

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2018.3.1.47>

## Ethical Uncertainty in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*

**Dr Nisha Singh**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith,  
Varanasi, India

### Abstract

Contemporary fiction describes the incident and stories placed in present scenario, which is not at all attractive and interesting, because it reveals the realistic structure of the society of which we are the parts. We can address it as a realistic fiction. Contemporary fiction normally focuses on providing people a way into some corner of everyday experience and making us realize others pain. With a famous wording of Michel Foucault, the modern prison system is like "a rather disciplined barracks, a strict school, a dark workshop, but not qualitatively different". According to Foucault, in modern society, the techniques of power imply a disciplinary supplement that causes a certain rational continuity in society – a continuity that fully encircles and subjectifies the modern individual. Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections* is in many ways an exemplary literary manifestation of Foucault's thesis. The paper aims to explore Ethical Uncertainty in Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections*.

**Keywords:** *America's Transition, Industrial Economy, Family, Individual*

### Introduction

Ethics or morality includes systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior. It determines the questions of human morality by defining concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong virtue and vice, justice and crime. Three major areas of study within ethics, recognized today are: Meta Ethics which talks about true values and morality. Normative ethics talks about morality based action. And third is an applied ethics talk about the rights of a person's action. Jonathan Franzen is the somewhat spoiled child of Don DeLillo's peculiar relationship with American culture. He talks about the Applied ethics through the various characters in the novel. DeLillo's *Underworld* has been the most persuasive American novel. It might objectively have been called *The Connections*. It represents the interconnectedness of American society by visualizing it as a web eased

on cords of suspicion and influence – a kind of Bleak House (desperateness) of the ordinal era. It pooled an antediluvian firmness and societal pragmatism with the panorama of the American writer as a calm traditional philosopher, scripting phrases and significant thesis leases about the influence of the twin in American society, about modern gadgets, crowds, waste, the military-industrial complex and so on. But there was a problem with DeLillo's novel was a Dickensian without any hominids in it. DeLillo insisted on connections, but in *Underworld* there are no connections at the human level at all, because there are no human beings in the novel, no one who really matters and whose awareness matters to himself.

### **Objective of the study**

The objective of the study is to explore the correction in every aspect of society and relationship. Franzenrealised something like this when he read *Underworld*, and pledged to put the matter right by producing, in his novel, a book of DeLillo-like extensiveness and logical analysis which was centred on human beings. He projected, in consequence, a relaxed DeLillo's. So *The Correction* is itself a correction, and as such it prospers marvelously. The title of *The Corrections* denotes most accurately to the deterioration of the technology-driven monetary boom of the late nineties, Franzen makes this clear at the beginning of the book's final chapter, also titled "*The Corrections*".

### **Review of Literature**

*The Corrections* was published to an extensive commendation from literary critics. The sagacity of apprehension found in its characters has been compared with those of Americans following the September 11 terrorist attacks, despite the novel's release having leaded that event by ten days. As a result, many have interpreted the novel as having psychic insight into the mood of post-9/11 American life, and copious publications have ranked it with the best works of contemporary fiction. Many critics have worked upon it but this area of ethical uncertainty was untouched. The novel also has been opted for film production by producer Scott Rudin in August 2001but could not be materialized into a complete film. Franzen said in an interview that "the most important experience of my life ... is the experience of growing up in the Midwest with the particular parents I had. I feel as if they couldn't fully speak for themselves, and I feel as if their experience—by which I mean their values, their experience of being alive, of being born at the beginning of the century and dying towards the end of it, that whole American experience they had—[is] part of me. One of my enterprises in the book is to memorialize that experience, to give it real life and form."<sup>i</sup>

The book talks about conflicts and issues within a family that arise from the presence of a progressive devastating disease of an elder. *The Correction*, when it appeared as a final point, was not

an instantaneous overflowing of a bubble but a much more gentle let-down, a year-long outflow of value from key financial markets, a contraction too gradual to generate headlines and too predictable to seriously hurt anybody. This financial correction equals the immediate “corrections” that Franzen’s characters make to their own lives in the novel’s final pages Franzen has said that “the most important corrections of the book are the unexpected impingements of truth or reality on characters who are spending ever larger sums of energy on self-deception or disavowal.

*The Correction* is a 2001 novel by Jonathan Franzen an American author. It revolves around the trouble of an elderly Midwestern couple and their three adult children, tracing their lives from the mid-twentieth century to “one last Christmas” together near the turn of the millennium. The novel was awarded the National Book Award in 2001 and the James Tail Black Memorial Prize in 2002. *The Correction* focuses on the lamberts, a traditional and somewhat repressed Midwestern family, whose children have fled to the east coast to start new lives free from the influence of their parents. The novel moves back and forth in time throughout the late twentieth century, depicting the personal growth and mistakes of each family member in detail. The book climaxes around the time of the technology driven economic book of the nineties as the troubled family’s problems begin to boil to the surface.

Alfred Lambert is a railroad engineer and the stern patriarch of the Lambert family, based in the fictional town of St. Jude. After his children grow up and move to the east coast, Alfred retires, but soon begins to suffer from Parkinson’s disease, (Parkinson’s disease also known as idiopathic or primary parkinsonism, hypo-kinetic rigid syndrome/ HRS, or paralysis is a degenerative disorder of the central nervous system) causing his organized and repressed personality to fracture. Alfred’s loyal wife Enid has long suffered from his tyrannical behavior, but his increasing dementia (Dementia is not a single disease, but a non-specific syndrome (i.e., set of signs and symptoms). Affected cognitive areas can be memory, attention, language, and problem solving) makes her life still harder. She is also tortured by the questionable life choices of her three children and their abandonment (desertion, the act of giving something up) of Midwestern Protestant values. As the economic book of the late nineties goes into full swing, the family massive problems become impossible to ignore. The eldest Lambert son, Gary, is a successful but seemingly depressed and alcoholic banker in Philadelphia who suspects his life is carefully controlled by his manipulative wife and children. Chip, the middle child, is a Marxist academic whose disastrous affair with a student loses him a tenure tract job and lands him in the employ of a Lithuanian crime boss defrauding American investors, Denise, the youngest of the family, is a successful chef in Philadelphia but loses her job after interlocking romances with both her boss and his wife.

Enid becomes more flexible in her worldview and less submissive to her husband's authority, and Chip begins a more mature relationship with a woman, simultaneously reconciling with his father. Gray, the only central character who fails to learn from his mistakes and grow during the course of the novel, loses a lot of money as technology stocks begin to decline. Franzen's emphasis on the human is welcome, and doubtless explains the novel's enormous popularity in America (where it has been a bestseller since it appeared in September), Franzen is very intelligent, very appealing writer; so much so that an essentially dark book stays in the memory as warm and comic. To call it Tolstoyian seems exaggerated, however. The novelist Michael Cunningham limes it to *Budden brooks*, but a comparison of those two novels shows *The Correction* is wide rather than deep, and smart rather than subtle. It has some of Mann's sweep and some of his gentle comedy (and even some of his Schopenhauer); but it lacks the luminous control of that great German book. Indeed, *The Correction* suffers from a desire to put too much in. His novel is a kind of glass-bottomed boat through which one can glimpse most of the various currents of contemporary America fiction; domestic realism; postmodern cultural riffing; campus farce; "smart young man's irony" of the kind familiar in Rick Moody and David Foster Wallace; and, rather too often, an easy journalism of style. With *The Corrections*, Franzen moved away from the postmodernism of his earlier novels and towards literary realism.

Another key then in the book is America's transition from an industrial economy to an economy, based largely on the financial, high-tech and service sectors. Alfred, a railroad engineer with a pension and a deep loyalty to his company, embodies the old economic order of mid-twentieth century America. His children, a chef, an investment banker, and a professor/internet entrepreneur, embody the new economic order at the turn of the millennium. Franzen depicts this economic transition most concretely in his descriptions of Denise's workplace, an abandoned Philadelphia coal plant converted into a trendy, expensive restaurant.

The narrative of Chip's involvement with Gitanas' attempt to bring the country of Lithuania to the market on the internet—comments on unrestrained capitalism and the privileges and power of the wealthy while meaningful distinctions between private and public sectors disappear. "The main difference between America and Lithuania, as far as Chip could see, was that in America the wealthy few subdued the unwealthy many by means of mind-numbing and soul-killing entertainment and gadgetry and pharmaceuticals, whereas in Lithuania the powerful few subdued the un-powerful army by threatening violence." The book addresses conflicts and issues within a family that arise from the presence of a progressive debilitating disease of an elder. As Alfred's dementia and Parkinsonism unfold mercilessly, they affect Enid and her three children eliciting different and over time changing

reactions. Medical help and hype do not provide a solution. At the end, Alfred refuses to eat and dies, to ultimate “correction” of the problem. There are many similarities between Franzen’s childhood in St. Louis and the novel, but the work is not an autobiography. Franzen said in an interview that “the most important experience of my life ..... is the experience of growing up in the Midwest with the particular parents I had. I feel as if they could not fully speak for themselves, and I feel as if their experience – by which I mean their values, their experience of being alive, of being born at the beginning of the century and dying towards the end of it, that hole American experience they had --- [is] part of me. One of my enterprises in the book is to memorialize that experience, to give it real transmission of family dysfunction and the waste inherent in today’s consumer economy, and each of the characters “embody the conflicting consciousness and the personal and social dramas of our era.”

### Conclusion

Influenced by Franzen’s life, the novel in turn influenced it; during its writing, he said in 2002, he moved “away from an angry and frightened isolation toward an acceptance—even a celebration of being a reader and a writer.” The life story of the five main characters and the secondary characters around them allows Jonathan Franzen to present the full impetus and extent of the world picture of the West at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Franzen aimed to link mental depression to economic depression, and he does this in poignant, non-trivial ways. (.....) I believe *The Correction* is a triumph. But it is a triumph that leads, as depression often does, into a black hole.

### References

1. Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. Harper Collins publishers, London, 2001.
2. Showalter, Elaine. *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. Ed. New York: Pantheon, 1985, p.5
3. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2008.
4. Singh, Sushila. *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2009.

---

<sup>1</sup>From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia