

An Introvert in an Extrovert World

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Essays on the Quiet Ones

Edited by

Myrna Santos

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To my beloved Mom, Frieda Keidan, who passed away on March 1, 2014,
and sadly was never able to see this book in print...

and

To Lisi Rose, without whom this book would not be possible. Truly!

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It all began when a friend gave me Susan Cain's book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* to read. He wanted me to better understand the frustrations and difficulties that he was going through as an introvert in the corporate world. I was thoroughly engrossed by the content of Ms. Cain's book and her research in arriving at her conclusions. I then became able to articulate many of my own deepest thoughts and feelings. As I wanted to pursue the psychology of introversion even more, I subsequently decided that this topic would be my panel focus at the South Atlantic Modern Language Association's Conference in November, 2013. I usually chair a panel each year at this conference, and I wanted to extend the subject matter to broaden the thoughts on *An Introvert in an Extrovert World*. I was most fortunate to have Megan Cannella and Edmund Goode presenting on my panel. They have been with me from the beginning of this project and their writing talent and dedication has been an enormous asset. My deepest appreciation goes to them and to my other contributors, each one individually adding enthusiasm and specific insight and dimension to the dynamics of this book.

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their chosen fields of study; I am so proud of them! I am so blessed to have them, their love, and support. They are my world.

INTRODUCTION

MYRNA J. SANTOS

We often seem to be living in an extrovert world—it is the route to attention. We teach our children to speak up, not to be shy, and we encourage them to be bold. Even our parents would tell us that “the squeaky wheel gets the oil!” Media tells us that the person willing to be the loudest will win the reality show, get the recording contract, get hits on YouTube... Growing up, we were encouraged to find our voice, choose a research area, and set the framework for a lifetime profession.

Some years ago I attended a workshop sponsored by my university. We discussed how different outcomes on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality test affect how people make decisions, and how these differences can manifest themselves when working together with other people. One thing that our facilitator told us was that a big difference between introverts and extroverts is not how they interact with people, but whether being around many people *drains energy* (introvert) or *gives energy* (extrovert). This premise was explored in Susan Cain’s *Quiet*, a landmark book that showcased the strengths of *introverts*—those who prefer reading to partying, listening to speaking. They are innovative and make significant contributions, but are uncomfortable with self-promotion. They are often labeled “quiet” and sometimes this description suggests negative connotations. Perhaps their being quiet is a personality characteristic or a product of their environment; perhaps their reserved nature is due to the hesitation of self-expression. However, from Van Gogh’s “Sunflowers” to the invention of the personal computer, the “quiet ones” have made immeasurable and invaluable contributions to our society, and life as we know it.

Maybe we have been “over media-ed” to death and are used to seeing the bubbly, shining, outgoing people on the TV and on the Internet, giving no recognition to the folks that help get them there. It might be time in our society and culture to start celebrating the quiet, the respectful—the character of introverts. Is it so that we are forcing everyone to be an extrovert as a measure of success?

Academia, in some ways, was made for introverts. We go home to our families, pets, and life each day and it gives us time to do something else. We lock ourselves away to write, meet submission deadlines, and put ourselves up for judgment when we teach, face colleagues, or approach tenure. Academia helps the introvert by letting him or her “escape away” and technology exacerbates the issue because we don’t have to see people unless we need or want to. Do we all have to put on our extrovert face from time to time? Of course. Perhaps that is why everyone loves the weekends so much, introverts and extroverts alike—we get to be ourselves. As the country song from Steve Azar proclaims, “I don’t have to be me ’til Monday,” and maybe that’s the secret. From Monday to Friday, we have to be more extroverted, and more assertive, but on Saturday and Sunday, a person gets to be who he or she really is. Extroverts are typically easier to understand universally, since extroverts live “out loud” a bit more than introverts. But introverts can be unfathomable to extroverts, and since there are more extroverts than introverts in the world, there is pressure on introverts to act like extroverts in order to be “normal.”

What do introverts look like to other people? Many people get the impression that an introvert is aloof or unfriendly, but not shy. This is because many times they do not have a problem speaking up when they have something to say, so the observer then might think that the “introvert” parts of a personality must just be unfriendliness. They also get called “serious” a lot too, with the implication that being “serious” is more of a malady than a marvel. According to *The Introvert Advantage: Making the Most of Your Inner Strengths* by Marti Olsen Laney, introverts also tend to keep their comments to themselves until they have really thought things through, and often do not like to start new projects without doing a lot of thinking and planning first. This means that they could appear to be *slow movers* to extroverts. The book also points out that introverts tend to enjoy serious discussions about real topics, and don’t enjoy chit-chat very much. A strategy for being an introvert in an extrovert world, proposed by *The Introvert Advantage*, is that introverts should view introversion as a positive strength, rather than teaching introverts how to “fix” themselves to become extroverts.

The relative strengths of the introvert can be illuminated by the comparison between the *culture of character vs. the culture of personality*. The former, according to Susan Cain, was valued more prior to the 20th century when urban migration and corporate culture became synonymous with the American dream. According to Cain, “Suddenly, people were flocking to the cities, and they needed to prove themselves in big

corporations, at job interviews and on sales calls ... We moved from what cultural historians call a culture of character to a culture of personality. During the culture of character, what was important was the good deeds that you performed when nobody was looking But at the turn of the century, when we moved into this culture of personality, suddenly what was admired was to be magnetic and charismatic.”¹ Indeed, today’s workplaces seem particularly designed for extroverts, being, according to Cain, “increasingly set up for maximum group interaction.”

More and more of our offices are set up as open-plan offices where there are no walls and there’s very little privacy. ... The average amount of space per employee actually shrunk from 500 square feet in the 1970s to 200 square feet today. In this extrovert-privileged workplace culture, introverts are rarely groomed for leadership positions, even though there is really fascinating research, such as that recently from Adam Grant at The Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, finding that introverted leaders often deliver better outcomes when their employees are more proactive. They are more likely to let those employees run with their ideas, whereas an extroverted leader might be more dominant and almost unwittingly be putting his or her own stamp on things. Thus, this may cause some good introvert ideas to become submerged, never coming to the fore.²

Teamwork is valuable and group work can often generate productive creativity, but as Cain notes, working alone also has its value: “None of this is to say that it would be a good thing to get rid of teamwork and get rid of group work altogether. It is more just to say that we are at a point in our culture, and in our workplace culture, where we have become too lopsided. We tend to believe that all creativity and all productivity come from the group, when in fact, there really is a benefit to solitude and to being able to go off and focus and put your head down.”³

Extroversion and introversion are typically viewed as on a single continuum. Thus, to be high on one, it is necessary to be low on the other. Rather than focusing on interpersonal behavior, however, Jung defined introversion as an “attitude-type characterized by orientation in life through subjective psychic contents” (focus on one’s inner psychic activity); and extroversion as “an attitude type characterized by concentration of interest on the external object” (the outside world).⁴ In any case, people fluctuate in their behavior all the time, and even extreme introverts and extroverts do not always act according to their type. Ambiversion is falling more or less directly in the middle. An ambivert is moderately comfortable with groups and social interaction, but also can enjoy time alone, away from a crowd. Many of us like to think of

ourselves in this capacity, but usually we tend to lean more to one side than the other.

Many claim that Americans live in an “extroverted society,” one that rewards extroverted behavior and rejects introversion. This is because the United States is currently a culture of personality, whereas other cultures are cultures of character. These cultures, such as Central Europe, Japan, or regions where Buddhism prevail, prize introversion. These cultural differences predict individuals’ happiness in their environment; for example, extroverts are happier, on average, in particularly extroverted cultures and vice versa. Researchers have found that people who live on islands tend to be more introverted than those living on the mainland and that people whose ancestors had inhabited the island for twenty generations tend to be less extroverted than more recent arrivals. Furthermore, people who emigrate from islands to the mainland tend to be more extroverted than people who stay on islands and people who immigrate to islands.

Ironically, introverts may be among the most confident, which seems counterintuitive to conventional wisdom related to “shyness” and the often conflated association between the two. Dharmesh Shah argues that qualities of truly confident people reinforce the strengths that might be paramount in the introvert personality:

Confidence is not bravado or an overt pretense of bravery. Confidence is *quiet*: It is a natural expression of ability, expertise, and self-regard. Confident people do not think that they are always right ... but they are not afraid to be wrong. They ask open-ended questions that give other people the freedom to be thoughtful and introspective: They ask what you do, how you do it, what you like about it, what you learned from it ... Confident people seek approval from the people who really matter, those whose opinion they respect and whom they know they can count on for support. They do not require the applause of those who are not significant to them.⁵

Being an introvert in an extrovert’s world is doable—maybe even pleasant. And maybe the world does not truly belong to one or the other, but the symbiosis between the two. The most important point to remember is that both types are equally important in their worth and contributions to society—the introvert should not be viewed as the “underdog” or disadvantaged one because he or she is less outgoing or verbal. We have all heard of famous introverts such as Bill Gates, Steven Spielberg, J. K. Rowling, Albert Einstein, Jane Austen, Thomas Jefferson, and Mahatma Gandhi—individuals who, through their quiet ways, have made a tremendous impact on human culture. Parents often apologize for shyness in their child in a classroom setting, and the volume of a person’s voice is sometimes more important than the quality of their work at the office. It

might be time in our society and culture to start celebrating the quiet, respectful character of introverts; but as with all changes in societal outlook, it will take time. Let us look beyond labels and into the horizon of the benefits each can provide to the other.

Notes

¹ Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Broadway Books, 2013).

² National Public Radio, "Quiet, Please: Unleashing the Power of Introverts." Interview with Susan Cain by Audie Cornish. January 30, 2012. <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/30/145930229/quiet-please-unleashing-the-power-of-introverts>.

³ NPR, interview with Susan Cain.

⁴ Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), 414–15.

⁵ Dharmesh Shah, <http://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20130606150641-658789-9-qualities-of-truly-confident-people>.

PART I:
**THE QUIET ONES IN LITERATURE,
FILM, AND TELEVISION**

CHAPTER ONE

THE QUIET ZOO:
THE LEARNED INTROVERSION OF SUBURBAN
DOMESTICITY IN FRANZEN'S *FREEDOM*
AND *THE CORRECTIONS*

MEGAN E. CANNELLA

For generations, wives have explicitly or implicitly been expected to honor and obey their husbands. More modern wives may be less inclined to verbalize the “obey” facet of their vows, but, hyphenated last name or not, it is still a commonly held belief that wives are at least somewhat submissive to their husbands. As women become mothers, they make sacrifices for the well-being of their children. From an early age, women are indoctrinated with their culture’s idea of how to be a good mother and wife. To submit to this societal expectation, she must sacrifice or silence at least part of herself. The ideal mother and wife silences herself in order to acquiesce to the cultural requirements placed upon her. This may seem like an extreme view of reality, but through Jonathan Franzen’s carefully crafted narrative lens in both *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, it is clear that the suburban tranquility silences the natural matriarchal voice.

On the surface, Enid Lambert, of *The Corrections*, and Patty Berglund, of *Freedom*, appear to be typical suburban moms. Their focus is on their families, specifically their children. Their personalities are docile and reserved. They are introverts, but upon further exploration it becomes possible that they may be situational introverts, only displaying introverted tendencies in regard to their domestic realities. Peter Lovenheim, author of *In the Neighborhood*, explores the isolation of suburbia and in his introduction states, “I’m talking about the property lines that isolate us from the people we are physically closest to: our neighbors.”¹ Enid and Patty have chosen a life that requires them to be introverts and have molded their personalities and actions accordingly. While there is no way for Franzen’s readers to ever truly know if Enid and Patty are natural

introverts, it is clear that after years of fastidiously choreographing domestic minutia, that is what Enid and Patty have become.

Enid and Patty are not anomalies. They are women who accepted the roles of wife and mother with little understanding of what that all entailed. They knew it would involve sacrifice, but the magnitude of the sacrifice was an unknown secret that ultimately defines each woman's midlife coming of age, which Franzen so skillfully captures within his narratives. Enid and Patty are taking on more than the expectations of their individual husbands, children, and miscellaneous suburban spectators. They are players in the gendered expectations that were designated to women generations before them. Cindy Meston and David Buss explore the ramifications of these expectations in their book, *Why Women Have Sex*, explaining:

In addition, many women have been taught by their parents, grandparents, teachers, or religious leaders that when it comes to sex, there are distinct gender roles to be followed: Men are the initiators of sex and "proper" women let them lead. It is not uncommon for women who rely on their partner to figure out what pleases them to remain sexually unfulfilled for years.²

Patty and Enid struggle with their search for fulfillment, which Franzen does not limit to sexuality. Their unwillingness to abandon their culturally approved roles as savants of suburbia silences their voices, rendering them, at the very least, amateur introverts. Lauded for his ability to capture Midwestern Americana within the pages of his novels, Jonathan Franzen unravels the myths of Americana and Suburbia. In *The Corrections*, Franzen explores the broken narratives of the Lambert family. Throughout the novel, it is clear that the suburban setting of St. Jude is as much a character as any member of the Lambert family. For Enid, the matriarch of the Lambert clan, St. Jude is a monument to the perfection she has always strived for, and now, through the lens of nostalgia, believes that she once had.

The Corrections centers on Enid trying to get her children to come home to St. Jude for one last Christmas in the family home, in a desperate attempt to create the Rockwellian reality for which she has always striven. For her children, specifically her daughter Denise, St. Jude is a pillar of conformity and the antithesis of who she truly is. Still, when called upon, Denise falls into the ranks of family obligation and becomes the version of herself that is permissible in St. Jude. Within the context of this novel, suburbia is a character that stifles and suffocates. Each of the women in the Lambert family suppresses her instincts, her wants, and her desires so

as to fulfill the role that has seemingly been put upon her. While this loss of identity, or, perhaps, misplaced identity, can be attributed to the patriarchal nature of Western society, it is more than just a woman knowing her proverbial place and having dinner on the table by 5 p.m. for her husband.

Enid and Denise, under Enid's influence, willingly displace their identities and suppress their true natures and desires. This displacement and suppression of identity was initially a pragmatic move of a savvy woman looking to achieve her respective goals at any cost, even if it means sacrificing herself; but over the years, Franzen illustrates, Enid and Denise both fall victim to the forced introversion of the suburban female, a silence that their actions serve to create.

In his article, "Assessing the Promise of Jonathan Franzen's First Three Novels: A Reflection of 'Refuge,'" Ty Hawkins explains, "In *The Corrections*, Franzen again offers a sweeping portrayal of American society ... St. Jude [is] a fictionalized version of St. Louis, and [the Lamberts] constitute a traditional, nuclear WASP family coming apart at every seam."³ Enid and Denise, individually, seem like ordinary women, exemplifying a typical mother-daughter dynamic. Enid is a homemaker who thrives on the perceived success of her children; and while she is continually shut out of the lives of her children and her husband, she clamors to be accepted by her family. When she married Alfred, she did so in a strategic move to create the life she wanted. Her actions were more tactical than romantic, yet they were still tainted by idealism. Ellen Willis, author of *No More Nice Girls*, suggests,

For the first time in history, marriage has become, for masses of people, a voluntary association rather than a social and economic necessity ... It is still the common sense of our culture that divorce is tragic, that we should be happily married for a lifetime, and that most of us could be, if only—well, if only we were different.⁴

Enid married for practical reasons and stayed married in a decades-long fit of determined idealism. "She'd always wanted three children. The longer nature denied her a third, the less fulfilled she felt in comparison to her neighbors."⁵ Enid knew what she wanted, and over time she used the characteristics of suburbia to validate her myopic quest. She does not obsessively mother and domestically compete with her neighbors because it is the thing to do. When her family mocks or belittles her, she seeks refuge under the veil of suburbia, citing it as the cause of her actions. Her family confirms this: "She loves that house. That house *is* her quality of life."⁶ She is merely filling the role that is expected of her, but what she

does not explain is that this is the role she has always sought. Her suburban introversion prohibits Enid from explaining her actions and domestic passions beyond simply trying to create matriarchal perfection.

As time goes on, cracks in the foundation of her marriage become glaringly obvious, and she fights hard to maintain that all is well, because, after all, she has what she wanted. She has a family. However, within the microcosm of suburban St. Jude, simply having a family is not collectively deemed to be enough. Regardless of the opinions of her peers, it could have been enough for Enid. Having her three children could have outweighed her perfunctory marriage, if only they had fit into the suburban mold that Enid championed. Her family, including her husband, refuses to submit to her dream and vision for them.

It frightened and shamed Enid, the loving-kindness of other couples. She was a bright girl with good business skills who had gone directly from ironing sheets and tablecloths at her mother's boardinghouse to ironing sheets and shirts chez Lambert. In every neighbor woman's eyes she saw the tacit question: Did Al at least make her feel super-special in that special way?⁷

The fear and shame that Enid feels contribute to her displaced identity and learned silence. Unable to reconcile what she dreamed of and what she ended up with, Enid becomes a flawed matriarch and a difficult role model for her daughter, Denise, to accept. Franzen showcases this: "[Denise] could not remember a time when she had loved her mother."⁸ Still Franzen acknowledges that Denise's perception of her mother is skewed,

[It is] possible that Enid wasn't entirely the embarrassing nag and pestilence that Denise for twenty years had made her out to be, possible that Alfred's problem went deeper than having the wrong wife, possible that Enid's problems did not go much deeper than having the wrong husband, possible that Denise is more like Enid than she had ever dreamed.⁹

The collective fear of women all over the world is that they are turning into their mothers. Denise is no different, and from a young age, her actions can all be identified as moving towards one goal: Becoming anything but Enid. Hawkins asserts: "the shaping of individual identity becomes an act of negation—dependent for its terms on what it is not, which is to say, dependent on the System for its own definition."¹⁰ In continuation of this thought, Denise's younger brother, Chip, suggests early on, "Your parents are not supposed to be your best friends. There's supposed to be some element of rebellion. That's how you define yourself

as a person.”¹¹ To that end, Denise largely becomes a testament to who Enid is not and, in that way, is still defined by the expectations of suburbia. Denise represents the voice of a generation that is very different from that of her mother, Enid’s. As her generation differs in its view of sexual identity, so it also differs in its view of marital bliss. In this Denise resembles the real-life Judy Blume, one of the champions and guardians of this change in gender-role expectation, who in a recent interview with Lena Dunham related how, as a young woman, she was not satisfied with the path that was laid out for her by society. She would not be satisfied with the forced introversion that accompanied her assigned gender role. Blume explains, “I wasn’t happy following my mother’s prescription for me. The ’50s-mother prescription for the daughter is: you go to college to meet a husband, because if you don’t find him in college, you’re never going to find him.”¹² Similar to Blume, Denise rejected Enid’s prescription for feminine existence. Despite her efforts, Denise’s quest for family is staggeringly different from that of her mother’s, yet absurdly similar.

Denise never subscribed to the marriage myth to which her mother so dearly clung. Enid struggles with her daughter’s approach to sexuality and commitment:

Even Enid cannot fully reconcile her dreams for Denise and scrambles to adapt them as best she can: Like a toothbrush in the toilet bowl, like a dead cricket in a salad, like a diaper on the dinner table, this sickening conundrum confronted Enid: that it might actually be preferable for Denise to go ahead and commit adultery; better to sully herself with a momentary selfish pleasure, better to waste a purity that every decent young man had the right to expect from a prospective bride, than to marry Emile.¹³

To the simultaneous dismay and joy of her mother, Denise’s first marriage, her marriage to Emile, does not work out. It is in the wake of her divorce that she begins what starts off as an emotional affair with her boss, yet evolves into a torrid love affair with her boss’s wife. Denise becomes a part of her boss’s family structure. His children adore her, and his wife, at first standoffish, soon enough becomes Denise’s lover. Denise adds herself to this picturesque family, and in turn creates a ghoulish representation of the family her mother had always wanted—a loving, passionate partner, and perfect children. In the end, however, Denise is left just as disillusioned as her mother is:

Without realizing it, Denise had let herself imagine that Brian and Robin had no sex life anymore. So on New Year’s Eve, when ... she saw Brian and Robin necking in the kitchen after midnight, she pulled her coat from the bottom of the coat pile and ran from the house. For more than a week

she was too ripped up to call Robin or see the girls. She had a thing for a straight woman who was married to a man whom she herself might have liked to marry. It was a reasonably hopeless case. And St. Jude gave and St. Jude took away.¹⁴

St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, seems to be the perfect home for the Lambert family, if not specifically the Lambert women. Willis writes, “As our cultural myth would have it, the family is not only a haven in a heartless world but a benign Rumpelstiltskin spinning the straw of lust into the gold of love. Sometimes, though, the alchemy goes awry.”¹⁵ Both Enid and Denise wage a subdued struggle to become the women they think they ought to be, the women they are determined to be. Yet each is swallowed by the introverted suburbia that Enid praises and Denise adoringly vilifies. It is not until the end of the novel that both women come to terms with the fact that what they had been chasing exists only in nostalgic fantasy.

The world in the windows looked less real than Enid would have liked. The spotlight of sunshine coming in under the ceiling of cloud was the dream light of no familiar hour of the day. She had an intimation that the family she’d tried to bring together was no longer the family she remembered—that this Christmas would be nothing at all like the Christmases of old.¹⁶

When we leave the Lambert family at the end of the novel, Enid and Denise are not where they had expected to be. Enid had subscribed to the promise of suburbia and lost herself as an undisclosed side effect. Denise defined herself in terms of her mother. As the novel progresses and Enid’s identity becomes increasingly muddled, Denise’s sense of identity unravels. For years, Enid fed into what can be seen as the machine of suburbia, expecting suburban bliss as the return on her investment. Instead she is left alone, with a despondent, deteriorating husband who at best tolerates her and at worst is completely apathetic. Nobody told her that it might not work out. She never considers that possibility. Having been fed this misguided destiny by her mother, Denise works her whole life to escape what she sees as Enid’s simpleton dream, leading her directly into a distorted version of what her mother had fantasized. Denise reflects, “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. You know, the safety of dead-ended things.”¹⁷ In the end, Denise is alone and her identity is mangled beyond recognition. Neither woman has the love or family that she set out for or thought that she had. But in their introversion, neither has the voice to demand what she wants.

In the lives of Enid and Denise, suburbia is not the culprit. Both women had mismanaged expectations, which ultimately leads to mismanaged identities. Once they lose themselves in the suburban lives that they were fighting for and against, respectively, they are silenced. After losing their voice, Franzen shows how each of the Lambert women dissolve into the silence, not because of the patriarchal hierarchy that is so often blindly blamed for the misfortune of others. No outside force holds Enid and Denise back. No one forces them to conform. They act of their own accord. They are active in their suffocation. As if entering an ominous deal with a menacing sea witch, Enid and Denise sacrifice their voices for the lives they are striving to attain. In the end, as an idyllic reality eludes the Lamberts, mother and daughter are left without definitive identities and without voices.

The aspect of her domestic dream of suburban bliss that silences Enid the most may be her marriage. As is clear in Franzen's depiction of Enid's marriage to Alfred, modern marriage seems to be less and less about the couple that is married and more about the interests of their children. Franzen offers his readers countless scenes of Enid and Alfred tolerating each other, perhaps for the children, leaving their union void of any sincere intimacy. "A decade-plus marriage had turned him into one of those overly civilized predators you hear about in zoos, the Bengal tiger that forgets how to kill, the lion lazy with depression. To exert attraction, Enid had to be a still, unbloody carcass."¹⁸ Parenthood is often held as a primary priority while marriage fights for second place with one's career. When did marriage become a means to an end? This lack of intimacy or priority in the Lambert's marriage does not get resolved, and remains as a question that Jonathan Franzen explores in depth in his novel *Freedom*.

Freedom explores the Berglund family and makes the reader a captive witness to the dissolving of the marriage of Patty and Walter Berglund. Patty and Walter sacrifice everything in their efforts to create the prototypical family life that they think they should have. Franzen allows the reader to see what happens when one's marriage is not a priority. Patty and Walter both set off to create a different life than the ones they endured as children, and they did this myopically, blinding themselves to their supposed partnership as husband and wife. In trying to create the ideal family unit, Patty and Walter Berglund not only ostracize their children, but they destroy their already neglected marriage, leaving nothing for them to cling to but a shell of familiarity.

Franzen first introduces his readers to Patty and Walter by writing, "Walter and Patty were the young pioneers of Ramsey Hill—the first college grads to buy a house on Barrier Street since the old heart of St.

Paul had fallen on hard times three decades earlier.”¹⁹ They were an ambitious young couple living in an ambitious young neighborhood. Patty and Walter start off as a wholesome couple, beginning a life together in a small Midwestern town. This is easily the quintessential image of young married life—working hard to remodel their first home, raise their young children, and make all the correct choices, based on the information they absorb from NPR. They had gone to college and gotten married, thus the next step is to start creating a smart, energetic, successful new generation, and what better place to do this than the Midwest. While the young Berglund family was seeped in Americana, Ralph J. Poole asks in his article, “Serving the Fruitcake, or Jonathan Franzen’s Midwestern Poetics,” “Why would the Midwest act as backdrop for depicting the tragic version of contemporary American life?”²⁰ The answer to Poole’s question is evident as the reader becomes further acquainted with the Berglunds, specifically Patty, and realizes the tone of Shakespearean tragedy that is intrinsic to every movement the family makes.

Patty, who documents her troubled childhood for the reader, endeavors to be the perfect mother: “It was obvious that the only things that mattered to her were her children and her house—not her neighbors, *not* the poor, *not* her country, *not* her parents, not even her own husband.”²¹ However, even that description is not entirely truthful, as her feelings for her children are not uniform.

And Patty was undeniably very into her son. Though Jessica was the more obvious credit to her parents ... Joey was the child Patty could not shut up about ... She was like a woman bemoaning her gorgeous jerky boyfriend. As if she were proud of having her heart trampled by him: as if her openness to this trampling were the main thing, maybe the only thing she cared to have the world know about.²²

From early on in the novel, when the reader learns of Patty’s affinity toward Joey, it is clear that there is something imperfect in the Berglund family. Alliances are misplaced, and thus outcomes are not what are expected or hoped.

Patty’s unstable and unequal distribution of affection wields uneasy influence over the well-being of her family, as she continues attempting to fulfil her matriarchal role. In their article “Family Instability and Children’s Early Problem Behavior,” Shannon Cavanagh and Aletha C. Huston write, “Other important family circumstances include maternal depression, maternal sensitivity, material and emotional resources in the home environment, and the family’s income-to-needs.”²³ The emotional state of the mother has a significant impact on the emotional state and

overall well-being of the family. This is illuminated in *Freedom*. Walter does not have much of a presence in the first portion of the novel. The focus is largely on Joey and on Patty, as she exists in terms of her family. This is easily explained by the fact that the largest portion of the novel is entitled, “Mistakes were Made: Autobiography by Patty Berglund (Composed at Her Therapist’s Suggestion).” Throughout the bulk of the novel, the reader learns about Patty and her family. The point must be made that the reader learns primarily about Patty’s family, as opposed to learning about Walter’s family or about the family of Patty and Walter. As Patty’s autobiography accelerates, she truly delves into her broken family, explicating how shaky the foundation is on which Patty and Walter built their family, and on which Patty established her own identity.

For the defense: Patty had tried, at the outset, to warn Walter about the kind of person was. She *told* him there was something wrong with her ... For the prosecution: Her motives were bad. She was competing with her mom and sister. She wanted her kids to be a reproach to them ... For the defense: She loved her kids! For the prosecution: She loved Jessica an appropriate amount, but Joey she loved way too much. She knew what she was doing and she didn’t stop, because she was mad at Walter for not being what she really wanted, and because she had a bad character and felt she deserved compensation for being a star and a competitor who was trapped in a housewife’s life ... For the prosecution: ... Unfortunately for Patty he [Walter] didn’t marry her in spite of who she was, he married her because of it. Nice people don’t necessarily fall in love with nice people.²⁴

Walter never made any great effort to stabilize his hemorrhaging relationship with his wife, and after years of putting their children before their marriage, Patty has an affair with Walter’s best friend. Walter falls in love with his coworker, experiencing a love that he never knew with his wife. Tragically, his lover dies, yet still Walter does not reunite with Patty, nor does he divorce her. While their family is irreparably broken, Patty and Walter reject the idea of divorce, and at times it is hard to tell if this is out of stubborn determination not to completely destroy their illusion of a family unit or a result of genuine compassion and companionship. In Chapter Four, “Correcting The Corrections,” of his book *Jane Smiley, Jonathan Franzen, Don DeLillo: Narratives of Everyday Justice*, Jason Polley observes,

Before *Freedom*, [Franzen’s] families always grew bigger by one member and older by half a generation. The threat to the stability of the family unit increases with number as with time. Family members develop their own

personal narratives as they age. Individual storylines counteract the cohesiveness of the family.²⁵

In *Freedom*, the family unit does not increase, and to be fair, it does not decrease so much as fade. The Berglund family is still composed of four people at the end of the novel: mother, father, son, daughter. Nevertheless, despite quantitatively being the same, by the end of the novel the Berglund family is a diminished shadow of what they had set out to become, perhaps following the example of their matriarch.

Patty and Walter fall into each other at the end of the novel as if out of habit. At the end of the novel, Patty goes to Walter to try and reconcile. When he refuses to let her into his home, instead of leaving, she passively sits in the cold, waiting for him. Out of a compulsive sense of worry, he checks on the near frozen Patty and brings her into his home and into his bed to warm her. At the end of the novel, Patty and Walter have stumbled their way back together. Still, they are not a fairytale married couple. Marriages like the Berglunds' are not idyllic. Even when asked by a neighbor why she and Patty had not yet met, "Patty laughed trillingly and said, 'Oh, well, Walter and I were taking a little breather from each other.' This was an odd and rather clever formulation, difficult to find clear moral fault with."²⁶ From this exchange, and by those that follow on the remaining few pages of the novel, it is clear that Patty and Walter are not in love in the traditional sense, or perhaps in any sense at all. Poole writes, "The end is cruelly—'perversely'—optimistic in the sense that the move from tragic depression to the recognition of tragic reality has been accomplished."²⁷

The end of the novel brings the reader right back to where the novel started. Patty and Walter are alone and moving. Whether they are moving out of the life they once knew or moving on to a better life is unclear.

In February, the two Berglunds went door to door along the street one final time, taking leave with polite formality, Walter asking after everybody's children and conveying his very best wishes for each of them, Patty saying little but looking strangely youthful again, like the girl who'd pushed her stroller down the street before the neighborhood was even a neighborhood.²⁸

A neighbor, seeing this couple still together, as much as these two people can be a union, observes, "I don't think they've figured out yet how to live."²⁹ This observation could not be any more accurate. This entire novel is built upon a relationship that is easily defined as unstable. Walter and Patty have an unsteady marriage because they are not true partners. They did not get married for love or to form a union better than

themselves. Walter and Patty were each adrift and seemed to have clung to each other for fear of drowning. Being unable to stay afloat on their own inherently makes them unable to stay afloat once they have entered into an uneven marriage.

Marriage as an institution has devolved because people are entering into marriage with misplaced and disproportionate expectations and priorities. Patty put her children before her marriage. Walter allowed himself to not be a priority of his wife. Patty and Walter each allowed themselves not to be seen by the other person. Patty and Walter each allowed themselves not to care about the fact that they were invisible to their spouse for one reason or the other. Patty is more married to her children than she is to Walter. Walter is married to his work and loves his children very much, but ultimately feels like he has lost them to the woman who he calls his wife. The more obsessed Patty becomes with Joey, and then, secondarily with her daughter Jessica, the more her marriage dissolves. Walter, the quiet, dedicated breadwinner, does not seem to know how to save his marriage, possibly because he knew it was broken from the start.

Franzen's novel is crucial to today's definition of the family unit. *Freedom* speaks to the fact that families today have destructive priorities when compared to the priorities of families a few decades ago. The desire for children to have a better life than their parents is amplified into a steroid-enhanced version of itself as parents sacrifice their personalities and identities to cater to their offspring. *Freedom* exemplifies parenting that has no boundaries but rather seeks approval from the children, who should be disciplined instead of impressed. Parents are sacrificing themselves, their marriages, and intimacy so that their children will love them. The Berglunds are easily representative of real families, and sadly, there is no concrete way to prevent marriages from sacrificing intimacy for the perceived good of their children. That intimacy is lost when individuals, like Patty or Enid, silence their voices and desires so that they can comply with an image they are expected to maintain.

Patty strives to be the perfect mother and loses any semblance of individual identity. With the exception of ferociously championing her children, she lives a fairly passive life. She keeps to herself, and she lives a relatively cold existence. Enid wants a perfect family and a perfect image. She thrusts herself upon social acquaintances in order to create the illusion of existing in an idyllic domestic state, which she has labored for her entire adult life. Patty pours all her energy into her children so that she can provide them with an upbringing superior to her own. Both of these women become introverts, to one degree or another, so as to be who they

think they should be. Both of them spend their lives punctiliously preparing for domestic success and bliss.

Enid and Patty are not abstract concepts or exceptions to a rule. They are accurate representations of real women. Women are often accused or judged because they change their personalities to be accepted. This is what Franzen is illustrating throughout his novels. Enid and Patty each become introverts to fulfill their image of the ideal matriarch. This is a representation of many women across the world who are expected to be the quintessential matriarchs, by either themselves or others. Whether Franzen's characters become introverts or simply amplify natural tendencies of introversion is unclear. However, both of these women fight a battle against the silence of suburbia, which they allow to dictate what motherhood should look like. They silence natural instincts and submit to the refined jungles of gated communities and big box stores, where they parade their regulated, PTA-approved brand of motherhood. Both of these matriarchs manifest and manipulate the suburban silence of their respective lives with an eerie mastery. The introversion that suburban life lays upon Patty and Enid is something with which these women continue to fight a silent war. Through Patty and Enid, Franzen exposes the loss of autonomy and the true emotional asphyxiation that comes from a lifetime of scrambling to maintain an image and a lifestyle that does not come naturally and never quite feels like home.

Notes

¹ Peter Lovenheim, *In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time* (New York: Penguin, 2010), xv.

² Cindy M. Meston and David M. Buss, *Why Women Have Sex: Understanding Sexual Motivations from Adventure to Revenge (and Everything in Between)* (New York: Times, 2009), 43.

³ Ty Hawkins, "Assessing the Promise of Jonathan Franzen's First Three Novels: A Rejection of 'Refuge'," *College Literature* 37, no. 4 (2010): 77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27917765>.

⁴ Ellen Willis, *No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012), 64.

⁵ Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 243.

⁶ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 214.

⁷ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 243.

⁸ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 427.

⁹ Franzen, *The Corrections*.

- ¹⁰ Hawkins, "Assessing the Promise," 77.
- ¹¹ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 59.
- ¹² Sheila Heti and Ross Simonini, ed., *Judy Blume and Lena Dunham in Conversation* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2013), 17.
- ¹³ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 122.
- ¹⁴ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 409.
- ¹⁵ Willis, *No More Nice Girls*, 219.
- ¹⁶ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 476.
- ¹⁷ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 219.
- ¹⁸ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 243.
- ¹⁹ Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 3.
- ²⁰ Ralph J. Poole, "Serving the Fruitcake, or Jonathan Franzen's Midwestern Poetics," *Midwest Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 263, <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.jjc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=31890828&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- ²¹ Franzen, *Freedom*, 8.
- ²² Franzen, *Freedom*,
- ²³ Shannon Cavanagh and Aletha C. Huston, "Family Instability and Children's Early Problem Behavior," *Social Forces* 85, no. 1 (2006): 555, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/38844427>.
- ²⁴ Franzen, *Freedom*, 156–57.
- ²⁵ Jason S. Polley, *Jane Smiley, Jonathan Franzen, Don DeLillo: Narratives of Everyday Justice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 123.
- ²⁶ Franzen, *Freedom*, 595.
- ²⁷ Poole, "Serving the Fruitcake," 280.
- ²⁸ Franzen, *Freedom*, 28.
- ²⁹ Franzen, *Freedom*.