making money off of something that does not belong to him. Similarly to Chip’s consumption of the loan from Denise, Gary likes the idea of obtaining a certain sum of money without doing any of the labor attached to it. Alfred has no problem with selling the patent for a low price because, in his mind, his payment came in the form of the work needed to create the patent, not in the monetary value of the patent or in what could be

profited from the patent. Later in the novel, when Gary finds himself watching adult videos on his computer, he realizes, “The pictures were softening rather than hardening Gary. He wondered if he’d reached the age where money excited him more than a beautiful nude blonde” (169). Using the phrase “reached the age” suggests that this event is common for all males. However, this never happens to Alfred. It is frequently implied in the text that Alfred is victim of sublimation: his job overwhelms his innate desire for sexual and romantic relationships; however, he never “reached the age where money excited him more than a beautiful nude blonde.” Instead, Alfred had reached the age where his job excited him more, not money.

Even though Gary’s labor pushes him to pursue money, Gary never shows concern for what his money could buy. While Chip quickly turns to consumption when his work fails him, Gary does not. Instead, Gary’s wife and children are the ones interested in what money can provide, such as a collection of abandoned hobbies “with an aggregate retail value possibly exceeding the annual salary of Gary’s secretary at CenTrust” (156). Gary can only see things for their monetary value, not their emotional value. Instead of seeing the toys as objects, he converts their worth into the salaries of other employees -- a residual trait inspired by Alfred’s frugality. Not only does the children’s frivolous spending reveal their materialistic disrespect for all labor, but it also shows how they view the home -- an idea that will be discussed in the following section.

Clearly, Gary has no interest in the material things his job could provide; however, he does believe that his labor-tied wealth should give him a certain status. During the deliberation between Gary and Caroline over where they should spend their Christmas, Gary reflects on what he does not like about the Midwest: “Gary hated how

unpampered and unprivileged he felt in [the Midwest]. St. Jude in its optimistic egalitarianism consistently failed to accord him the respect to which his gifts and attainments entitled him” (175). While Alfred easily established himself as the boss in the Midwestern home, Gary struggles with obtaining the same level of respect. He feels more entitled to such respect since he provides more wealth for his own family. Alfred and Enid had raised Gary to be responsible and as an adult, Gary wants a reward for becoming so successful and responsible -- an award that comes in the form of his desired respect. At one point in the novel, Gary reflects on a time when:

[Enid] carped about Gary’s “materialism” and “ostentation” and “obsession with money” - as if she herself weren’t dollar-sign-headed! As if she herself, given the opportunity, wouldn’t have bought a house like Gary’s and furnished it very much the same way he had! [Gary] wanted to say to her: *Of your three children, my life looks by far the most like yours! I have what you taught me to want! And now that I have it, you disapprove of it!* (217)

Even though Gary is frustrated, this idea that “[Gary’s] life looks by far the most like [Enid and Alfred’s]” only solidifies the practicality that went into raising Gary. Because of the structure that was given to Gary in his childhood, Gary was able to achieve success in the way that reflects his parent’s wishes, and yet, his mother is disdainful towards Gary’s wealth. Enid’s disapproving attitude comes from a place of jealousy. While she is happy for her son and for his success, she is still jealous that she will never have such economic success in her own personal life. As the urban setting grows more favorable, Enid begins to feel that she and her midwest lifestyle are inferior to her own children.

This sense of inferiority sparks an anxiety in Enid which is felt by her entire generation: that she is being overshadowed by the success of the younger generation.

Gary's surplus of wealth only serves as a reminder for Enid of what Alfred was never interested in doing or providing. Gary senses that his mother is jealous of his wealth and begins to seek payment for her by way of the patent. When Gary was a child, Enid was a stay-at-home mom while Alfred was frequently away on business trips. Gary was able to see that "[Alfred's] work so satisfied him that he didn't need [Enid's] love, while her chores so bored her that she needed his love doubly. In any rational accounting, his work canceled her work" (249). Because Alfred was the patriarchal figure in the house, he did not see the benefit of her labor. However, since Gary possesses the same sense of frugality and self-worth as Alfred, he recognizes that the labor performed by Enid as a stay-at-home mom is just as valuable as the labor he and Alfred perform. As the eldest Lambert child, Gary most-likely exhibited the most sensitivity and awareness towards Enid's loneliness and neglect. Overtime, Gary transforms himself into a husband he knew his mother needed: someone who provided and someone who wanted to be at home with family. As an adult, Gary sees the patent as an opportunity to make more money, but he also fears the patent's lack of potential. Gary recognizes the value of the dollar and he understands how much money would be going to waste if the price of the patent was not a matter up for discussion. The sense of urgency over the patent comes from Gary's own personal profit-drive goals, and also a desire to seek reparations for Enid's unpaid domestic labor. Gary hopes to make enough money from the patent to give Enid the money she deserves; the money he believes she earned from raising children by herself, and the money for taking care of Alfred for so many years.

While Enid's labor revolves around the unpaid domestic sphere, her daughter, Denise, eschews any idea relating to domesticity. Instead of being an unpaid housewife, Denise ensures her payment by shifting an idea from the domestic sphere to the capitalist sphere -- cooking for others. Through her work as a chef, Denise knows her value and guarantees herself a salary. Denise's set of values are very similar to those held by Alfred. As a chef, Denise creates and builds food for her customers -- a line of work similar to Alfred's previous career. Like Alfred, Denise sees her work as a service to others and she takes pride in her abilities. Her confidence and security in her work can be seen at numerous points in the novel. One moment comes when she is abruptly required to prepare lunch for her parents; Enid describes Denise as "bump[ing] a drawer shut with her hip" (73). Even though Enid reads this action as disdain from Denise, it is actually a moment of confidence from Denise. Even though she was not anticipating making lunch, Denise still possesses a certain level of confidence and comfortableness while in the kitchen.

The cause of Denise's work ethic and pride most likely comes from Alfred's determination to raise her better than his two sons. Before Denise was born, Alfred claimed, "A last child was a last opportunity to learn from one's mistakes and make corrections, and he resolved to seize this opportunity. From the day she was born he would treat her more gently than he'd treated Gary or Chipper" (278). While Alfred does exhibit more affection towards Denise, he also expects a lot from her in terms of labor. When Denise is a teenager, Alfred spends less time traveling for work and begins to show an interest in bringing Denise with him to work at his office. Denise immediately begins to thrive and Alfred praises her for it by saying, "You made an impression on those men.

You opened their eyes to the kind of work a girl can do... Now you've had a taste of life in the real world" (374). Alfred is pleased that Denise is equipped to perform such tasks and that she was impressive to her coworkers. The "taste of the real world" that Alfred refers to involves Alfred's outlook on life. He believes that because of her strong work ethic in this field, she will acquire a liking for the work that Alfred has done. He believes his form of labor reflects the "real world" while a field in anything less does not seem to have a point. Even though Denise does not explicitly recreate Alfred's labor, she comes close by upholding the values instilled in her at a young age by Alfred.

Since Denise's labor is so similar to Alfred's labor, it is natural for the effects of the two separate labors to be similar as well. Much like Alfred, Denise had not been focusing on life at home; instead, she was focused on her career. She had indirectly avoided fostering any serious relationships and any relationship she did manage to form came alongside her job. Her first husband, Emile, was her partner in a restaurant but Denise eventually "felt more skilled and ambitious and hungry than her white-haired husband. She felt as if while working and sleeping and working sleeping, she'd aged so rapidly that she'd passed [her husband] and caught up with her parents... She said to herself: 'I'm too young to be so old'"(378). Here, Denise sees that her priorities are aligned with those of her parents. The statement "I'm too young to be so old" suggests that Denise is upset by this realignment of priorities, and yet, despite being able to recognize this, Denise continues to allow her work to take precedence in her life.

At the end of the novel, when Alfred's illness gets increasingly insufferable, Enid asks Denise to stay at the house and help take care of the ailing Alfred. Denise processes the request and thinks:

[Denise] told herself a story about a daughter in a family so hungry for a daughter that it would have eaten her alive if she hadn't run away... A daughter who, in her desperation to escape, had taken refuge in whatever temporary shelters she could find... But naturally, these refuges, chosen in haste, proved unworkable in the long run... The burden of listening to Enid and Alfred and being patient and understanding fell squarely on the daughter's shoulders... And now the time had come, according to the story that Denise told herself about herself, for the chef to carve herself up and feed the pieces to her hungry parents. (499)

This story Denise tells herself reveals that she may be aware of the reasoning behind her previous choices. However, the fact that Denise believes this is all a "story" suggests that she may find it false. Denise feels that putting her life on hold in order to take care of her parents would be a waste of her talents. Denise struggles to imagine a life where she has a successful career *and* a family of her own; instead, she believes she must have one or the other. When Enid asks Denise to stay, Denise knows that her type of character would never be able to perform the labor of taking care of Alfred since she was never conditioned to perform nurturing acts outside of her work.

Even though all of the Lambert children have acquired well-paying jobs, the children still feel as if they are not measuring up to their parents' set of standards. The notion that one's labor should provide one with security and success sets up a systematic thought process involving certain expectations. At the hands of neoliberalism, it is expected that the concept of family exists as a result of one's labor. Those in the novel who grow up in a neoliberal landscape see family as a commodity -- something that can only be experienced if their labor allows it. It is ultimately because of this flawed logic

that the nuclear unit suffers in Franzen's novel. In the case of this novel, the most frequent encounters of suffering take place within the home.

Chapter 3: The Domestic Sphere's Disappointment

One of the ways *The Corrections* addresses neoliberalism's effects on the nuclear family is through the home. Franzen makes the claim in his novel that "the family [is] the house's soul" (267). If the home is the physical embodiment of the family, then it is only natural for it to become the place for moments of major malfunction if the family itself is malfunctioning. A version of home that is free from dysfunction becomes unattainable the minute a member of the household steps foot across the home's threshold. The hierarchies and social constructs that are acceptable and ideal in areas outside of the home -- areas including one's labor make their way inside the home by way of those who exist in both realms. It is impossible for members of a nuclear unit to separate themselves from the outside world, therefore the outside world's disappointment becomes immediately present in the center of familial development -- the home.

In the case of Franzen's post-millennium novel, the anxiety coming from outside the house stems from the rise of neoliberal economics during the 20th and 21st century. Even the characters in the novel who grew up prior to the age of neoliberalism feel its attempt to turn the population inward. Such repercussions are felt in their relationship to the home and what they believe the home should provide. Each member of the Lambert family has a specific idea of what a home should be and what their role should consist of while in the home. Unfortunately, the home never lives up to the expectations held by the characters. These expectations come from a place of longing for values that were supposedly held during the time prior to the rise of neoliberalism, while simultaneously stemming from a desire to reject those same values. As a result of these opposing

desires, the home becomes the center for the family's dysfunction rather than being a place of togetherness. Even after multiple failed attempts, the Lamberts continue to optimistically strive towards the mirage of nuclear life that the home constantly tries to set up. However, by the end of the novel, the reader can predict an inevitable failure based on the characters' own shortcomings -- shortcomings that are to be expected during the age of neoliberalism.

The idea that the home fails to exist as a place for cohesion is seen almost immediately within the novel (in the chapter appropriately titled "The Failure") when the Lambert's youngest son, Chip, is *supposed* to host both of his Midwestern parents, and his younger sister Denise, for lunch in his city apartment. Since Chip cannot afford to take his parents out for lunch, he uses "a home cooked... rustic and affordable Italian lunch" as a means to disguise his own financial incompetencies (93). In her book, *Coming Up Short* (2013), Jennifer Silva claims that neoliberal policy "has promoted self-reliance, rugged individualism, untrammelled self-interest, and privatization" (14). Silva uses these terms when referencing current culture, however, the idea of "rugged individualism" predates neoliberal thought. It would be easy for a reader to describe Alfred as a "rugged" individual. During his youth he found pride in his work -- work that was frequently performed alone. However, there is a major difference between Alfred's "rugged individualism" and that of those raised under a more neoliberal economy. The "individualism" that had once only applied to labor, as illustrated by Alfred, has seeped into the family's domestic living space. Chip's attempt to provide his family with lunch, despite his lack of funds, reflects Silva's notion of "self-reliance." Having lunch with his family gives Chip the opportunity to spend time with people who genuinely care about

him and want to see him succeed. However, Chip feels that he is an embarrassment and that if he were to spend time with his family, the family would witness his embarrassment. Instead, he believes running after a girl and the prospect of a manuscript -- a job opportunity that he feels would provide a sense of purpose while also providing financial stability -- are more advantageous ways to spend his time. As a result of this self-prioritizing, Chip leaves his parents in the hands of Denise who must then take charge of the family luncheon (32). Chip runs from what he expects to be an awkward and unpleasant afternoon with his parents, while also running from his own shortcomings. Chip struggled with putting together his own home life and he feels stuck in the shadow of what his parents expect from him. As a child, Chip was bright and successful (33), but as an adult living in a city overrun with capitalist and consumerist priorities, he struggles. By chasing a girl and a manuscript, Chip not only goes after two of his personal desires, but he also maneuvers himself closer to the life he believes his parents want for him -- having a family of his own and an economically sound career.

Leaving Enid and Alfred with Denise is not any less disastrous than if Chip had stayed. In hopes of salvaging the meeting, Denise prepares the lunch Chip had planned for them (65). Denise's quick act of kindness and leadership is then undermined by Enid's recollection and obsession with a fancier meal she had once seen. Enid says, "[The party] had *pyramids* of shrimp. It was solid shrimp, in pyramids. I've never seen anything like it. (21)" and continues to say "The desserts were a foot tall... It was elegant. Have you ever seen anything like that?" (98). Even though Denise prepares a nice lunch for her parents, Enid's own familial expectations for the afternoon do not live up to her reality. Enid was expecting to participate in an afternoon with her husband and

two children. Chip's sudden abandonment hurts Enid and she displaces herself from her less than perfect afternoon by fantasizing over a life that appears to be a much better version of her own midwestern existence. Enid's disinterest suggests that even when characters perform for the benefit of the family, their acts of selflessness are ultimately unappreciated. As a result, inward attitudes are reinforced.

Perhaps the most distressing moment during the whole lunch fiasco is Alfred's muted disappointment. Even though Alfred is described as "imposing" (16), he is also found thinking to himself, "Seeing their children was the only thing he seemed to care about anymore" (10). Since Alfred is no longer in the workforce, he begins to exist entirely within the domestic sphere. As a result, his family, specifically his children, begins to take priority in his life. When Alfred was working, he regarded his children harshly and made no serious attempt to bond with them. Once Alfred is removed from his work, he longs for what he pushed away when the children were still under his own roof. If his children are "the only thing he seemed to care about anymore," then spending an afternoon with them in the close quarters of a home would mean much more to Alfred than it would Chip. While eating his lunch with Enid and Denise, Alfred "shook his head as though Chip's having cooked, Chip's absence now, overwhelmed him." He then immediately says, "I am increasingly bothered by my affliction" (100). The term "affliction" possesses physical and spiritual meaning when referring to Alfred. While the term certainly refers to his looming dementia and Parkinson's disease, it also extends into his emotional poverty. Now that he spends more time in the household, Alfred is more sensitive towards the disconnect between he and his family. The affliction has less to do with Alfred's health and more to do with his disassociation from his family. Alfred was

anxious to see Chip, but once Chip abandons the idea of joining his family for lunch, Alfred discovers his own faults as his family's patriarch. Alfred never spent any quality time with his family; instead of building a bond with his children, he expected one to already exist when he got home from work. Now that his children are adults, they can easily leave Alfred behind, as he had done with them. Alfred's absence in his children's youth stands as an example for an impressionable Chip. Chip's abandonment of the lunch echoes Alfred's own absence during Chip's childhood.

The harm Alfred's absence does to the home is most noticeable during Enid's "Revenge Dinner" (249). After Alfred leaves the home for eleven days without giving Enid the farewell Enid expects, Enid plots her revenge on Alfred by preparing a meal she knows he hates: liver and rutabaga. Alfred's eventual homecoming is far from optimal; upon entering the home, Alfred immediately doles Enid a critique of her ability to follow his orders, an action that only fuels Enid's hunger for revenge. Alfred frequently refers to himself as "the boss" (250), a term used to describe Alfred's patriarchal position in the household despite his frequent absences. Enid makes a point to think, "whatever Alfred's shortcoming as a husband, no one could say he didn't play by the rules. The kitchen was her domain, and he never meddled" (252). When Alfred cannot "boss" Enid in the kitchen he makes up for it in his treatment over their children. During the Dinner, Alfred abides by Enid's rules and "put bite after bite of vile Revenge in his mouth, chewing quickly and swallowing mechanically, telling himself he had endured worse than this" (257). However, this reluctant submission to Enid's power in the home is quickly followed by an attempt to regain his own power within the home. Young Chip refuses to eat his dinner, but Alfred asserts that Chip will not leave the table until he has taken "one

bite of each thing” (257). After Chip once again refuses to eat the food, Alfred “leaned over Chipper’s plate and in a single action of fork removed all but one bite of the rutabaga” (258). He then instructs Chip to eat the last bite on the plate. Chip continues his refusal to give in to his dad’s command, but once everyone has left the table, Chip finds himself hostage to Alfred’s order to stay at the table until he takes the last bite. Even when Chip eventually succumbs, Alfred is not there and Chip remains at the table in the shadow of Alfred’s “broken promise” (263). Even though the Lambert family is together at the dinner table, the event still lacks the idea of family unity.

The “Revenge Dinner” captures the nuclear family’s dysfunction. It is a dinner consisting of all family members sitting down at the table together which should signify unity in the household. However, since the dinner revolves around Enid’s revenge, the concept of unity disappears. Alfred’s dominance in his marriage pushes Enid to seek control in the only area vulnerable to Alfred: the domestic domain. Enid and Alfred’s power struggle interrupts the ideal family dinner and transforms it into a manipulative event. Instead of experiencing family bonding, each Lambert spends the dinner seeking forms of control. Enid resents Alfred for his entitlement for patriarchal power and seeks to claim some of his power for herself. In response, Alfred feels attacked by Enid’s dinner and attempts to reclaim his dominance by ordering Chip to eat his dinner. Meanwhile, Chip resents his father for his lack of participation in his youth and does not wish to be bossed around by someone who does not take interest in the family unit. Chip sees the family dinner as an opportunity to protest his father’s behavior. All of these acts of bitterness on the micro level result in the overall demise of the traditional sit-down dinner. The characters seek compensation for Alfred’s disconnect from the family.

Unfortunately, Alfred's children can only object to Alfred's behavior for so long before they, too, begin possessing his habitual absenteeism. While Chip becomes an eventual reflection of Alfred's absence, Gary tries to avoid a similar outcome by making up for what his father lacked.

In the chapter "The More He Thought About it, the Angrier He Got," the eldest of the Lambert children, Gary, finds himself in a war of sorts with his wife, Caroline over what kind of values should be demonstrated within their home. Gary finds certain traditions, such as eating dinner together every night as a unit -- something he was often cheated of as a child due to Alfred's work obligation, imperative to the success of a family. When he wishes to have these traditions in his own household, Caroline retorts with "You're the one who's bent on having these sit-down dinners. The boys couldn't care less" (163). Gary's wife and children's unappreciation for Gary's efforts exemplifies the home failing to provide that which is expected from the characters. While Gary wishes his home to be an echo of the positive elements of his childhood, such as sitting at the table every night for dinner, he also wishes it to be a correction of his childhood's shortcomings. Amid these wishes and efforts, Gary ultimately finds himself unknowingly becoming more and more like Alfred -- disconnected from the family he created. Gary's isolation differs from his father's insofar as Gary actually wants to be close to his family. When Gary was younger, "it was in [Gary's] nature to throw [his] arms around [Alfred], but this nature had been corrected out of [him]" (250). Alfred sees affection from children as a behavior that needs to be corrected, thus driving a stark wedge between him and his sons. Gary consciously attempts to be present in the areas of his children's lives where Alfred had been absent from Gary's. Gary's isolation from his

own home exists because of his lack of solidarity with his wife. Since the two passively fight with each other, their children are left in the crosshairs with no foundation for family values. The overall lack of interest in family values, arguably caused by the rise of the profit-driven neoliberalism, disturbs Gary. His wife and children do not see the home as a place for the family; instead, they see it as space they are called on to fill with things, hence the boys' frequent, short-lived, expensive hobbies (154). Even though Gary desperately wants his home to be a place of familial congregation, his fellow family members have been irreversibly influenced by neoliberalism, thus preventing his dream from ever coming true. While Gary prepares dinner as a desperate attempt to bond his family together, Franzen narrates:

To Gary, it seemed that the nature of family life itself was changing -- that togetherness and filiality and fraternity weren't valued the way they were when he was young. And so here he was, still grilling. Through the kitchen windows, he could see Caroline thumb-wrestling Jonah. He could see her taking Aaron's headphones to listen to music, could see her nodding to the beat. It sure *looked* like family life. (164)

Gary seems to believe that "filiality and fraternity" are not "valued" in his household because he is not a part of it, when in reality, those two institutions *do* exist between Caroline and her sons. Since Caroline lacks Gary's authority, she positions herself as a friend to her children. Aaron, Caleb, and Jonah view Caroline more as a friend than a parent, which is why they easily give her their loyalty and affection. Caroline understands and reinforces her sons' capitalist desires, such as fulfilling their consumerist wants, and as a result, she is the recipient of the family life and values that Gary cares so

much about. Unfortunately, since Gary lacks Caroline's enthusiasm for and participation in his family's consumerist ventures, he becomes ostracized from his wife and children. Family life and those who believe in that institution are being left behind in the wake of America's shifting priorities from a life rooted in family to being driven by profit and materialism. Because of his desire to cook a meal for his children, Gary is physically pushed outside of the home and is left to witness something that "*looked* like family life" while understanding that it is indeed not.

After offering his family a meal in hopes of salvaging any values held when he was a child, Gary once again finds the home to be a place for failure. In a manner that mirrors the indirect lack of appreciation towards Denise by Enid in the early pages of the novel, Caroline does something similar to Gary. During the family dinner, "[Caroline] slid off her chair, hobbled to the sink with her plate, scraped her dinner into the garbage grinder, and hobbled upstairs. Caleb and Aaron excused themselves and ground up their own dinners and followed her. Altogether maybe thirty dollars' worth of meat went into the sewer" (164). When Gary had been a child, he and Chip were not allowed to leave the table unless they had finished their dinner -- a rule set in place by their "boss" of a father. Here, Gary's sons seem to be the boss. The blatancy of these actions does not come from a place of disrespect but rather from a place of indifference and ignorance. Gary's children are incapable of understanding what a dinner together could mean to their father. Caroline had told Gary that "the boys couldn't care less" about eating dinner together and this moment in the novel proves that. When Gary forces his family to have dinner with him, he is trying to uphold a set of values that can no longer exist in today's "rugged individual[istic]" society. When he comments on how much "meat went into the

sewer,” Gary is not bothered by the loss of money, but by the loss of family. However, the fact that he notices the economic worth of the meat critiques the notion that he is free from the pressures of capitalist America. Gary can only understand his spiritual loss by quantifying it in financial terms. Overall, it is not meat that his family puts down the disposal, but rather Gary’s dream of being part of a family -- a home that is better than the one in which he grew up.

The youngest Lambert sibling, Denise, also falls victim to the shortcomings of the home. Denise funnels all of her energy into her labor as a chef -- work which revolves around a form of caretaking all while she turns a profit. She does not make the idea of a home her priority partly because the home in which she grew up was focused on labor. Denise takes any residual desire for a home that her labor does not satisfy and often finds herself intruding on the homes of others. When Gary passively asks if she has ever been involved with married men, Denise dodges the question by saying, “You see a person with kids, and you see how happy they are to be a parent, and you’re attracted to their happiness. Impossibility is attractive” (216). In this passage, Denise acknowledges the impossibility of happiness within the family, but she does not deny her attempts at obtaining it. One of her ways of grasping at other people’s happiness is through food. As a chef, Denise is able to provide people with the most vital form of sustenance -- food; and yet, any attempt outside the possibility of profit seems unwarranted to those around her. Despite Enid’s insensitivity during the luncheon at Chip’s apartment, Denise continues to make food elsewhere as a way of making herself feel useful -- usually in places where such efforts are not needed. Before initiating an affair with her business partner, Brian, Denise volunteers to make dinner for him and his family. However, after

cooking the meal, Denise learns that dinner has already been prepared by Brian's wife, Robin. Franzen writes: "'There's a dinner in the fridge. There's already a dinner... I just made a second whole dinner.' Denise laughed, really angry" (386). She goes to tell Robin, "I just realized that I've been making dinner and you already made it" (387). When using the word "angry," Franzen suggests that Denise is not angry over her efforts to make dinner, but rather because she realizes her efforts are not required in this home. Instead of working towards making her own family, Denise becomes genuinely disappointed when her attempts at infiltrating other families fail.

At the beginning of Denise's relationship with Brian's wife, Robin, Denise has the opportunity to prepare dinner outside of her job; however, this event only takes place in the domain of Denise's own home (401). Being able to finally provide someone she cares for with a meal leaves Denise with a feeling of victory that differs from the one had while she is working. However, much like previous instances, the novel reiterates the connection between disappointment and home. When Denise asks if she can fix dinner for Robin, she is bothered by Robin's "[determination] not to be impressed" (401). Denise is looking for someone to not only acknowledge her abilities as a chef, but also as a woman, and no one around her is willing to provide her with this. In response to her lack of satisfaction, Denise spends her time sleeping with married partners in hopes of being part of the thing she will ultimately destroy: a loving, happy family.

Perhaps the most disappointing of all the setups for the home within the novel is Enid's desire for having "one last Christmas in St. Jude" (75). For many Americans, Christmas is a holiday, but it is also a backdrop for the gathering of family. Over time, Christmas has lost the significance of family and now seems to embody Silva's idea of

neoliberal “self-interest” by revolving around sale prices and wishlists. Franzen uses his novel to reveal the selfish politics that occur in the planning for this holiday. Franzen does not imply that people are any less inclined to celebrate Christmas; on the contrary, by orienting the novel’s plot around Christmas, Franzen reveals the holiday’s prevalence in today’s society. However, while Franzen’s characters still celebrate Christmas, they begin privatizing the holiday by refusing to celebrate unless the celebration takes place in their own home. Over the course of the novel, the plot is always building towards Christmas and the answer to whether or not Enid will get the gift she most wants:

“Christmas in St. Jude.” Having Christmas in St. Jude would give Enid the gift of family, an archetype she hopes to fall back on when her wishes for economic freedom are less likely (an idea that will be discussed further in the American Dream section). In his essay entitled “Serving the Fruitcake, or Jonathan Franzen’s Midwestern Poetics” (2008), author Ralph J. Poole writes, “Ironically, everybody -- meaning the readers, *not* the novel’s characters -- could see the result coming, only Enid and her family are blind to the effects they constantly produce” (280). “The effects they constantly produce” refers to the repeated failure the Lamberts have when trying to gather their family in one place. Despite these failures, Enid remains hopeful that her wish of having everyone home for Christmas will come true.

Since Denise seems to be the most responsible when it comes to her parents’ wishes, she agrees to Enid’s wish early on, but her cooperation is once again undermined by Enid’s constant need for more. When Denise agrees to Christmas in St. Jude, she admits that she will only be available for a few days, to which her mother replies, “You can’t take a week?” (75). Even though Denise’s decision has more to do with wanting to

satisfy Enid than it does Denise's own wishes, her willingness to be agreeable goes overlooked. Instead of being thankful for what she is given, Enid has the immediate reaction of wanting *more* -- a characteristic typically possessed by spoiled children on Christmas Day.

Gary's unit, on the other hand, is far less agreeable than Denise. While he is more than willing to join Enid in St. Jude, despite his disdain for the suburban midwestern town, his wife Caroline is not as compliant. Throughout "The More He Thought About It, the Angrier He Got," the reader witnesses the power struggle between Gary and Caroline over whether or not the couple will be celebrating Christmas in St. Jude. Gary wants to bring his kids, specifically Jonah, with him to visit their grandparents in St. Jude, while Caroline would rather have her children spend Christmas in their own home. The argument over the matter continues throughout the chapter with Gary and Caroline both being equally stubborn. At one point, Gary says to Caroline, "I was under the impression that we're a family and that we do things together" (181). This statement further proves Gary's awareness of his family's shortcomings. The term "impression" suggests that Gary is aware that they are *not* a family and that they do not do things together. However, he is not only mourning the absence of unity in his own family but in families in general; he is starting to believe that no families do things together. He seems to be less upset with his wife and more upset with the institution that leaves them arguing over a holiday that should be rooted in family. As part of her argument against Christmas in St. Jude, Caroline blames Enid in her reasoning: "[Enid] goes looking for things to disapprove of, and she tries to tell *my* children how to dress for dinner in *my* house... If we absolutely have to see your parents, we're doing it on our

own turf" (184). The emphasis on the word "my" suggests Caroline's desire for control over her children and over her own home. Since Caroline does not work, the home has become her vehicle for power. When Gary steps foot into the home, he is not stepping into the house that he has provided, but rather onto Caroline's "turf." The word "turf" gives the connotation of competition -- a competition that mirrors capitalism's agenda in which merchants compete to satisfy consumer's wishes. Both of these word choices reveal Christmas's transformation from something that was once family-oriented to something that now revolves around the self. Caroline is unable to untie herself from her home and therefore does not wish to spend the holiday at Gary's family's home since it would mean a decrease of her power.

In the end, Enid's wish is granted and all of her children do end up in St. Jude together. However, as to be expected, the holiday is far from the joyous celebration that many think of when thinking of Christmas. Enid's utopic vision for the holiday is overshadowed by Alfred's deteriorating health condition and by the strength of the children's personalities. When Chip finally makes it to the house, Enid claims his presence "is the best Christmas present [she has] ever had" to which Gary bitterly responds with, "Well, she'd better enjoy it in a hurry, because she owes me a discussion and I'm expecting payment" (537). Rather than enjoying the moment of togetherness the Lambert's have finally pulled off, Gary turns the reunion into something revolving around money. Gary spends the holiday resenting both of his families because he feels neither family has repaid him for trying to amend their dysfunction. He feels unappreciated and that he is "owed" something in return for his efforts towards helping and providing for the family. Similarly to when his family sends their dinner down the

disposal, Gary is once again unable to quantify what he feels he is “owed” in measurements other than money.

Despite the family’s efforts, it seems as though the Lamberts are at their worst when they are together. The home is too personal of a place for the characters to exist in and act civil towards one another. Even though every Lambert seems to subconsciously yearn for the safety and cohesion of the nuclear family, their resentment towards one another makes obtaining the goal of a family, even if it is just for an afternoon, a hypothetical dream. It is through these small, yet frequent disappointments within the home that Franzen is able to indicate the possible disbandment of the nuclear family in postmillennial society. With the rise of profit-motive neoliberalism, Franzen is fearful that society will ultimately leave family values in the past, even though it is the structure that some people long for the most. The longing for family and for a definite household is interpreted as part of a redefined American Dream surfacing in the 21st century. The connection between one’s labor and one’s home is most easily seen in regards to the American Dream. When one’s labor falls short, its shortcomings are quickly seen within the realm of the home -- a connection that makes the idea of success in labor and in the home something that can only be dreamt about.

Chapter 4: Keep Dreamin' the American Dream

The American Dream has long been defined as finding fulfillment in the ability to obtain upward mobility as a result of hard work.³ Over time, many have come to the conclusion that such a dream is no longer attainable. Despite an overall rise of neoliberalism in American culture, many still hold onto what the American Dream once promised. Today, many believe that the American Dream has expanded from the standard definition and is now also concerned with obtaining strong familial bonds.⁴ Despite an expansion in definition, Franzen suggests in *The Corrections* that the American Dream is as unattainable as it ever was and that such ideology should be interpreted literally; the Oxford English Dictionary defines “dream” as “an unrealistic or self-deluding fantasy” and Franzen urges Americans to view the American Dream as just that (OED Online). From the early pages of the novel, the story begins propelling towards the unlikely event of a Lambert family Christmas. While this plan is originally conceived by Enid, it exists as the novel’s main plot point and ultimately becomes the overlying dream of the novel. Enid uses the capitalist holiday to disguise her desperation for having all of her children and grandchildren in her home at the same time. Even though Pew Research Center revealed that Americans are now more concerned with obtaining family bonds, Franzen challenges these concerns by limiting the likelihood of a Lambert family reunion to one day: Christmas. Enid recognizes the significance of Christmas as a consumerist holiday and thus realizes that she can exploit the holiday as a

³ Further reading on the history of this ideology include Lawrence R. Samuel’s *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (2012) and Jim Cullen’s *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (2003).

⁴ According to Pew Research Center; refer to page 7 of this document’s introduction for specific details.

way to bond her family together. Even though every character in this novel longs for human connection, few characters prove that such an idea is possible in the current time period. If the American Dream has widened the scope of its original meaning, the characters in *The Corrections* prove the dream can never become reality in an age when capitalist thought is as prevalent as it is today. Franzen reveals each character's individual relationship to the American Dream through their attitudes towards the family unit, which is most prominently seen during Christmas.

While Christmas is an excuse for many to spend money in order to buy presents for their loved ones, Enid deviates from her frequent money-obsessed mindset and convinces herself that the holiday is more about having everyone in her family together. Prior to this sudden change of heart, there are several instances when Enid seems to be more concerned with material possession and how she is perceived by others than she is with spending quality time with her family for the sake of family. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, Enid expresses frustration towards Alfred for instilling a strict budget even though they reside comfortably in the middle economic class. Enid expressed disdain for having purchased a cheap rug while Franzen writes, “[Alfred and Enid] were so unaccustomed to spending money on themselves... It seemed to [Enid] that in trying to save money in life she had made many mistakes like this” (9). Enid's attitude suggests that one of her dreams is to have money that she can spend frivolously without question. In this respect, she is more in line with the original definition of the dream. However, while obsessing over materialistic things such as the foot-tall desserts (98) and the families who are able to flaunt such things, Enid is aware that she will most likely never be able to make such a dream a reality -- a dream revolving around spending

money without a budget and without fear of being scolded by her husband. Instead, Enid turns to the idea of family. Enid begins compensating for her dream of having disposable money with a dream about family. She rightfully believes that her efforts towards passively fighting with Alfred over expenditures would be better spent cultivating a stronger relationship between her children and herself, thus the desire to have a family Christmas in St. Jude.

During her persistent campaign for Christmas, she uses the popular mindset of the contemporary generation in order to appeal to her grandkids. She tempts Gary's kids: Noah, Aaron, and Jonah, by bribing them with gifts. However, she still utilizes the budget-based thinking given to her by years with Alfred by telling Jonah that she will buy him "two books that cost less than ten dollars each or one book for less than twenty dollars" (176). Enid is trying to accomplish the American Dream while also utilizing modern day economics. Enid's dual-method approach towards luring her grandchildren into her dream Christmas is the only active attempt made in the novel to coincide the American Dream with contemporary neoliberal consumption. Since the grandchildren do not participate in Enid's Christmas, Enid's efforts are fruitless, thus reiterating Franzen's cynicism towards the hybridity of family values and neoliberalism. It is then implied that the younger generation has little interest in neither the fulfillment of the American Dream nor the wishes held by those older than them. What is even more unsettling is when it is revealed that the grandchildren turn down Christmas at Enid's in order to see *The Lion King* (484), the reader can see that the younger generation is more concerned with what they are able to immediately gain, such as tickets to a play, rather than long-term benefits, such as spending quality time with extended family during the holidays.

Despite the grandchildren's absence, Enid's wish of having all of her children home for Christmas comes true; however, the holiday is quickly overshadowed by Alfred's decaying health and the overall deterioration of the traditional American Dream.

If the standard definition of the American Dream is making a life for oneself by working hard, then Alfred is the novel's personification of that ideal. Alfred secured a place for his family in middle-class America through his dedicated labor to the railroad company. In short, Alfred was able to achieve the American Dream; however, as America becomes more and more privately-motivated, the American Dream absorbs the idea that family is as important as material success. The characters in Franzen's novel begin to believe that there are alternate ways of measuring one's success other than one's career. Unfortunately, an expansion in the definition does not ensure the American Dream's success. As the American Dream extends from what it was once limited to, Alfred's previous success in the American Dream is no longer recognized and his health begins to decline, thus representing the decline in hope for any original American Dream. Literary critics such as Srirupa Chatterjee, have noticed the connection between Alfred and the narrow idea of the dream. Chatterjee writes in her article "'Forever Fearful of a Crash': Family vis-a-vis Materialism in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*" (2007), that Alfred's "refusal to accept his physical and mental debility owing to Parkinson's attests to the poignant failure of his ideals under the imperatives of contemporary globalization" (Chatterjee 7). While Alfred struggles to accept his dwindling health, there are moments when he gives nuance to "the imperatives of contemporary globalization" -- one of which seems to be the dream's shift towards the family unit. At a turning point in the novel, while attempting to vacation on a cruise liner with Enid,

Alfred attempts suicide by jumping off the boat railing. As he is falling, Alfred thinks to himself:

He was remembering the nights he'd sat upstairs with one or both of his boys or with his girl in the crook of his arm... These were evenings when nothing traumatic enough to leave a scar had befallen the nuclear unit. Evenings of plain vanilla closeness in his black leather chair... in the end, when you were falling into water, there was no solid thing to reach for but your children. (336)

In what he thinks to be his last moments, Alfred reaches for his children. He acknowledges that his children are the most important things in his life and he longs for the time he was able to spend with them. However, since these thoughts are only expressed internally, Alfred's family is unable to learn his hidden desire for such a unit. Instead, his underlying anxiety over yearning for one dream while existing within the limitations of another is often miscommunicated to those around him.

Many of Alfred's actions and mishaps are interpreted as testimonies to his stubbornness and deteriorating health. However, some instances reveal the character's anxiety towards contemporary America (and its dreams) and how a character like Alfred can fit into a society seemingly rooted in values different than his own. At the beginning of the novel, Franzen discusses the "alarm bell of anxiety" (3), heard by many Americans during this time period. The "bell" represents a handful of things: the shift in American values from outward to inward, the fear that the Midwest is becoming significantly less ideal than other areas of the country, and the creeping belief that the American Dream is, and has never been truly achievable. Even though Alfred, and then Gary and Denise make money and achieve upward mobility, they are not as fulfilled as they had hoped

they would be. In response to the bell, Enid begins making interior changes to the Lambert home in hopes of bringing the house into the 21st century. One of the ways she attempts to do so is by switching out Alfred's comfortable chair. Alfred is disgusted by the request while Franzen writes, "The chair was the only sign he'd ever given of having a personal vision of the future... The chair was a monument and a symbol and could not be parted from Alfred. It could only be relocated, and so it went into the basement and Alfred followed" (10). In Alfred's case, his chair is his throne. When he returns home from a job in which he is dominant, as previously explained in the labor section, he expects to come home to a similar sense of dominance. Alfred is able to get comfortable in his position in the house by way of sitting in his recliner. However, as explained in the home section, Enid retains dominance over the household while allowing Alfred to believe he is in control. Enid asserts her dominance by allowing Alfred to keep his throne as long as it is moved out of sight. While it is easy to interpret Alfred's actions in this scene as an act of rebellion towards his self-proclaimed guerilla wife (6), Alfred's refusal to give up his chair is parallel to his refusal to give up his position in the American Dream. Unfortunately, space allotted for such individuals is rapidly decreasing and Franzen exemplifies this by moving Alfred to the basement. Since the basement is literally lower than other levels of a house, moving Alfred to the basement suggests being swept away or seen as lesser than what is happening on the ground level. It is only after Alfred moves to the basement that the reader starts to see examples of Alfred's weakening health condition.

One of the novel's saddest and most pitiful moments involving Alfred's health arrives during Enid and Alfred's cruise. While in the bathroom, Alfred hallucinates a

turd speaking to him from the floor. The turd repeatedly calls Alfred heinous names and threatens to “get in [Alfred’s] clothes and touch the upholstery” while also “smear[ing] and leav[ing] a trail” (282). The hallucinatory conversation extends across multiple pages of the novel and is the manifestation of one of Alfred’s possible anxieties expressed by the early ringing of the “bell.” Since Alfred is aware the American Dream is now encompassing more than he was able to achieve, he begins to see himself as a turd. His health no longer allows him to suppress the fear that all he believed in and has stood for no longer matters in contemporary America the way it once did. When the turd says it will leave “a trail,” it is referring to Alfred’s fear that he has contaminated the promise of his children’s familial future with his own failure in the family department. Additionally, if Alfred is the novel’s symbol for the American Dream, then this scene also suggests the novel’s overall attitude towards the American Dream. The American Dream is a turd and its promise will get in one’s clothes and “touch the upholstery.” It is nothing more than some annoying figure that will become permanent but never beneficial. Seeing himself as a turd on the bathroom floor of a cruise shows the severity of Alfred’s condition. When Alfred calls out to Enid for help, Enid is unable to provide (289). The reader sees how desperately Alfred needs help while also seeing the lack of help other characters are willing to give him. Alfred, along with the American Dream, requires love and attention, especially from the younger generation, in order to survive. When the Lambert children are asked to support Alfred, Chip agrees to stay because he has zero alternative obligations.

Out of all the characters in the novel, Chip seems to be the most consciously aware of capitalism’s presence around him and the effect such capitalism is having on his

society. Near the middle of the novel, when Chip is about to run off to Lithuania with Gitanas -- his corrupt new boss -- the two discuss the nature of their scars. Gitanas sees a scar on Chip's hand and says to Chip, "Self-inflicted. You pathetic American," to which Chip responds, "Different kind of prison" (134). The word "prison" suggests that Chip feels bound to the capitalist society around him; and because of this burden, he not only feels that the American Dream is unattainable, but he feels discouraged from even attempting it. Lack of attempt is seen through the fact that Chip never pursues a real relationship with anyone around him; instead, he puts all of his energy into the people who have something to give him -- things that include sex, job opportunities, and money. Chip is disturbed by the growing presence of the economy and believes that he can be successful without making money (32) -- an idea that directly disputes the standard definition of the American Dream. Instead of working towards upward mobility, Chip dreams of spending money in order to indulge his insatiable desires -- a dream that lacks any hope for future happiness. Unsurprisingly, Chip's dream quickly becomes unattainable when the act of labor is removed. In order to make money, Chip makes some ironic choices: he begins selling books which he had believed "would fetch him hundreds of dollars... each of them had called out in a bookstore with a promise of a radical critique of late-capitalist society" (92). In an ironic attempt to prove the American Dream wrong, Chip sells a book critiquing "late-capitalist society" in an attempt to make some money so he can participate in that very same "capitalist society."

In similar moments of extreme vulnerability, Chip reveals that he is tempted by the widening promise of the American Dream. When Chip is in the middle of shoplifting a fish that he plans to serve his parents for lunch, he runs into a man with his daughter

and thinks to himself “what it would be like to father a child, to always be needed instead of always needing” (96). The thought of Chip having a child has an element of longing while also having an element of impossibility. Chip seems to want to be in the position of being needed rather than needing, and yet, at the same time, he seems to be acknowledging the unlikelihood of such an event. Chip fears his need will always erase the possibility of being needed -- a fear given to him while living in a heavily capitalist city. The fear that his consumerism and materialism will never subside enough in order for him to have a family of his own reflects the anxiety held by those living in an age when one’s family is becoming more important alongside consumption and neoliberal policy. However, Chip differs from those similar to Gary’s children in that he is able to express any sort of desire for something other than what he has. This separates from him from the rest of the contemporary population and provides hope for the American Dream. In the end, Chip escapes his “prison” and makes his subconscious dream of being needed come true when he finally obtains a nurturing relationship between himself and his father. One of the differences between Chip and his siblings is that he gives in to spending time with family, whereas Denise struggles to commit.

If the modern American Dream is one that takes place around family, then Denise sees the dream, but she only sees it as an impossibility or as a sacrifice to herself. Since her labor is the most similar to Alfred’s, it is more likely that she is more rooted than her brothers in her labor than she is with family. While there are moments when Denise is tempted to add an element of family to her personal goals, she hesitates. In the later pages of the novel, Denise admits to herself a conflicted relationship between both versions of the dream by saying that in her youth she “had gone to school in a bright

modernity and come home every day to an older, darker world” (383). Denise’s existence in two different generations -- one which is “bright” and “modern” while the other is “old” and “dark” -- founds her struggle with untying herself from her labor. Such struggle prevents Denise from giving herself to a strong relationship -- an act which would illustrate the overall absorption of one American Dream into another one that is equally concerned with family as it is labor. As described in the Home chapter, even though Denise admits she sees comfort in forming relationships, she is similar to Chip in that she sees a relationship as an impossibility. Without relationships, Denise is comfortable in her labor and as a result, her idea of the American Dream is a modern retelling of the original definition -- one that is structurally similar to the original dream while also taking place in contemporary America. Therefore it should come as no surprise when Denise feels compelled to reject Enid’s offer to stay after Christmas in order to take care of Alfred. It would make sense for Denise to want to care for her father, especially if Alfred is the novel’s symbol for the original American Dream and has beliefs that are closely aligned with those of Denise. However, taking care of someone would exhibit a sense of compliance towards the new American Dream. Since Denise has already achieved the overall goal of the original Dream, it is not in her best interest to attempt aspects of the new Dream. It is when she tries to pursue other components of the American Dream, such as familial happiness, that she ruins both her prospects of a career and being a part of a family. While Chip and Denise are both reluctant to show compliance towards the American Dream, Gary exhibits total cooperation and is still unable to achieve it.

When the reader is first introduced to Gary, he is found taking “a box of 8x10 paper from the big stainless refrigerator, and [feeding] two strips of celluloid to the motorized negative cleaner - a sexily heavy little gadget” (138). The juxtaposition of new-age technology with an older and disappearing artform -- developing photographs, reveals Gary’s existence in contemporary America while also showing his participation in the years before him. As described in the Home section, Gary is determined to maintain a set of values for his children that are a reflection of those held when he was a child. This commitment is once again shown through Gary’s attitude towards developing photographs: “To reassure himself that he wasn’t clinically depressed and to make sure that Caroline never suspected anything of the kind, he’s resolved to work in the darkroom twice a week” (140). By forcing himself to work in the darkroom, Gary forces a perverted perspective on the original American Dream. Gary believes that he will be successful (an idea strongly tied to the American Dream) in deterring himself and his wife from the notion that he is depressed if he labors over family photographs. The reason Gary does not want Caroline to think he is depressed is because he wants the Dream of having a tight-knit family. While he does physically have a family, cooperation is not shown by Gary’s wife and sons. Instead, Gary seems to be the only member interested in having a family, as explained in the Home section. The idea that Gary gives his best effort to have a family and still fails, further suggests the overall impossibility of the American Dream. Even though Gary attains significant upward mobility for himself and his family, he lacks meaningful relationships with the members of his family, thus leaving him in a state of depression. While Chip and Denise struggle with admitting their desires for a family, Gary has no issue with these feelings but he is

still unable to make it a reality. Franzen is trying to explain that the American Dream is unattainable in contemporary America no matter how badly it is wanted.

Expanding the original definition of the American Dream to include the strength of familial and friendly bonds does not increase the chances of one finding success in America; instead, it gives Americans more room for error. Instead of having the expectation to achieve upward mobility in one's job, Americans are now under the impression that they must be a part of a family and have a healthy relationship with that family along with being successful in their career. In a society where capitalist methods of thinking seem to be the most prevalent, it becomes more and more difficult for one to live up to the expectations set in place by the American Dream. As a result, Franzen's novel provides a depiction of twenty-first century America where people are more discouraged by what they will not be able to achieve and ultimately feel that they are required to choose between a successful career and an ideal family. Despite the Dream's effort to allow more room for success, it is only putting more pressure on Americans to succeed. The American Dream is most prominently seen as unattainable when one's labor fails to provide characters with the sense of wholeness originally promised. In wake of labor's failure, the characters show interest in obtaining stronger personal bonds with those around them but are ultimately unsuccessful because of the neoliberal distractions, such as material consumption, filling contemporary American culture.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Jonathan Franzen's contemporary American novel, *The Corrections*, presents neoliberalism's decimating effects on the nuclear family as an institution. Hesitance toward overall domesticity, failure to find fulfillment in one's line of work, and the insatiable desire to obtain the American Dream, are all ways Franzen's characters reveal neoliberalism's dominance in society. A culture dominated by capitalism leaves little room for the nuclear family; areas once satisfied by familial bonding are now being exploited for commercialism and consumerism, as shown by the characters of this novel. Even when characters attempt a rebellion against capitalism by exhibiting nostalgia towards simpler ways of living, the overarching effect of neoliberalism is too embedded in American culture as a whole for the idea of simpler living to become plausible. Franzen writes his societal hopelessness into the pages of *The Corrections* as a way of warning the public. If Franzen only ever sought to "document a history of deterioration," as Poole suggests, then it is the reader's decision on how Franzen's warning be applied and on what should be done about the deterioration in terms of prevention.

Even though this research project focused solely on one specific novel, I would be interested in reading Jonathan Franzen's other novels and essays, along with other pieces of popular contemporary fiction⁵ from different authors. Reading more within this genre would provide more insight into how the specific effects on the nuclear family discussed in this thesis, are portrayed in other works. After reading other primary texts from this era, one would be able to comment on whether Franzen's novel was alone in its eerie

⁵ Especially texts published after the turn of the twenty-first century.

prediction of an economic and global tragedy, and whether or not the authors possess a more hopeful tone than that of Franzen. If contemporary fiction continuously captures the nuclear family as unlikeable and en route to its probable demise, then perhaps in 2001, Franzen was on the edge of an emerging trend in contemporary literary fiction.

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