

Interaction as transaction in jonathan franzen's the corrections



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Lambert family, the protagonists of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, view the world through a lens which attaches monetary value to people, objects, and actions. Money is a constant presence in their lives, whether there's plenty or not enough. Alfred, Enid, Gary, Denise, Chip, and other characters, seem only to exist in relation to someone or something outside themselves. They seem to evaluate their own worth according to that someone or something. The traditional ideal of family interaction becomes a series of transactions, as the Lamberts coldly communicate through a wall of imagined currency; constructed to protect their emotional vulnerability.

Each member of the Lambert family is valued for their occupation in the corporation of the family. Enid chooses her husband, Alfred, because he is an "earner" and "she intend[s] to be comfortable in life as well as happy" (265). When she first meets Alfred, Enid studies the outer packaging of Alfred, whom she views as a product. She concludes Alfred's "...suits were themselves luxuriantly pleated wool beauties." (265). Enid bases her value of him on her evaluation of his packaging. In the end, when Alfred is put in a nursing home, Enid admits to always just wanting his body. He is her investment and she notices that "her life...bore a strange resemblance to the lives of those friends of hers, Chuck Meisner and Joe Person in particular, who were 'addicted' to monitoring their investments...but she was the same way with Alfred: painfully attuned to every hopeful upswing, forever fearful of a crash" (470). Enid's hopes in life are materialistic and so she constantly watches her investment to measure her own success and worth. Throughout the novel Enid obsessively compares herself to people, especially friends, in terms of class or money. Like Enid, Gary, their eldest son, also identifies

Alfred with his work. Gary sees Alfred, who works for a railroad company, as “...forever on the verge of derailing as he lurched down hallways...the old iron horse was careening toward a crash, and Gary could hardly stand to look” (171). As Alfred’s health declines and he can no longer work, Gary’s value of him declines and he ponders whether Alfred’s life is still meaningful when he asks: “ This train should not be running on these tracks?” (171). Denise points out to her brother, Gary, his unrealistic view of their father: “ It’s just as much a fantasy to act like Dad’s some worn-out old machine. He’s a person, Gary. He has an interior life” (211). Denise’s view of her father is more human. Gary responds to her with: “ If he wants to sit in that chair and sleep his life away, that’s just fine...But first let’s yank that chair out of a three-floor house that’s falling apart and losing value” (211). His concern is completely financial. Gary’s father is “ falling apart and losing value” and instead of processing this, and emotionally dealing with it, Gary focuses on the waning worth of the house to create and emotional distance.

Franzen continually incorporates psychology and economy throughout the novel, suggesting an enmeshment, shown through the Lamberts to be unhealthy and detached. Enid’s anxieties over Alfred’s worth are revealed when she equates Alfred to “...a wad of money stashed in a mattress... moldering and devaluing” (276). As Alfred gets older, his health deteriorates and he loses his ability to work and be the “ earner” Enid had invested in. Enid’s “ Alfred stock” plummets when he refuses to buy a certain stock they both know will make them money. Because Alfred is a “ wad of money...in a mattress,” Enid must wage a battle on the marital mattress in an effort to persuade her husband. The mattress is a property of shared privacy.

Typically, Enid is on one side, sobbing herself to sleep, and Alfred is on the other, seeking refuge in dreams. Enid observes that "...a depression in the heartland ha[s] shriveled him [Alfred]" (276). The Depression era shapes Alfred's outlook on finances and leaves him " shriveled," or financially impotent and unable to take risks. Alfred also suffers from chronic depression and this leaves him almost incapacitated and emotionally impotent. Enid must deal with the effects of both kinds of depression on her marriage—the " heartland" (270). She decides Alfred is a "...bad investor. But she [is] not," and in bed with him, " she'd been known...when a room was very dark...to take a real risk or two" (276). Enid sees contact with her husband on their bed as a financial risk. While she attempts to manipulate her husband with oral sex, she asks suggestively: " We could have a little extra money in the bank, you think? Take the boys to Disneyland. You think?" (276). After a few seconds, Enid's gamble disappoints, and Alfred uncomfortable with Enid's familiarity and assertiveness with money, pushes her away. To feel dominance, Alfred then forces her to have intercourse with him. When it comes to money, Alfred falls short of Enid's expectations, but her constant suggestions only serve to remind Alfred of his inability to financially perform.

Enid's value among the family is her labor inside the home. Her " alchemical lab beneath the kitchen contained a Maytag with a wringer that swung over it, twinned rubber rollers like enormous black lips. Bleach, bluing, distilled water, starch. A bulky locomotive of an iron, its power cord in a patterned knit fabric" (265). This " lab" where Enid keeps her tools, is similar to Alfred's lab in the basement. She is a worker like Alfred, only with a different job.

Enid is the hardworking consumer, who distracts herself by collecting meaningless junk and working in her lab. Her occupational education develops “ during and after the Depression” where Enid “ learn[s] many survival skills” (265). She buys into a false reality of work and consumption—the American Dream, to keep herself distracted from feelings that are possibly too traumatic or too difficult for her to manage. Franzen writes: “ elective ignorance [is] a great survival skill, perhaps the greatest” (265). Enid preserves herself by viewing the world with “ elective ignorance” and not accepting the reality behind the financial façade she adds to it. Franzen compares Alfred and Enid’s son Gary’s marriage to a cash register in which “ love and goodwill” are deposited and spent. When Enid insists on a family Christmas in her Midwestern hometown, St. Jude, Gary’s wife Caroline, is adamant about not going. Franzen writes: “ the till of their marriage no longer contained sufficient funds of love and goodwill to cover the emotional costs that going to St. Jude entailed for Caroline or that not going to St. Jude entailed for him” (191). Christmas in St. Jude is an “ emotional cost” rather than an opportunity to see family. Furthermore, Gary only agrees to go if his parents agree to consider selling their house so that Gary doesn’t have to worry over possibly taking care of them in the future. He is only willing to spend Christmas with his parents if they agree to the exchange.

Although Gary and Caroline have serious marital problems and seem to be in constant competition for power, Gary cannot bring himself to divorce her because he is afraid of the financial consequences. He “...let himself imagine being divorced. But three glowing and idealized mental portraits of his children, shadowed by a batlike horde of fears regarding finance, chased the

notion from his head” (202). Behind the glossy “ portraits,” or packaging of his children, Gary hides an ugly anxiety about finances. Fear motivates Gary to protect himself from emotional pain by viewing his relationships as financial interactions. Like Enid, Gary views his children as products he creates and his marriage as a business venture he hopes will be lucrative. Franzen points out a certain logic that many people subscribe to in the text: money makes people inherently different. When Denise visits Austria, she meets with Enid’s wealthier friends from St. Jude Klaus and Silvia. Klaus talks about St. Jude’s “ phony democracy” and it’s peoples belief that there are not “ class differences,” “ race differences,” or “ economic differences” (390). All these differences boil down to economics and the achievement of the American Dream. The dream is supposed to be available to all people who work hard enough, yet it isn’t. The people of St. Jude pretend there is equality. Klaus claims he doesn’t remember meeting Enid some Thanksgivings back, because “ everyone pretends to be the same” (390). Immediately afterwards Silvia exclaims, “ Isn’t the champagne wonderful? Really different! Klaus and I used to drink it drier, but then we found this, and we love it” (391). Klaus adds, “ there’s such snob appeal to dry” (392). The difference between people-money-is prevalent in the way Klaus and Silvia view the world. They are sure to point out the “ wonderful...really different” champagne they serve Denise. However Denise notices “ Klaus t[ake] a bottle from a silver bucket and pour Sekt with a flourish” and observes “ the Sekt [to be] sweet and over carbonated and remarkably much like Sprite” (390). To Klaus and Silvia, money makes things inherently superior, but in actuality the difference is meaningless or non-existent. Denise, the chef, cannot detect the “ wonderful” difference of their champagne. Like Enid, <https://assignbuster.com/interaction-as-transaction-in-jonathan-franzens-the-corrections/>

Klaus and Silvia are doing exactly what the people of St. Jude do, but instead of pretending they're the same, they pretend they are inherently different. They insist on the presence of their differences because it allows them to feel a false superiority in the world. But the universal human struggle transcends all social-economic borders making all people in some respects the same.

Chip wakes up to this reality after his traumatic experiences in Lithuania. He goes with Gitanas, a criminal warlord who promises Chip money. Chip feels a brother-like connection to Gitanas (who looks like him) and Gitanas sees Chip as a "...valued employee, a vulnerable and delightful American, an object of amusement and indulgence and even mystery" (438). To Gitanas, Chip is an object, a product, a way to make money, a hard worker. Although Chip needs money the most, he, like Denise, tries to see the world without the capitalist lens the other Lamberts look through. Gitanas' struggle to reconcile his capitalistic beliefs with those of his country, parallels Chips struggle within himself to reconcile his inherited beliefs with his theoretical beliefs. "' How Lithuanian we all felt," Gitanas says, " when we could point to the Soviets and say: No were not like that... No we are not free-market, no, we are not globalized-this doesn't make me feel Lithuanian. This makes me feel stupid and Stone Age. So how do I be a patriot now?...What is the positive definition of my country?" (444). With Gitanas and Lithuania, Franzen shows a drive in other parts of the world to emulate and resist concepts like the American Dream. Chip frequents spas in Lithuania looking for sexual release and " with each prepaid ejaculation he rid himself of another ounce of the hereditary shame that had resisted fifteen years of sustained theoretical attack. What

remained was a gratitude that he expressed in the form of one hundred percent tips” (438). Chip’s venture into the “ theoretical” world of Marx and Foucault is an “ attack” on his Midwestern, capitalist heritage. Chip is able to excrete his “ shame” because he unabashedly pays for the release. Once the shame is gone, the theories he “ resisted” for so long begin to take permanent hold as part of his world view. When Chip comes home for Christmas, “ the Midwestern street,” his parent’s street, “ struck the traveler [Chip] as a wonderland of wealth and oak trees and conspicuously useless space. The traveler didn’t see how such a place could exist in a world of Lithuanias and Polands” (536). Chip becomes an outsider, a “ traveler” to the land where he grew up. The Midwestern ideology of financial competition is broken as he recognizes the real opulence and waste of middle class American life compared to war torn places like Lithuania and Poland. Chip acknowledges “ it was a testament to the insulatory effectiveness of political boundaries that power didn’t simply arc across the gap between such divergent economic voltages. It seemed mirage-like. It seemed like an exceptionally vivid memory of something beloved and dead” (536). This memory is of the capitalist ideology he used to believe in, that Enid, Alfred and Gary still view as inherent.

Alfred considers letting himself drown, and escaping this ideology, when he falls off the cruise ship. He thinks about the “ objectless world of death” and the “ universe of unbeing” that lies waiting in the depths of the cold, dark water (426). The “ orange flotation device” that is thrown to him he thinks, “ would be a GOD in the objectless world of death...It was his last object and so instinctively, he loved it and pulled it closer” (426). The object reminds

him of his own existence. If death is a place of nothingness, than life is a place filled with objects that he attaches meaning to. With this scene, Franzen points to the way objects are used to define people in the text. People use the objects around them to define who they are; they relate themselves to the their objects. Alfred hopes: some day "...he [could] wake up transformed into a wholly different person with infinite energy and infinite time to attend to all the objects that he'd saved, to keep it all working, to keep it all together" (462). The objects are Alfred and if he is capable of tending to the objects, and therefore himself, he can exist. Without caring for these objects, Alfred will cease to exist (462). He contemplates this and says " aloud" to himself in the basement, " I ought to pitch the whole damn lot of it," (463). This allusion to suicide is present throughout the novel. Once pulled aboard the ship and out of the freezing water, Alfred " reconsider[s] the wisdom of surviving" because the crew " treat[s] him like a child" (463). He doesn't want to live if he cannot keep his individual privacy and care for himself, the way his objects in the basement beg to be cared for. Alfred is the object in Enid's life that she had uses to relate herself to, and once he is gone, her anger and judgment towards the world decreases. Because she feels less oppressed, Enid is free to exist without the broken down, depressed, and emotionally unavailable object that is Alfred. It is only when she visits Alfred that she gets depressed.

Despite this, Enid does not fully shatter the capitalist lens. She continues to " bicker about money," with Gary, " but [it is] only recreational" (562). She tortures him about his failed stock choices and he tortures her about the \$4.62 she owes him for the six-inch bolts he bought for the shower. Gary is

entrenched in his belief of the materialistic American Dream and spends his limited time at Christmas calling out a “ summary” of the family situation, as if in a business meeting. He speaks like a financial analyst when addressing his father’s health, and like a debt collector when confronting his mother about the ridiculous debt she owes him. Gary kisses his mother goodbye, saying, “ call Hedgpeth [Alfred’s doctor] tomorrow morning. Then call me and tell me what the plan is. I’m going to monitor this closely” (543). His detached attitude protects Gary from dealing with his father’s inevitable death, and therefore his own inevitable deterioration and death. Franzen writes: “ Chip could see it clearly now, behind the cold front of Gary’s departure: his brother was afraid” (543). Because Chip has shattered the lens, he is able to see the reality of his brother’s “ cold front.” Fear of feeling vulnerable, motivates the Lamberts, who are Franzen’s representation of America, to buy into a capitalist view of their world.

Works Cited

Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. New York: Picador.