The Family Novel in North America from Post-War to Post-Millennium: A Study in Genre

Vorgelegt von:

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To the memory of my father,

Hermann J. Dell,

who always believed in me.

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I.   INTRODUCTION

When Jonathan Franzen's third novel *The Corrections* was published on September 10, 2001, it became an immediate success. Reviewers have even gone so far as to claim that the publication of Franzen's novel had an impact on America's cultural landscape considered equally enormous as, on a political level, the dreadful events that only one day later left the nation in terror and grief[1]. Regardless of the question whether such a comparison is justified or not, it cannot be denied that Franzen's third novel has indeed caused an astonishing echo. Celebrated by the academic community as well as by reviewers, *The Corrections* was soon called the first masterpiece of the twenty-first century[2]. As New York City dramatist Donald Margukies remarked, one could hardly attend an East coast dinner in the weeks and months following the publication of Franzen's novel without noticing the fervent discussions about it (Marshall, n.p.). The majority of reviewers praise the novel for its complex structure, its engaging portrayal of characters, its wittiness and its keen observation of the everyday intricacies of contemporary American life. The chorus of the praisers and acclaimers also points repeatedly to the company in which the book is held to be – a company that includes internationally acclaimed novelists ranging from Thomas Mann to Salman Rushdie or Don DeLillo.

Such applause for a family novel is not the norm. Considering the fact that Franzen's third work is a perfect example of a family novel, the praise is rather surprising. Generally speaking, the genre of the family novel has been traditionally regarded as trivial by literary critics. There are numerous scholars whose treatises on family novels are nothing short of condescending. Their criticism ranges from the widespread association of the family novel with the superficial and mundane to the very specific wish that the family novel go to hell[3]. The family novel, often (and unjustifiably) associated with the domestic novel, has been derided by critics for the past couple of decades. An astonishing number of scholars and critics have attacked it for lacking the necessary pinch of social criticism. In their opinion, family novels are full of predictable characters and deal with average and smallish problems

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[1] As Elena Lappin writes in the German weekly *Die Zeit*: "Zwei Ereignisse erschütterten Amerika im Herbst 2001: die Verheerungen des 11. September und die Veröffentlichung eines Romans von Jonathan Franzen mit dem Titel *The Corrections*. Es mag hart klingen, beides in einem Atemzug zu nennen. Aber der Roman wühlte das Land auf wie ein Erdbeben und legte entlang klar definierter, aber lange verborgener Verwerfungslinien sein rohes Innenleben frei", *Die Zeit* 24 (6. 6. 2002) 53.

[2] E.g. by John Marshall in "Meteoric Success a Novel Experience for Author Jonathan Franzen", *The Seattle Post*, http://seattlepi/nwsource.com/books/41634_franzeno6.shtml (acc. 11 Oct. 2002).

[3] W. J. Keith, "To Hell with the Family: An Open Letter to the New Quarterly", *Special Issue: Family Fictions. The New Quarterly* 1/2 (1987): 320-24.

in a domestic, often pastoral, environment. Their general assumption - if not prejudice - is that the conflicts in these novels are petty and the scope restricted to the immediate familial surroundings, i.e. the house, the neighborhood, the village, the small town. Celebrated family sagas of high aesthetic quality, e.g. John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, have been regarded in terms of the famous exception that proves the rule. The surprisingly meager number of works on the family novel can thus be seen as a direct consequence of the generally shared negative attitude towards this genre.

Despite academia's disregard of the family novel, its manifold exemplars have always met with the significant interest of the reading public. Leaving aside for a moment the possible reasons for this continuous public approval, an explanation of academia's low opinion of family novels includes formal as well as thematic aspects. Especially in the past few decades critics have tended to appreciate a certain radicalism of style that family novels generally were assumed not to offer. Secondly, a novel concentrating on family life was not only thought of as being restricted to the domestic sphere, but also as displaying merely regionalist features, a combination considered traditionalist by modernist or postmodernist critics. Frank Lentricchia's essay on Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (a book to which *The Corrections* has been compared frequently[4]) is a striking example of the almost arrogant stance academia has taken towards the more "traditional" family novel. Disregarding the fact that *White Noise* is also a family novel, albeit a postmodern one, Lentricchia praises it as the longed-for deviation from the domestic fiction of, e.g., Bobbie Ann Mason or Frederick Barthelme. According to Lentricchia, such novels, which he sees as limited, have developed parallel to a stable socio-political situation in the US:

> So American novelists and critics first look sentimentally to the other Americas, where (so it goes) the good luck of fearsome situations of social crisis encourages a major literature; then look ruefully to home, where (so it goes) the comfort of our stability requires a minor, apolitical, domestic fiction of the triumphs and agonies of private individuals operating in "the private sector" of Raymond Carver and Anne Tyler, the modesty of small, good things: fiction all but labeled "No expense of intellect required. To be applied in eternal crises of the heart only." Unlike these new regionalists of and for the Reagan eighties, DeLillo offers us no myth of political virginity preserved, no "individuals" who are not expressions of – and responses to – specific historical processes[5].

Besides attacking domestic fiction (under the heading of which he also subsumes family novels) for their supposedly minor intellectual stimulus, Lentricchia's surprising observation

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[4] Cf. Stewart O'Nan, "Jonathan Franzen: A Stranger in the Family Paradise", *The Atlantic* September 2001, www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/09/noteworthy.htm (acc. 18 Oct. 2002).
[5] Frank Lentricchia, "Don DeLillo's Primal Scenes", *White Noise. Text and Criticism*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin, 1998) 413.

(and criticism) is that this kind of literature seems to be thought of as connected to a secure and calm political environment.[6] In the passage quoted above, Lentricchia is not critical of the somewhat simplistic understanding of fiction as merely reflecting socio-historical conditions that this attitude entails, but of the claim that truly grand literature could only grow in an unstable world. He also attacks regionalist elements in fiction, a feature which also very often, though not exclusively, applies to family novels.

Lentricchia commits the fallacy of believing that the works of fiction published in a certain period simply constitute a blueprint of the social and political aspects of this time. This, in my view, mimetic fallacy entails two problems. First of all, it presupposes that fiction merely *responds to* certain tendencies, acting like a seismograph that only records tensions. Such a view underestimates fiction's ability to shape and create new views on what it means to be a human being, in short: its capability of changing the world. Second, it ignores the possibility of understanding fiction as a *reaction against* the economic, social, political, and cultural coordinates of a period of time. It is to both these aspects of the nature of fiction that I wish to draw attention in my discussion of the generic development of the family novel in America in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the chapters to follow I intend to challenge the prevailing prejudices against the family novel as a genre. My discussion of American family novels from post-war to post-millennium will show that the genre's position as the stepchild of academic debate is unjustified, if not unacceptable. As we shall see, the novels discussed here have little in common with, e.g., the family romances that were so popular in the nineteenth century. Taking a hermeneutic approach to what I consider to be the most important family novels from post-war to post-millennium, it is my objective to prove that the family novel is a genre that is not only very much alive, but as radical and revolutionary as the times allowed in which the respective works were published.

The literary analysis of each chapter is accompanied by an outline of the political, philosophical and economic context of each novel. I will sketch major cultural tendencies, which will be supported by sociological data, as well as consider comparable literary works from the same period. While my approach is chronological, I am not suggesting that one period in the development of the family novel follows the other, separated by clearly

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[6] This assessment is in sharp contrast to a definition provided by Gero von Wilpert, who maintains that family novels usually are the product of repressive times. "Familienroman", *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur*, 7. ed. (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1989) 288f. For a more detailed discussion of von Wilpert's definition, cf. p. 18.

discernible boundaries. Despite the differences between the various generic forms of the family novel I will point out, they do not always succeed each other; periods of literary history overlap, and various forms and stages of the family novel often also coexist.

My examination of the development of the family novel in North America is not intended so much as a depiction of the genre's *improvement* as it is of its *change*. All the family novels discussed here are outstanding works of high literary quality, each of which was awarded the National Book Award. Thus, my interpretation aims at pointing out the differences not in quality, but in aesthetic form, cultural content, and political or artistic vision. Yet I also consider it necessary to analyze novels that have entered the canon in some way or other. For each epoch, or literary movement, I will discuss a well-known and academically appraised novel by an established author. Thereby I hope to defy the dominant view of family novels as minor writing[7].

I will address the respective novels with a number of questions, such as: Why can we consider a particular novel a family novel? How is family presented in the text? What general picture of, or attitude towards, 'the family' do we get? What is considered, or presented as, normal, what as a deviation from the norm? In what way does the representation of family tie in with - or challenge - the *zeitgeist*? What holds the family/-ies together, what drives it/them apart? Do the family members overcome their current conflicts and tensions, and if so, how do they go about it? What does that say about the author's view of the world, about his or her picture of society? In accord with this microscopic approach, I will also look at relations between the single family members. To this end, I will examine the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters, etc., and explain what conclusion can be drawn from that as to the condition of the family in particular and society in general. In the progress of my analysis, I will record and comment on the changing answers to these questions and the changing parameters relevant for them. Towards the closing stages of my thesis, I hope to be able to present the features and characteristics that distinguish the different exemplars of the family novel from its predecessors and successors. At the same time, I expect to be able to show the characteristics they have in common. One of the questions to be asked will be: Is there such a thing as a deep structure to all these different family novels? And if so, what does it consist of, and to what end and which effect is it employed? A first step towards categorizing family novels has been made by Denis Jonnes' study on what he sees as an essential feature of all stories: "[S]tory-telling cannot be

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[7] Such an opinion is held, e.g., by Roger Boyers: "[I]t is not the novelist of the very first rank that we […] associate with the family novel". Roger Boyers, "The Family Novel", *Salmagundi* 26 (1974) 4.

conceptualized independently of a system defined by a particular order of interpersonal relation; specifically, that subsumed by the term 'family'."[8] While Jonnes is more interested in relating all kinds of stories to family patterns, he also develops interrelational models of fictional representation of family compared to family as a social formation. Applied to the family novel, Jonnes' approach helps distinguish between the "correlative mode", i.e. the fictional representation of an actual family (as in an autobiography) or of the family as a "sociotype, i.e. figures taken to be typical of a period or generational cohort who are caught up in a sequence marked as typical of a particular group." (Jonnes 249) In addition, he mentions the "projective mode", which employs a fictional family to compensate for a dreary reality or "to mark off an interrelational sphere abstracted from the wider social network (political, economic) and often subject to a refiguring in accord with some idealizing factor." (Jonnes 250) Against these two modes, Jonnes sets the "disjunctive mode", by which the author of a family novel takes "an ironic or hostile stance towards social-familial norms." (250) One of the questions to be asked by this study will be in how far Jonnes' categories apply to the novels to be discussed here.

I intend to take two turns in my hermeneutic approach to the question of the generic character and development of the family novel in North America. From a diachronic perspective, this study aims at recording the generic changes of family novels in the course of the last half-century. On a synchronic level I will look at the way family is functionalized for the social diagnosis the respective novels offer. The general function of family in fiction is astutely explained by Peter von Matt:

> Es ist die unbestreitbare Aufgabe der Literatur, vom gesellschaftlichen Ganzen zu reden und in dessen Verlängerung vom Ganzen der Welt. Ebenso unbestreitbar aber kann dies die Literatur nur, indem sie von den intimsten menschlichen Konstellationen spricht und aus ihnen heraus erzählt: Mann und Frau im Flug und Sturz der Liebe, Eltern und Kinder im dramatischen Gefüge von Symbiose und Trennung.[9]

> [It is the indisputable duty of literature to speak of society as a whole, and by extension of the world as a whole. It is just as indisputable, though, that literature can only achieve this end by telling out of and about the most intimate human constellations: man and woman in the rise and fall of love, parents and children in the dramatic fabric of symbiosis and separation. (K.D.)]

And he adds:

> Die Pflicht, vom Ganzen zu reden, und die Unausweichlichkeit, dies nur über das Private tun zu können, begründen zusammen die Symbolhaftigkeit jeder Familie in der

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[8] Cf. Denis Jonnes, *The Matrix of Narrative. Family Systems and the Semiotics of Story* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990) 6.

[9] Peter von Matt, *Verkommene Söhne, missratene Töchter. Familiendesaster in der Literatur* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1995) 59.

> Literatur, den allgemein gesellschaftlichen Repräsentationscharakter sowohl der Mitglieder wie des akuten Konflikts. (59)

[And this duty to speak of the whole, together with the inevitability to be able to do this only by recurring to the private realm, substantiates the symbolic character of each family in literature, its general character of representing society through the family members as well as their immediate conflict. (K.D.)]

Von Matt's thoughts are of vital importance for various reasons. On the one hand, his elaborations offer a safe ground from which attacks derived from a thematic perspective on the family novel (see, e.g. W. J. Keith's attack as discussed in the following chapter) can be countered. On the other, he shows that the personal is the political in the family novel, and does not, as has been widely assumed, equal merely the superficial and domestic. Assuming, then, that family discourses are always also political discourses, I will pay further attention to the condition of contemporary American society. In this context, disease as a common theme of the novels to be discussed in my thesis will take up a significant role towards the end of my argument. Disease in fiction needs not merely to be read as a symptom of decay, i.e. as a journey inevitably leading to death, but can also be indicative of a crisis out of which the individual can emerge regenerate and as a more mature person. As I will illustrate in chapter VII, the particular role of disease in the various family novels scrutinized here can provide a crucial clue to the meaning of the novel as a whole. As remains to be shown, this holds especially true for fin de millennium family novels, where disease indeed has a cathartic effect on the characters.

Among the questions and issues evolving around the subject of my analysis, the most pressing aspect concerns the generic character of the family novel. As obvious as it may seem at first glance, the question of what determines a family novel has, in most cases, not even been asked, let alone answered, by the critics and scholars that so far have examined family fiction. As I will show in my discussion of the secondary literature on the genre, many critics seem to presuppose a universally shared idea of what a family novel is. What is worse, some do not even stick to one term; instead, they juggle with various expressions, disregarding the very different connotations each of them entails. Before I begin to interpret the novels relevant to my thesis, I will therefore distinguish between the various terms with which scholars have been operating so far. In a second step, I will then set up a number of characteristics that provide a basic idea of what constitutes a family novel. In other words, I will present a "working definition" of the family novel. While such a preliminary set of characteristics can

be neither exclusive nor universally applicable, it can at least serve two purposes: On the one hand, it will explain my own idea of the subject, which will in turn serve as a *tertium comparationis* for the novels I examine. On the other hand, it will help to tell apart a 'genuine' family novel from novels that simply deal thematically with family in some way or other. After a thorough discussion of the various exemplars of this genre, I will reconsider this working definition in my final chapter and show its merits as well as its limits. I thereby hope to trigger off, eventually, a larger debate on the genre. Although there can be little doubt that an inclusive definition of the family novel is impossible, my re-definition of the genre attempts to be more precise, more heterogeneous, and clearly less condescending than preceding discussions of the genre.

After (re-)defining the family novel I will address the general question of the cultural relevance of the genre, its attractiveness as "Organ der Reflexion von Zeitgeschichte in der Form von Familiengeschichte"[10]. In this context, the family can be seen, according to Friedrich Engels, "as a microcosm of the conflict in the larger culture: '[The family] is the cellular form of civilized society, in which the nature of the oppositions and contradictions fully active in that society can already be studied.'"[11] By considering the family novel to be a genre that is very much alive, I have referred to the question of its impact on culture and society, and, in turn, the way it is influenced by the cultural and historical factors that form the background from which it emerged. One of the objectives of my thesis is to point out how well-suited a genre the family novel is to critically reflect and comment on important socio-cultural trends and developments. To put it more precisely, the major paradigm changes in the past century were accompanied and echoed by a new model of the family novel. My study intends to shed light on the question of how family novels present and reflect the most pressing discourses of their day.

To that end, I will look at family novels from what I have roughly divided into three major periods, or categories. The main part of my thesis will be devoted to the close reading of various family novels arranged in a chronological order. I have set the starting point of my discussion after World War II in order to complement a discussion of the family novel as a genre presented by Yi-Ling Ru[12]. Ru's study does not go beyond the 1930s and 1940s. As I will point out in a separate discussion of her book in chapter 2.2, she outlines the features of

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[10] Lothar Müller, "Der eine Name: Esterházy, der andere: Rothschild. Über die Wiederkehr des Familienromans", *Merkur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken* 8 (August 2003) 666.
[11] Cf. David M. Klein and James M. White, *Family Theories. An Introduction* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1996) 182. Klein/White have taken the quotation from Engels' *The Origin of the Family* (1848).
[12] Yi-Ling Ru, *The Family Novel. Toward a Generic Definition* (New York: Lang, 1992).

what could be called the deep structure of the family *chronicle* or *saga* in the first half of the twentieth century. Apart from the merits that her study offers, one of its drawbacks is its static character: Ru does not show the development of (and within) the genre. This study is intended as a first step towards the exploration of this as yet uncharted territory.

After a thorough discussion of the secondary literature on the genre and the suggestion of a working definition of 'the family novel' in chapter II, I will proceed to an investigation into the symbolic qualities of parent figures in fiction in chapter III. The various functions of father and mother figures in a literary text shall serve as the basis for my subsequent interpretations of the family dynamics in the respective novels to be scrutinized. My literary analysis begins with the post-war family novel and focuses on John Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957) as its prime model. The subsequent chapter will be devoted to an analysis of the postmodern family novel: Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) will take center stage in my discussion. Last, but not least, in chapter VI I will concentrate on novels published from the 1990s until the first years of the new millennium. Here I will focus on Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001).

Generally speaking, the most obvious tertium comparationis of all these novels is their portrait of a single white middle-class Anglo-Saxon Protestant family. My selection is not to suggest at all that the WASP family represents *the* typical American family; it is simply one of many variations of the American family, though the most dominant one viewed from America's old Eurocentric perspective. However, an inclusion of other forms of family into my analysis, be it the matrilineal Jewish family, the polygonal African American family affected by the cruelties of slavery, racial segregation, or various forms of discrimination that would also impinge on immigrant families to a similar extent, is barely constructive as it would obstruct the comparability of the novels to be discussed here. While I am aware of the problems connected to such a more or less arbitrary drawing of boundaries, I do not intend to engage in a lengthy discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of such ascriptions[13].

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[13] The difficulties that might come up for which my discussion can certainly be criticized, concern, on the one hand, the purpose of drawing boundaries. This is something most postmodernist critics will object to, pointing to the works that are excluded from such a canon, and their subsequent 'marginalization'. However, my study is not political in that it intentionally includes or excludes works from authors of a certain ethnic background, gender, or social group. Rather, I have looked at the single works and their aesthetic composition in deciding which ones to include in my discussion, and which ones not. On the other hand, my selection can be criticized for using such hotly debated terms as "postmodernist". To radical constructivists as well as deconstructionalists, it may indeed seem either naïve or impertinent to work with terms that have proven to be so difficult to define. Since I belong to neither camp, I will try to stick to the smallest common denominator, i.e. those categories that a vast majority of critics see as characteristic of works from a certain epoch, or literary movement. Moreover, in a field that is so little discussed by academic critics as that of the family novel, I will attempt to begin to classify it by introducing different categories by which the various exemplars can be differentiated.

For my aim to track the lines along which the family novel in America has developed and changed, a comparable family constellation in a similar cultural background is vital. My decision for the white mainstream middle-class family is motivated mainly by the peculiar prejudices with which scholars have so far approached it (cf. chapter 2.1).

In chapter IV, I will concentrate on the post-war family novel in general and on the New England author John Cheever in particular. His first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), will be at the center of my analysis. Among the issues addressed in this chapter will be the question if the binary view of the world dominating 1950s American discourse also influences the family in Cheever's novel. In fact, it seems that the Wapshot family, descendants of an old New England clan, is subject to a gap that separates their pastoral paradise from the hostile urban world where the future of the family lies. The traditional nuclear family in *The Wapshot Chronicle* is endangered by the alienating forces of post-war American society, and in order to understand Cheever's vision and his social critique, it is essential to concentrate on the effects of these alienating forces on the unity of the family. Among the hypotheses of chapter IV will be the idea that Cheever's vision in *The Wapshot Chronicle* is tragic because he looks back nostalgically to a past whose advantages the new generation of Wapshots is denied. Whether the 1950s conformity that dominates Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), the bestselling novel of the decade, also informs Cheever's novel will be another topic to be discussed in chapter IV. Differences between *The Wapshot Chronicle* and Nobel Prize winner John Steinbeck's saga *East of Eden* (1952) will also be addressed briefly.

As I intend to illuminate in the subsequent analysis of the postmodern family novel in chapter V, the parameters that were constitutive of the post-war family novel no longer apply to its successor(s). To that end, the sequel to Cheever's novel *The Wapshot Chronicle*, *The Wapshot Scandal* (1964), will serve as a good example of the North American family novel on its way to postmodernism. I hope to be able to demonstrate that *The Wapshot Scandal* displays features of early postmodernism, a phase that Tony Hilfer has identified correctly as 'black humor'[14]. Stepping deeper into this part of the realm of the postmodern family novel, I will then focus on Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), again as an example of a literature that can be considered postmodernist because of thematic as well as formal characteristics. As my discussion intends to demonstrate, by drawing on postmodern themes as well as narrative strategies, DeLillo's novel successfully transcends the confines of a genre generally held to be

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[14] Tony Hilfer, *American Fiction Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1992) 128.

conservative. Among the questions to be discussed in chapter V will be that of how the consequences of post-industrialist excessive consumerism are brought to bear on family life. The emptied lives and loves of the postnuclear Gladney family, who are in the center of the novel, will be shown to both embody and critically comment on what various philosophers and sociologists have identified as the postmodern condition. The central hypothesis of this chapter will be the assumption that DeLillo's portrait of the family is ironic because, among other deficiencies, none of the characters can think beyond life in postmodern consumerist America.

I will then move beyond postmodernism and focus on a fin de millennium family novel by Jonathan Franzen: *The Corrections* (2001). The family novels I analyze in my thesis go beyond an uncritical mirroring of society. Harmless as their alleged happy ending plots may seem at first sight, we will see how family novels in the second half of the twentieth century critically comment on the flaws of the society that serves as their background. For instance, it is the unstable, insecure and disturbing aspects of contemporary society that serve as an impetus of fin de millennium family novels such as *The Corrections*. My central hypothesis in chapter VI is that authors like Franzen are writing against a postmodern, postindustrial world where signs have turned to simulacra and meaning is as elusive as language. These authors are using the family as their most effective instrument of creating meaning. As Jonathan Franzen remarks:

> We're in an era where it's very hard to be idealistic about anything. Even when you do manage to achieve idealism for a few moments, you immediately start examining it and become ironic. In a prosperous post great society era [...], there aren't so many places to find meaning. But family does remain an enduring generator of meaning. Since the fiction writer is trying to tell stories that have meaning I think it's natural to be looking at family[15].

In this statement, Franzen hints at several important issues of contemporary life. The first point he makes concerns what Jedediah Purdy has criticized as the dominance of irony in our everyday lives[16]. As Purdy explains, it is the predominance of irony which prevents us from challenging the problems with which our postmodern world confronts us. Different as the origins of their disapproval of this sort of irony are, both Purdy and Franzen feel the need to leave behind a postmodern way of life. In the case of *The Corrections*, this does not mean that Franzen does not rely on irony as a literary device. As I will explain later in my discussion of

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[15] Jessica Murphy, "Mainstream and Meaningful", *The Atlantic,* 3 Oct. 2001, http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/int2001-10-03.htm, (acc. 11 Oct. 2002).

[16] Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things. Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

his novel, he employs irony, however, to reveal the flaws of a society too ready to hide from responsibility by adopting an individualistic and incessantly ironic lifestyle. Although Franzen does not want readers to understand *The Corrections* as a social novel[17], his use of irony and satire is an important strategy to convey social criticism. Franzen's second point is that we (Americans, as well as the people in the Western world in general) are living in a world that is fundamentally different from the Cold War that dominated the world until the breakdown of the Soviet Union in the late eighties and early nineties. What Franzen calls a "post great society era" is our fin de millennium condition. This condition is depicted in *Underworld* by Don DeLillo[18], who influenced Franzen to a certain extent[19]. In the epilogue of *Underworld*, protagonist Nick Shay tries to cope with the confusion and indeterminability of life after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Ironically, it was precisely the order of the Cold War – its simplistic separation of the world into binaries such as East and West, good and bad, *Us* vs. *Them* – that provided people with stability despite their fear of the apocalypse of a Third World War. As soon as the antagonistic world order has collapsed, however, people feel lost. Their fears of a nuclear war have vanished, but so has everything that made peoples' lives meaningful. In a sense, we can say that the apocalypse has happened – there is no center anymore, everything has fallen apart. This breakdown of the old order, however, creates space for an art that uses the debris of the past to literally illuminate the present, to make it brighter, more colorful and multi-facetted. The art of various post-cold war artists in *Underworld* gives a new meaning to life. Thus in true modernist fashion, DeLillo offers the solaces of avant-garde art as a way out of the 'anything goes' of the fin de millennium condition he depicts at the end of *Underworld*. This condition goes hand in hand with the third important point Franzen makes, namely fiction writers' renewed attempts to create meaning. This last point especially indicates a departure from postmodernity's (and, arguably, modernity's) deliberate evasion of meaning. It is a change that is closely connected to narrative style and stands at the beginning of a new era in fiction that once again relies on realist modes of representation.

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[17] See, for example, his opinion as expressed in the interview with Jessica Murphy mentioned above: "I want to curl up and take a nap when I hear the phrase 'social novel'. So I would never want to apply that term to my book, because I wouldn't want you to think of it as a snore". (n.p.)

[18] Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998).

[19] As he asserts in an interview Sven Birkerts: "DeLillo's sort of dad-like to me, and although I love his work I also sometimes have a son-like impatience with it." See Sven Birkerts, "The Esquire Conversation: Jonathan Franzen.", *Esquire* (5 Sept. 2002) http://www.esquire.com/cgi-bin/printtool/print.cgi?pages=4&filename=%2Features%2, (acc. 11 Oct. 2002).

To put it in a nutshell: The object of my analysis is the generic development of family novels in the USA from the post-war period to the fin de millennium. I wish to refute the unjustified bad reputation of the family novel by showing that it should not be confused with the sentimental realm of the family romance, or other forms of family fiction. Taking into account various works that range from various epochs, I will attempt to provide a new perspective on the family novel as a genre. My study is not aimed at presenting a history on the American nuclear family, although I will recur to sociological developments of the Western family in the second half of the twentieth century as they are mirrored and/or criticized by the novels to be analyzed. My approach is hermeneutic in that it takes into consideration developments in cultural as well as literary history; it is microscopic in that it is concerned with the personal relationships within families in a single society. I intend to present a generic study of the family novel that provides the reader with the development of the genre in about the past fifty years, and that comments on the major paradigm changes in literary history, showing their influence on the genre.

II.   ANSWERING THE QUESTION: WHAT IS A FAMILY NOVEL?

2.1 Pride and Prejudice: The State of Criticism

In the following paragraphs I will take a look at various critical approaches to the family novel. Apart from the fact that secondary literature on the genre of the family novel is scarce, an overview over the some of the scholarly contributions will show how interpreters seem to take pride in their prejudiced assessment of a genre they fail to define more often than not.

In 1969, Philip Tody[20] asked a question that is still of interest today, namely whether family novels are necessarily conservative. In his essay, Tody deplores the state of the twentieth century family novel, which in his view rarely articulates social criticism. In contrast to nineteenth century naturalist masters like Emile Zola who used the family as a symbol of society's corruption and degradation, Tody sees their twentieth century counterparts as much more conservative. In his view, there is a clear connection between form and content. It is the traditional form that makes twentieth century family novels so conservative; in a time of formal radicalism[21], Tody says, these family novels perpetuate conventions. As a literary genre, he judges, the family novel is as conservative as a classical tragedy. That is to say, there are certain structures which will always remain essentially the same. In general, Tody thinks it is difficult for an author of a family novel to abide by whatever kind of radical principles she might have had in mind initially. Tody sees the hegemony of the father as a thematic characteristic of family novels in general, and interprets it as a sign of the patriarchal principle by which family novels are governed on their deep structure. He is Freudian in his opinion that it is the absence of the Oedipus complex that is a sign of a family novel's conservatism. Needless to say, such a critique seems rather arbitrary and not very substantial at all; it testifies to the general character of his paper. Tody's critique further includes the scope of family novels, which he sees as generally limited insofar as the study of a single family, in his view, prevents a panoramic study of society. He qualifies this debatable viewpoint by explaining that if the family is socially open and used as a symbol, both is possible.

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[20] Philip Tody, "The Politics of the Family Novel. Is Conservatism Inevitable?", *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Culture* 3.1 (1969) 87-101.
[21] As Tody's paper was published in 1969, it is quite clear that he is referring to radical postmodernism.

This last point, which Tody sees as the exception rather than the rule, is identified by Peter von Matt as a predominant feature of family in literature. As the latter puts it in his book about (dysfunctional) family relations in literature, family in fiction needs to be read as

> einerseits eine psychologisch-realistisch erfaßbare Menschengruppe [...], ein Häuflein aufgeregter Einzelmenschen im heiklen Beziehungsnetz, und andererseits ein symbolisches System, das in jedem seiner Teile über sich hinaus verweist. [...] Wie immer man sich den menschlichen Intimverband denkt, die Gruppe, in der die Kinder aufwachsen und erstmals sozialisiert werden, sobald er die dramatis personae einer Erzählung oder eines Schauspiels abgibt, werden seine Mitglieder Teile eines symbolisch-repräsentativen Systems, in dem sich die Ordnung des gesellschaftlichen Ganzen abbildet, zusammen mit deren Gefährdungen, Zwängen und Erleichterungen. (58f.)

> [...on the one hand a group of human beings that can be grasped on a psychological-realistic level [...], a small crowd of agitated individuals interconnected in a complicated web of relationships, and on the other hand it is a symbolic system that points beyond itself in each single part. [...] How ever one imagines this intimate human unit, the group where children grow up and are socialized, as soon as it becomes the dramatis personae of a tale or a play, its members become part of a symbolic-representative system, where the order of society as a whole is portrayed, together with its dangers, its constraints, and its moments of relief. (K.D.)]

In other words, von Matt thinks family in fiction is always necessarily a symbol of society, thus much less restricted in scope than it may appear to be at first sight. This observation is crucial as it helps to make a case for the force of social criticism within a family novel.

While Tody sees the traditional, non-experimental form of the family novel as the main reason for its conservatism, Roger Boyers[22] pays more attention to content. He, too, holds the family novel to be an essentially conservative genre: "The underlying assumption in the family novel is that families must somehow find a way to preserve themselves, that the entirely liberated individual is not often better off than he would have been had he been able to make his peace in the family." (15) On the level of characterization and plot, Boyers sees the family novel as nothing short of boring, a judgment he bases on the family novel's alleged predictability: "Families become stereotyped, role relations fixed and archetypal. [...] Surprise is reduced to the level of extravagance or unaccountable eccentricity of behavior." (8f.) The role of father in the respective families is comparable to the role the author plays for his text; in Boyer's view, the author is a god of his fictional universe who holds "unmistakable control over his characters." (8) This interpretation allows him to associate an author's political views with the message of a novel that supports the status quo. Finally, and not surprisingly,

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[22] Roger Boyers, "The Family Novel", *Salmagundi* 26 (1974) 3-25.

Boyers follows Tody in claiming that the family novel lacks "cultural depth" and instead merely displays "local color" (9).

P. M. W. Thody holds a similar view with respect to the family novel[23]. His main point is that "literary genres can have their influence on the content of literary work." (61) He, too, connects the family novel with conservatism, but diverges from Boyers' view when he remarks that "the conservatism of the family novel is something that takes the author by surprise." (63) As we have seen before, that ties in neatly with what Tody had stated five years earlier. In contrast to Tody and Boyers, Thody takes an almost poststructuralist approach in a *Barthes*ian sense. The author in Thody's view, however, is not entirely dead, but merely transformed by the power of his own text. Essentially, Thody thinks that the family novel is a literary genre that has the power to transform originally rebellious writers into conservative ones: "to write about the family [...] is [...] to plead for continuity and tradition as against radicalism and innovation" (63). The conservatism Thody ascribes to family novels lies in the socially and politically traditional attitudes they portray, i.e. it is more a matter of content than of form.

W. J. Keith's open letter to *The New Quarterly* is a polemic negative response to the family novel[24]. While Keith admits to be only half serious, he does question "the usefulness of a critical symposium on the family in Canadian (or any other) literature" (321). Keith does not even trouble himself with the family novel proper – his attack starts with the family as a theme: "'the family in literature' seems to me as barren a topic for literary commentary as any I can imagine. It represents, indeed, an archetypal example of what literary criticism ought not to be doing" (324). This is in stark contrast to the opinion of P. M. W. Thody, who explains approvingly that "the study of literary genres can throw light on what is called the sociology of literature" (Thody 61). As Keith's article suggests, a 'sociology of literature' is something that should be avoided by all means, provided it is possible at all. According to Keith, the trouble lies in the approach to family in fiction as taken by what he derisively calls "thematic criticism"[25], an approach that he sees as dangerous because "everything, however incompetent, is grist to its mill. Here is a story about 'the family'; no matter that it is boring or coarsely conceived or feebly written, it can be 'thematically significant'!" (324) As these

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[23] P. M. W. Thody, "The Influence of Genre on Ideology: The Case of the Family Novel.", *Proceedings and Papers of the Sixteenth Congress of the Australasian Universities' Language and Literature Association, Held 21-27 August 1974*, ed. H. Bevan et al., (1976) 58-70.
[24] See footnote #3.
[25] The term 'thematic criticism' and the approach to fiction it entails is an established expression especially in Canadian literary criticism. Introduced by Northrop Frye, it is still hotly debated.

polemic comments suggest, it does not even occur to Keith that there could be such a thing as an interesting, marvelously written family novel with timeless literary qualities; it seems that quite a few of the masterpieces of the twentieth century have escaped his attention. Apart from that, his attack on thematic criticism is grossly exaggerated. Keith commits yet another mistake: he confuses the sociological aspect of the family as a cultural unit with the symbolic meaning the family takes on as an instrument in fiction. His argument is that the family in fiction could never be a *tertium comparationis* for literary critics because of the various backgrounds of the respective authors, as well as the various settings of family novels. The following passage is representative of Keith's stance:

> I am therefore skeptical of your [*The New Quarterly*'s editor's (K.D.)] deduction that 'there exists a distinctively Canadian presentation of the family'. A brief consideration of the hard facts of Canadian geography casts doubt on the proposition. What generalizations are likely to apply with any accuracy or usefulness to 'the family' in a small village in the Maritimes, in rural Quebec, in Montreal or Toronto, in a Horizon-like prairie community, in Hodgins' northern Vancouver Island? […] And I am tempted to parody the whole process by inventing absurd topics for 'literary research': compare the family as represented in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Wuthering Heights*. […] Above all, there is a disturbing sense of the deterministic and the stereotypical pervading the whole enterprise. Why should writers of different age, gender, ethnic origin, social position, religious affiliation, etc., etc. portray 'the family' […] in a similar way just because they show up on census-returns or passport-statistics as belonging to the same nation? And even if some vague tendencies were discernible, what would this tell us that could possibly be of literary interest? (Keith 322)

As we can see here, Keith is not capable of looking beyond a sociological approach to family in fiction. Neither does he perceive that beyond the regional differences in setting, the respective novels might show astonishing similarities on the level of their deep structure. If we were to take him seriously, we might as well give up any attempt of comparing two works by two authors, even two works by the same author, for fear of the differences one might find on the surface. While Keith's attacks focus on the family as a theme in fiction, he does not bother to take into account the family novel as a genre. Had he done this, his criticism would have had to be much less condescending – and more thorough, too. His final appeal "To hell with family: let's talk about literature!" (324) ought to be taken as that which his assaults were not really meant to be: a joke.

The statements of the critics discussed up to now are similar in that they lack a thorough classification of the genre of which they hold such a low opinion[26]. They remain vague in their attempts to give an account of what the family novel exactly is, when and how it emerged, developed, where and when it flourished, etc. They all seem to have a general idea about works published mostly in the nineteenth century by British or American popular, but not necessarily critically acclaimed, authors, dealing with minor domestic turmoil.

In her monograph *Family in Fiction* Roshan Shahani takes an altogether different approach to family novels[27]. Concentrating on Canadian family novels written by women from different ethnic backgrounds[28], Shahani in her analysis foregrounds the novels' construction of myth on the one hand and of identity on the other hand. In order to "discover their sense of place in the present" (Shahani 12), the (mostly female) protagonists of Canadian family fiction need to come to terms with the past. Thus for Shahani, "the search for roots is really part of the family motif." (11) The mythical features Shahani points out are the Quest myth as well as the act of mythologizing the family itself. She sees these features as essentially Canadian: "[I]t can be ascertained that the persistence with which the family is mythologised seems characteristically, if not exclusively, a feature of Canadian literature. The example of *The Grapes of Wrath*, where the American family is extolled, is a significant instance of the exception that proves the rule." (180) Whether this observation is useful or not when it comes to the latest developments in the realm of the family novel in North America remains to be seen after a close reading of the works I have chosen for my thesis. As insightful as her study of the specific Canadianness of the novels she analyzes proves to be, it does not suffice to characterize the family novel and its development in the twentieth century. Although Shahani does present a more thorough discussion of family fiction, she focuses on thematic aspects, i.e. the family as a theme in fiction, rather than on generic characteristics of the family novel.

So far the works of these scholars and critics require an explication of what they understand to be a family novel. Neither of them bothers to define the term, they all use it as if the family novel were a monolithic genre with clearly delineated features. However, this is not the case

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[26] Peter von Matt, whose work is not concerned with generic aspects, but looks at thematic aspects instead, namely at the theme of disobedient children in (mostly German) literature throughout the ages from medieval literature to late twentieth century fiction, is an exception.

[27] Roshan Shahani, *Family in Fiction. Three Canadian Voices* (Bombay: The Registrar, S.N.D.T. Women's University, 1993).

[28] Shahani looks at the works of Margaret Laurence, Gabrielle Roy and Joy Kogawa.

at all. There are various reasons why it remains difficult to provide an inclusive definition of the genre of the family novel. For one thing, the sheer abundance of family fiction in the past two centuries makes it hard to reconcile its various exemplars. For another, the question as to what exactly constitutes a family novel, in contrast to novels that also, but not exclusively, concentrate on one or more families, is much more difficult to answer than one may think. The following definition of the family novel seems more neutral and inclusive:

> Familienroman, e. stofflich im Problemkreis des bürgerl. o. adl. Familienlebens, den Konflikten und Bindungen des Zusammenlebens, im weiteren Sinne auch noch der Generationen und der Ehe angesiedelter Roman, doch nur selten rein in dieser themat. Begrenzung, meist spielen beim anspruchsvollen F. umgreifendere und allg. soz. Fragen hinein. Der F. entsteht meist in Zeiten der Unterdrückung öffentl. Lebens oder geringen Interesses an diesem, setzt realist. Gestaltungsweise voraus und ist bes. häufig eine Form der Frauendichtung. […] Eine neue Form bildet der auf die Geschlechterfolge ausgreifende Generationenroman (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Stifter, *Witiko*, Freytag, *Die Ahnen*, Th. Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, R. Martin Du Gard, *Les Thibaults*, Galsworthy, *Forsyte Saga* […]). (von Wilpert 288)

[Family novel, a novel thematically situated in the context of the bourgeois or aristocratic family, the conflicts and relations of living together, also in the broader perspective of genealogy and marriage, yet only rarely in this thematic limitation, frequently the family novel deals with more encompassing and general social issues. The family novel mostly originates from an oppression of public life or little interest in the latter, is based on the compositional premises of realism and is most often a form of women's writing. […] A new type is constituted by the generational novel (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Stifter, *Witiko*, Freytag, *Die Ahnen*, Th. Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, R. Martin Du Gard, *Les Thibaults*, Galsworthy, *Forsyte Saga* […]. (K.D.)]

Three aspects are striking about this definition. The first feature to note is von Wilpert's assertion that there is such a thing as a highbrow, high-quality family novel, provided that large-scale social issues are included as well. As we will see, this is a characteristic that all the family novels I discuss here have in common. Second, there is the striking remark that family novels are written mostly in times of a repression of public life[29], or of little interest in public life on the author's part. This is a particularly interesting interpretation to which I will not recur until the conclusion of this thesis. Last, but not least, the family novel as von Wilpert sees it is constructed according to realist premises. I shall take up this point in the concluding

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[29]Such a 'repression of public life' as von Wilpert mentions it refers probably to a dictatorship or any other totalitarian regime. Considering Don DeLillo's postmodern family novel *White Noise*, which will be discussed in chapter V, such a totalitarianism does not have to be political. The characters in *White Noise*, for instance, suffer from the dictatorship of consumerism and the totalitarian influence of the media. In Franzen's fin de millennium family novel *The Corrections*, it is the "tyranny of Cool" (*TC* 561) that negatively influences the lives one of the protagonist's children, and against which Franzen is writing.

chapter as well. Von Wilpert's definition diverges, furthermore, from those quoted above in that it distinguishes between two different forms of family fiction, namely the family novel and the family chronicle, or generational novel. This is a distinction Yi-Ling Ru's fails to draw in her approach to the genre, as we will see in the next chapter.

Christopher Flint's study of seventeenth and eighteenth century domestic novels is an impressive inquiry into the roots of modern family fiction[30]. It is especially useful for an understanding of the term "domestic fiction". Flint focuses on prose fiction where the recently emerged affective (one-generational) nuclear family[31] features prominently. Like von Wilpert, Flint distinguishes domestic fiction - the sphere of action set in the household and immediate surroundings of the family - from generational novels and observes: "The family chronicle in prose fictional form, providing an extended representation of a family through several generations, does not appear in any force until the late nineteenth century." (35) It is important to see that, in using the term 'domestic fiction', Flint refers to a very specific quality of such works, namely that of the sentimental:

> The entire process of life is sentimentalized and exhaustively amplified. […] The ordinary is elevated to the status of the heroic; everyday life is transformed into a desirable philosophical objective; and family alliances are restored at story's end in what amounts to a triumphant verification of their essential value. (38)

As he explains, such works had a clear pedagogical intention: "Because these narratives were […] the fictional equivalent of conduct books, they did not merely express a literary convention; they also consciously manipulated social attitudes concerning the family. […] Such works drew parallels between an individual's adoption of a family ideology and that individual's adequacy as a legitimate member of society." (Flint 37f.)[32] So far, Flint's observations about *domestic fiction* corroborate the general prejudice against the *family novel* as held by so many contemporary critics. One could say that the composition of domestic fiction in its eighteenth and nineteenth century form has helped to establish the generally negative view of twentieth family novel. The presentism of the criticism presented earlier, i.e., the application of twentieth century literary values to family fiction of the eighteenth and

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[30] Christopher Flint, *Family Fictions. Narrative and Domestic Relations in Britain, 1688-1798* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998).

[31] Flint defines family (which, in the seventeenth century, encompassed a rather large group of people, including the household servants) as "the group of people who share close biological, affective, and economic ties that individuals in the group regard as binding them to a dutiful code of conduct toward one another." (Flint n.p. (foreword).

[32] The following statement taps the same vein: "Prose fiction, at least by mid-century, had become a pedagogical tool aimed at normalizing adult relations either through an analysis of successful child-rearing or, conversely, through an examination of the negative effects of inadequate upbringing." (Flint 15)

nineteenth century, is anachronistic and unhelpful, even if it is true that, as Flint shows, early family fiction did establish the norms and ideals associated with the bourgeois (later middle-class) affective nuclear family. We need to take into account that this form of family had only been recently made into a subject for instructive fiction; it was regarded as "a *modern* normative ideal of social organization [my italics, K.D.]" (Flint 3) and supported the attitudes held by the most ingenious thinkers of the day[33]. But times have changed, and domestic fiction has lost its appeal and given way to the family novel proper. Therefore, the criticism discussed previously is unproductive in view of the family novel in the second half of the twentieth century.

While Flint, like most scholars discussed so far, looks more at the thematic use of family in prose works of the time instead of generic features, his analysis is nevertheless elucidating for the purpose of my own thesis. First of all, I share Flint's concept of the symbolic use of the family in a work of fiction, as expressed in the following quote:

> My methodology […] assumes that both discursive representations of the family and the practices they may have recorded are part of a series of negotiations within the social sphere. In thus arguing for a versatile perspective, I am influenced by Michel Foucault's notion of 'tactical polyvalence' in the discourse surrounding the family's and the state's deployment of sexuality. (Flint 11)

Flint is referring to Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, where the family is seen as an institution that "neither mirrors nor provides a model for society. Instead, it was employed to enable a variety of complementary interests" (Flint 11). His most important conclusion easily disempowers critics armed with simplistic arguments about the necessary correlation between the form of a novel and its (conservative) content. The following observation by Flint exposes the assumptions of critics such as Tody, Boyers and Thody as shallow: "The relation of narrative form to family structure is not […] simply one of ideological or epistemological reflection. It is one in which narrative art translates the values of the family into formal precepts." (19) Flint's argument does, however, come close to the critics discussed above when he asks:

> [D]o fictional relations take the form of, or generate, family relations? Both narrative and genealogy usually develop in linear fashion, acquiring coherence by making the relations between characters or kin meaningful and by plotting a beginning and end that accentuate the continuing temporal (or historical) dimensions of human

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[33] As Flint describes, it was John Locke who "naturalized" the nuclear family: "What Locke does in *Two Treatises* is to emphasize the contractual and artificial basis of the family in order, paradoxically, to underscore its natural constitution." (42)

experience […]. This is especially true of the 'realistic' writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who used the family paradigm as a source for both their subject and their technique. (20)

In contrast to Tody, Boyers, Thody and others, Flint does not connect 'conservatism' of form with 'conservatism' of content. Rather, he focuses on realist techniques of writing, and this is of vital importance. In my opinion, it is not only obsolete, but quite wrong to simply dismiss realist strategies of writing by associating them with conservatism. Such a connection is highly ideological and therefore problematic. What radical postmodernist critics have doomed as outdated and obsolete, i.e. the realism of technique and perspective, is now experiencing an impressive revival; at the same time, what has been celebrated in the *Nouveau Roman* and in 'historiographic metafiction'[34] seems now to be on its way to oblivion. Any literary critic should be careful to avoid committing what could be called the 'ideological fallacy'. I will take great care in avoiding any judgmental attitude to the various methods, styles, techniques of writing and approaches to the text that are presented within the frame of this thesis. That is, I will not make general statements claiming that a certain narrative technique is inherently more revolutionary than another.

Generally, most of the above-cited scholars regard the nineteenth century as the great age of family fiction.[35] The rationale behind this view is obvious: if realism is the mode of representation best-suited for family novels, the genre must have been at its peak in a time when realism dominated the novel. If the content was also designed to criticize society, then at such a time, family novels could indeed be and actually were revolutionary. In addition to that, the nineteenth century attributed more importance to intact and functional nuclear families than contemporary (Western) society does. The breakup of a family in the nineteenth century was a tragic and rather uncommon event, while today it is less tragic because of the frequency with which it occurs. Feminism and other post-'68/'69 intellectual movements have taught us that the breakup of a family may even be liberating for its

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[34] The term was introduced by Linda Hutcheon in *The Poetics of Postmodernism*; cf. chapter 5.1 for details.
[35] This opinion is corroborated by Lothar Müller, who sees Mann's *Buddenbrooks* not only as the final point in the development of a popular genre, but also as a novel that unconsciously comments on its status in the much-quoted scene where little Hanno, the last of the Buddenbrooks, is caught drawing a final line under his name in the family tree: "Der Doppelstrich des kleinen Hanno ist zum Schlußstrich unter das Genre des bürgerlichen Familienromans insgesamt geworden. Gewiß, es kamen John Galsworthys *Forsyte Saga* und deren Nachfolger, doch schon der Roman Thomas Manns, 1901 erschienen, gilt im Rückblick als Spätling einer Tradition, die ans bürgerlich 19. Jahrhundert gebunden war und mit ihm unterging." (Müller 664)

individual members. It is generally (if incorrectly, as Barabas/Erler[36] explain) agreed that the family has lost many of the functions it held in the past. The question that consequently arises is whether a family novel, and one with a happy end at that, could be anything but traditionalist, an assumption I wish to refute especially in my analysis of fin de millennium family novels. Before I move on to a close reading of the primary texts, however, I wish to direct attention to questions about the generic features of family fictions.

2.2 Realism, Conflict, Decline? Ru's Structuralist Taxonomy

As I have already mentioned above, secondary literature on the family novel as a genre is often biased and not very substantial. Although there are numerous articles and book chapters on the family as a motif or theme in fiction, scholars have rarely considered the generic dimension of family fiction. Yi-Ling Ru's 1992 monograph *The Family Novel. Toward a Generic Definition* is the only exception so far and therefore deserves an in-depth discussion. As Ru rightly points out, "there has long been a confusion of the family novel proper with novels in which the family merely appears but is not the primary structural and thematic focus". (1) She argues that there is a clear distinction between the novel and its sub-genre, the family novel. In order to explain this distinction, she approaches the genre from the perspective of literary history, i.e. she asks how the family novel has developed. Ru engages in a structuralist discussion of the family novel in order to lay bare its rhetoric, which she considers to be fundamentally different from other forms of the novel.

In contrast to what the scholars whose opinions I have discussed in the preceding chapter hold in their contributions on the family novel, Yi-Ling Ru does not see the nineteenth century as the great age of family fiction. In her view, "the family novel did not evolve into a separate generic category until the beginning of the twentieth century" (Ru 1f.). For Ru, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* is "the first prototype of the family novel in the West which marks the ripped development of this sub-genre because it reflects a more distinct form, one that separates it from other kinds of novels" (4). Ru's observation is crucial as it no longer allows scholars to confuse the popular domestic fiction of the nineteenth century with what she sees as the family novel proper. As a result, scholars will no longer be able to defend

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[36] Friedrich K. Barabas, Michael Erler, *Die Familie. Lehr- und Arbeitsbuch für Familiensoziologie und Familienrecht*, 2nd ed. (Weinheim: Juventa Verlag, 2002).

their prejudices against what they think to be the poor quality of family novels since they need to reconsider what a family novel really is.

What Ru treats as 'the family novel proper' are the early twentieth century exemplars she discusses in her book. As will become clear in the next chapter of this thesis, what Ru is really concerned with is the family chronicle, or family saga; at least that is the case for the examples she analyzes, i.e. John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* and *The Turbulent Trilogy* by Pa Chin, but not for Martin du Gard's *Les Thibaults*. In other words, Ru fails to distinguish between the family saga and the family novel. She does, however, point to the differences between domestic novels and family novels.

Ru explains the fundamental dissimilarity between domestic fiction and the family novel proper by naming what she sees as the latter's "four most distinguishing characteristics" (2):

> [F]irst, it deals realistically with a family's evolution through several generations; second, family rites play an important role and are faithfully recreated in both their familial and communal contexts; third, the primary theme of the novel always focuses on the decline of a family; and fourth, such a novel has a peculiar narrative form which is woven vertically along the chronological order through time and horizontally among the family relationships. (2)

While this definition applies perfectly to the novels Ru discusses, it is not precise enough. For example, when she says that a family novel "has a peculiar narrative form which is woven vertically along the chronological order through time", she fails to specify this point. Yet it is crucial to see that whereas the *family saga's* vertical structure touches several generations from great-grandfather to great-grandchild, the *family novel's* vertical structure mostly only touches as few as two generations, namely parents and children[37]. Because of this imprecision in her definition, Ru is able to include (in her discussion of multi-generational novels, i.e. family chronicles) du Gard's *Les Thibaults*, a novel that deals with the relationship between a father and his two sons. The price of this is a failure to distinguish between a family saga and a family novel, a distinction I will elaborate on in the following chapter.

Comparing the rhetoric of novels from different countries and cultures that were published in the early twentieth century, Ru is able to prove that they share a general underlying structure. Although I agree with Ru's position concerning traditional family chronicles (which she sees as family *novel*s), I do not think that the characteristics she mentions are a universal feature of all family novels. As I will show in the course of this

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[37] Also, Ru should have added that the family saga not only moves horizontally "among the family relationships", but of course also always vertically, i.e. from parent to child, grandparent to grandchild, etc.

thesis, the definition of the family novel as Ru lays it out neither works for its postmodern exemplars nor for its fin de millennium successors.

For Ru, 'family novels'[38] intend to give "a direct sense of reality to the reader" (5) and must therefore be written in a realistic mode. While she does not imply that 'family novels' belong to realism as a historical phenomenon in literature, she insists that the development of the plot is rendered in a realistic way. She holds that the author's use of autobiographical sources for the work in question, as well as a meticulous characterization of the various figures, constitute the key elements of this realistic depiction. Since she argues that 'family novels' describe the lives of several generations, she even claims that length (i.e. the number of pages!) is a necessary criterion of family novels. Part of the realistic effect of the 'family novel' is achieved, according to Ru, by an "elaborate recreation of traditional community life" (12), where family rites play the most important part. In such works, rites are used "as a way of uniting people and strengthening the sense of community" (Ru 13). It is crucial to keep in mind here that Ru sees family rites in fiction as a sign of health and prosperity; to her, they constitute the one bastion where the family shows its unity and strength. A closer look at later models of the family novel proper will convey that although family rites remain significant signs of the state of the family, they render a completely different picture (cf., for instance, the family meals in White Noise (chapter 5.2.1)). Yi-Ling Ru sums up the essence of realistic depiction in 'family novels' as follows: "Such realistic elements as a sense of history, a sense of the nation, social concerns, and ideological beliefs in reformation, individuation, and sympathetic attractiveness for the reader constitute the most basic features of the family novel." (12)

The third distinguishing characteristic of the 'family novel' is identified by Ru as its main theme, i.e. the conflicts within a family:

> The story develops around conflicts within the family and concentrates on relationships as revealed in family circles. Many kinds of conflicts among family members expose the central theme, which concerns the family's values and changing vitality through time. The thematic significance then expands beyond the family to all humanity. (28)

This observation is not to be underestimated since it allows us to distinguish novels that deal with family as one theme among others from the family novel proper. While the former center around the thoughts, actions and feelings of one or more protagonist, the latter is not concerned solely with the life of an individual, but with "the family as epitomized in one [or

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[38] In the context of my discussion of Ru's study I use the expression 'family novel' to stress that I am referring to Ru's use of the term, by which she actually (if unknowingly) refers to family chronicles or sagas.

more] member's life" (Ru 28) In other words: while novels dealing, among other themes, with the family concentrate usually on one protagonist, the family novel's protagonist is the whole family itself (Ru 31). Among the conflicts within the 'family novel', Ru distinguishes father-son conflicts and husband-wife conflicts, regarding the former as the more important one. Leaving aside here the justified question of why Ru takes an essentially androcentric view by ignoring mother-daughter, father-daughter or mother-son conflicts, it is necessary to note that she believes the husband and father to be the most important figure in family conflicts. He represents the old ways, while his sons and his wife stand for the new. Ru explains:

> The reason the family novel creates such a strong father figure is that, for the true family novelist, the father is the founder and the pillar of the traditional family, the character who insists on traditional values and relies on family relationships to rule the community. Without a strong father, [...] the large group (the centerpiece of the family novel) could not have been formed or long existed."(32f.)

In the conflict between the old and the new, as Ru observes, the 'family novel' shows the victory of the new over the old.

Ru holds the structure of a 'family novel' to be decisive factor all forms of the genre share. As she explains, "the development from a family's rise to its fall determines the specific form of the family novel." (37) In other words: 'true' 'family novels' always depict the decline of a family[39]. While this observation may apply to fin de siècle family sagas such as *Buddenbrooks*, I will illustrate that a deviation from this rule is one of the most outstanding features of the fin de millennium family novel. To return to Ru's argument, however, I would like to stress once more the difference between the family novel proper and the novel of the individual. Ru is correct in stating that the difference lies in time as well as in scope: while the family novel tends to cover several decades/generations, the novel of the individual tends to concentrate on one person's life, or maybe even only a period in one's life. Similarly, there is a difference in scope, as "the novel of the individual tends to examine a man's [sic] experience through life, while the family novel deals with the plight of the group through history" (Ru 37). Carol Shields' *Larry's Party*[40] is a case in point. Although the protagonist's family affairs are described in great detail, and are shown to structure his life, the novel really

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[39] That this is only true to a certain extent is proven by John Steinbeck's monumental family saga *East of Eden*. While at the end of the novel, Cal's brother and father die, the reader learns from the words of the Trask family's wise Chinese-American servant Lee that Cal, blessed by his dying father, will found a new and happy family with Abra. Thus *East of Eden* is an example of a family chronicle that does not show the decline of a family, but rather its continuity in an even improved form. The end suggests that Cal has learned from his mistakes and will not repeat the mistakes of his father nor those of his grandfather.

[40] Carol Shields, *Larry's Party* (Random House of Canada, 1997).

centers on Larry, his hopes, dreams, achievements and failures, covering the time from his early twenties until his death.

To sum up, Yi-Ling Ru contends that the 'family novel' is a piece of fiction of considerable length written in the realist mode, depicting the decline of a family over the generations while paying special attention to family rites. The origins of the 'family novel' date back to the beginning of the twentieth century. In contrast to other exemplars of the novel, the family novel's protagonist is the family itself. Its main conflicts are father-son conflicts and husband-wife conflicts, conflicts that need to be understood as a collision between the old and the new. The new always emerges as the winner of the battle between tradition and modernity. Its narrative structure makes the family novel an autonomous exemplar of the novel. In Ru's words: "The family novel transforms and elaborates the basic constituents of the fiction into a more unique form by its extensive scope, broad range, and multiple symbolic meanings. Significantly, this artistic process separates the 'family novel' from traditional fiction." (40)

Generally speaking, Ru's definition is a useful attempt at defining the generic characteristics of the family novel (that is actually the family chronicle). Many of her observations are feasible, yet there are also problematic assumptions. Looking at the quotation above, for example, we need to ask ourselves what exactly Ru means when she refers to the 'family novel's "multiple symbolic meanings". After all, every good novel displays multiple symbolic meanings. Moreover, Ru sets the 'family novel' apart from what she calls – but neglects to specify as – "traditional fiction". Seen from a postmodern perspective, the vast majority of novels written at the beginning of the twentieth century must necessarily appear "traditional", and seen from a fin de millennium perspective, the novels Ru discusses in her monograph naturally seem traditional, while the fin de millennium family novel is the revolutionary.

A discussion of the rhetoric and underlying structures of the family novel proper in North America from post-war to post-millennium renders a picture that is different from Ru's characterization of the 'family novel'. While she contends that in what I see as family sagas, the father is God-like while the sons are either Christ-like or Satan-like (79), we will see how the postmodern as well as the fin de millennium family novel deconstructs such rigid binary characterizations. Moreover, the death of the father is no longer a sign of decay and decline. As a consequence, Ru's statement that family "novelists tend to concentrate on the chronological history of the family from its rise to its fall" (125) does not seem to apply to every family novel. In the fin de millennium family novel, for instance, there is no fall but

rather a crisis which has a cathartic effect and ultimately leads to the transformation of the family. I would also like to underline here that what Ru has defined as the 'family novel's extensive scope' (its description of several generations through time, or Ru's horizontal dimension) and its great range (the various members of the family whose lives are described, or Ru's vertical dimension) may be feasible criteria for the family saga, but they do not necessarily apply to the family novel. As I will show, the latter tends to focus on parents and children, i.e. two generations of direct kinship. To use sociological terminology: Yi-Ling Ru sees the classical extended family[41] as the subject matter of the family novel, while I would like to contend that family novels concentrate more on the classical nuclear family[42]. In my opinion, the extended family is the subject matter of the family saga. The following chapter will be devoted to a detailed discussion of the differences between the various forms of family fictions that have been recognized in secondary literature in the past.

2.3 (Re-)Defining the Family Novel

As I have attempted to show above, many critics fail to define the terms family novel, family saga or family epic, family chronicle, family fiction, domestic fiction, and family romance. In order to arrive at a notion of what a family novel is, a definition of this term requires a thorough look at the various genres and subgenres of family fiction that are different from what I consider the family novel proper[43].

Put very generally, the term 'family fiction' is the broadest and therefore most superficial expression we can use in order to refer to any form of fiction in which one or more families of whatever structure and type figure more or less prominently. We could say that the

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[41] According to Margaret Ward, the extended family "encompasses the nuclear family and all other relatives". Cf. *The Family Dynamic. A Canadian Perspective* (Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1994) 7; Charles L. Jones et al. add the distinction of the vertically extended family in cases of "importance of the elder generation on either the male or female side". See Charles L. Jones et al., *The Futures of the Family* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1995) 41.

[42] According to Cheal, a nuclear family is "composed of a legally married couple and their children", a relatively narrow definition which applies basically to what Cheal calls the "isolated nuclear family". See David Cheal, *Sociology of Family Life* (Houndmills & New York: Palgrave, 2002) 4.

[43] My discussion and definition of various terms, genres, and subgenres does not attempt to be complete. For one thing, an all-encompassing survey of the numerous forms of family fiction that there are is impossible because I only look at a very specific kind of literature (mainly the novel) in a very specific context (mostly twentieth century English-speaking North America) at a very specific time (from post-war to post-millennium). Obviously this selection is not representative of 'the Western world', let alone the whole of world literature. Knowing that my discussion must necessarily remain somewhat incomplete, I intend to render a general impression of the various forms of family fiction, by way of roughly outlining what they have in common and where they differ.

term 'family fiction' refers to works of prose rather than dramatic or poetic works, and this is also how I will employ it. The term does not, however, hint at the length or focus of a fictional work. Thus 'family fiction' could allude to a short story as well as a novelette, an anecdote, a novel, a saga, etc. It could even refer to a fairy tale, science fiction, or the fantastic world of magic realism of utopian/dystopian fiction. It is different from oral stories in that it is put in black and white; but even an oral story could be subsumed under the heading of family fiction. As we can see, the term 'family fiction' is not very useful in determining genre or theme. The only thematic conclusion we can draw from the term is that the family as the subject of a work plays a slightly more important part than other themes or subjects. It is an expression that we can draw on in a very general way, as a sort of comprehensive term that tries to capture the way in which the family is made the subject of (prose) narrative inspection and discussion.

The next cluster of terms I would like to look at seems to be a little more difficult to define since there are very different ways of employing them, depending on the academic discipline. The terms in question are 'family saga', 'family chronicle', and 'family epic'. For example, a folklorist uses the term 'family saga' in a different way than a medievalist, or someone interested in more modern forms of literature. The former will use the expression to refer to oral family narratives that are passed on from one family member to another. As Lawrence Clayton explains: "[T]he form has evolved into what C. Hugh Holman […] calls 'a form lying between authentic history and intentional fiction'. One modern type of saga consists of stories that develop in families and serve as the oral, traditional lore of that family. These narratives, which resemble the early [Scandinavian (K.D.)] sagas in scope, tend to be even more episodic, less chronologically arranged, and less 'heroic' in content than examples of the early Scandinavian form."[44] This is the same type of narrative that William A. Wilson refers to as the 'family novel' and that he defines as "the personal and family narratives told in [one's own] living room"[45] and that he likens to literature:

> How do my mother's stories work as literature? They work, I would argue, the same way a novel works. […] My mother's stories […] do not stand alone; they are always related to other stories and other background events and can be understood only as they are associated with these – something literary critics call intertextuality. It is through this intertextuality that characters in the family oral novel emerge into full-bloom, three-dimensional individuals, just as well-developed characters emerge gradually from the pages of a written novel. It is also through this intertextuality that events in a number of the stories interlink into coherent meaningful wholes, just as

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[44] Lawrence Clayton, "The Family Saga. An Interpretive Analysis", *Hoein' the Short Rows*, ed. Francis E. Abernethy (n.p.: Dallas 1987) 113.
[45] William A. Wilson, "Personal Narratives: The Family Novel", *Western Folklore* 50.2 (1991) 129.

events in a novel unfold and interlink as we push our way through page after page.
(137)

As we can see, while Clayton and Wilson touch on the same thing, i.e. folklore oral family narratives, they too use different terms. In order to avoid confusion, I would like to refer to such narratives as 'orally transmitted family sagas'. They are to be distinguished from the generational novel, or family chronicle. By these terms we can understand "a prose fictional form, providing an extended representation of a family through several generations" (Flint 35). The generations described in a family chronicle range vertically from grandparents to grandchildren; they can, and often do, however, include more generations. Horizontally, they often (but not as a rule) also include family members beyond the immediate circle of the nuclear family, such as cousins, nieces and nephews, etc. Classic examples of the family chronicle are Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* or John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*; a recent generational novel is Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* (2002). It is the family chronicle that Yi-Ling Ru actually has in mind when she speaks of the family novel and its characteristics. For Ru, "the primary theme of the [family chronicle] always focuses on the decline of a family" (2). This, besides "its development of the story depicting a family chronology" (Ru 5), is an important thematic quality of the family chronicle which sets it apart from other forms of family fiction. Moreover, because of its quite large subject matter (the history of and relations among an extended family), the family chronicle tends to have a "great length" (Ru 6). This may as well be traced back to the fact that "it is essentially realistic" (Ru 6) in nature[46], i.e. tending to verisimilitude of depiction. A family chronicle is inherently different from a family romance, as Christine Bridgwood underlines: "In the family saga, […] marriage, with its consequent integration into the social order, is never the straightforward means of precipitating the narrative's climax and conclusion that it is in romance. The saga differs from other popular fiction genres in its lack of drive towards narrative closure and its tendency to begin at a point where romance stops." (167) Bridgwood reminds us of the generic flaws of the family saga by criticizing that it often lacks "some of the most important conventions of dominant ways of storytelling – the impetus towards the resolution of the plot, the circularity

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[46] This is a point that is also underlined by Christine Bridgwood, who observes that "many of the saga's strategies remain those of classic realism". See Christine Bridgwood, "Family Romances: The Contemporary Popular Family Saga.", *The Progress of Romance. The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. Jean Radford (London: Routledge, 1986) 168.

of a narrative that solves all problems it encounters, the successful completion of the individual's quest and, to some extent, the process of identification" (168).[47]

As with the term 'family saga', there are very different denotations of the term 'family romance'. For example, for Christine Boheemen, the term refers to a genre "typically presenting a story about the transcendent importance of humanity's relation to origins", i.e. to "fictions that project the relationship to origin as the journey of a return home"[48]. Drawing on Freud's notion of the 'Familienroman' as a fantasy about origin[49], Boheemen defines family romance within a novel as "a self-styled fantasy about origin" (23). Ordinarily, however, the term is used to refer to a particular genre of fiction. Family romances are considered as a kind of sentimental fiction, and it seems that they are bound to have a happy end. They usually focus on issues of courtship and marriage. A case in point is Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women.* Such novels tend to portray romantic quarrels and are often set within the domestic sphere. A family romance is distinguished from a family novel by theme, and from a family chronicle by time span. As Bridgwood explains: "The romantic fiction is structured into a coherent linear narrative around a few moments of transcendence […], whereas the family saga is, by definition, structured as a long-term process." (167f.)

What can be said about the family romance partly applies to the domestic novel as well[50]. As the name already suggests, this particular type of fiction is also confined to the domestic realm and therefore necessarily connected to family in some way or other. Yet the domestic novel need not be centered on the family alone. Family may be one theme among others; it may be an important topic, but not the most important. Yet the attempt to establish a fine functional family, preferably of higher social status (i.e. respected by everyone as well as wealthy) is prominent in the domestic novel. Scott F. Stoddart's definition illustrates this:

> Written largely by women throughout the nineteenth century, the paradigmatic domestic novel illustrates a fundamental Victorian ideology. […] The female

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[47] I do not intend to comment on the literary values on this or any other form of family fiction discussed here, and have chosen this quote because of the generic characteristics of the family chronicle it points out.

[48] Christine Boheemen, *The Novel as Family Romance. Language, Gender, and Authority from Fielding to Joyce* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987) 5.

[49] According to Lothar Müller, Freud's study "Der Familienroman des Neurotikers" first appeared in 1909, only a few years after the publication of Thomas Mann's famous family chronicle *Buddenbrooks*. Müller sees Freud's study as a bedrock of twentieth century conceptions of family in fiction in that it established "einen Begriff des Familienromans, der die genealogische Kette resolute der ödipalen Binnenstruktur der Familie unterordnet." Morover, Müller underlines, Freud's term was "ein mächtiger Agent in dem Prozeß, der seit dem 19. Jahrhundert aus der Rivalität von Genealogie und Generation den Konflikt der Generationen untereinander als dominantes Modell für die Erzählung von Familiengeschichten heraustreten lässt." (Müller 665).

[50] Both genres seem to have certain aspects in common, so that the domestic novel "has been called both 'domestic novel' and 'domestic romance' interchangeably". Cf. Winfried Fluck, "Containment or Emergence? A Theory of American Literature", *Making America: The Cultural Work of Literature*, eds. Susanne Rohr, Peter Schneck and Sabine Sielke (Heidelberg: Winter, 2000) 72.

protagonist, usually parentless, desires to fulfill goals relating to her personal social situation, ensuring a basis for economic interdependence through marriage. […] her episodic journey introduces the heroine to characters who help guide her in shaping healthy attitudes toward marriage, family, and motherhood, so this 'final domesticity' institutionalizes a sense of family and solidifies the inherent need of the protagonist. […] She, therefore, chooses marriage, establishing herself as an appropriate maternal model.[51]

As this quote suggests, most of the domestic novel's features testify to the conservatism, conformity, and depiction of stereotypical roles held to be typical of the genre.

Looking at the particular characteristics of the family romance and domestic novel, it can be assumed that it was these that many scholars had in mind when they thought they were writing about the family novel. The negative image and criticism of the 'family novel' as we have seen it in the various approaches discussed above need therefore be redirected towards the family romance and the domestic novel. They do not necessarily apply to the family novel proper.

Taking into account how many terms have been confused by scholars and critics, it seems inevitable that the expression 'family novel' is also used in different ways, and this is indeed the case. For instance, Freud uses the term "Familienroman" (family novel) to refer to specific juvenile fantasies about being descended from powerful and famous public figures. He understands these fantasies to be a psychological strategy to be observed in the process of teenagers' emancipation from their parents. This is what Christine Boheemen refers to in her monograph, and this is also what Eli Mandel means when he writes about 'the family romance'.[52] Such an understanding of the term is not, however, what I am concerned with here. I am looking at the family novel as a literary genre, not as a psychological device. A family novel deals with one or two generations of a family. In most cases, it focuses on the so-called 'isolated nuclear family', i.e. a legally married couple and their children (Cheal 4). That is not to say that there are no other relatives, such as grandparents, uncles, etc. If they do appear, however, they do not play an important part.

This leads to another crucial characteristic of the family novel, namely that of the cast of characters. In a genuine family novel, the family itself is the protagonist. The immediate members of the family get the narrator's attention. Ideally, they all serve as protagonists, i.e. each of them is given a more or less similar share of the narrator's attention. This is the reason

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[51] Scott F. Stoddart, "The Muddle of Step-Parenting: Reconstructing Domestic Harmony in James and Forster", *Family Matters in the British and American Novel*, Eds. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, Elizabeth Mahn Nolten, Sheile Reitzel Foor (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997) 116.
[52] Eli Mandel, *The Family Romance* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1986).

why Carol Shields's novels *The Stone Diaries*[53], and more so *Larry's Party*, should not be considered family novels proper. In both novels, one character is at the center of attention; the story develops only around him or her. Even though in both novels family is clearly a major issue as well as structural element, the focus is on merely one protagonist. While *Larry's Party* and *The Stone Diaries* might be included in a more broadly conceived definition of the family novel, I would like to categorize such novels as 'lifespan novels', because unlike a *Bildungsroman*, they not only cover the development of a protagonist up to a certain point, but go beyond such a point until his or her death.

It should not come as a surprise that it was not before the twentieth century with the establishment of the nuclear family as the main unit of organizing social life in the private realm that the family novel came into being[54]. In this context, it is important to see that the nuclear family as most of us see it - namely the 'normal' way of living - is merely an ideological construct. As David Cheal reminds us: "An ideology provides collective definitions of what a 'normal' family is thought to be […]. Family ideologies are held out as ideal ways of living, although it is often unclear how many people are actually able to achieve their ideals in practice." (72) In employing a certain image of the nuclear family in their novels, the authors of family novels reveal, on the one hand, what is considered the standard or normal way of living, of their day. On the other hand, by the ways in which they present the particular situation of the respective family in the novel we can see what the authors think about this norm, whether they see the need for it to change or not. As Lothar Müller points out, the sociological changes in favor of the nuclear family are paralleled by a development in the history of family fiction as well:

> Der langzeitorientierte Raum, in dem sich die Genealogie entfaltet, verblaßt dabei zunehmend zugunsten der Drei-bzw. Zwei-Generationen-Sequenz, die synchron im hochgradig verdichteten Raum der modernen Kleinfamilie ihr dramatisches Potential produziert. Die Schrumpfung der genealogischen Kette und die Dramatisierung des Binnenraums der modernen Familie verhalten sich nicht nur bei Freud, sondern insgesamt in den Wissenschaften und Künsten des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts komplementär zueinander. Sie privilegieren den Generationenkonflikt als narratives und dramatisches Modell aller Erzählungen von Familien […]. (665)

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[53] Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993).

[54] Most sociologists agree that the nuclear family is what David Cheal calls 'an arbitrary social construction (11) and restricted mainly to Western societies. While in North America, for example, many people "generally prefer to live in small family groups that have mainly taken the form of nuclear families (Cheal 19), the organization of society in nuclear families proper has suffered from the ever-growing divorce rates and the new, more complex family situations caused by it. The family in a post-divorce situation is called 'post-familial family' by Cheal (65). In spite of the dominance of post-familial family situations, most people still cling to the image of the nuclear family and its idea of love and marriage: "Despite changes in timing and permanence, marriage continues to be central to interpersonal life in North America. Cultural stereotypes favoring the traditional family life have not changed." Cf. Jones et al (75).

[The long-term oriented space in which genealogy unfolds increasingly fades in favour of the three– or two-generations sequence that produces its dramatic potential synchronically in the highly dense space of the modern nuclear family. The shrinking of the genealogical chain and the dramatization of the inner space of the modern family are complementary not only in Freud's writings, but in all sciences and arts of the nineteenth and twentieth century. They privilege generational conflict as narrative and dramatic model of all narratives about families […]. (K.D.)]

Unlike other forms of family fiction, the family novel proper is a dynamic genre that is adaptable to very different styles, fashions, periods, and philosophies of and about literature. Of all the types of family fictions, the family novel is one of the most flexible, and most vibrant. As I will illustrate in the chapters to follow, it holds forth against reproaches that the scholars and critics discussed above have made when they complain that family fictions were boring, predictable, lacking in depth, conservative, necessarily written in a realist style, portraying only stereotypical figures and roles, and merely good at depicting local color.

Summing up, my working definition of the family novel includes the following aspects:

a) Historical perspective: The family novel emerged in the twentieth century as a consequence of the rising social and cultural importance of the isolated nuclear family.

b) Narrative perspective: The protagonist of a family novel is the family as a gestalt. Most if not all of the family members' points of view are reflected.

c) Thematic perspective: Unlike the family romance, issues of courting and marriage are of no vital importance to the content of a family novel. Unlike the family saga or chronicle, the family novel does not cover the lives of several generations. In contrast to the domestic novel, the family novel is not restricted to the domestic sphere. It does not focus on petty conflicts but concentrates on vital issues that threaten the unity of the family.

There are certain questions left open by this working definition, such as: Are family novels always written in the realist style? Is decline necessary, and conservativism really inevitable? These issues will be reconsidered in chapter VII, where a more detailed and comprehensive definition will be provided after the central texts have been thoroughly analyzed. The next chapter will offer a first approach to the literary texts by probing the symbolic dimensions of those members of a family whose use and abuse of authority as well as giving and taking of love and care is the potential of many internal family conflicts: the parents.

III.   PARENT FIGURES: FUNCTIONS AND SYMBOLIC POTENTIAL

3.1   The Mother Figure in Fiction

Speaking very generally, mother figures in fiction oscillate between two poles. They tend to be good – that is, meeting a social norm – or bad, i.e., deviating from common expectations. While it can be worthwhile to scrutinize an author's reasons for inventing either conforming or non-conforming mothers, such mother figures are often one-dimensional. For literary analysis, ambiguous mother figures are more interesting. In fact, a complex mother figure is also an apposite instrument to assess the quality of a literary work. To judge whether a mother in fiction is 'good', 'bad', or both, it is necessary to look not only at the intention of the author, but also at the reader's response to the figure. In order to convey a moral, authors need to gain the sympathy of the readers. In their constructions of mother figures, authors can rely on a set of common images and ideas, in short: an ideology about mothers. Often such images are metaphorically connected with nature.

By and large, if she is 'good', the Mother as an archetypal figure is associated with qualities of protection and love[55]. The metaphor of Mother Earth epitomizes these qualities; she generously provides comfort, food and shelter for her children. In Christian mythology, the Divine Mother adopts and, to a certain extent, amplifies the role of Mother Earth. Christian mythology endows Mary with the crucial quality of suffering, a quality that is not nearly as much associated with Mother Earth. Besides this ability of suffering and endless endurance, the Divine Mother's benignity is one of her outstanding features. If we encounter a mother figure in fiction that is entirely good, it is highly probable that she is drawn from the myth of Mary, Mother of Christ, or similar mythically or religiously charged images of mothers. Needless to say, such wholly positive mother figures rarely appear in a realist novel; they occur more frequently in romance. The same can be said, of course, for mother figures that are entirely evil.

Not only the earth is metaphorically linked to the mother; anthropomorphizing nature in a similar way, the sea is often associated with a mother's womb, not last by psychoanalysis[56]. As the *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* explains, "earth and sea are themselves symbols of the mother's body" (*DoS* 677). The symbolic connection of the mother

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[55] A popular example of a mother figure that is positively charged through and through is Mrs. 'Marmee' March in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (ed. Elaine Showalter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989)).

[56] Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd ed., transl. John Buchanan-Brown (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996) 677ff. For further references I will use the abbreviation *DoS*.

with the moody and unsteady sea points to an inherent ambiguity in mother figures: "Mothers are anchors of shelter, warmth, love and nourishment. On the other hand they may run the risk of suppressing their children by limiting their horizons and of stifling them by exercising the office of nurse-maid and governess to excess." (*DoS* 677)

While the Mother generally is expected to be a frugal, warm, and giving figure, a source of pleasure and unconditional love, she can also appear in a different guise. Then she is the evil mother, the good mother's dreaded opposite. Egocentric, full of spite and vices, she represents the negative force her children need to overcome. The archetypical evil mother is best represented, of course, by the evil stepmother in fairy tales[57]. The good mother and the evil mother represent the extremes on a scale of motherhood qualities; needless to say, in fiction there are many types in between. According to von Matt, there is more diversity among the position of mother figures in fiction than there is among their male counterparts:

> Mit den Vätern ist alles einfacher, mindestens was die Literatur betrifft. Sie stehen für das Gesetz, verkörpern das Gesetz, sei es das geltende oder das überholte. [...] Die Mütter hingegen nehmen, wo immer die Kinder mißraten, wo immer es zum Gericht kommt über sie, eine Stellung ein, die auf breitem Band fluktuiert." (233)

[Things are simpler with fathers, least as far as literature is concerned. Fathers represent the law, they embody the law, be it the current or the overcome law. By contrast, whenever children are spoiled, whenever they are judged, mothers take a position that fluctuates within a broad range. (K.D.)]

While recognizing the variety of representations of the Mother, von Matt focuses on four archetypes of bad mother figures in fiction. The first archetype he mentions is the stupid mother who (unconsciously) harms her children. Even though the stupid mother may have good intentions, she must nevertheless be assessed as 'bad'[58]. The second type is the erotic mother, a type that, as von Matt shows, is always dangerous for the family as a whole: "Die erotische Mutter ist ein unberechenbares Risiko, dem alles mögliche Unheil entspringen kann." (237) A famous example of the erotic mother can be found in John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden*, where the mother is a prostitute and a cold and money-oriented woman at that. She causes much of her sons' suffering and is directly related to the death of her eldest son. In essence, the erotic mother is an even greater deviation from the traditional nurturing and

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[57] The fact that most often it is the *step*mother who is evil, and almost never the real mother, confirms once more the point that in general, 'natural' mother figures are associated with positive characteristics, a state that we then perceive as normal.

[58] This only works if we *condemn* her good intentions because a) the narrative suggests such an impression by implying the utter inappropriateness of these 'good' intentions or b) the values represented by the respective mother figure match the general tone of the narrative but not the attitude of the readers (cf., for instance, the famous 'Meretlein' episode in Gottfried Keller's *Der Grüne Heinrich* (n.p: Goldmann, 1994 (1854/55)).

protecting mother than the stupid mother. She stands for a norm the author wants us to see, namely that the mother as a sexual being is a paradox: "Hat sie einmal geboren, soll die Frau nicht weiter begehren. Diese Absurdität ist eine unübersehbare literarische Wirklichkeit, als Regel vermittelt über den moralischen Pakt [zwischen Autor und Leser] – dort etwa, wo sich die Leser über solche Mütter ärgern und empören." (von Matt 237) In choosing to present the erotic mother as a dangerous deviation from the traditional protective and caring mother, authors confirm their conviction about the validity of traditional role models. They invite the reader to share this conviction.

Additionally, von Matt mentions the iron mother (247f.), a figure who, mostly because of the father's absence, takes on the role of the father. She is usually presented as a 'good' figure if she withstands (i.e. remains as rigid as iron when faced with) erotic temptations; however, she can become a problematic figure when she stands for strict rules and an authoritarian education that does not grant the children the freedom and independence they need. The iron mother, in other words, is endowed with an iron will. An interesting example of the iron mother can be found in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*[59]. In this novel, the dying mother Addie Bundren is shown to be so very indifferent to all members of her legitimate family (she only loves her illegitimate son), the children she has had from a man she never loved, that she insists on being buried not in the family graveyard at home, but in the far-away Southern village she comes from. As we learn in the course of the novel, Addie must have known exactly how difficult it will be for her family to meet her wish. As a kind of posthumous punishment, she compels them to take her casket to her native village on what becomes a veritable tour de force. Eventually, it is because of her ultimate request that the family is destroyed: the husband is exposed as a fraud, one of her sons ends up in the madhouse, another is seriously hurt, and the daughter raped. Addie, the iron mother, is the judge in the family trial, and her verdict is cruel. However, since readers come to realize that the reasons for this verdict lie in a life full of hard work and without pleasures or even so much as gratitude from her family, she does not seem entirely evil but remains an ambivalent figure.

Last, von Matt names the Medean mother, an archetypical figure derived from Greek mythology that kills her children. As in the case of the iron mother, even a Medean mother figure can find absolution in the eyes of the readers when the author succeeds in having them share her vision of the murderess as a victim. A case in point is Toni Morrison's *Beloved*[60].

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[59] William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Vintage International, 1985 (1930)).
[60] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1987).

While Sethe's act of killing her daughter is damnable, the killing can also be seen as an act of mercy – Sethe wants to save her daughter from the cruelties of slavery. Thus, in the case of mothers deviating from the norm, i.e. mother figures that do *not* conform to the stereotype of the loving, caring, or protective woman, the author can communicate her values to the reader through the way she judges these mother figures. If she succeeds in making a pact with the reader, i.e. if she convinces the reader that the mother figure in question is a victim of the circumstances, the author expresses social criticism by showing how society needs to change. Then her critique is progressive. Similarly, when she shows the lack of traditional values, that is, when she condemns a deviating mother figure, the author expresses social criticism of a more traditional sort by showing the negative of social change. Then her critique is conservative. In both cases, the author depends on the readers' complicity in order to impart her moral vision.

Apart from variations of the evil mother, there are also different examples of the good mother. Expanding on von Matt's types of mother figures in fiction, one could add the selfless mother, as represented, for example, by Ellen O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's popular novel *Gone with the Wind*. She is among those fictional mothers who comply with the norms – she nurtures the sick to such an extent that she dies in the end. It seems that if a mother is too helpful, loving and caring, in a word: selfless, that is what she is doomed to become in the end, quite literally self-less, i.e. dead. It is safe to assume that mothers who are too good do not add much to the development of a story. It is only by dying that they add a twist to the respective story.

It should be quite evident by now that mother figures in fiction often play a complex role in the story that is being unfolded. Through their way of raising children, the author can present a crucial part of her view of society to the reader:

> Die Konstruktion der Geschlechter – und damit verbunden die Genealogie der Moral – läuft stets auch über die Stellung, die der Mutter gegeben wird, über die Rolle, die sie zu spielen hat. Die sittliche und ästhetische Qualität des Werks läßt sich unter anderem daran bemessen, wie weit die Mutter reine Funktion auf dem Grundriß eines geläufigen Frauenklischees bleibt oder aber ein eigenes Gesicht gewinnt im Geschehen, eine eigene Seele und ein eigenes, das heißt unvorhersehbares Handeln. (von Matt 233f.)

[The construction of genders – and the genealogy of morals linked with it – always also relies on the position the mother is allowed, on the part she is to play. The moral and aesthetic quality of the piece of fiction can be assessed, among other aspects, by the question of how much the mother corresponds to a female cliché or whether she is able to show her own face and her own soul in the story, and whether she is able to act individually, i.e., in an unpredictable way. (K.D.)]

The most important questions we need to ask with regard to mother figures in fiction are: Is the figure endowed with positive or negative connotations? Are her *actions* good or bad? Are her *intentions* noble or wicked? And what is the narrator's stance towards both actions and intentions? Thus a novel celebrating a traditional mother figure (or judging an unconventional type of mother as dangerous) may be seen as morally conservative and aesthetically conventional. On the other hand, a novel celebrating revolutionary models of motherhood, or showing the constraints of tradition on mothers, may be seen as the author's protest against a certain conservative moral convention, especially when there is also an opposition to a conservative father figure.

A major educational factor, the mother is often a counter-force to the law of the father. Her influence or secret siding with the children can soften the impact of the father's authoritarian voice. On the other hand, as Peter von Matt explains, mother figures in fiction can also be tools in the fathers' educational policies. The situation gets more complicated when the father is either absent or weak, as in the case of the iron mother. Then the blame for the child's bankruptcy can be redirected only at the mother, and often the relationship between a mother and her child is disturbed by feelings of guilt and responsibility. A famous example is Gottfried Keller's *Der grüne Heinrich* (1854), a novel featuring a protagonist whose spoiled relationship to his mother is to blame for her (and his) early death[61]. More importantly though, it is precisely because of the absence of the father in *Der grüne Heinrich* that Heinrich takes the wrong choices too many times in his life. This lack of the patriarchal principle cannot be countered by Heinrich's mother, who consequently does not succeed in bringing her son back onto the right track. She dies alone and with the broken heart of a mother who is forced to see that her only son has become a failure. Heinrich, realizing the extent to which his irresponsible behavior has caused pain to his mother, is finally forced to confront his bad conscience and his guilt and dies of a broken heart, too. Despite her endless love for her son, and despite the sacrifices she makes to help him, Heinrich's mother cannot fill the void that the death of the father has left. It is her mistake that she does not choose another husband. A novel like *Der Grüne Heinrich* says much about the attitude of its author, and Keller's vision of society is evident: without patriarchal support, the protagonist (and, by

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[61] Interestingly, both Heinrich and his mother die unhappily only the first version of the novel. In the second version of *Der Grüne Heinrich* Keller changed the ending into a happy one. Heinrich manages to see his mother before her death and vows to become a useful citizen in order to honor her suffering for him. This crucial change of plot is often regarded as a means of accommodating the expectation of the German bourgeois society from which Keller drew the major part of his readers.

extension, the future) is lost. As all these examples illustrate, the mother figure is a crucial source of meaning in the (family) novel and should not be underestimated.

It is therefore remarkable enough that many critics, among them Harold Bloom, have focused *exclusively* on father-son-relationships in literature, or have at least given them priority over mother figures and their relationships to their children[62]. As Eli Mandel puts it: "Harold Bloom would have it that the family reveals a primal struggle of father and son, paradigm of literary history, the story of resentments among strong writers and source of their creativity and its forms."[63] Such an understanding seems androcentric at best and ignorant at worst. Clearly, conflicts and struggles between mothers and daughters can be just as important, although we could concede to Bloom (and critics like Yi-Ling Ru following his lead) the point that there are indeed many family novels that center on the struggle between father and son. The reasons for this - at least in the nineteenth century, if not even until World War II – may lie in the fact that women's sphere of action was mainly reduced to the domestic sphere. Consequently, mother-daughter conflicts in literature did not provide satisfying material for (serious) fiction. A quarrel between mother and daughter would be restricted to the domestic sphere only, and not help the social vision of the novel in question. Traditionally, the father was the most powerful person in a family, and a daughter, dependent on either a father's or a husband's income, did not have many choices but to obey. Because of the distribution of power between the sexes in a family (and in society), father-son conflicts were more attractive themes. In the chapters to follow, I will go beyond Bloom's limited view and ask if and how this changes in the family novel in the second half of the twentieth century.

To sum up, we can say that the significance of a mother figure, the question whether she is a success or a failure, depends, on the one hand, on her intentions and actions, that is, on the fruits her education bears on her offspring. On the other hand, it depends on the attitude the narrator takes on towards this success or failure. The combination of these aspects leads to an interpretation of authorial intentions, social criticism and philosophy. A complete picture of the mother's function can only be achieved, though, by taking into consideration the functions and symbolic potential of her male counterpart, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

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[62] Bloom has introduced the famous comparison of the relationship between writers and their predecessorto that between fathers and sons: the sons must overcome the rule of the father in order to become an authority themselves. See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973).
[63] Eli Mandel, *The Family Romance* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1986) x.

3.2   The Father Figure in Fiction

Der König des Hauses, der Vater, ist König von Rechts wegen: er regiert in seiner Familie,
er leitet alles. […]In der Tat! Es gibt auf der Erde weder Rechte noch Pflichten,
weder Größe noch Autorität, die sich mit den Rechten und Pflichten,
mit der Größe und Autorität eines Vaters vergleichen ließen.
Joseph Hang, 1923[64]

As the *DoS* tells us, the Father in literature is generally associated with less affirmative qualities than the Mother. Standing for "all figures of authority in education, [...] the law, and for God himself", the father is an "inhibiting force" (*DoS* 372). More often than not, he prevents the free maturation of his child(ren): "The role of the father is regarded as one which discourages attempts at independence and exercises an influence which impoverishes, constrains, undermines, renders impotent and submissive" (*DoS* 372). A famous example of such a father can be found in Thomas Mann's turn-of-the-century family novel *Buddenbrooks*[65]. Just as his own father encouraged the profession of merchant and discouraged his son's interest in the fine arts, Johann Buddenbrook, one of the protagonists, wants his little son Hanno to become a merchant, too. By trying to force his son to engage in the mercantile business (that, ironically, he himself is completely tired of) while simultaneously opposing the sensitive boy's affiliation for music, Johann Buddenbrook becomes a major threat to little Hanno. He inhibits his little son's development just as his own father's decision to make a good merchant of him had forced him to live a life he has never really enjoyed. When the Buddenbrook family ceases to exist (something that was regarded as tragic in the nineteenth and early twentieth century) due to a lack of male heirs, it is because of the rigid law of the fathers in their family. Analogous to his characterization of various archetypes of the mother figure in fiction, Peter von Matt calls such a father figure an "iron father". The iron father makes the laws, and he never admits defeat. He stands for rigid and absolute authority (cf. Hang's quote above). As von Matt illustrates, especially writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century used the figure of the iron father in order to corroborate the social system:

> [Die Gestalt des eisernen Vaters hat] im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert große Bedeutung […], indem [sie] die bürgerliche Patriarchalität legitimiert, ist jedoch weniger eine gesicherte Begebenheit als ein Element jenes Vorganges, in dem ein wiederkehrendes Bild mit dem Gesetz einer Epoche seinen Ausgleich sucht. Man will den eisernen Vater naturhaft, und dieser Wille ist Teil der zeitgenössischen Ordnung. (von Matt 101)

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[64] Quoted in Barabas/Erler, 58.
[65] Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks. Verfall einer Familie* (Berlin: Fischer, 1901).

[The figure of the iron father is very important in the eighteenth and nineteenth century as it legitimates the patriarchal system of the bourgeoisie, yet it is less a reliable incidence than an element of that development by which a returning image is looking for a compromise with the law of an era. The 'natural', genuine iron father is wanted, and this desire is part of the contemporary order. (K.D.)]

In twentieth century American literature, *East of Eden*'s Cyrus Trask is a convincing example of an iron father. The progenitor of Adam Trask, husband of the aforementioned evil erotic mother Cathy, is said to be "something of a devil" (Steinbeck 14). The only time that Cyrus speaks to his son Adam about his feelings towards him, we realize how close cruelty is to the 'love' Cyrus claims to have. He tells his son: "Sometimes I think you're a weakling who will never amount to a dog turd. Does that answer your question? I love you better. I always have. This may be a bad thing to tell you, but it's true. I love you better. Else why would I have given myself the trouble of hurting you?" (Steinbeck 27) What we can see here is the paradox of the iron father, who thinks it best to treat his children with strictness so severe it can kill them. To such a father, love for his children entails making them 'fit' for life by setting up rigid rules. As the quotation above aptly shows, such a sense of duty and love is perverse. It does not benefit the children as much as it benefits the conscience of the iron father. While such an attitude may have seemed acceptable in fiction two hundred years ago, novels of the twentieth (and beginning twenty-first) century demonstrate its dangers. The sons and daughters of an iron father must rebel against their procreator if they want to live their own lives. Such a rebellion seemed dangerous especially in the didactic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In the twentieth century (particularly after World War II), by contrast, rebellion becomes essential as iron fathers are more and more compared to obsolete regimes of authority. *East of Eden*, with its celebration of rebellious sons, is one example; *The Catcher in the Rye*, where the son must oppose his parents in order to live a better life, where revolution (whatever form it may take) is the only way to a better future, is another. It is crucial to remember, therefore, that the iron father is a powerful tool for authors to demonstrate their stance towards the world they live in. As in the case of the iron mother, authors can legitimate the strictness of an iron father as a means to prevent the children (and the world) from being corrupted, justifying in this way the existing order of the world. Vice versa, they can show the cruelty, obsolescence, and therefore the necessity of overcoming the will of the iron father. In both cases, the author can utter social criticism, be it of change, or be it of established structures.

Apart from the restrictive, inhibiting father, the archetype of the good father in fiction also exists. Such a father figure stands for procreation, courage, and regeneration. In that case (which is much less common than the iron father) he is truly flawless: "Like God and Heaven, he is an image of regular, wise and righteous transcendence." (*DoS* 372) To find a suitable example of the good father, we can turn once again to *East of Eden*, this great American family saga. The character in question is, of course, Samuel Hamilton. Samuel is as loving, tolerant, funny, wise, and admirable as a father can be. He is the direct opposite of Cyrus Trask and also is to be seen in contrast to Adam Trask, who is a negligent and partial father to Aaron and Cal for the largest part of the novel.

It is curious to note that while the iron father is usually an outstanding citizen as well as a financially successful *pater familias*, he fails in the emotional realm. In contrast to that, the good fathers in fiction are most of the time much less successful; they are no earners but support their children emotionally. Many of the father figures of the various family novels I discuss here are appropriate examples of this. We will see how Leander Wapshot (*The Wapshot Chronicle*; cf. the following chapter) is an amiable and loving character but does not contribute much to his family's monetary situation; Alfred Lambert (*The Corrections*; cf. chapter VI), and Jack Gladney (*White Noise*; see chapter V), on the other hand, are successful in their professional lives but do not seem to add much to their children's emotional well-being.

The fate of the father in a family novel is to leave the world to his children. In most pieces of family fiction, as Peter von Matt explains, the father gradually loses his autonomy as much as the child (most often: the son) is initiated to adulthood (manhood) and all the privileges as well as responsibilities it entails. If he is restrictive, the loss of autonomy to his son can be seen as something good; however, if the father is good and the son fails to live up to this ideal, it is tragic. The loss of power and autonomy can be a direct event, when the father dies; it can happen in a subtle way, when he retreats to the background and leaves the organization of life to his son. It is safe to say that the death of the father is a more widespread fictional element as it is stronger in effect. Another element of tragedy is introduced in a family novel when the natural course of events - the father passes away before his children - is overturned and his children die before him. Then the question of guilt comes into play: is the father guilty of his child's death, or is it the child's own fault? Or are both victims of society? The answer to this question (if an answer is possible) is a crucial clue to the author's social vision – and critique.

To understand the extent to which the fictional father can lose his autonomy, it is necessary to explain what this power consists of. According to Peter von Matt, there are three kinds of fatherly power – physiological power (the strong father), social power (the rich father) and the power of metaphysical eminence (the holy father). Taken together, he calls them the "Modell von der dreiteiligen Autorität, die phasenverschoben zerfällt [the model of tripartite authority, which disintegrates in stages (K.D.)]". (von Matt 136) These three aspects of power can all be embodied by one person; the loss of one, however, may be fatal. Thus the power of a father whose authority is based mainly upon his wealth may be completely destroyed if he loses his money, even if he remains physically or meta-physically strong. Usually, the loss of the three 'branches' of fatherly power proceeds in stages until the father is unable to act and/or exist any longer. In other words: in the beginning, a father figure (ideally) encompasses all three branches of power. Yet the father is bound to lose them (or pass them on) to his son (or child in general) as both grow older. Thus the decrease in the power(s) of the father is inversely proportional to the increase in the son's (child's) power(s). The loss of an aspect of power may only be temporary, as the example of King Lear shows. The tripartite authority of the old king, who gives up his social power (his kingdom) to his daughters and later loses his senses (his physical and mental power) in the thunderstorm, is restored by the end of the play.

The power and autonomy of the father are necessarily challenged by his children (most often: the son). While the father stands for the traditional way, the son represents the new generation, and their new ways of doing things. In the course of life it is inevitable that the father leaves the world to his sons. Thus the sons in literature can symbolize various tendencies: "Entweder verkörpern sie das diabolische Prinzip einer großartig geltenden Ordnung, unterhöhlen die sterbende, ragende Einrichtung der Welt, oder sie verkörpern vorläuferhaft eine neue Zeit, die der Epoche des Vaters den Garaus machen wird." (von Matt 166) [They either stand for the diabolic principle of a system that is binding on a large scale, or they represent a new time, which will eradicate the era of the father. (K.D.)] That this conflict is assumed to be one between fathers and sons is clearly very much an anthropocentric view, but it is one that has long dominated the literature of the West[66]. Yet the conflict itself is easily adaptable to other constellations as well, e.g. father-daughter

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[66] An early example of a father-daughter conflict is William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, where Shylock's daughter Jessica breaks with her father and the Jewish tradition to start a new life in the Christian world of Venice.

relationships, as recently published family novels such as Roth's *American Pastoral*[67] or Akhil Sharma's *An Obedient Father*[68] demonstrate.

To classify father figures in fiction, Peter von Matt introduces the concepts of "the liquefied father", "the decaying father", and "the falling father". As these terms suggest, all three types represent various stages of the loss of power and autonomy. The first example, the 'liquefied' father, is a formerly iron father who changed his mind and his attitude and eventually dissolves into tears, forgiving the 'sins' of his children. Such a liquefied father, to a certain extent at least, is Swede Levov in *American Pastoral*, who cries to see that his daughter has turned into a physical and mental wreck. The tears of the liquefied father acknowledge the surrender of his values and point of view for the sake of his child(ren). In contrast to that, the decaying father may be a sick father whose body, and along with it his power, is slowly wasting away. Philip Roth's autobiographical account of his father's disease in *Patrimony*[69] features such a father figure. Usually, the decaying father passes away in the end. The twentieth century has come up with famous alternatives to such a development, however. In Franz Kafka's famous story "Das Urteil", for instance, a decaying father turns unexpectedly into an almighty monster, a mysteriously cruel and punishing God. The liquefied father and the decaying father are symbols of a vanishing, crumbling authority.

As far as twentieth century fiction is concerned, two more father figures needs to be added to this inventory: that of the absent father, and that of the violent/violating father. The absent father (a paradox) dominates most of African-American literature of the (second half of the) twentieth century. Here the absence of the father symbolizes the disastrous effects of slavery on families. But there is also a different reason for the growing number of absent fathers in contemporary novels. Since family novels (consciously or unconsciously) reflect the social conventions of the time in which they are written, it should not come as a surprise that the absent father is an increasingly prominent "figure" in family novels written towards the end of the century. In other words: the more widespread the phenomenon of the single-parent family (usually with a single mother) is in society, the more likely it is to appear in current family novels. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the increasing appearance of the (sexually) abusive father. Novels such as Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley or Sharma's *An Obedient Father* have broken a centuries-old taboo and referred explicitly to a father's sexual abuse of his daughter. The

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[67] Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997).
[68] Akhil Sharma, *An Obedient Father* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2000).
[69] Philip Roth, *Patrimony. A True Story* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991).

break of this taboo has been preceded (or paralleled) by a rising awareness of child abuse in our society; what was formerly unmentionable is now a ubiquitous piece of news. The sexually abusive father must be destroyed by the children in order to set them free from his oppression (and to please the readers' sense of justice). When the children manage to escape the confines of their past, there is some hope that society endows an individual with the capacity to be healed and to overcome the terrors of the past. By contrast, a novel such as *The Bluest Eye*, where an innocent child is driven into despair and madness by the sexual abuses of her socially underprivileged father, expresses social criticism in a most bitter way.

All in all we can say that more often than not, father figures in fiction bear negative connotations. More than the mothers, they stand for the 'law and order' in existence within the universe of the novel in question. The author can use them to show how the present system is changed by the following generation. If s/he supports this change, the author will show more or less subtly the negative sides of the old era and the positive aspects of that to come. If s/he thinks the change is inevitable but for the worse, the author will highlight the positive features of the age doomed to perish, and the dangers and threats of the new era. In the first instance, the children judge their parents (especially the stronger parent: traditionally, that was the father) and testify to their failure and /or obsolescence; in the latter, the sad fate of the (good) parents throws a bad light on the children.

Our judgment of a father figure depends on various factors. Whether a father figure is good or not depends on the value system of the author, visible in his/her attitude to the value system within the novel, and our ability to read both correctly and compare them with our own system of values and beliefs[70]. Our reception of and response to the various fathers in fiction is not static but subject to change. Thus an iron father may seem justified in his action according to an eighteenth century value system. But the author may condemn this value system and critically distance herself from the figure she created. Or she may fully support this system by showing how the iron father is the only alternative to a corrupt environment. Also, the iron father may find the approval of an eighteenth century readership, but meet with the disapproval of a twenty-first century readership. And last, the readership may agree with the iron father but not with the way in which authors distance themselves from him. We can easily see now that to decode the moral system established within a family novel in general and by a father figure in particular is not without its problems. To interpret this moral system,

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[70] The following comments also apply to the role of the mother in fiction, or similar figures charged with the education of children. Cf. the preceding chapter.

once we have decoded it, is even more difficult – we would have to answer the question of whether we can detect the author's very own and personal moral system behind all this. This final question will probably divide interpreters forever into those who think we can do so and those who think we cannot. I do not claim that my answer to this question is correct but I will take sides. Concerning the question whether there is a direct relationship between a novel's composition and its moral system, I do not agree with Peter von Matt who argues:

> Die Regeln von Aufbau und Verfugung einer Handlung mit ihren vielen Tätern und Opfern, Helfern und Intriganten, haben sie etwas zu tun mit den Regeln von Gut und Böse, vom richtigen und vom schlechten Handeln? Handlung ist Handeln, und alles Handeln steht in Bezug zu sittlichen Normen oder Absprachen. In der Literatur aber existieren die sittlichen Normen nie außerhalb des Textes. Sie werden im Text aufgebaut, oder es gibt sie nicht – mag alle Welt noch so innig der Meinung sein, die moralische Qualität seines Werkes sei die seines Autors. Aufgebaut wird das moralische Gesetz im Werk dadurch, dass einer aufmarschiert, der es verkörpert, […] dass eine dasteht, die es lebt. Wenn dem so ist, wenn das moralische Firmament nicht vorausgeschaffen über die dramatis personae sich spannt, sondern mit und aus ihnen erst erwächst in der Literatur, dann ist notwendigerweise alle Figurenführrung, alles Einfädeln und Verflechten und Auflösen der Konstellationen Kompositionsarbeit auch im Bereich der Moral [sic]. (von Matt 143)

[The rules of constructing and grouting a plot with its many perpetrators and victims, helpers and conspirators, do they have anything in common with the rules of Good and Bad, of right and wrong deeds? Plot is nothing but action, and all action is connected with moral norms or agreements. In fiction, however, those moral norms never exist outside of a text. They are built into the text itself, or they don't exist – in spite of everybody's opinion that the moral quality of a piece of fiction is that of its author. The moral law within a work of fiction is constructed by means of the appearance of someone who embodies it, a person who lives it. If that is indeed the case, if the moral firmament does not precede the dramatis personae but grows with them and out of them in fiction, then, as a consequence, all leading of characters, all threading through and interweaving and solving of the constellations as an act of composition clearly lies in the moral realm. (K.D.)]

Which moral realm, one is inclined to ask von Matt, if not that of the author? While von Matt may be right in saying that the moral vision of a novel or drama or poem may not match the author's own moral vision one to one, he should have to concede the point that it is the author who is responsible for the composition of a novel, for the constellation of characters and events, and thus for the moral vision created by the work itself. It is common knowledge that characters take on something like a personality of their own during the course of writing, a personality many authors claim they cannot influence. But that does not mean that the author has no control whatsoever about the moral system of his work, despite all the (by now obsolete?) declarations of the author's death. I hold it to be evident that a piece of fiction always shows the traces of the author's moral vision. While the ways in which this vision may

be unfolded are manifold, the fact that it is there is not debatable. In a family novel, this moral vision is acted out in the relationship between parents and children, between the parents themselves or among the children themselves, to put it short: in the constellation of characters; it is acted out in the stance the narrator takes towards the events in the novel; it is acted out in our own judgments of the development of events in the novel, and more. As we will see in the chapters to follow, family novels of the twentieth and twenty-first century are not didactic, but they do offer a critical perspective on the society they portray. In that the moral vision of each respective novel is influenced by the moral vision of its author. Whether this is intended by the author or not is of no importance. To detect the moral vision of each family novel, to discuss the literary modes and devices by which it is supported, and to position it within the context of literary history, is the purpose of my study. The next chapter will acquaint the reader with the moral vision, aesthetic devices, and formal aspects of John Cheever's outstanding post-war family novel *The Wapshot Chronicle*.

IV.   THE POST-WAR FAMILY NOVEL

4.1   The Fifties: Texts and Contexts

John Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle* is an early version of the family novel in the second half of the twentieth century. Before analyzing the novel itself, I would like to introduce briefly the cultural environment in which it was produced. By outlining the basic coordinates of the decade as well as the features of outstanding 1950s pieces of fiction, I wish to explain the peculiar position Cheever's first novel holds among them. The rough sketch below is meant to serve as a mirror against which the constellation of characters, as well as the most important themes, of the novel can be interpreted.

The 1950s in America have an ambivalent reputation[71]. They bred what would later be derisively called "the silent generation"[72]. Indeed, Americans coming (and being) of age in the fifties remain rather pale in comparison with the flower power generation of the 1960s and early 1970s. After World War II, many people in the United States were taking advantage of the G.I. bill, which allowed veterans to take advantage of a generous federal credit they could use to pay either for the tuition of a college of their choice, or enabled them to purchase a family home. Society prospered, and families bloomed; North America witnessed the baby boom[73]. After the war, it appears, people were content to live uneventful and structured lives. Men worked and supported their families with their salaries; they were the 'breadwinners'. Women were expected to raise the children and be good housewives; their role was to be 'homemakers'. In other words: man's sphere remained the public, woman's sphere the private world[74].

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[71] While most historians liked to describe the decade as an age of complacency, writers were more critical: "Der Dramatiker Eugene O'Neill erkannte in den Nachkriegsjahren ein 'unfaires *non-sequitur* (sic)'. Für Norman Mailer waren die fünfziger Jahre 'eine der schlimmsten Dekaden in der Geschichte der Menschheit'." Cf. Gert Raeithel, *Geschichte der nordamerikanischen Kultur. Band 3. Vom New Deal bis zur Gegenwart 1930-1995* (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 1995) 190.

[72] Warren French (ed.), *The Fifties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama* (Deland, FL: Everett/Edwards, 1970) 6.

[73] "In the postwar years the idea of family was attractive for many. In the stability following the war, people married in increasing numbers. Advertisers painted glowing pictures of family life in an effort to extend markets. Family size grew to eventually produce the baby boom." Cf. Margaret Ward, *The Family Dynamic. A Canadian Perspective* (Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1994) 175.

[74] This is confirmed by an article originally published in 1961 by the sociologist Morris Zelditch, whose description of the typical American nuclear family includes his vision of the father as "the primary executive member" (256), while the mother's role is to give emotional support. In fact, Zelditch does not see an alternative to the nuclear family, except in very different cultures. Cf. Morris Zelditch, "Role Differentiation in the Nuclear Family", *The Family. Its Structures and Functions*, ed. Rose Laub Coser (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974) 256-58.

In this context, it is interesting to note that traditional family ideals, such as the importance to raise respectful, successful and upright children, played an important part on all levels of society. Such family values even made their way into popular TV shows of the day:

> In dem seit 1959 gezeigten Fernsehwestern *Bonanza* ist der Held nicht mehr der einsame Gunman, der soziale Probleme mit Colt und Strick lost, sondern ein Familienvater, der seine Söhne zu Sorgfalt, Nachdenklichkeit und Zurückhaltung erzieht und vor Gewaltanwendung zurückschreckt. (Raeithel 326)

[In the television western Bonanza, broadcast since 1959, the hero is no longer the lone gunman, who solves social problems with his colt and a rope, but a family father, who teaches his sons care, reflection, and reserve, and who shrinks from violence. (K.D.)]

TV shows like *Bonanza* not only confirmed the traditional role differentiation in the nuclear family (the father as the ultimate authority), they also seem to have catered to a certain need in the audience, a need maybe caused by the recent experience of the atrocities of WW II – people apparently wished to watch a world of intact families, where moral principles were still heeded. American television complied: "Die Familie wurde als sicherer Zufluchtsort geschildert, als Hort der Zufriedenheit, in dem jedes Familienmitglied Verständnis, Schutz und Rat finden konnte." (Raeithel 326) The fiction of the 1950s, especially Cheever's Wapshot novel(s), did not offer such easy answers, as we shall see in the next chapter.

As far as American society is concerned, gender boundaries seemed stable in the 1950s, as did racial identity; conformity was the air of the day. Next to the comforts conformity offered, however, it also spurred negative aspects. America's greatest fear was communism. The rise of Senator McCarthy and his communist witch hunt haunted the decade. Writers were summoned before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and forced to lay open their political attitudes. No wonder, then, that a phenomenon such as the silent generation should emerge; as Warren French reminds us, "talk was dangerous, and it was more fun to listen to the endless inanities of television." (6) For literature, the environment seems to have been a rather hostile one[75].

Many critics have indeed condemned the fiction of the fifties for "its own lack of luster" (French 6). Taking into account the emergence of the beat generation in the mid- and late 1950s with such famous protagonists as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, or Lawrence Ferlinghetti, such a judgment seems unjust. However, there is a grain of truth in it as far as the

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[75] Ironically, authors were not only suspected of supporting by the country's conservative forces, they were also criticized by the communists themselves: "Amerikas Kommunisten erhielten 1952 weniger Stimmen als die Partei der Prohibitionisten. Der Kommunistenführer William Foster machte Pragmatismus, Freudianismus, Existenzialismus und die amerikanische Gegenwartsliteratur einschließlich Hemingway und Faulkner für die 'Verwirrung' der Wähler verantwortlich." (Raeithel 180)

early fifties are concerned. After all, it was hard to equal pre-war masters such as Hemingway, Faulkner, or Thomas Wolfe[76]. Generally speaking, then, to talk about fiction in the fifties is to talk about two main tendencies: those writers addressing the dangers of conformity, anonymous mass society, and alienation in a more conventional way, and the opposite side, i.e. the revolutionary poets and writers of the Beat generation (who were often concerned with the same topics). Whereas the formers' social criticism was more nostalgic along the lines of highlighting a supposedly 'golden past', or expressing their belief in the regeneration of classical American values, the Beats' cultural critique was much more acidic. It was often essentialist, if not fatalistic, in that their works often expressed cul-de-sac feelings about the fundamental loneliness and lack of prospect of the individual in a society more and more determined by bureaucracy and consumerism.

The two major strands of literature in the 1950s reflect the general social and political ambiguity of the decade, an ambiguity compactly expressed in Robert Kelly's paradoxical definition of "the complacency of the years from 1945 to 1960" as an "age of anxiety"[77]. The most important aspect of the literature of the 1950s is an increasing feeling of an existential insecurity: "Alienation wird zum allgegenwärtigen kulturellen Modewort der Epoche." [Alienation turns into the ubiquitous and most fashionable cultural term of the era. (K.D.)] (Schaller 123ff.) Some scholars hold the expulsion from paradise to be the most important topic of fifties fiction (Raeithel 287); others stress the question of identity and the contemplation of the relation between individual and society[78]. Both positions have in common what indeed characterizes many heroes and heroines of 1950s fiction: a fundamental loss of orientation in a (not yet post-)modern world.

This loss of orientation finds its expression in the various popular genres of the day. The first reactions to World War II were the so-called war novels (Raeithel 287f.; Schulze 496), among which Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) stands out as a highlight. Apart from that, the genre of the war novel soon faded into the background. Developments in literature such as "the 'Black' rising, the growth of a Jewish-American movement in fiction, a new academicism in poetry, an 'off-Broadway' movement in drama" (French xi) followed, among which works such as Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, and Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* are probably the most important, at least as far

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[76] Martin Schulze, *Geschichte der amerikanischen Literatur. Von den Anfängen bis heute* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1999) 495.

[77] Hans-Wolfgang Schaller, *Der amerikanische Roman des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1998) 121.

[78] Alfred Hornung, "Postmoderne bis zur Gegenwart", *Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte*, ed. Hubert Zapf (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997) 306.

as the novel is concerned. The œuvre of American writers was internationally recognized in the 1950s; popular writers such as William Faulkner and John Steinbeck, who had published their most important works in the 1930s and 1940s, were awarded the Nobel Prize.

A close look at outstanding novels and plays of the fifties reveals the importance of family. As for stage plays, family life and its problems found a tremendously successful expression in Arthur Miller's social domestic drama *Death of a Salesman* (1949). A microcosm for American society in general, the Loman family and their tragic fate are used to critically review the shared ideal of the American dream. Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into the Night* (1956) and Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) both explore family as a locus of humankind's bitterest experiences. Especially in the latter play, however, family is depicted as a source of catharsis, renewal and regeneration as well (Hornung 299).

This also applies to Nobel Prize winner John Steinbeck's great family chronicle *East of Eden*. After the disappointments, hardships, losses and betrayals several generations of two Salinas Valley-based families have to go through, the reader is rewarded with a happy end suggesting a better (family) life in the future. It is because of the happy end and the faith in family Steinbeck expresses that his nineteenth work compares with other family fictions in the fifties. Apart from this, however, despite the realism of depiction, biblical myth dominates the structure of the novel. For that reason it does not fit very well into my discussion of the post-war family novel. *East of Eden* stands out in Steinbeck's oeuvre as well as in the decade it was written because not only did he consider it his most important novel (a view many critics and reviewers did not share)[79], but also because it is a modern interpretation of Genesis and the stories about Adam and Eve and, more importantly, Cain and Able. Above all, however, *East of Eden* is a family chronicle and not a family novel in the sense of my definition of the term (cf. chapter 2.3). It is a novel against which *The Wapshot Chronicle* could be roughly mirrored, but it is not suitable for in-depth comparison.

The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (*MGFS*), a novel French calls "the most widely read and most influential serious novel of the decade" (6), seems more appropriate for comparison at first sight. In contrast to *East of Eden*, *MGFS* is written solely under the realist paradigm[80]. Additionally, it does not cover the lives and loves of several generations, but is concerned

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[79] Cf. Annette Pehnt, *John Steinbeck* (München: dtv, 1998) 106ff.

[80] *East of Eden* is a mixture of various genres: Steinbeck drew heavily on biblical myth, but also incorporated parts of his own biography and family history into the novel. The epic tale of the Hamiltons and the Trasks is narrated with a remarkable eye for detail as well as truthful description, which suggests realist techniques. However, because of Steinbeck's strong focus on myth, some of his characters remain one-dimensional, a fact many scholars have criticized. (Pehnt 108ff.)

with a nuclear family. However, *MGFS* is not a genuine family novel either; it is centered on Tom Rath, head of the family, only. Published in 1955, Sloan Wilson's bestseller is symptomatic for the literature of the 1950s in many regards. It tells the story of the World War II veteran Rath who comes back home to find himself and his family confronted with the anonymous and cold world of mass society. The novel struck a nerve, and much more so than *East of Eden*. People could identify with the Raths and their problems. *MGFS* was so successful that it has become, as Jonathan Franzen reminds us, "along with *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Organization Man*, a watchword of fifties conformity."[81] It is crucial to realize that, in the vein of *East of Eden*, the family in *MGFS* overcomes the crisis. In this regard, both Steinbeck's and Wilson's works complied with the fifties' vision of a happy family as the ultimate objective. Life can confront us with many difficulties, they seem to suggest, but if we only remain honest and hopeful, we will overcome them. Or, as Franzen puts it: "one of the clear implications of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is that the harmony of society depends on the harmony of each household." More importantly, both Steinbeck and Wilson suggest that this harmony can in fact be achieved. In that they differ crucially from later family fictions. They also differ, for that matter, from *The Wapshot Chronicle*. As I will show in the following chapter(s), John Cheever's first novel is not only the first successful serious family novel in America in the second half of the twentieth century, it also paints a picture of family life that is less optimistic and more complex than other 1950s family fictions.

4.2 John Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957)

John Cheever belongs to those twentieth century American masters of fiction whose work has curiously suffered persistent academic neglect. This holds especially true for the five novels he has written[82]. Almost five decades after the publication of Cheever's first novel in the 1950s, there are still comparatively few book-length studies of his work. This is all the more striking when one takes into account that each of his novels occasioned a considerable number of reviews, the tone of which ranges from enthusiastic applause to open disapproval.

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[81] Jonathan Franzen, "Introduction", *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, by Sloan Wilson (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002) n.p.

[82] In her dissertation on Cheever's oeuvre, Annegret Wemhöner disapprovingly mentions, as late as in 1988, Cheever's "weitgehend vernachlässigte[s] Romanwerk". See *"The Deeper Levels of Life and the Sense of Time and Place": John Cheevers Romanwerk zwischen Romance und Novel of Manners* (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1988) 14.

As R. G. Collins observes: "John Cheever has been praised by an astonishing number of his peers as one of the greatest writers of the century; at the same time, paradoxically, few writers have been discussed with such ill temper by an important group of reviewers and critics."[83] Starting out as a short story writer for the *New Yorker* at the age of seventeen[84], Cheever never really lost a reputation of being a typical writer of (and for) the white upper middle class whose habitat, in his short stories, is either the city of New York or the suburbs of New York state. As a consequence, he had to face the classic reproaches accompanied by such an image: "The fiction writers [of the *New Yorker*] have frequently been accused of both preciousness and of acting as apologists for their comfortable middle-class readership, a group that is financially and culturally insulated from American society as a whole." (Collins 2f.) In fact, Cheever's best-known epithet stems from his association with the *New Yorker*: he was famously dubbed the 'Dante of Suburbia'.[85] Although John Cheever, a native of New England, has received America's most prestigious prizes of fiction (including the Howells Medal for best fiction from 1960-1965), this public recognition of his novelistic achievement has never really incited adequate academic interest. While his short stories have long been included in the canon (even before his collection *The Stories of John Cheever* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1978), relatively little has been written on his longer fiction. In this regard, despite the considerable monetary success of his works for the publishing companies, Cheever the novelist has always stood in the shadow of someone like, for example, his close friend John Updike.

When John Cheever published his first novel *The Wapshot Chronicle* in 1957, the responses were generally favorable if at times ambivalent. Although he had needed quite some time to finish it[86], in addition to which an early version of the novel had been refused by his previous publishing company[87], when he finally published what would be the first of two

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[83] R. G. Collins, *Critical Essays on John Cheever* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 1.

[84] With the help of his later friend and editor Malcolm Cowley, Cheever published his first story, "Expelled", in *The New Republic* in 1930. Having previously been expelled from Thayer Academy in South Braintree near Boston for smoking, it is usually assumed that Cheever used this experience for his first story. See Malcolm Cowley, "John Cheever: The Novelist's Life as a Drama", *Sewanee Review* 91.1 (Winter 1983) 1-16.

[85] As Francis Bosha explains, "Richard Gilman […] coined the term 'Dante of Suburbia' to describe Cheever's 'prophetic role' in calling 'suburbia to repentance'." Francis J. Bosha (ed.), *The Critical Response to John Cheever* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994) xxv.

[86] According to his friend Malcolm Cowley, Cheever "felt that he couldn't publish the book until after his mother died" (5), yet had been working on it for more than eight years. What speaks against Cowley's interpretation is a statement made by Cheever's youngest son Benjamin: "It is possible that my grandmother's death in 1956 gave him freedom to finish the book, but it's also true that he had submitted an earlier version to Random House in 1952 [sic], when his mother was in splendid health. See Benjamin Cheever (ed.), *The Letters of John Cheever* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988) 179.

[87] As early as 1951, Cheever wrote a letter in which he said: "I gave Random House a hundred pages of the novel on Friday and now I wait nervously for the telephone to ring […]. I think that the material is exceptional

Wapshot novels, the public was enthusiastic. In fact, it was through the publication of *The Wapshot Chronicle* (*TWC*) that Cheever, who before had been known only as a talented short story writer (and this mainly to the readers of *The New Yorker*), gained a reputation as an equally gifted novelist. *TWC* won him the National Book Award in 1957[88]. Vending figures, however, appear to have been moderate at best. As Cheever himself remarked quite melancholically: "The novel, despite all its good luck, did not net enough cash to keep a family of five in shoe-lather and I'm damned if I know how I can finance another."[89]

Reviews of *TWC* almost univocally praise its craft of evoking atmosphere while, at the same time, they criticize a certain lack of coherence. As Maxwell Geismar in what is probably the least favorable review of all remarked, *TWC* "is not quite a novel"[90]. Geismar complains that "the story as a whole becomes rather fragmentary and episodic. One has the final impression of a series of related 'sketches', which do not quite achieve […] the inner growth and development of a novel" (5). This criticism is generally shared by other reviewers. Carlos Baker sees *TWC* as "held together by largely spit and wire. It shows that while John Cheever's fortes are many, amusing, touching, and admirable, one of them is not architectonics"[91]. And Donald Malcolm holds: "*The Wapshot Chronicle* is a book that will be remembered more for its episodes and digressions than for its total effect."[92] The fact that the perspectives of each family member are portrayed in *TWC* was also judged negatively, as Donald Malcolm's 1957 review demonstrates:

> The characters that Mr. Cheever creates in this fashion are at once very brilliant and very fragile. They shine in individual episodes but seem to stagger under the burden of supporting a full-length novel. […] Mr. Cheever seems to have room at the center of his stage for only one person at a time, and the place of honor is occupied alternatingly by Leander Wapshot, his cousin Honora, and his two sons Coverly and Moses. Each, in his moment of triumph, tends to crowd the other into wings. (18)

From today's point of view, this narrative strategy can also, however, be seen in a positive light when it is recognized as a crucial characteristic of a family novel: each member of the family gets a similar share of the narrator's attention, so that the protagonist is not a single

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but I base my opinion on the fact that it is unlike anything that Random House has printed in the last couple of years. Anyrate, I like it." The letter is quoted in Benjamin Cheever 26ff.

[88] *The WC* was so successful that it made history in the Book of the Month Club: it was the first book to be recommended by this institution that contained the word "fuck" (the passage in question refers to a scene in chapter 35 on p. 311). As has been pointed out often, the Club tried to bargain with Cheever and to talk him out of using this word. He refused to change the term and the Club had to give up in the end. Cf. B. Cheever 178.

[89] The 1958 letter of John Cheever showing this remark is quoted in B. Cheever 214.

[90] Maxwell Geismar, "End of the Line", *The New York Times Book Review* (24 March 1957) 5.

[91] Carlos Baker, "Yankee Gallimaufry", *Saturday Review* 40 (23 March 1957)14.

[92] Donald Malcolm, "John Cheever's Photograph Album", *The New Republic* 136 (13 June 1957) 18.

person but the family as a *gestalt*. Therefore, Wemhöfer misses the novel's point when she claims:

> Nun ist die Geschichte der Wapshots aber nicht wirklich das integrative Element des Romans, denn es werden Ausschnitte aus dem Leben vieler Nebenfiguren recht detailliert dargestellt, die mit dieser Familie oft nur in handlungsmäßiger Verbindung stehen, so daß der Roman insgesamt episodisch wirkt." (19)

[The story of the Wapshots is not really the novel's integrative moment, because episodes from the lives of numerous side characters are depicted in detail that are only connected to this family through plot, which makes the novel as a whole seem episodic. (K.D.)]

At the same time, Wemhöner unwillingly points at the true (genre-related) character of *TWC* by mentioning that "der stoffliche Vorwurf 'Familienchronik' die Wahl eines eindeutigen Protagonisten unmöglich macht und eine Verknüpfung der Schicksale mehrerer Hauptfiguren nahelegt." (19) […the subject matter of a family chronicle makes it impossible to choose only one protagonist, but suggests a conncection of the fates of several central characters instead. (K.D.)] Juggling with the genres of the romance and the novel of manners in order to determine the character of Cheever's first novel, Wemhöner does not see that *TWC* is to be classified as a family novel. Her observation that the family as a whole is the protagonist is a striking piece of evidence.

In contrast to that and from a comfortable distance to 1957, today we know how to appreciate Cheever's peculiar style as a clever narrative device to symbolize the destructive impact of life in the hostile urban worlds of post-war America on the family. When the reviewers quoted above condemn the *Chronicle'*s episodic and fragmentary style, their judgment clearly testifies to a postwar gusto, and to the expectations critics in the 1950s had of a novel, namely that it be a coherent and smooth narrative unit. Apparently, at this point the majority of American critics did not yet value a style of writing such as Cheever's, which would lead the way to more radical postmodern narrative techniques (such as, for example, a multiplicity of perspectives and/or polyphony). Positive responses to Cheever's first novel(s) emerged no earlier than the 1980s. The most vehement defense of Cheever's much-criticized 'episodic style' comes from Samuel Coale, who argues that there is an obvious inner logic to Cheever's work(s):

> In fact such episodic notation mirrors the emblematic form of the romance that Hawthorne employed. Hawthorne's persistent use of allegorical symbolism in Cheever's fiction is often replaced by Cheever's similar use of the manner and mores of suburbia: both conventions help tie the various episodes and fragments together. Each episode in a Cheever book can be seen as an emblem of the entire theme and vision of the book: each incident repeats, comments upon or embroiders the basic vision or situation of Cheever's fictional world. The experience of loneliness,

isolation, nostalgia, moral conflicts with good and evil surface in each of Cheever's separate events. […] These fragments reflect the actual modern experience of characters' lives and help to break up and subvert the cocoon of manners and illusions […].[93]

While Coale and others hold *TWC* to be a romance in the tradition of Nathaniel Hawthorne[94], I would like to expand on this characterization and contend that it is a first and foremost a family novel. The specific aspects that make *TWC* a typical post-war family novel will be discussed in the following chapters.

My discussion of *TWC* as a paradigmatic post-war family novel intends to demonstrate that the binary world of 'the age of anxiety' also informs Cheever's novel. As we will see, *TWC* is dominated by binary oppositions such as the country vs. the city, nature vs. culture, male vs. female, etc.. These binary oppositions are mirrored thematically in the split of the family and formally in the structure of the novel. The much-criticized episodic structure of *TWC* mirrors the anxiety and social tension of the thematic level. The novel is divided into four parts, or three thematic sections. The first section (Part One of the novel) is set in a (fictional) decaying little Massachusetts seaport town named St. Botolphs. It introduces the Wapshot family, consisting of Sarah and Leander, the parents, Moses and Coverly, the boys, and their eccentric cousin Honora. This section focuses on the old life, on the customs and traditions of St. Botolphs. It is the world of Leander, this old-timer who stands for a Puritan New England seafarer family tradition whose roots date back to the seventeenth century. Structurally speaking, the first section is the most coherent part of *TWC*. It is told in the single voice of an omniscient third-person narrator. However, there is a thematic digression from the story of the Wapshot family. The depiction of the family's life at West Farm is interrupted when a young woman is introduced who stays with the Wapshots for a while. While we may grant those who complain about a lack of coherence in *TWC* the fact that the details of Rosalie's life we are given seem to have nothing to do with the Wapshots at first sight, her function for the Wapshot boys Moses and Coverly is soon evident. If it had not been for Rosalie, the boys

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[93] Samuel Coale, "Cheever and Hawthorne: The American Romancer's Art", *Critical Essays on John Cheever*, ed. R.G. Collins (1982) 203f.

[94] To conceive of *TWC* merely in terms of a romance would not do it justice. A similar idea has been noted by Slabey, who argues that "[t]hough Cheever's alma mater is the Romance-tradition, his vision (though not his style) resembles William Dean Howells's depiction of the troubled day-to day existence of the middle class: people living on the thin surface hiding terror and violence and pain attempting to plug along with honor in a chaotic world." While the latter part of the quote refers more to the Cheever's short stories, the first part definitely applies to his novels. Cf. Robert M. Slabey, "John Cheever: The 'Swimming' of America", *Critical Essays on John Cheever*, ed. R.G. Collins (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 181.

would never have left St. Botolphs. Thus Rosalie symbolizes the hostile future intruding into the Wapshots' pastoral paradise.

The second section (Part Two) describes Moses' and Coverly's departure from their quaint old hometown, and their adventures in New York and Washington, DC. The boys hope to make their fortune in America's post-war urban jungles. This part of *TWC* introduces one of the novel's most dominant dichotomies: it contrasts the old America, this dream land of opportunity evoked by Leander's autobiography, with the new America, a nightmare land of frustrated opportunity with its post-war economic and social changes, which determine Moses' and Coverly's lives in the big cities. This second section of the novel seems much more episodic than the first third. The story develops in rough stages rather than in an intricately linked chain of events. Additionally, another narrative voice is introduced, namely that of Leander the autobiographer. The chapters featuring Leander's journal, or autobiography, are naturally told from his own perspective. What makes them so unusual is the fact that unlike a typical journal style, they are told in a third person voice. Because of this second narrative voice, and because the Leander chapters evoke times past, they stand in stark contrast to the chapters centered on Coverly or Moses. The second section of the *Chronicle* establishes a new rhythm – it is told in a staccato pace, in a structure that seems much more chaotic than the first section. Thus the structure of the second section parallels its theme – that of the contrast between old and new way of life, the struggle to survive in the new America and its ever faster way of life.

The last section (Parts three and four) familiarizes the reader with the rather difficult lives of the Wapshot boys in present-day America. Like the second section, the third section is rather episodic, thus mirroring the young Wapshots' hectic lives and loves. However, it ends on a nostalgic note with Coverly, the youngest Wapshot, finding his father's ultimate legacy in the old house in St. Botolphs. By that time, both Wapshot boys have found decent jobs and have each fathered a male heir, a fact which entitles them to the family inheritance provided by their rich cousin Honora. Eventually, their quests mastered, Moses and Coverly visit St. Botolphs, only to learn of their father's death. This section does not reconcile the old with the new but instead, as I wish to explicate later, shows the ultimate victory of the new America. That this development is tragic and part of Cheever's social critique is evident when we take into consideration the Wapshots' nostalgic relationship to their family's (and country's) past.

4.2.1 The Importance of Being a Wapshot: Heritage and Tradition

In the center of *TWC* stands the old Yankee family of the Wapshots, whose lineage dates back to the seventeenth century. As the narrator explains, the Wapshots "would not want to be considered without some reference to their past" (*TWC* 9). We are thus made aware of how deeply rooted the Wapshots are in their New England family tradition. According to the narrator,

> [t]he branch of the family that concerns us was founded by Ezekiel Wapshot, who emigrated from England aboard the *Arbella* in 1630. Ezekiel settled in Boston, where he taught Latin, Greek, and Hebrew and gave lessons on the flute. He was offered a post in the Royal Government but he judiciously refused, establishing a family tradition of thoughtful regret that would – three hundred years later – chaff Leander and his sons. Someone wrote of Ezekiel that he 'abominated periwigs and had the welfare of the Commonwealth always upon his conscience.' Ezekiel begat David, Micabah and Aaron. Cotton Mather spoke the eulogy at Ezekiel's grave. (*TWC* 9f.)

The passage quoted above demonstrates how the narrator uses biblical language in describing the Wapshots' ancestry. This renders the reader with the impression that heritage is important and that the Wapshot family line has a considerable influence on the lives of the present generation of Wapshots: "Ezekiel begat David, Micabah and Aaron. […] David begat Lorenzo, John, Abadiah and Steven. Stephen begat Alpheus and Nestor. […] Nestor begat Lafayette, Theophilus, Darcy and James." (*TWC* 10) These 'begats' serve the purpose to firmly establish a family past. As we will see, the contrast between the more or less glorious past, i.e. the bygone days of Wapshot men as explorers and seafarers, and the comparatively distressing family present, i.e. the gloomy lives Moses and Wapshot are living in postmodern America, is one of the major structuring devices of *TWC*. The lack of female names in the genealogy demonstrates the dominance of males in the family. The Wapshot family is introduced as a male-centered, tradition-oriented, and not least for these reasons, a respectable family. The novel thus establishes a dichotomy of male vs. female spheres. This binary opposition, as we shall see later, also informs all family structures in *TWC*. The archaic character of the 'begats' also makes them an instance of irony. They are meant half seriously (tradition is important, and the Wapshots come from a good family) and half ironic (the tradition of the Wapshots, and their pride of it, is superseded in modern days). Thus the 'begat' passages are a good example of Cheever's attitude towards his tale: he is constructing a world he feels sympathetic to yet knows is - and must be - obsolete. The often mentioned

claims that Cheever paints a nostalgic picture of the past in the *Chronicle* prove to be untenable as they overlook the numerous instances of irony in the narrative.

The Wapshots' family lineage is based on the family history of the Cheevers. As has been pointed out frequently, also by Cheever himself, his own seventeenth-century ancestor was named Ezekiel Cheever, at whose grave Cotton Mather gave the eulogy[95]. This instance is one of many in *TWC* that have a direct autobiographical source. For that reason some critics see the *Chronicle* as Cheever's way of dealing with his own Yankee heritage. With the Wapshot novels, as Adam Gussow argues, Cheever made "an effort to exorcise the ghosts of his family past"[96].

Apart from such autobiographical coincidences, however, the passage quoted above is a means of establishing the cultural and social background of the twentieth century Wapshots. It puts them in the tradition of Puritan New England characters. By underlining, in addition, that "a cousin by marriage had had the name traced back to its Norman beginnings – Vaincre-Chaud" (*TWC* 9), in other words, back to the Middle Ages, we get to know that the Wapshots are a family with a very strong sense of tradition. The Wapshots' emphasis on genealogy makes them a typical New England family: "The Harcourts and the Wheelwrights, the Coffins and the Slaters, the Lowells and the Cabots and the Sedgewicks and the Kimballs – yes, even the Kimballs – have all had their family histories investigated and published and now we come to the Wapshots […]" (*TWC* 9). Their social and cultural average makes the Wapshots a suitable protagonist of a family novel. George Garrett has indicated the symbolic character of the Wapshots: "In this history of the Wapshots and St. Botolphs Cheever offered a history of the nation, its growth, bloom, and the question of its possible decay and corruption."[97]

In contrast to a generational novel, the Wapshots' family tree is only mentioned in passing. In that regard, the novel's title, which rings of a family chronicle, is misleading. The family tree serves merely as a means to show the importance of tradition for the twentieth century Wapshots. *TWC* portrays an extended family on a horizontal level. We will see how in Cheever's 1957 novel, in contrast to subsequent forms of the family novel, family relationships are intact and not only restricted to the immediate circle of the nuclear family, but also including members from the extended circle of the family.

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[95] As R. G. Collins notes: "His father, Frederick Lincoln Cheever, was a descendant of the Ezekiel Cheever who came to Massachusetts in 1630, an ancestry that plays a significant part in Cheever's first two novels." (6)

[96] Adam Gussow, "Cheever's Failed Paradise: The Short Story Stylist as Novelist", *The Literary Review* 27.1 (1983 Fall) 113.

[97] George Garrett, "John Cheever and the Charms of Innocence: The Craft of *The Wapshot Scandal*." *Critical Essays on John Cheever*. ed. R.G. Collins (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 57.

The Wapshot family is divided by a gap between the old and the new way of life. Leander and Honora stand for the old ways, while Sarah Wapshot and other mother figures represent aspects of the hostile future. Moses and Coverly experience the changes of modern post-war society in full force and are therefore the new and, as it appears, lost generation of Wapshots. The important message of the *Chronicle* seems to be that American society has changed for the worse and that this change is visible in the example of Moses and Coverly Wapshot. This interpretation, which I will try to elaborate in the following pages, is supported by most studies on Cheever's first novel, however varying in their judgment of this development they may ultimately be. In the following chapters, I will focus on each family member in its full individual complexity as well as in their respective functions for the family in order to explain the condition of the Wapshot family, the social forces they experience and the values for which they stand. Starting with the mother figure(s) in *TWC*, I will proceed to discuss the role of the father before turning to Moses and Coverly and the roles they take on in the relationships to their parents, their wives, and to each other.

4.2.2 The Iron Women in Their Summer Dresses. Mother Figures and Their Negative Potential

Contrary to general positive associations of the mother, *TWC* presents a rather negative picture of its mother figures. All of them threaten the unity of the family. Of the several mother figures in *TWC*, Sarah Wapshot is the most important one. Lynne Waldeland explains that "Sarah Wapshot is Cheever's first extended characterization of a wife and mother."[98] In spite of this, she occupies a comparatively weak position in the Wapshot family. We learn relatively little about her, and throughout the novel she remains a figure of the periphery compared with *TWC*'s male characters.

We are introduced to Mrs. Wapshot at the very beginning of the *Chronicle* in a scene that encompasses the major coordinates of her existence. She is a crucial figure in St. Botolphs' Fourth of July parade, being celebrated as a benefactress of the village and, significantly, as the founder of the Woman's Club in St. Botolphs. Readers are thus made aware quite early in the novel that Sarah Wapshot is not satisfied with the conventional role as 'homemaker' that 1950s society assigns her. Although the extent of her emancipation is not

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[98] Lynne Waldeland, "Women in the Fiction of John Cheever", *The Critical Response to John Cheever*, ed. Francis J. Bosha (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994) 251.

elaborated until much later, her exceptional status is quite obvious. To the people in the village, she is an icon:

> Mrs. Wapshot had founded the Woman's Club in St. Botolphs and this moment was commemorated in the parade each year. Coverly could not remember a Fourth of July when his mother had not appeared in her role as founder. The float was simple. An oriental rug was spread over the floor of a truck or wagon. The six or seven charter members sat in folding chairs, facing the rear of the truck. Mrs. Wapshot stood at a lectern, smiling sadly at the charter members or at some old friend she recognized along the route. Thus above the heads of the crowd, jarred a little by the motion of the truck or wagon, exactly like those religious images that are carried through the streets of Boston's north end in the autumn to quiet great storms at sea, Mrs. Wapshot appeared each year to her friends and neighbors, and it was fitting that she should be drawn through the streets for there was no one in the village who had had more of a hand in its enlightenment. (*TWC* 5)

Thus the first image we get from Mrs. Wapshot is that of a melancholy goddess in her wagon[99]. She combines the spiritual (she is compared to religious images) with the rational (she stands for enlightenment). Yet her elevated status has its drawbacks. A little aloof, distinguished by qualities no one else appears to possess, Sarah Wapshot is a lonely figure. This representation is characteristic of the position she takes in her own family.

Sarah Wapshot is introduced through her activities in the village and not through her role as a mother. In fact, the many activities she has triggered and the many changes she has accomplished in the past suggest that she must have neglected her duties at home in favor of making the village of St. Botolphs a nicer place. This is what we first learn about her:

> It was she who had organized a committee to raise money for a new parish house for Christ Church. It was she who had raised a fund for the granite horse trough at the corner and who, when the horse trough became obsolete, had had it planted with geraniums and petunia. The new high school on the hill, the new firehouse, the new traffic lights, the war memorial – yes, yes – even the clean public toilets in the railroad station by the river were the fruit of Mrs. Wapshot's genius. She must have been gratified as she traveled through the square. (*TWC* 5)

The narrator takes an ambivalent stance towards Mrs. Wapshot's achievements. The repetition of the affirmative "yes" (which is also an indicator of stream of consciousness here) testifies to a certain initial reluctance to mention all the things she has changed for the better, and is as ironic as the reference to Sarah Wapshot's "genius" in connection with public toilets. Her achievements are petty, the narrator appears to insinuate here, and thus her status as an

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[99] To Frederick Bracher, Sarah Wapshot "suggests Demeter-Ceres" because of the patience she has with her husband. Cf. Frederick Bracher, "John Cheever's Vision of the World", *Critical Essays on John Cheever*, ed. R.G. Collins (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 174.

icon is questionable. At least it says a good deal about the backwardness of life in St. Botolphs.

The lines above imply that Mrs. Wapshot is not the type of the nurturing mother; she simply does not have the time to focus her life exclusively on her children. Neither could she be the type of the stupid mother. She is introduced as a figure whose significance lies more in the public than in the private realm. That this is bound to bring about some marital trouble does not come as a surprise when the narrator dryly remarks: "Mr. Wapshot – Captain Leander – was not around. […] He did not mind missing his wife's appearance in the parade." (*TWC* 5f.) While these remarks are ambivalent to the extent that we do not know whether Leander's absence is a clear sign of disharmony between the spouses, or simply due to the fact that Sarah has been in the parade for years and years, we soon realize that Sarah's demeanor betrays unhappiness:

> Then came Mrs. Wapshot, standing at her lectern, a woman of forty whose fine skin and clear features could be counted among her organizational skills. She was beautiful but when she tasted the water from the glass on her lectern she smiled sadly as if it were bitter for, in spite of her civic zeal, she had a taste for melancholy […] that was extraordinary. She was more admired among the ladies than the men and the essence of her beauty may have been disenchantment (Leander had deceived her) but she had brought all the resources of her sex to his infidelity and had been rewarded with such an air of wronged nobility and luminous vision that some of her advocates sighed as she passed through the square as if they saw in her face a life passing by. (*TWC* 7)

This passage is among the few instances in the novel where Sarah is described in detail. In effect, it is almost the only account of her outward appearance and emotional situation we get. It hints at what James O'Hara sees as the major theme of the *Chronicle* - the battle of the sexes: "The battle for sexual dominance sets the story in motion […]"[100]. In this battle, as we shall see, Sarah is presented in a rather critical light.

Despite the relatively unsympathetic tone in which Sarah Wapshot is introduced in *TWC*, the narrator does not fail to illustrate that she is far from leading a selfishly happy life. As the quotes above have already indicated, Sarah has suffered very much in her marriage. Her husband has cheated on her but, like a Phoenix, she has raised from the ashes of such painful situations an even stronger woman. But there is again some ambiguity in the way her conjugal unhappiness is presented; when the narrator claims that Sarah "has been rewarded with such an air of wronged nobility and luminous vision" that she makes her friends in the village sigh dramatically with pity, these remarks reveal a faint irony. Instead of sympathizing

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[100] James O'Hara, "Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle*: A Narrative of Exploration", *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 22 .2 (1980) 20f.

with Sarah's sorrows, the narrator suggests that there is some poetic justice in her suffering since she has been rewarded with the status of a martyr in the eyes of the villagers. There appears to be some connection between the narrator's depiction of Sarah's manifold activities and the unhappiness in her marriage; readers are encouraged to draw the conclusion that if Sarah were a more dutiful wife and mother, Leander would not have been unfaithful. In other words: if Sarah was more conforming to traditional gender roles, she would be happier in her marriage. An instance like this reveals Cheever's attitude towards women, which corresponds to the more conservative feelings about gender roles of his day[101]. Waldeland strongly supports such a reading: "Despite his seeming awareness that Sarah's behavior is at least partly attributable to the absence of fulfillment in the conventional roles available for women […], Cheever rails against Sarah's failure to keep up with the housework and to be an omnipresent nurturer of husband and sons." (251) Although I generally agree with this interpretation, I would like to emphasize that Cheever, or rather, the narrator of *TWC*, does not 'rail' against Sarah. Cheever's style is subtle, and it is through the ambiguity of his descriptions that the attentive reader realizes a faint note of criticism. But there are also other passages that encourage us to empathize with Sarah. Some of them are illustrated when a visitor, a young woman named Rosalie Young[102] whose boyfriend was killed in an accident on Wapshot territory, is left in Sarah's care. Pleased to be able to help the stranger, she carries breakfast eggs up to her room, only to find out that her guest is not happy at all with the breakfast she made. Ready to accommodate her guest, Sarah complies with Rosalie's childish plea for something else to eat:

> She felt no resentment at this miscarriage of her preparations and was happy to have the girl in her house, as if she was, at bottom, a lonely woman, grateful for any company. She had wanted a daughter, longed for one; a little girl sitting at her knees, learning to sew or make sugar cookies in the kitchen on a snowy night. While she made Rosalie's sandwich it seemed to her that she possessed a vision of life that she would enjoy introducing to the stranger. They could pick blueberries together, take long walks beside the river and sit together in the pew on Sunday. (*TWC* 53f.)

It is the tragedy of Mrs. Wapshot that her motherly vision is disturbed by Rosalie's true personality; from the way she has been introduced to the readers, we already know that picking blueberries only comes to Rosalie's mind as an excuse to find a place where she can

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[101] In *Baby and Child Care*, the most influential and widely read handbook for parents in the 1950s, Benjamin Spock saw the mother as the parent whose main concern and responsibility was the education of the children. (Raeithel 238). For mothers interested in public affairs, like Sarah, society did not offer many opportunities: "Arbeitende Mütter taten sich in den USA schwerer als in anderen Industrienationen." (Raeithel 239) Cheever's attitude towards Sarah's public activities reflects this conventional position.

[102] Annegret Wemhöner is right in characterizing Rosalie as an interloper, i.e. "an individual who enters the locale under consideration, and […] disrupts the locale." (32)

have undisturbed intercourse with her boyfriend; that she has not the slightest inclination towards housewifely duties, and that she has no interest at all in religious activities, although - or maybe because - her own father is a minister. But Sarah does not realize this until the moment of Rosalie's departure. She treats the young woman as a daughter, sensing that the girl is in trouble and needs help. Like a true mother, Sarah tries to show Rosalie what she considers the right direction for her. A good example is the way she tries to educate her guest:

> [Rosalie] planned to read on the rainy days – to catch up on my reading, she said. All the books she chose were ambitious, but she never got through the first chapter. Sarah tried gently to direct her. *Middlemarch* is a very nice book or have you tried *Death Comes for the Archbishop*? After breakfast Rosalie would settle herself in the back parlor with some book and in the end she would take the old comic sections out of the woodbox and read these. (*TWC* 75f.)

Sarah's maternal feelings are bound to be disappointed. When Rosalie is eventually picked up by her parents, it is evident why she is such a superficial and inefficient person; her parents prove to be people who have a strong sense of social hierarchy, are very materialistic (Mrs. Young seems to think only about clothes and jewelry), and display no sense of decency. Rosalie's mother offends Sarah by making debasing remarks about the old Wapshot home ("It's a quaint old house, I can see that. I love quaint old things. And some day when I'm old and James has retired I'm going to buy a quaint, run-down old house like this and do it all over myself." (*TWC* 107)). What is more, Mr. Young humiliates her by offering money for what Sarah considers a simple act of hospitality. Readers are encouraged to feel pity for her: "Then Sarah began to cry, to cry for them all – Coverly, Rosalie and Moses and the stupid priest –and she felt such a sharp pain in her breast that it seemed as if she was weaning her children." (*TWC* 107) But she is dealt the final blow by the short-time ward herself:

> Upstairs in the spare room Rosalie, like Mrs. Wapshot, was crying. Her bags were packed but Sarah found her lying face down on the bed and she sat beside her and put a hand tenderly on her back. 'You poor child,' she said. 'I'm afraid they're not very nice.' Then Rosalie raised her head and spoke, to Sarah's astonishment, in anger. 'Oh, I don't think you should talk like that about people's parents,' she said. 'I mean they are my parents, after all, and I don't think it's very nice of you to say that you don't like them. I mean I don't think that's very fair.' (*TWC* 107)

Here we have one of several instances where Sarah's motherly feelings are bitterly rejected. The two other instances concern her sons and are crucial in several regards. On the one hand, they demonstrate that it is Leander who has the power to make final decisions in the family; on the other hand, they show how Sarah can never be part of the world her husband shares with her sons. In both cases, Leander asks one of his sons to accompany him to a fishing camp in Canada. These trips, as I will illustrate in the following chapter, are part of an

important male ritual. Leander decides when the time is right for his sons to go. He does not care at all about Sarah's concerns. This marks the territory of their relationship as dominated by traditional gender boundaries: the man takes a decision, the woman remains silent. Sarah learns that with open rebellion, she achieves nothing. When Leander thinks it is time for Coverly to go, Sarah secretly gives her youngest son a cookbook to take with him as a token of civilization. Here we not only witness the secret war between the spouses, we also see that Sarah is not the totally careless mother of the narrator's initial description. Sometimes she is even inclined to sentimentality:

> Sarah gathered those things that she thought Moses might need when he took up his life in a strange place – his confirmation certificate, a souvenir spoon he had bought at Plymouth Rock, a drawing of a battleship he had made when he was six, his football sweater, prayer book, muffler and two report cards – but, hearing him shout loudly up the stairs to Coverly, she sensed, in his voice, that he would leave these things behind him and she put them away again. (*TWC* 100)

Apart from the fact that Sarah cries when Moses leaves St. Botolphs, we get to know nothing more about her motherly feelings. She is a good mother in that she possesses the right amount of love for her sons, but apparently she is not to be very important for their development. In contrast to Leander, we do not know what she has taught them. When they go away to find luck in the big cities of post-war America, Sarah does not play a part in their lives anymore – again in contrast to Leander, whose letters of advice brighten his sons' days in the urban jungles they find themselves in.

There are no important rituals Sarah shares with her sons; there is no significant message she passes on to them. But there is also no need for her sons to be rebellious; she does not put pressure on them, reprimand them constantly, or diminish their joy of life in any other way. Sarah seems to have things under control while at the same time leaving her sons the freedom they need, and the boys seem to respect her mother, and love her. They do not try to intervene in her mother's life, and, most importantly, Sarah trusts in the maturity of her sons and their ability to cope with life, and does not interfere in their lives, either. Interpreted positively, this means that the relationship between Sarah and her sons is characterized by tolerance, mutual respect, and unselfishness. Seen negatively, it means that Sarah is not an important figure in the lives of her sons. Waldeland claims that "[m]ost often, […] mothers in Cheever are neglectful, occasionally domineering, and rarely nurturing. Generally, Cheever gives more attention to women in the role of wife than of mother, perhaps as an outgrowth of his own concerns about the difficulties of marriage." (252) In the case of Sarah Wapshot at least, such a reading is by and large justified.

A striking feature of Sarah's almost every appearance is her incessant smile. When she first emerges as an eminent member of the Fourth of July parade, she is "smiling sadly" (*TWC* 5). Stepping of the wagon that carried her, she is "smiling good-by" (*TWC* 23); at dinner with her family before Rosalie comes into her life, Sarah "smiled seraphically at the twilight" (*TWC* 35). Upon meeting Rosalie, "her face [is] composed in a sorrowful smile" (*TWC* 38); and when we last see her, now a widow and once again playing her part in the annual parade, "the sadness of her smile [is] all the same." (*TWC* 347) The text leaves several possibilities for interpretation. For one thing, the smile could epitomize the essence of her existence – she keeps and displays faith, hope and charity despite her general philosophy that life is a pilgrimage and therefore full of hardships. For another, the constant smile as an answer to any situation she is faced with renders Sarah a somewhat one-dimensional figure. Yet another way of reading the conspicuous smile is to deconstruct it by assuming that Cheever created a mother figure whose demeanor is meant to show what a sweet and gentle (in other words: socially acceptable female) character she is, while beneath the surface it unconsciously betrays the author's restrictive and prejudiced attitude towards women, namely that a smile is their answer to everything. Just like Poe's female characters, whose beauty is forever connected with physical frailty, (unconscious) symbol of their restricted existence, Cheever's most prominent mother figure is doomed to smile as if there was no other way to confront life. Whatever reading one prefers, it seems evident that Sarah's reaction to her environment does not rise above the gender boundaries society assigns her. Passing through life with a smile on her lips, Sarah conforms to the image of Woman as a gentle and good-hearted sufferer. In that she is a good example of the 1950s ideal of womanhood.

At the same time as this image is constructed in the novel, however, it is also contested. The narrator's description of Sarah's quarrel with Leander over the fishing camp (see above) is a case in point. As I have already mentioned, Sarah tries to prevent Leander from taking Moses to the fishing camp in the Canadian wilderness:

> For once Sarah was angry and stubborn. She didn't want Moses to go north with his father and on the evening before they were to leave she said that Moses was sick. *Her manner was seraphic* [my italics]. 'That poor boy is too ill to go anywhere.' 'We're going fishing tomorrow morning,' Leander said. 'Leander, if you take this poor boy out of a sickbed and up to the north woods I'll never forgive you.' 'There won't be anything to forgive.' […] Leander got Moses out of bed before dawn the next day […] and they started for the Langely ponds in the starlight while Sarah was still asleep. (*TWC* 61)

While it is obvious that Sarah lies about Moses being sick, her motives are not quite clear. Apparently she just does not want Moses to take part in Leander's male spring ritual. Her

angel-like manner (cf. italics in quote) is only superficial; underneath the surface her motives are selfish[103]. While she does not succeed to keep father and son apart this time, her efforts are successful later. When Leander discovers that Coverly has brought Sarah's cookbook to the camp, he is angry and disappointed: "'Oh Goddamn it to hell, Coverly,' Leander roared. 'Goddamn it to hell.' He took the book out of his son's hands, opened the door and threw it out into the night. Then he blew out the lamp, feeling […] as if the boy had fallen away from his heart." (*TWC* 67) In this situation Sarah is clearly depicted as a negative influence on the relationship between father and son. She stands for 'culture' plotting against 'nature', one of the binary oppositions in Cheever's first novel.

The conflict between Sarah and Leander represents *en miniature* the conflict at the heart of *The Wapshot Chronicle* – the old/traditional way of life in America as characterized by a functional relationship to nature is played out against the new/modern American way of life that is dominated by the maelstrom of civilization, or post-industrial culture. In this conflict, women stand for the restrictions of culture, while men represent the benefits of nature. Moses' thoughts at the fishing camp with his dad corroborate such a reading:

> Here on this half were the deep lake, the old man with his superannuated Cygnet and the dirty camp. Here were salt and catsup and patched blankets and canned spaghetti and dirty socks. Here was a pile of rusted tin cans around the steps […]. Here was the smell of earthworms and guts, kerosene and burned pancakes, the smell of unaired blankets, trapped smoke, wet shoes, lye and strangeness. […] On the other half was the farm at St. Botolphs, the gentle valley and the impuissant river and the rooms that smelled now of lilac and hyacinth and the colored engraving of San Marco and all the furniture with claw feet. […] The difference seemed more strenuous than if he had crossed the border from one mountain country into another, more strenuous he guessed because he had not realized how deep his commitment to the gentle parochialism of the valley was […] and he had never seen how securely conquered that country was by his good mother and her kind – *the iron women in their summer dresses* [my italics]. He stood, for the first time in his life, in a place where their absence was conspicuous and he smiled, thinking of how they would have attacked the camp; how they would have burned the furniture, buried the tin cans, holystoned the floors, cleaned the lamp chimneys and arranged in a glass slipper (or some other charming antique) nosegays of violets and Solomon's-seal. Under their administration lawns would flourish at the back door and there would be curtains and rugs, chemical toilets and clocks that chimed.
> His father poured himself some whiskey and when the stove was hot he took some hamburgers and cooked them on the lid, turning them with a rusty spoon as if he was following some ritual in which he disregarded his wife's excellent concepts of hygiene and order. (*TWC* 63f.)

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[103] It is remarkable that Sarah's behavior is described as 'seraphic', i.e. she is compared to the seraphim, the highest angels. The encyclopedia describes a seraph as "himmlisches (sechsflügeliges) Wesen. In Jesajas Berufungsvision (Jes. 6) stehen die Seraphim um Gottes Thron; sie bilden den höchsten der 9 Engelchöre." By likening Sarah to a seraph, the narrator underlines the mixture between innocence and power inherent in her behavior. *Bertelsmann Universallexikon*. Band 16 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1992) 216.

In *TWC*, the usual association of the mother/woman with nature, more specifically earth, and the father/ man with culture and progress, more specifically technology, is reversed. Moses thinks of his mother and the women of St. Botolphs as "the iron women", using a metaphor of machinery, i.e. civilization, progress, culture. Although he feels comfortable at the camp, the quote above demonstrates his strong ties to his mother's world, thus paving the way for his life in the city where nature is no longer important. As in the case of Coverly and the cookbook, we are made to understand that Sarah's world successfully interferes in rituals of virility, and that this is something the narrator does not regret openly, but seems to feel at least ambivalent about.

There is another instance, however, where Sarah is depicted as willfully damaging the relationship between father and sons, or, to be more precise, between Leander and his youngest son. The occurrence in question is mentioned by Coverly during a psychological examination in New York City. When asked by the psychiatrist whether he thinks his parents are happily married, Coverly reports that Sarah used to tell him that Leander had wanted her to have an abortion when she was pregnant with him. In Coverly's account Sarah is exposed as destructive. "She told me lots of times. She told me I shouldn't trust him because he wanted to kill me. She said he had this abortionist come out to the house and that if it hadn't been for her courage I'd be dead. She told me that story lots of times." (*TWC* 142) Besides the disastrous effects these comments had on the relationship between Leander and Coverly, who used to be afraid of his father, Sarah harms her sons on a physical level as well. As Coverly recounts in the psychological examination, she used to be a beater: "[O]nce she just laid my back open. [She] took my grandfather's buggy whip […] and she just laid my back open. There was blood all over the wall. My back was such a mess she got scared, but of course she didn't dare call a doctor because it would be embarrassing […]." (*TWC* 143) While Coverly does not seem to be much disturbed by these memories at all, readers are nevertheless encouraged to see Sarah as a strict and relentless mother, in other words: an 'iron' mother *par excellence*.

The mother of the Wapshot family appears almost exclusively in the first third of *TWC*. Throughout the rest of the novel, Sarah is barely present, and if she does turn up, it is only in the periphery. That the central mother figure should be of such a striking unimportance is remarkable for a family novel. Scholars have speculated about Cheever's reasons for this. The explanation mentioned most often draws on autobiographical sources. Cheever himself has repeatedly admitted that the figure of Sarah Wapshot is based on his own

mother. Most scholars were quick to point out the similarities: like the real-life Mrs. Cheever, Sarah Wapshot supports herself and her family through the money she makes with a gift shop (R.G. Collins 7); and in similar fashion to the attitude taken by the narrator in *TWC*, Cheever felt that, by taking up a man's place, his mother had deprived his father of an essential feature of his self-esteem[104]. Thus Lynne Waldeland notes: "Cheever has said that [Mrs. Wapshot] is modeled on his own mother, and some of his admitted resentment of his mother's absences from the home comes through […] in *The Wapshot Chronicle*." (251)

Apart from autobiographical explanations, however, there may be some structural reasons for Sarah's scarce appearance in the second and especially third section of *TWC*. As I mentioned before, the first third is set in St. Botolphs and is the only section in the novel where the Wapshots are together, living under one roof as a nuclear family. It is only natural then that Sarah's role should diminish once the boys have left home. However, this does not explain the predominance of Leander, the father, throughout the whole novel. It does show, though, that Sarah Wapshot is closely connected to the village of St. Botolphs, and by extension to the ways of life in 'quaint old' America. As soon as her sons leave home to take up the struggles of modern life, Sarah's world is bound to disappear. No one in the big cities of New York and Washington, or in the strange and artificial military towns where Coverly raises his little family, cares about geraniums and petunia planted in an old horse trough. What seemed so like 'progress' to Moses at the fishing camp is restricted to the small world of St. Botolphs. Thus while the narrator seems to belittle Sarah's enlightening 'genius' at the beginning of the novel, he clearly shows the value of concern for others and for the place we live. Setting the dull, depressing and meaningless daily lives of Moses' and Coverly's wives against Mrs. Wapshot's at times rebellious activism, the narrator encourages readers to favor the latter. This, in turn, testifies to the narrator's and, by extension, the author's conservative value system. We have seen before that despite her activities in the village, for which she is criticized by the narrator, Sarah's sphere remains the domestic. This complies with 1950s domestic standards. While the narrator does not paint a flawless picture of mothers in 'the good old days', he underlines (late 1950s) society's lack of opportunities for self-fulfillment. At this point it is evident that Cheever instrumentalizes Sarah Wapshot for his social criticism. Sarah is not the *über*-mother a sentimental family novelist would have created. But she is a not a completely negative character either. The impression we get is that the narrator

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[104] In *TWC*, Sarah destroys Leander's male pride by turning the apple of his eye, his beloved old boat *Topaze*, into 'The first floating gift shoppe in New England'. Sarah does not realize how important his position as captain of the *Topaze* is to Leander. She is so much absorbed by her dream of owning a souvenir shop that she does not have the slightest understanding of her husband's situation.

knows that the idea of the 'good old days' is an illusion, and that there is no paradise lost because it was not there in the first place. The world that has produced such women as Sarah Wapshot was not a perfect idyll, yet contemporary (post-war) life is worse. We will see that the figure of Leander, the father, allows for a similar reading.

There are two more mother figures in *TWC*, both of which carry negative overtones to a similar extent as Sarah, and testify to what James O'Hara has criticized as "the inherent misogyny in *The Wapshot Chronicle*" (21). The characters in question are Honora Wapshot and Justina Scaddon, both of them elderly cousins of Leander. While neither of them has children of their own, they both function as mothers. Cousin Honora plays a crucial part in the lives of both Wapshot boys; Justina only influences Moses as she tries to make a sheer hell of his life with his fiancée and later wife Melissa, her ward. Both women can exert their authority because of their financial means. Of the two, Honora is by far the more important - and more complex - figure. The secret matriarch of the Wapshot family, Honora is a much more noteworthy and intricate character than Sarah Wapshot. In contrast to Sarah, whom we have seen to be a crucial figure in St. Botolphs' public life, Honora's realm is the private. While we know nothing about Sarah's background except her maiden name (Coverly), Honora is explicitly mentioned in the Wapshot family tree (*TWC* 15f.). Honora is the first female Wapshot to be mentioned in the lineage. This clearly testifies to her importance in the *Chronicle*.

Honora, "this childless matriarch" (*TWC* 41), is also an emblem for the decline of the Wapshot clan. Due to a substantial inheritance from a rich uncle, she has the financial means to control her family in St. Botolphs. Leander and his family rely on her goodwill. They depend financially on Honora and therefore have to heed her wishes. Since Honora sometimes abuses her privilege, i.e. exerts pressure on her family because of her financial wherewithal, she appears as a destroyer of the male Wapshot tradition. As we will see, it is mainly because of her that the family falls apart.

Because of her wealth, she has a greater power over the Wapshot boys' future than their own mother[105]. The details of Honora's will - "she would divide her fortune between them, contingent upon their having male heirs" (*TWC* 41) - puts the boys under pressure:

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[105] Kenneth C. Mason notes: "Because of her money and the force of her personality, Honora has equally as much influence as Leander upon the lives of Moses and Coverly, and Cheever uses her in important ways to connect them to the family's past." Kenneth C. Mason, "Tradition and Desecration: The Wapshot Novels of John Cheever.", *The Critical Response to John Cheever*, ed. Francis J. Bosha (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994) 63.

> The news of the inheritance did not seem to elate the boys – it did not seem at first to penetrate or alter their feelings toward life, and Honora's decision only seemed to Leander to be a matter of course. What else would she have done with the money? But, considering the naturalness of her choice, it came as a surprise to everyone that it should lead them into something as unnatural as anxiety. (*TWC* 41)

Whenever they are ill, or facing whatever challenge to their virility, Honora keeps asking about their condition, thus making the boys feel nervous and guilty. Evidently, she has the same kind of negative influence on Moses' and Coverly's emotional state as Sarah[106]. Especially Coverly, the more sensitive of the two brothers, is anxious about fulfilling Honora's gender expectations even when he is already a married man. Finding a homosexual co-worker in love with him, and reacting to his friend's advances, he feels obliged to preserve the virility she expects of him: "Coverly turned to his companion and they exchanged a look of such sorrow that he thought he might never recover […], and suddenly Coverly felt a dim rumble of homosexual lust in his trousers. This lasted for less than a second. Then the lash of his conscience crashed down with such force that his scrotum seemed injured […]." (*TWC* 289 f.) Even before his marriage, Coverly considers it necessary to plot against Honora because he is afraid that the choice he made would not satisfy her expectations. Instead of introducing his future wife to his family in St. Botolphs, Coverly writes only a letter: "He enclosed a photograph of Betsey, but he would not bring his bride to St. Botolphs until he was given a vacation. He took these precautions because it had occurred to him that Betsey's southern accent and sometimes fractious manner might not go down with Honora and that the sensible thing to do would be to marry and produce a son before Honora saw his wife." (*TWC* 188) As these instances underline, Honora is a restrictive force in his life. She represents the moral imperative, the superego, for Coverly. Her name already alludes to the status she takes: her parents, both missionaries, had virtue in mind when they called her Honora, the honorable one. Their daughter, however, does not always live up to this expectation. While she has preserved her female honor of chastity, in her relation to her family she does not live up to the ideal her name implies.

As a mother figure, Honora bears negative connotations. Although readers might feel more sympathetic to her than to Sarah because of her funny and very individual ways, Honora is an 'iron mother'. As long as her ideas and suggestions are followed, she is amiable. But whenever she thinks this is not the case she takes drastic measures of punishment. A case in point is Honora's unwilling observation of Moses' seduction of Rosalie. As with Coverly,

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[106] I am referring here to the way Sarah tried to influence her sons against the male spring fishing ritual with their father.

Honora represents the moral imperative that Moses does not heed. Although he never learns of her presence (she had been hiding in the closet of the guest room) during his tryst with Rosalie, he and the rest of the family are forced to bear the consequences of Honora's irritation. She makes arrangements to sell Leander's boat, the *Topaze*, thus about to destroy his happiness. Moreover, she tries to force the family to turn their house into a tourist home. Ultimately, Honora is willing to undo these acts of punishment only if Moses is sent away from St. Botolphs. Leander complies, and thus Moses leaves St. Botolphs (for good). The effect of the mother figure Honora's power is explained psychologically by Wemhöner:

> Honora will Moses' Konformität mit dem Normsystem seiner Familie erzwingen […]. Das Verhältnis von Moses und Rosalie kommt ganz klar durch das wechselseitige Verlangen nach Liebe zustande, und Honoras Bestrafungsaktion gegen Moses entspringt dem Wunsch, ihn für seinen hedonistischen Lebenswandel zu bestrafen […] und ihn der gleichen Einsamkeit auszusetzen, die sie selbst immer wieder strafend empfindet. (38)

[Honora wants to force Moses to conform to his family's system of norms […]. The affair between Moses and Rosalie is obviously caused by a mutual desire to be loved, and Honora's punishment of Moses comes from her wish to reprimand him for his hedonistic way of life […] and to expose him to the same loneliness that she is punished to feel again and again.]

When Honora acts like a mother, it is mostly to command or to punish. Because of her punishment, the family unit in St. Botolphs is torn apart. Moses is accompanied by his younger brother, who would not bear to stay behind by himself and follows his brother out into the world of urban America. With the boys' departure from St. Botolphs the equilibrium of the Wapshot family is destroyed. Although Coverly promises to come back to St. Botolphs, both he and Moses will be swallowed by post-war America. The family will never live together harmoniously in St. Botolphs again.

Honora's pose as an iron mother is ironically countered by her sentimentality. She does have sentimental moments, but does not want anyone to notice. When she has visitors, Honora hides the photographs of her family behind the sofa because "although she liked having photographs of the boys around, she never wanted any of the family to catch her in such an open demonstration of affection." (*TWC* 90) The pose as iron mother has its costs, however. Like Sarah, Honora is shown to be a fundamentally lonely figure: "Honora walks past the window on the soft grass but they have not heard her; they are laughing too loudly. Halfway down the house she stops and leans heavily, with both hands, on her cane, engrossed in an emotion so violent and so nameless that she wonders if this feeling of loneliness and

bewilderment is not the mysteriousness of life." (*TWC* 50) Despite the fact that we are encouraged to empathize with Honora, she is not depicted as a victim.

Like Sarah, Honora Wapshot is romantically elevated. While the former is depicted as a lonely goddess in a wagon, Honora is described as a 'poetic' person: "Admiring that which is most easily understood we may long for the image of some gentle woman, kind to her servant and opening her letters with a silver knife, but how much more poetry there is to Honora, casting off the claims of life the instant they are made." (*TWC* 44f.) But in spite of this romantic elevation[107], neither Sarah nor Honora are sentimental figures. Samuel Coale has noted that "Cheever constantly plays off romantic images against more mundane ones." (205) Thus we are informed about Sarah's installation of public toilets in St. Botolphs, and witness Honora board a bus with her dress undone down the front.

Similar to Sarah Wapshot, Honora remains an ambivalent figure; however, the constraining impact both mother figures have on the lives of the male Wapshots is quite evident. Honora even interferes in Leander's funeral service, making sure that the family tradition is preserved: "Honora raised her voice once during the service when the rector began to read from St. John. 'Oh no,' she said loudly. 'We've always had Corinthians.'" (*TWC* 346) But the very last words the narrator finds for her are kind ones; they ask us to forgive Honora her flaws and faults, and to see her as that which she really is: "She is the image of an old pilgrim walking by her lights all over the world as she was meant to do and who sees in her mind a noble and puissant nation, rising like a strong man after sleep." (*TWC* 348) As this quote underlines, Honora is more than just a thorny old spinster who consciously tries, like her cousin Justina, to make her family unhappy. She stands for a time that has become obsolete, and she defends values she does not know have become obsolete as well. That these values clash with the modern world can only partly be blamed on her.

The third important mother figure in the *Chronicle* is Cousin Justina. A former dancing mistress and widow of a multimillionaire, Justina represents the evil mother. Cousin Justina, "a bona-fide man-hater" (Waldeland 259), is the wicked stepmother from the fairy tale. From all the mother figures in *TWC*, she is the character that is most obviously derived from myth. Not only is she really a stepmother (Justina and her late husband adopted Melissa, Moses' fiancée and later wife), her circumstances of living are reminiscent of a fairy tale: she resides

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[107] Wemhöner sees Honora as a figure that allows for a reading of *TWC* as a romance: "die Exzentrizität macht aber Honora zu einer einsamen Person, so dass die mythisch-gesellschaftliche Festlegung auf die psychologische Ebene und damit auf die Romance hin verweist." (34)

in an old castle that is slowly decaying, and is willing to poison the lives of Melissa and Moses. She even has the looks of a veritable modern witch: "Justina sat by the fire, drinking sherry. She was, by Leander's reckoning, about seventy-five by then, but her hair and her eyebrows were ink black and her face, framed in spit curls, was heavily rouged. Her eyes were glassy and shrewd." (*TWC* 247) Justina is malevolent through and through and even admits to it:

> 'I'm wicked, as you say, and I'm rude and I'm boorish and I discovered, after marrying Mr. Scaddon, that I could be all these things and worse and that there would still be plenty of people to lick my boots.' Then she turned to [Moses] again her best smile and he saw for once how truly powerful this old dancing mistress had been in her heyday and how she was like an old Rhine princess, an exile from the abandoned duchies of upper Fifth Avenue and the dusty kingdoms of Riverside Drive. (*TWC* 306)

The list of Justina's corrupt traits of character seems endless. She is a bad (step)mother and does not think of Melissa's best, but only of her own interests. She is parsimonious, egoistic, and domineering. Significantly, she tries to destroy the romance between Moses and Melissa by assigning each of them a room that is in a completely different part of the castle (she tries to prevent them from having premarital sex). After finding out that Moses tricked her by climbing over the roof to his fiancée's bedroom, she even shoots at him. She forces Moses and Melissa to stay with her if they want her consent to their marriage plans. Under her own roof, Justina can control Melissa and almost succeeds in turning her against Moses. Some critics have noted that Moses' relationship to Melissa resembles the pattern of a quest quite literally: he is the knight who must save the princess from her imprisonment by the dragon in the castle[108]. Justina is the dragon, naturally, and Melissa is depicted as a princess by the narrator, who time and again connects her physical appearance with the color gold:

> She was beautiful and it was the degree of beauty that fills even the grocery boy and the garage mechanic with solemn thoughts. The strong, dark-golden color of her hair, her shoulder bones and *gorge* [sic] and the eyes that appeared black at a distance had over Moses such a power that, as he watched her, desire seemed to darken and gild her figure like the cumulative coats of varnish of an old painting […]. (*TWC* 250)

Moses' brother Coverly has a similar impression when he first meets Melissa: "She took Coverly's breath away; her golden skin and her dark-blond hair." (*TWC* 295) The color gold symbolizes a treasure, and Moses needs to overcome Justina's obstacles in order to gain that treasure. It is a difficult task, for even after they have been married Justina continues to interfere in their lives by giving them twin beds for a wedding present. Only when Justina's

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[108] Lynne Waldeland observes: "[Justina's] extreme behavior causes us to see her in mythic terms as a wicked witch guarding the castle in which the beautiful damsel awaits rescue by the knight." (250)

castle burns down[109] are Moses and Melissa free to flee her realm and to live their own lives. Like Sarah and Honora, Justina is a mother figure who bears negative connotations; unlike theirs, her motives are always destructive. Ironically, while her name suggests 'justice', Justina represents the opposite.

Mother figures in Cheever's first novel are problematic. They put pressure on the Wapshot men one way or other, and erect barriers and obstacles in their path rather than help them. In short: they cause anxiety and distress. There is also true for a minor mother figure in the *Chronicle*: Leander's first wife Clarissa. Clarissa is the only mother figure who would have been entirely positive - had she not chosen suicide. Having been raped and made pregnant by Leander's boss, Clarissa marries Leander to avoid scandal. What has begun like a marriage of convenience (Leander will lose his job if he does not marry her) turns into a marriage made in heaven: Clarissa, whom we meet only through Leander's journal, and Leander fall deeply in love with each other. They travel through New England together in what seems like the perfect honeymoon to a place where Clarissa can give birth to the baby, and release it for adoption. But their bliss is doomed to end soon. Yet another version of the evil mother interferes and is responsible for the tragedy of Leander's life: their wicked landlady. When Clarissa has given birth to her baby, she is overwhelmed by motherly feelings and wants to keep it. In his journal, Leander recalls his first wife's innocent happiness: "Clarissa in bed, smiling. Masses of dark hair. Baby at breast, swollen with milk. Writer cried for first time since leaving West River. 'Don't cry,' Clarissa says. 'I'm happy.'" (*TWC* 172) Clarissa is so full of maternal love that she is happy to care for the child of her rapist. But the evil landlady forces the child away from her, causing Clarissa to drown herself[110]. A truly good wife and mother, Clarissa does not fit in the misogynic world of *TWC* and is bound to die early.

To resume, we can say all major mother figure share essential characteristics. Like the others, Sarah Wapshot is not a very complex character. She is portrayed in an ironic light: while the narrator acknowledges both her problems and the braveness with which she tackles them, he exposes her as a flawed goddess. Yet compared to the other mother figures, Sarah is rendered most realistically and amiably. She is an iron mother with a tender side. Since she and not Leander survives, she represents the future and its negative potential. The same is true for the

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[109] The fire that destroys the castle is a veritable *deus ex machina* for Moses and Melissa.

[110] By choosing the name 'Clarissa', Cheever alludes to Richardson's eighteenth century heroine by the same name, who was also raped and never recovered from the assault. Like Richardson's chaste female protagonist, Cheever's Clarissa must die.

other mother figures. In contrast to Sarah, Honora Wapshot represents a more rigid iron mother. She is depicted as an eccentric spinster whose motives are often selfish and whose actions put strains on the Wapshot men. Finally, Justina Scaddon symbolizes the evil stepmother of the fairy tale. Both her motives as well as actions are destructive. Of the three mother figures in *TWC*, she is clearly the most (and exclusively) negative and least realistic. Minor mother figures, like Leander's deceased wife Clarissa, show negative tinges as well.

The mothers in *TWC* represent some part of the future in America. Sarah, a widow but relatively happy with her own business, a souvenir shop, is ready to confront the future. Honora, with her three-cornered hat and black Puritan clothes, also moves on and becomes a fan of the Red Sox, going to all of their home games. Justina sows discord into Moses' and Melissa's relationship and foreshadows their eventual divorce in *The Wapshot Scandal*. Each mother figure will no longer play a part in the lives of Moses and Coverly Wapshot. They are replaced by the latter's wives, who turn into the new American mothers.

The mother figures in *The Wapshot Chronicle* are all associated with negative actions or events. It is certainly striking that there is not a single 'good' mother in Cheever's first novel. Cheever's message is evident: the mothers represent the hostile future. The coordinates of this future are critiqued by Cheever. The domain of the American woman is the domestic sphere; deviations from this 'norm', as in the case of Sarah Wapshot, are depicted to be unethical. Femininity, especially in its matriarchal aspect, is too flawed and demanding to have a positive effect on men's lives. The mother figures in *TWC* are ambivalent at best and adverse at worst. The world of *The Wapshot Chronicle* is an androcentric one. In that it matches in general the domestic and social conventions of 1950s America.

4.2.3 "All Gone with Dawn's Early Light". The Legacy of the Father

In contrast to the mother figures in Cheever's novel, the father represents the positive aspects of a golden past. However, this past is doomed to perish. Therefore, the traditional fate of the father in fiction awaits Leander: he is bound to die and leave the world to his sons. In *TWC*, the father's positive connotations resound in his important humanitarian/humanistic legacy.

Leander Wapshot is the only real father figure in *TWC* (his own father, an unhappy man who left his family, is only mentioned briefly in Leander's journal). Up to now, interpreters have mostly concentrated on his life as an individual instead of reading him in

terms of the function(s) he takes as head of the family. He has often been seen as the protagonist of Cheever's first novel. Since I argue that *TWC* is a family novel and therefore has a 'gestalt'-protagonist, i.e. the family itself, I do not agree with such an assumption. It is because of Leander's journal, this notable autobiography of his that takes such an eminent place within the frame of the novel, that he has been regarded as the most important character in the book. This interpretation is certainly supported by the comparatively small role Sarah, the mother, is assigned. Yet other family members, especially Moses and Coverly, equal Leander's position in the *Chronicle*. Hence, in speaking of Leander and his function in the novel, it is indispensable that we connect his individual experiences with his status as a family father.

As a figure representing tradition, Leander is closely connected with St. Botolphs, where he feels truly at home. Like his hometown, Leander has resisted the changes of the twentieth century. The sights and smells of St. Botolphs recall 'the good old days'. The town possesses "an aroma of the past. In a drilling autumn rain, in a world of much change, the green at St. Botolphs conveyed an impression of unusual permanence" (*TWC* 3). But this 'aroma of the past' is not solely something pleasant; it is accompanied by the odor of decay. St. Botolphs invites nostalgia – but we are also reminded of the uselessness of nostalgic feelings. As the narrator thoughtfully observes: "But it was difficult, from the summit of Wapshot Hill, not to spread over the village the rich, dark vanish of decorum and quaintness – to do this or to lament the decadence of a once boisterous port. […] There was beauty […], and there was decadence […], but why grieve over this?" (*TWC* 18f.)[111] As with St. Botolphs, the glory days of Leander are over. Despite his endless capacity of enjoying life, the departure of his sons leaves Leander a lonely man. He suffers the same fate as St. Botolphs – namely that of being left by the young. The traditional way of life in the old seaport town is inextricably linked with Leander. Both represent the past, and both are bound to give up the ghost.

Leander's attempts to copy the tradition of his forebears is doomed to failure. Leander's outdated way of life is symbolized by the *Topaze*, an old ship Leander uses to transport tourists. Leander's ancestors had been seafarers, who explored foreign worlds and often got stranded in Samoa, enjoying the natives' open arms[112]. In his journal, Leander

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[111] This last rhetorical question alone already proves all those critics wrong who accuse Cheever of sentimentality and nostalgia.

[112] In *The Wapshot Chronicle* there are several explicit allusions to the sexual exploitation of Samoan natives by nineteenth century American seafarers, the most amusing of them in a passage of Leander's uncle Lorenzo's journal (*TWC* 12ff.). While these sexual encounters are always depicted as invigorating and pleasant, as

recalls how one of his ancestors killed a shark with his bare hands. Leander's record looks less adventurous: his ship is 'an unseaworthy bulk'[113], and the short way to Nangasakit and its amusement park is as far as Leander ever takes his old vessel. What is more, he does not even have complete command over the ship; his cousin Honora is the owner and puts the boat up for sale whenever she likes to reprimand Leander. Unlike his forebears, Leander never travels the world to see its wonders. The only time he leaves Massachusetts is on a business trip to New York as a young man. But he has kept at least one custom of his forebears - that of keeping a journal: "[A]ll the Wapshots were copious journalists. [...] They chronicled the changes in the wind, the arrival and departure of ships, the price of tea and juice and the death of kings. They urged themselves to improve their minds and they reproached themselves for idleness, sloth, lewdness, stupidity and drunkenness [...]." (*TWC* 11) (Interestingly enough though, Leander does not start writing this 'journal' until after his sons have left and he has lost the 32-years-old *Topaze* in a storm. Therefore, not even in his journal-writing does Leander truly follow the habit of his forebears – unlike them he writes in retrospect.) Yet this family tradition is also doomed to perish - the journals of the Wapshot men are stored in the attic, "spread out at one's feet like the ruins of a vanished civilization" (*TWC* 11). Leander is the last Wapshot to write a journal; his sons will not continue the tradition. This reinforces the growing gap between the past, which Leander represents, and the future, for which his sons stand.

Born and bred in the nineteenth century, Leander has known a world without the comforts of modern-day life that later turn out to be the nightmares that come to haunt his sons. He has witnessed the turn of the century and has brought into the twentieth century his ideals of a more wholesome, happy, and healthy age.[114] At the time the story begins, Leander is in his sixties, a good-looking man, and a figure of vitality. An optimist by nature, Leander has preserved a love for nature, especially the sea, as well as a youthful sense of joy and adventure. He is a sympathetic character because he has remained young at heart. Cousin Honora, the narrator explains, "had arranged for him to have the captaincy of the *Topaze* to

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something fun with no responsibilities entailed, such a view must seem outrageous in the context of postcolonial criticism. Samoan women are (unconsciously) portrayed as mere sexual toys willing to please the sailors. The latter can leave whenever they are satisfied and do not think it necessary to take the responsibility for, or meet the consequences of, those sexual encounters. Thus the few brief remarks about the Wapshot men and Samoan women betray a rather discriminatory picture. In that regard, they match the general misogynist tone of the novel.

[113] As the name suggests, for Leander the *Topaze* is a real gem: "The *Topaze* seemed to be his creation; she seemed to mirror his love of the seaside girls and the long, foolish, brine-smelling summer days." (*TWC* 6)

[114] Despite occasional moments of nostalgia, Leander is not uncritical towards the past. He remembers the problems entailed by a much more restricted society. As he puts it in a letter to his son Coverly, by way of example: "Sex problems hard nut to crack in 19th century gloom." (*TWC* 289)

keep him out of mischief" (*TWC* 6) – as if he were a mere boy. Because he is optimistic, smart, brave, and innocently adventurous, Leander represents an ideal American.

Leander stands for the positive, Thoreauvian aspects of America's past: a life in harmony with nature[115], the art of keeping life simple, and the art of staying true to oneself. To look to the future with hope, to have a sense of family, and to be amiable: Leander accomplishes all this. That his love of life is so abundant that he cannot help cheating on his wife is not commented on, except that we know that Sarah suffers from it; but readers are encouraged to forgive his mistakes. That effect is achieved by the sympathetic way in which the narrator treats Leander: "[Leander] was not surprised to find his ways crossed and contested by his wife […]. He did not always see eye to eye with Sarah but this seemed to him most natural, and life itself appeared to regulate their differences." (*TWC* 61) We are to see his positive sides rather than dwell on the negative ones. The same can be said for the past, which Leander symbolizes: the narrator wants us to see its good aspects[116].

Leander trusts in the self-reliance of his sons, and his way of teaching is subtle. In that he comes close to an ideal father. He suggests rather than orders; he leaves his sons be instead of trying hard to shape them according to his view of life. Leander emphasizes tradition, or 'ceremoniousness', in his education:

> Leander would never take his sons aside and speak to them about the facts of life, even although the continuation of Honora's numerous charities depended upon their virility. If they looked out of the window for a minute they could see the drift of things. It was his feeling that love, death and fornication extracted from the rich green soup of life were no better than half-truths, and his course of instruction was general. He would like them to grasp that the unobserved ceremoniousness of his life was a gesture or sacrament towards the excellence and the continuousness of things. […] The cold bath he took each morning was ceremonious – it was sometimes nothing else since he almost never used soap and got out of the tub smelling powerfully of the sea salts in the old sponges he used. The coat he wore at dinner, the grace he said at table, the fishing trip he took each spring, the bourbon he drank at dark and the flower in his buttonhole were all forms that he hoped his sons might understand and perhaps copy. (*TWC* 60f.)

That modern times cannot compete with such a nature-oriented way of life must be seen as an instance of social criticism: in *TWC*, John Cheever "present[s] a harsh critique of modern American materialism" (Mason 61), i.e. a critique of post-war America. This harsh critique is

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[115] In that aspect, Leander is reminiscent very much of Henry David Thoreau's view depicted in *Walden*.
[116] This is precisely the reason why so many interpreters have accused Cheever of nostalgia. They object by saying that such an America as *TWC* suggests it did never exist (cf., e.g. Cynthia Ozick, "Cheever's Yankee Heritage", *Critical Essays on John Cheever,* ed. R. G.Collins (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 62-66. While they may be right in that point, most of them overlook that Cheever's past is never a past without flaws. In fact, the narrator exposes Leander's sometimes overt nostalgia as problematic as well.

successful because Cheever, in his depiction of the Wapshots' life at West Farm, employs a ubiquitous New England myth - that of the land as a Garden Eden[117]. The old Wapshot dominion is a neatly kept, beautiful place full of flowers a little away from the village, where the Wapshots live a peaceful and harmonious life. Compared to their childhood at West Farm, the boys' professional lives in the big cities seems unnatural. The pastoral idyll established by life in St. Botolphs in general and West Farm in particular is revealed to be corroded, however, when we learn of the poverty of the Wapshots and their dependence on Honora's goodwill, or of the backwardness of St. Botolphs, its slow decay and lack of opportunity. Theo D'haen explains: "…Cheever undermines the pastoral myth of America as the new Eden even when he seems to be applying it straightforwardly: West Farm and St. Botolphs are not true paradise, but only its distant shadows." (275) The paradise Cheever paints in the *Chronicle* is flawed, and that keeps the novel in a safe distance to sentimental writing.

Leander is an influential figure in the lives of his sons, and clearly a positive one. In contrast to what we learn about Sarah's occasional brutal punishments of her sons, Leander never appears in a negative light. Yet the knowledge he passes on to his sons is obsolete: "He had taught them to fell a tree, pluck and dress a chicken, sow, cultivate and harvest, catch a fish, save money, countersink a nail, make cider with a hand press, clean a gun, sail a boat, etc." (*TWC* 61) Moses, who works as a banker in New York City, and Coverly, who is a computer specialist on a military base, cannot apply the skills they learned from their father. D'haen observes that "the tragedy of Leander is that [his] values and skills are utterly useless in suburbia, the place where Leander's sons have to spend their lives. Leander rightly applies the norms by which he has lived, and the loss of which he laments in the present-day world, and he chooses to disappear into that element which gave him his last grain of self-respect: the sea." (267) Leander dies by drowning; unlike D'haen's description puts it, however, the novel does not suggest a suicide[118]. Still: that post-war American society does not have any

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[117] Theo D'haen notes: "In *The Wapshot Chronicle* the myth of the American Eden is embodied in life on West Farm, the hereditary domain of the Wapshot family, and in St. Botolphs, an imaginary little town in Massachusetts. […] The idyllic naturalness of St. Botolphs […] forms a sharp contrast with the artificial hell of New York's dormitory towns. […] Cheever's protagonists move between these two worlds: mythical paradise, and a far more concrete hell." See "John Cheever and the Development of the American Novel", *Critical Essays on John Cheever*, ed. R.G. Collins (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 237f.

[118] On the day before he dies, we learn how Leander happily goes fishing. His death his alluded to, but it is quite clear that Leander never planned it."[…] and when he saw a trout it seemed like a shade- a spirit of the dead – and he thought of all his dead fishing companions whom he seemed cheerfully to commemorate by wading this stream. Casting, gathering in his line, snagging flies and talking to himself, he was busy and happy and he thought about his sons; about how they had gone out in the world and proved themselves […]." The events just before his death suggest a similar interpretation: "On Monday morning at about eleven the wind came out of the east and Leander hurriedly got together his binoculars and made himself a sandwich and took the Travertine bus to the beach. […] He waded out to his knees and wetted his wrists and forehead to prepare his circulation for the

space anymore for a way of life as close to nature as the life Leander has led is seen negatively in the *Chronicle*. We can therefore understand it to be another instance of Cheever's social criticism.

Leander is diametrically opposed to all the mother figures in the novel. He communicates with his sons in a way that their mother does not seem capable of. He (not Sarah!) writes them once a week after they have left for Washington and New York. His letters are surprisingly frank in that there does not seem to be a taboo between Leander and his sons. Whatever their problems are, Leander shows a great deal of understanding for his sons. In this respect their relationship is certainly exceptional. Leander is neither authoritative ruler nor flawless saint; he keeps an independent position and is more of a good friend than a father. He is always ready to offer them advice about life and the "hobgoblin company of love" (*TWC* 298), but he never enforces his rules upon them.

The relationship between father and sons is deeper than that between the two brothers and their mother. In contrast to Sarah, Leander does have important rituals to share with his sons; the most remarkable one is the annual fishing trip to Canada. The trip he takes with his eldest son Moses is an exceptional instance of male bonding[119]; Leander initiates his son to the rites of masculinity. Moses is "enthralled" by the wintry Canadian landscape and feels close to his father. "He watched his father's head and shoulders with feelings of admiration and love." (*TWC* 66)

Leander divides his love equally between the boys and tries not to prefer one over the other, although it seems that he thinks higher of Moses than of Coverly. This is most obvious when he is shocked to find his 11-year old son trying to play Oberon after having watched a performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with his mother (!):

> Girdling himself with a loose arrangement of neckties, [Coverly] tried flying from the backstairs into the parlor, where his father was adding up the monthly accounts. He couldn't fly, of course, and landed in a pile on the floor […], and while Leander did not speak to him angrily he felt, standing above his naked son in the presence of something mysterious and unrestful – Icarus! Icarus! – as if the boy had fallen away from his father's heart. (*TWC* 60)

As a father, Leander is emotionally close to his sons but not able to support his family financially. When Honora threatens to kick them out of West Farm, Leander's solidarity with his family is most obvious: "A ragged image of his wife and his sons appeared to him then –

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shock of cold water and thus avoid a heart attack. At a distance he seemed to be crossing himself. Then he began to swim […] and he was never seen again." (*TWC* 344) Leander's death may seem mysterious, but it is not a case of suicide.

[119] For Mason, Moses' and Leander's fishing trip is "a magical scene in the novel, an incident begging comparison with Hemingway's famous fishing trip in *The Sun Also Rises*." (64)

thinly dressed and standing in a snowstorm […]. This image of his family roused in him passionate feelings. He would defend and shelter them. He would defend them with sticks and stones; with his naked fists." (*TWC* 92)   Since Honora's attempt of punishing Leander's family is just as exaggerated as Leander's heroic feelings, we can understand this scene not as sentimental, but as a satirical description of Leander's romantic fantasy – and his true feelings. Leander's idealism (a loving father ready to sacrifice himself to save his family) is connected with narrative irony (Leander's fantasy is hopelessly inflated). Adam Gussow explains: "Idealism and irony may at first glance appear to be mutually exclusive, but in Cheever's case they have always been mutually empowering; he passionately believes that abstract ideals worth pursuing do exist, yet his art is grounded in the inevitable frustrations entailed in their pursuit." (106)   The sine qua non of Leander's behavior is that he trusts in his boys' capabilities and leaves it to them how to live their lives. In contrast to Honora and other mother figures, Leander is anything but a morally restrictive force in the lives of his sons. He is a veritable *Lebenskünstler*, a man who knows how to counter sad experiences with an admirable capacity of optimism.

Leander Wapshot is the moral guide of the *Chronicle*. The book's message, according to William Esty, is Leander's "joy in created things"[120]. His values and way of life are shown to be desirable yet doomed to perish. To heed his advice, the novel suggests, is not to go wrong. This is an essential part of Cheever's point of view: "As always for Cheever, the wisdom needed to prepare us to face the future – a wisdom so elusive in modern America – is best sought in a study of the past." (Mason 62)   That society prevents Leander's sons from living a life like their father is criticized by way of showing their dull jobs and unhappy marriages.

Many interpreters have highlighted Leander's mythical potential. While the *Chronicle* itself half-jokingly suggests a connection to Homer's *Odyssey* (Leander, Captain of the *Topaze*, likes to compare himself to Odysseus whenever he approaches the amusement park to where he takes his passengers: "'Tie me to the mast, Perimedes,' Leander used to shout whenever he heard the merry-go-round." (*TWC* 6)), his name suggests the mythical Leandros. Hence Margaret Wemhöner reads him as a tolerated outsider[121], a modern-day Leandros:

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[120] William Esty, "Out of an Abundant Love of Created Things", *The Critical Response to John Cheever*, ed. Francis J. Bosha (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994) 21.

[121] Wemhöner is wrong in one crucial point: Leander is <u>not</u> to be understood as an outsider. By contrast, he is very much integrated into St. Botolphs society; he is a fundamental part of his hometown. This becomes evident at the day of his funeral when the church is full of people; in fact, there are so many people that Honora is astonished: "… and when the doors were opened and she saw a crowd she […] asked in a loud voice, 'What are all these people doing here? Who are all these people?'" (*TWC* 346)

"[Leander ist] durch seine 'love of the seaside girls' […] im Sinne der mythischen Vorlage [Leandros] als 'quester for love' definiert." (28) Additionally, interpreters (Wemhöner; Bracher) like to see him as a personification of Neptune, the god of the sea. Leander's love for the ocean, his captaincy, and especially his death in the sea, support such an interpretation. Like Sarah, the lonely goddess on her wagon, or Justina, the wicked witch, Leander is romantically elevated.

Cheever based the figure of Leander on his own father[122]. According to Cheever himself, the style and some parts of Leander's journal are directly taken from the journal his own father kept. This journal itself deserves to be mentioned separately. It provides the reader with intimate insights into the youth of Leander, his hopes and dreams, his troubles and failures. The telegram style in which the journal is written is remarkable. Unlike the typical first-person accounts normally encountered in journals, Leander's autobiography is written in a third-person telegraph style meant to render a more 'objective' image of past events. However, as the following quote shows, Leander's account is sensual as well: "Sing of the night boats. All that writer knows. Fall River, Bangor, Portland, Cape May, Baltimore, Lake Erie, Lake Huron, Saint Louis, Memphis, New Orleans. Floating palaces. Corn-husk mattresses. Music over water. One-night card games, one-night friendships, one-night girls. All gone with dawn's early light." (*TWC* 165) In speaking of himself in the third person ("writer"), Leander indeed creates an impression of sincerity and truthfulness that he would hardly have been able to achieve had he written his journal in the first person. This peculiarity leaves at times an odd-sounding but all the more touching picture of Leander's feelings. It is precisely the seemingly impartial yet sensual tone of his third-person account that gives the range of emotions he depicts an even stronger effect. To write his journal in the third person has a twofold effect: On the one hand, Leander creates a distance to his experiences, but on the other, he takes on a nostalgic air with regard to his past.

Leander's positive image is reinforced by the heritage he leaves. His death, at least in *TWC*, is not completely in vain. While he does not leave his sons much money, he does have something prepared to accompany them on their way into an unknown and potentially hostile future. Leander's last words are safely deposited in the family copy of Shakespeare's *Collected Works*:

> 'Advice to my sons,' it read: Never put whisky into hot water bottle crossing borders of dry states or countries. Rubber will spoil taste. Never make love with pants on. Beer

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[122] R.G. Collins explains: "Leander Wapshot of *The Wapshot Chronicle* is said to be modeled after Frederick Lincoln Cheever, and John has admitted that the famous journal of Leander Wapshot in his novel is based on a similar journal, in a similar style, written by his father." (7)

on whisky, very risky. Whisky on beer, never fear. […] Never sleep in moonlight. Known by scientists to induce madness. […] Bathe in cold water every morning. Painful but exhilarating. Also reduces horniness. Have haircut once a week. Wear dark clothes after 6 P.M. Eat fresh fish for breakfast when available. Avoid kneeling in unheated stone churches. Ecclesiastical dampness causes prematurely gray hair. Fear tastes like a rusty knife and do not let her into your house. Courage tastes of blood. Stand up straight. Admire the world. Relish the love of a gentle woman. Trust in the Lord. (*TWC* 349)

That Leander's legacy is posited (and found!) in an edition of Shakespeare's works[123], the novel suggests that the humanist values that Shakespeare (and Leander) stand for will survive even in a world moving towards the more or less playful meaninglessness of postmodernity.

In contrast to the mother figures in the *Chronicle*, Leander is a thoroughly positive character. He is more important than any of the female characters as far as the moral education of his sons is concerned. The rituals he shares with his sons are an exemplary instance of filial bonding. The love and understanding Leander passes on to his sons make him a good father figure. That his idea of happiness has become obsolete is not Leander's fault, although some critics have remarked that both Leander and Honora are anachronisms, that they are stuck in the past (Collins 1984: 75). This may be true, but *TWC* suggests that those who are trapped in the golden past are at least better off than those who are trapped in the gloomy world of the present. The fate of Leander's sons is a case in point.

4.2.4 Look Back in Anxiety: Talking about a New Generation

The fate of the new generation of Wapshots, the first one to leave their hometown and make a living in the big city, offers significant clues of John Cheever's vision, and social critique. If they achieved living happily ever after at the end of the book, their fate would betray an optimistic vision of the future, or could be read as an ideal version of family for Cheever to construct against the trends of his own day. That the novel's ending does not allow for such an easy interpretation not only testifies to the aesthetic quality of *TWC*; it also signals Cheever's fears as to the fate of family in particular, and the fate of society in general. In the following analysis, we will see that while Moses and Coverly do not end up looking back in

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[123] Leander's conviction that sleeping in moonlight induces madness is, of course, an allusion to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play which is mentioned explicitly in *TWC* when Coverly, as a little boy, is taken by his mother to see a performance of the play and gets so excited that, to the silent dismay of his father, he wants to be Oberon. (*TWC* 60)

anger to their past in romantically decaying St. Botolphs, their lives come to be affected by the troubles of a more and more merciless world. Their professional and private lives already pervaded by anxiety, the Wapshot boys are left with a nostalgic look back at the old days.

Moses and Coverly Wapshot are one of several pairs of brothers in Cheever's fiction[124]; among these, they are clearly the most important one. The Wapshot boys are a crucial part of the *Chronicle*, and stand in the center of *The Wapshot Scandal*. Together with other pairs of brothers in Cheever's fiction, they need to be read as part of Cheever's general agenda: "Some of the brother pairs he creates are primarily sympathetic, others almost primordially antagonistic, but taken together they develop two of Cheever's main themes: a pervasive alienation from modern mass culture and, paradoxically, a deep distrust of nostalgia."[125] Within the cosmos of *TWC*, the Wapshot boys represent the future (or: modern times), and we will see that this future will not be pleasant as it leaves no space any longer for the freedom of the individual, a life in harmony with nature and the community, or the comforts of family. These tendencies are already insinuated in the *Chronicle*, but in its sequel, *The Wapshot Scandal*, they turn into truly lethal forces.

From various moments of sexual initiation to their encounter with life in the metropolises of post-war America until the period of family life in the suburbs, Moses and Coverly Wapshot are confronted step by step with the perils and frustrations of modern-day American society. The development and formation of their respective characters follows a downward movement as the circumstances of their lives change from innocent and healthy (St. Botolphs) to the questionable paradise of their new homes in the suburbs of post-war America. In their process of initiation, the brothers have similar experiences, be it as to their quests for love, their jobs, or encounters with characters that cause problems. That their experiences should be so very much related emphasizes their validity and ubiquity: Moses and Coverly represent a whole generation of Americans facing the same challenges and problems. They will become part of the gray mass of flannel suits crowding the streets of America's big mid-century cities. Therefore their struggles need to be read as the general struggle of post-war American men; if the Wapshot boys fail, everyone is likely to fail, and we need to examine more critically the conditions under which they fail. The social criticism built into the portrayal of Leander Wapshot is thus amplified by the fate of his sons.

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[124] Samuel Coale remarks: "In Cheever's four novels […] his creation of the two antagonistic brothers becomes not only the major psychological focus but also the major thematic and structural one […]." See "Cheever and Hawthorne: The American Romancer's Art", *Critical Essays in John Cheever*, ed. R.G. Collins (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 198.

[125] Cf. David Raney, "What We Keep: Time and Balance in the Brother Stories of John Cheever", *Journal of the Short Story in English* 37 (2001) 63.

Each step the brothers take away from their hometown leads them further into a future dominated by isolation and loneliness. Once arrived in the Big City, the brothers are faced with the absurdities and hardships of modern life. The trouble both brothers run into with their first jobs reveals that they can no longer draw on the positive influence of St. Botolphs. Moses gets a government job because of his rich cousin Honora's connections, but he soon loses it because of an affair with a morally questionable woman. The protection of the family is not worth anything in the metropolis. Coverly does not even get the job he was promised by his cousin Mildred because he fails the required psychological exam. As in Moses' case, for Coverly the ties of family do not bind in the metropolis; except for collecting antiques, Cousin Mildred does not care about her family. Instead of keeping family bonds alive in the present, Mildred and her husband prefer to dwell in the family's past. Moses' and Coverly's first experiences in the big city anticipate the decline of the family as an institution that both brothers will face in the future.

Apart from the fact that both Moses and Coverly leave their hometown on the same day, their lives take strikingly similar turns. Both brothers choose Manhattan as the basis for their second jobs. Coverly becomes a 'taper' (an old-fashioned version of a computer specialist), while Moses starts to work as a banker. Both of them meet their wives in New York City, both of them marry and then move to the suburbs (Coverly lives in Remsen Park, a suburb-like, impersonal, and artificial military town, while Moses moves with his wife to Proxmire Manor, a suburb in New York State). Both brothers suffer from marital trouble related mostly to the spleens of their wives. They seem to move in a way that society expects of them: leave your hometown, find a job, a girl to marry and found a family with, and later get your own comfortable house in the suburbs.

Moses and Coverly comply with the typically 1950s career.[126] The men act as providers, the women stay at home to raise the children and run the household. Compared with the troubles of the war, this way of life seems attractive at first sight. But neither of the Wapshot brothers is really happy. Their jobs are consuming them; their wives are unhappy and take it out on their husbands. Life in the suburbs is too anonymous to be comfortable. [127]

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[126] Sloan Wilson's 1950s bestseller *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* problematizes such a career.

[127] The structure of the Wapshot brothers' lives seems directly derived from William H. Whyte's popular book *Organization Man*, which had been published a year before the publication of *TWC*. Whyte "diagnostizierte als den repräsentativen Erwerbstätigen der fünfziger Jahre den *Organization Man* (1956). Er lebte mit seiner Familie in Suburbia, die jetzt Lebensmittelpunkt und nicht bloß Schlafstätte war. Dort sollte die Frau eine Oase der Erholung schaffen, während sich der Mann *downtown* dem Existenzkampf stellte." (Raeithel 188). At the same time as Whyte may have influenced Cheever's first novel, his own account of 1950s American culture seems to have drawn on Cheever's fictional work as well, as the following passage by Raeithel suggests: "Gleichmacherei, Konvention und Mittelmaß regierten die Vorstädte. In einer der Geschichten von John Cheever

The passages describing the Wapshot brothers' fundamental frustration in modern society count among those where Cheever's social criticism is most poignant.

The lives of the two brothers lack crucial elements of happiness. In *TWC*'s frame, happiness is to live in a 'functional' family, a friendly community of neighbors, and to experience professional fulfillment. It's society's fault, *TWC* suggests, that the new Wapshot generation cannot reach this goal. Coverly's wife Betsey is a case in point. A country girl from Alabama, Betsey (whom Wemhöner sees as Coverly's mythical doppelganger (46)) is open and friendly, if naïve. She seems as forlorn in the big city as Coverly. They soon move in together and when Coverly finds a job as a taper, they get married and move to a military town where everything looks alike: "Remsen Park was a community of four thousand identical houses, bounded on the west by an old army camp. The place could not be criticized as a town or city. Expedience, convenience and haste had produced it when the rocket program was accelerated […]." (*TWC* 259) Remsen Park is the polar opposite of St. Botolphs: it is anonymous, cold, and eerily homogeneous. At the center of St. Botolphs is the green with the canon from the Civil War; in Remsen Park, there is no such trace of the country's legacy, but instead there is clear evidence of its future: "At the heart of the community there was a large shopping center with anything you might want – all of it housed in glass-walled buildings. This was Betsey's joy." (*TWC* 259) It will remain her only one[128]. While the Remsen Park represents the new America, the St. Botolphs stands for old America. The critical light in which Remsen Park is described, St. Botolphs is by far the more preferable place.

Betsey is emblematic of *TWC*'s dominating themes of loneliness and alienation. During their first weeks in Remsen Park, Betsey tries hard to make friends, but is rebuked by most of her neighbors, who all seem to prefer to stay to themselves. She soon learns that "Remsen Park was not a very friendly place" (*TWC* 260), and so the supermarket becomes her major point of (social) orientation: "[She] went into the supermarket, not because she needed anything but because the atmosphere of the place pleased her. It was vast and brightly lighted and music came down from the high blue walls." (*TWC* 261) At first glance, her spare-time activity may seem a rather strange and desperate act, but Betsey's preference of the

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sorgte ein Familienvater für hochgezogene Augenbrauen, weil er in Sandalen und nicht in Halbschuhen den Morgenzug in die Stadt bestieg." (188)

[128] Scott Donaldson identifies the supermarket as one of "two dominant symbols in [Cheever's] work for this modern malaise […]." See "Supermarket and Superhighway: John Cheever's America", *Virginia Quarterly Review* 62.4 (1986 Autumn) 655.

supermarket as a locus of entertainment mirrors a new and compelling tendency of the decade:

> Gemeinsam sei den amerikanischen Bürgern aller Klassen ihre Marktorientierung, erkannte Erich Fromm. Es war bis zur Energiekrise nichts Besonderes, an einer Straßenkreuzung vier Tankstellen vorzufinden, eine an jeder Ecke. In Huntsville (Alabama) mußte das Bürgerkriegsdenkmal einem Supermarkt weichen. Politiker verlegten ihre Wahlkämpfe mehr und mehr auf die Kaufstraßen und Parkplätze der großen Einkaufszentren, weil sie dort die meisten Menschen vorfanden und wohl auch die zufriedensten. Shopping war Freizeitgestaltung und Antidepressivum. (Raeithel 184)

[What American citizens of all classes had in common, as Erich Fromm realized, was their market orientation. Until the energy crisis, it was not unusual to come across four gas stations at an intersection, one at each corner. In Huntsville, Alabama, the Civil War monument had to give way to a supermarket. Politicians relocated their election campaigns more and more to the shopping streets and parking lots of the big malls, because it was there that they got hold of the majority of the people, and the most content ones at that. Shopping was spare-time activity as well as anti-depressant. (K.D.)]

That Cheever should pick up this tendency and elaborate on its negative effects on the American family points to an important aspect of his social criticism.

Her hostile surroundings ruin Betsey's numerous attempts to overcome her isolation. Compared with Sarah Wapshot's numerous social activities, Betsey's sphere of social interaction is restricted. The only conversations Betsey is able to strike up are with salespeople. Eventually, however, Betsey's persistence is rewarded as she seems to have found a friend in her neighbor Josephine Tellerman. For Betsey, this one friendship means everything: "Betsey and Mrs. Tellerman would do their shopping together. Betsey and Mrs. Tellerman would be on the phone every morning. 'My friend Josephine Tellerman tells me that you have some very nice lamb chops,' she would tell them at the butcher. 'My friend Josephine Tellerman recommended you to me,' she would tell them at the laundry." (*TWC* 272) To keep that friendship Betsey is even willing to forgive a sexual assault on her by her friend's husband. But Betsey lives an illusion when she feels that "the pain of traveling and moving and strangeness and wandering was ended and that it had taught her the value of permanence and friendship and love." (*TWC* 274) In modern-day America, there is no space for such values. When she is finally betrayed by her only friend, a world breaks down for her; she even has a miscarriage. From that time on she is ill-humored and takes her frustration out on Coverly.

Betsey's fate suggests that the modern world of towns like Remsen Park prevents people from the pursuit of happiness. The atmosphere of anonymity and selfishness affects all

the people. Everyone is lonely in Remsen Park. After having committed a sexual assault on Betsey, Max Tellerman admits that he is suicidal and that "sometimes [he gets] so lonely [he does not] know where to turn […]." (*TWC* 275) After having realized that Josephine lied to her, Betsey feels that "through every moment of her life […] ran the cutting thread, the wire of loneliness, and that when she thought she had been happy she had only deceived herself for under all her happiness lay the pain of loneliness and all her travels and friends were nothing and everything was nothing." (*TWC* 280) Clearly St. Botolphs appears like paradise in comparison to Remsen Park[129] or the old castle where Moses and Melissa have to endure the numerous little cruelties of Justina.

Life in modern-day America is a paradise lost for the Wapshot boys. No matter where Moses and Coverly go, no place is as pleasant and harmonious as their hometown. Moses' and Coverly's new (sub)urban environment is hostile because it is corrupt, uniform and cold. Theo D'haen regards the brothers' departure from St. Botolphs as the most crucial event in the novel: "St. Botolphs is the American Eden, and suburbia […] is its counterpole. The real subject of Cheever's work – and given its Biblical overtones a theme better suited to Puritan New England is hard to imagine – is the expulsion from Paradise." (274)[130] It is exactly this theme which marks *TWC* as a typical novel of the 1950s.

In contrast to Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, *TWC* does not exploit biblical topoi. Moses and Coverly are no modern-day Cain and Abel. That is not to say, however, that there are no biblical allusions in *TWC*. Moses, for instance, is to save a captured princess (Melissa, his future wife) from an oppressive force, Justina (Wemhöner 43). He thus resembles the biblical Moses, who led the people of Israel out of their captivity in Egypt. Not taken from the bible, Coverly's name carries connotations of the pastoral as well as it can suggest a fool[131], both of which would apply to the younger one of the Wapshot boys, who loves nature, and seems less confident (and more clumsy) than his older brother.

As with Leander, Cheever's construction of Moses and Coverly seems to be based on his biography. Interpreters have looked to Cheever's personal background and found that he

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[129] We have to take into consideration though that Cheever saw both places as 'metaphors for human confinement' (cf. George Hunt). As we have seen before, St. Botolphs is not the ultimate paradise on earth; it, too, has its flaws. But compared to the settings of Moses' and Coverly's adventures in the 'real', modern-day America, it seems a much better place.

[130] Mason's interpretation taps the same vein: "The movement of the Wapshot novels is from order, stability and the essential sanity of life to depersonalization, social incoherence, and rootless anomie – a fall, in short, from a living tradition to desecration." (61)

[131] Wemhöner aptly notes: "Der Name Coverly erinnert an den des ‚country squire' Sir Roger de Coverley, eine von Addison und Steele im *Spectator* beschriebene Figur, die durch Gutmütigkeit und eine gewisse Weltfremdheit charakterisiert ist und daher komisch wirken kann. [Es erscheint daher] gerechtfertigt, in der Namengebung eine bewußte Anspielung auf dieses mythische Vorbild zu sehen." (26)

had a short but intense relationship to his brother when they were both young men. Later their relationship suffered; when Cheever's brother died of alcoholism, they were no longer on speaking terms with each other. Critics have been trying to take the relationship between the Cheever brothers into consideration. Thus, in trying to account for the peculiar links between brothers in Cheever's fiction, Raney argues: "A likely factor in this scarcity of fictional brothers, and one reason for the intensity with which Cheever invests them when they do appear, is the author's relationship with his own brother. Frederick Cheever was a major influence in his life and the object of both his warm affection and icy resentment." (Raney 67)

All in all we can say that both brothers stand for the future generation of Americans. In that they differ sharply from their father. They break with the most important Wapshot tradition of all: that of keeping a journal. Although they go away to find their luck in the world and leave St. Botolphs like their forebears, it is soon evident that, in contrast to their ancestors, Moses and Coverly will not come back to St. Botolphs. They and their peers will populate the suburbs and empty military towns of the new America, separated from tradition and separated from nature. With such a constellation, they are bound to be unhappy: "To survive in the outside world […], Moses and Coverly have to live by the rules of modern American society. […] In short, they are forced to renounce all "self-reliance' and join suburbia." (D'haen 275) Moses and Coverly are heading for life in a world where the values of family are doomed. From the already strenuous relationships to their respective wives, Melissa and Betsey, we can guess that their marriages will not last. Strikingly, neither Melissa nor Betsey have a family of their own; Melissa is an orphan and Betsey grew up with an evil stepfather.

The similarities between the two brothers' lives are remarkable; therefore, I agree with David Raney, who remarks: "As they struggle with each other and with the past, they come to seem less an assortment of disparate quirks and compulsions than one painfully divided self." (78) The future they are facing is bleak; it is dominated by supermarkets and their atmosphere of artificial cheer, as well as by marital trouble, a general superficiality, egotism, and coldness in human relations, and, most importantly, by loneliness. That the future leads into emptiness and unhappiness is perhaps the most important piece of social criticism *TWC* offers. Raney observes: "[The brother stories] pit Cheever's disillusionment and bewilderment at modern life against his rejection of the 'seductive and dangerous' past, the need to live fully in the moment against his deep wariness toward much of what his late 20th century moment had to offer." (78)

4.3   Synopsis: The Nostalgic Family Novel

Like any good family novel, John Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle* mirrors, as well as critically comments on, the times it depicts. *TWC* had been written and is set in the decade after World War II and appears to portray a typical fifties family: a married couple with two children. In that regard, *TWC* corresponds to what Jonnes calls 'the correlative mode' of family fiction (Jonnes 249), because its characters can be taken as typical of the 1950s. The conflict at the heart of the Wapshot family, the unbridgeable gap between a happier past and the gloomy present, can be correlated to the 'age of anxiety' of post-war America.

The Wapshots deviate slightly from an ideal(ized) post-war American family, and this deviation is shown to have negative effects. A case in point is the Wapshots' financial situation. In contrast to the typical 1950s American family, Leander is not the earner. Two women provide for the family and pay the bills: Honora supports her kin with her heritage, Sarah runs a thriving souvenir shop. Leander's conservative opinion is not heeded: "To have his wife work at all raised for Leander the fine point of sexual prerogatives […] When Sarah announced that she wanted to work […] he thought the matter over carefully and decided against it. 'I don't want you to work, Sarah,' he said. 'You don't have anything to say about it,' Sarah said. That was that." (*TWC* 159) Sarah's attitude has disastrous consequences. After she has turned her husband's beloved *Topaze* into a souvenir shop, he is so fundamentally shaken that he pretends suicide. Despite his attempts to distract himself from the loss of his ship by starting a journal, Leander never really recovers from the shock, and in fact dies not long after. Readers are encouraged to share the underlying assumption that a society where women take decisions against the will of their husbands is deficient. Here Cheever complies with 1950s values[132]. In contrast to 1950s conformity, however, Sarah is not content with the role of wife and mother, and exchanges the private for the public when she participates in St. Botolphs' social organizations. In this regard, Sarah is clearly an emancipated woman.

Her financial independence notwithstanding, Sarah respects tradition when it comes to marriage. Although there is some allusion of marital trouble between the Wapshots, divorce is out of the question. In this regard, at least, we can say Leander and Sarah act in accordance with 1950s social norms: "Up until the last few decades, the nuclear familial 'norm' that American society publicly advocated and […] characterized as being representative was

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[132] Cheever's vision of family in his first novel is quite outdated compared to today's standards. The idea of conventional roles expressed in *TWC* is "based on the structural-functional notion that men and women have separate spheres of action, and that the home is the proper place for women, just as the labour force is for men." (Ward 89)

monogamous, patriarchal, heterosexual, middle to upper class, and Caucasian."[133] Where they diverge from the standard in certain respects, the characters are meant to highlight the negative aspects of change. Their failure to come close to an ideal 1950s couple demonstrates that Cheever's characters are not constructed along simplistic and stereotypical lines. The fissures in the nuclear family eventually become the gap that separates the new generation from happiness and fulfillment. *TWC* is nostalgic as it mourns the loss of a more harmonious past.

The structure of *TWC* equals its content. The life of the Wapshots is most harmonious in those passages that are written in a more coherent manner. The novel is most coherent in its first third, set in St. Botolphs, when the family is still united. The harmony and unity of narration in the first third suggests that the family's initial situation is seen as close to ideal. In contrast to that, *TWC* is broken up into three alternating strands of narration when the family is split up in the second and third parts of the novel. The much criticized tendency to thematic digression resulting from this represents the irrevocable separation of the characters, which is part of Cheever's cultural critique. Kenneth C. Mason holds that "[t]he preponderance of *The Wapshot Chronicle*'s thematic burden lies in showing the disparity between the traditional values and the integrated sense of community of a town like St. Botolphs and the generality of modern America. Cheever manifests this glaring disparity by solidly rooting a family into a rural port town and then forcing the family's contemporary generation out into the greater world." (65)

In *TWC*, John Cheever addresses what Hill and Kopp call "[den] vermuteten Bedeutungs- und Funktionsverlust der Familie in der modernen Gesellschaft"[134] [(the) family's suspected loss of meaning and function in modern society. (K.D.)]. On a structural as well as on a thematic level the *Chronicle* moves from unity to disintegration. Structurally, the novel changes from the coherent to the episodic. On the level of content, the characters move from harmony to disharmony, from tradition to displacement, from affection to isolation. The meaning of family changes from warm and cozy shelter (the Wapshots in St. Botolphs) to lonely prison (Coverly and Moses in their marriages). This development is only hinted at in *TWC* but fully expressed in its sequel, *The Wapshot Scandal* (*TWS*). In fact, while *The Wapshot Chronicle* closes with a faint note of decline, *TWS* shows the degeneration of the Wapshot clan more openly. *TWC* establishes the first steps of this decline, the most obvious

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[133] Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, Elizabeth Mahn Nolten, and Sheila Reitzel Foor, eds., *Family Matters in the British and American Novel* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997) 2.

[134] Paul B. Hill and Johannes Kopp, *Familiensoziologie. Grundlagen und theoretische Perspektiven*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2002) 48.

of which is the death of the father, Leander Wapshot. He enjoys a rewarding relationship with his sons. His death is an immense loss for them. The various mother figures, whom we have seen to bear mostly negative connotations, cannot replace the void Leander has left; nor can Betsey and Melissa provide adequate support of their husbands. By the end of Cheever's first Wapshot novel, the marital trouble between the Wapshot boys and their respective wives is already evident. All characters seem bound for the worse. Both Sarah and Honora are lonelier than ever. The notion of decline that Yi-Ling Ru sees as a salient feature of family fiction also marks Cheever's family novel.

The general tone of *TWC* is a tone of mourning for that which has been lost in modern day America. Nature loses to culture, the city wins over the country, the future subdues the past – and the female seems to dominate the male. This development suggests the conservative position Cheever uses as the background in *TWC*. We witness the death, decay and disappearance of people and customs that had made the world of the past a pleasant place. That once important values (such as friendship, family, and a love of nature) have become obsolete is a development that is regarded with suspicion, if not open disapproval, in the *Chronicle*. Here lies the novel's social criticism. It echoes the general tenor of the day: "Post-World War II America is frequently described as fragmented, entropic, and fearful of the impending doom of nuclear apocalypse. In this world the foundations of once-reliable structures have been shaken."[135] That *TWC* ends with Leander's "Advice to my Sons", which Coverly finds in the family copy of Shakespeare's works, may be interpreted as a note of hope, however.

In *The Wapshot Chronicle*, Cheever underlines the importance of humanist values. In that his first novel fits into the general atmosphere of post-war American fiction, which Schulze characterizes as follows: "Die Atmosphäre der unmittelbaren Nachkriegszeit vermittelte den Eindruck, als sollte 'Bewährtes' – auch auf dem Hintergrund der *red decade* – fortgeschrieben werden." (495) [The atmosphere of the time immediately following World War II permitted the impression as if 'tradition' – also in view of the *red decade* - was to be continued. (K.D.)] Cheever is serious about the moral agenda conveyed by *TWC*; he wants us to see that which he considers important in life. This "moral earnestness", as Bracher puts it, "is pervasive in all of Cheever's writing."[136] But it is in his early writing, among which *TWC*

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[135] D. Quentin Miller, "Updike's Rabbit Novels and the Tragedy of Parenthood", *Family Matters in the British and American Novel*, eds. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera et al. (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997) 195.

[136] Frederick Bracher, "John Cheever's Vision of the World", *Critical Essays on John Cheever*, ed. R.G. Collins (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 169.

is to be counted, that Cheever is most obviously "on the side of affirmation; instead of ridiculing man's weakness and limitations, Cheever holds up for admiration the virtues and potentialities of his fellow men." (Bracher 169)

The Wapshot Chronicle finds its place among the various streams post-war American literature because it is situated in what is generally perceived an early 1950s present. I have pointed our earlier that there are no dates or significant historical events around which the action evolves. This peculiar timelessness of *TWC* is in no way atypical for a family novel; as we will see in the discussion of postmodern and fin de millennium family novels, none of them is constructed around significant historical events or specific dates. This atemporality may be attributed to the fact that their authors are interested in the universal nature of family matters. In other words: it endows the family in question with a strong symbolic quality.

TWC is an example of the family's novel's early stage in the second half of the twentieth century. The most important family members get a similar share of the narrator's attention. In Cheever's first novel, however, the focus is more on the men (Leander and his sons) than on the women. Traditional gender roles in the 1950s, which Cheever unconsciously applied to *TWC*'s deep structure, could serve as an explanation. Additionally, *TWC* does not yet display the coherent and exclusively family-centered plot of its successors in the genre. Instead, the narrative is often disrupted by peripheral characters.

The main themes of *TWC* are alienation and loneliness, the effects of which are shown in the example of the Wapshots' fate. Cheever depicts a family moving from (relative) harmony to obvious disharmony. However, the family as a social institution as such is never questioned. The conflicts that the family experience come from the outside. The times are out of joint, fatally affecting a once healthy organization. In that regard, *TWC* is grounded on a conservative vision. Cheever's social criticism is directed against post-war America's homogenizing culture, against the very tendencies that make a happy family life impossible – among which he counts emancipated women. Cheever criticizes the replacement of the idea of technical progress for the notion of tradition; he warns of the dangers of consumerism immanent in the increasing importance of the supermarket; and he offers art (to be more precise, the humanist values of Shakespeare) as an answer to post-war conformity and frustration. A more detailed distinction of the several stages of the family novel (and the special position of the post-war family novel) will be offered in the final chapter, when all family novels indicated in the introduction have been scrutinized.

V.   THE POSTMODERN FAMILY NOVEL

5.1   Postmodern America. Texts and Contexts

In this chapter I wish to introduce a further stage in the generic development of the family novel in the second half of the twentieth century. With the 'swinging sixties' bringing new forms of social protest, and the seventies witnessing a great variety of innovative styles of living, conceptions of the structure and function of a social institution as old as the family also changed dramatically. These tendencies are on display in postmodern family novels. My main task here will therefore be not only to illustrate these different conceptions of the family as we encounter them in postmodern family novels, but also to address the subject of whether altered family structures are approved of or not. In fact, we will have to face the question whether the changes depicted are judged at all. Possible answers to this question will provide fruitful insights into the particular aesthetic and political positions that authors of postmodern family novels hold. A further objective of my analysis of postmodern family novels is to illustrate differences from the post-war family novel I discussed in the preceding section. We will see that the postmodern family novel changes in form as well as in content as it mirrors some of the changes brought about by the civil rights movements. It will also become evident that it employs more radical aesthetic means than its predecessors. In other words, I intend to show that postmodern family novels transcend the borders of conventional conceptions of the genre. My investigation aims at challenging the unjustified assumption that family novels are as rigid, predictable and conservative as some critics claim.

Before I outline the social changes in America in the sixties and seventies in general and the consequent modifications of family structures in particular, I will revisit the Wapshot novels of John Cheever once more to show how they have paved the way to subsequent generic forms of the family novel. After that, I shall focus on what I consider the most prominent example of the postmodern version of the genre under scrutiny here - Don DeLillo's family novel *White Noise*.

In the previous chapter, we have inspected Cheever's idea of how the last traces of pastoral America have vanished in the haze. The second Wapshot novel leaves a much bitterer taste. Published in 1963, *The Wapshot Scandal* depicts life in a thoroughly postmodernized America, where the retreat of pastoral paradise is irretrievably lost.

In contrast to its predecessor, where there still exists the idea of family as an important social institution providing shelter and guidance for its members (albeit in a somewhat

nostalgic hue), *The Wapshot Scandal* (*TWS*) knows only unhappy or, to use a more fashionable term, dysfunctional families. Regardless of Moses' and Coverly's new families, in *TWC* the Wapshot family of St. Botolphs serves as the focal point of the novel. In its sequel, *TWS*, there is no such center anymore. In fact, family life as such is no longer the book's main concern. Other themes, such as the dangers of atomic warfare, or emptied-out life in suburbia, are at least equally important. The frustrating marriages Moses and Coverly lead, and their respective collapses, seem a symptom of a larger social malaise. Their friends and neighbors also suffer the monotony, quarrels and disappointments the Wapshot boys face in their marriages. Adultery is a ubiquitous phenomenon, and so it is not surprising that Melissa and Moses finally get a divorce, while Betsey and Coverly are bound for a life together in constant discord. The alienation and superficiality that mark the society they live in have made their way into the realm of the family. The opposite is also true: the families in *TWC* reflect the social problems Cheever saw in the early 1960s. His often sardonic portrait of the unhappy people in his novels shows his disapproval of the developments in his country. Cheever's critique oscillates between satire and tragedy with moments of black humor that posit it in the vicinity of postmodernist texts[137].

Despite the fact that *TWS* is narrated in a realist mode (and even more so, as could be argued, than its predecessor *TWC* with its two narrators), its antennae have picked up the signals of postmodernity. Long-established values, such as the importance of a functional family life, have lost their sway. Family no longer provides the individual with a shelter from the impacts of a society rapidly changing from post-war hopes and dreams to excessive consumerism. Television dominates domestic life. There is in *TWS* an especially disturbing scene showing Coverly's wife Betsey in the living room watching TV when she sees her neighbor falling off a high ladder. She is aware of the implications of the accident: "Betsey looked out of the window long enough to see that his body was inert." (*TWS* 32) Instead of rushing to help, Betsey just continues watching TV. Much later, she hears the paramedics arrive and learns that her neighbor has died. The incidence hardly appears to affect her. The social criticism in this scene is obvious, as Cheever seems to suggest that television has a numbing effect on people, and destroys even the least bit of compassion they might otherwise have felt. In that, *TWS* acidly comments on the socioeconomic changes of its day: in the year 1965, two years after *TWS* was published, 94 percent of all American households were

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[137] According to Schaller, 'black humor' applies to the works of Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Vladimir Nabokov, and other well-know postmodernists. (148)

equipped with a TV set (cf. Raeithel 332). In its critical assessment of this development, *TWS* also paves the way for Don DeLillo's depiction of the media-saturated society in *White Noise*.

While Cheever condemns the fundamental transformation of social interaction (be it within the family, or outside of it) brought along by the triumph of mass media, he does not yet portray a deviation in the family structure as such. The postmodern, postnuclear patchwork family does not yet exist in Cheever's world. Although he reveals the social institution of the family to be flawed and unstable, it still hovers above the text in its traditional organization: breadwinner-husband, homemaker-wife, and their biological children. The small number of children in *TWS*, however, signals that the conception of family as it used to be is about to die out. Moses and Melissa, as well as Coverly and Betsey, each have a son, but their little families are dysfunctional as the parents fail to provide a stable and happy atmosphere for their sons to grow up in. What is more, the little boys almost never appear in the novel; we learn so little about them that they hardly seem to exist. The disintegration of their families has deprived them of their identities. Although John Cheever may not yet have had an idea of what exactly the family of the future might look like, he nevertheless already knew that the sealed nuclear family no longer provided an appropriate example of 1960s American society. If *TWS* does not yet depict alternatives to the nuclear family, it at least anticipates some of the changes in the social structure on which the postmodern family novel would elaborate some years later.

On a structural as well as on a thematic level, *The Wapshot Scandal* goes beyond the relative complacency of its predecessor as well. The narrative is de-centered in that it consists of a collage of different events in the lives of various characters more or less closely connected to Moses and Coverly. While the St. Botolphs-based Wapshot family, especially father Leander, serves as the bond that links the characters and their lives, *TWS* lacks such a focal point. What is more, readers will quickly note the failure (or even lack) of other sense-providing systems (i.e. metanarratives, as Lyotard calls them[138]) such as religion, political opinions, etc. Nevertheless, these factors do not necessarily make *TWS* a postmodern novel. Since the absence of sense-giving instances is clearly lamented – usually a sign of modernism – instead of being celebrated, it is more precise to say that *TWS* is an interrogation of the effects of an emerging postmodern society on the life of an individual or a collective. Its criticism emerges from a position outside of the cultural and socioeconomic developments it depicts.

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[138] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) xxiv.

By contrast, postmodern family novels such as Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (*WN*) render the consequences of 'the postmodern turn' on the family from an inside position, often drawing on the assumptions of poststructuralist thinkers or cultural theorists of the postmodern age. That is to say, they not only extend the limits of conventional family models, but they also bring in different themes in more radical aesthetic forms. For a fruitful discussion of the question whether *WN* is a postmodern(ist) novel or not, and in order to decipher the postmodern philosophies and cultural theories on which it draws, it is necessary to examine briefly some core formulations. I shall delineate a few essential aspects of these new themes and concerns to facilitate an understanding of what a postmodern family novel is, and how it differs from its predecessors. Since there is an ongoing debate on issues related to the term 'postmodern'[139], to attempt a conclusive definition here does not seem useful. Instead, I will focus on those shapers of the concept of the postmodern whose ideas are essential to understand the novels scrutinized here.

Historically speaking, the term "postmodern" is already approximately a century old. The first to mention it were the British historian Arnold Toynbee[140], as well as the American poet Charles Olson, who both brought it up independently from each other (Hornung 326). Theories of the beginnings of the paradigm shift (as it is generally perceived) from the modern to a post-modern age vary greatly. In accordance with the first occurrence(s) of the term, some locate the beginnings of Postmodernity at the end of the nineteenth century, initiated by thinkers like Nietzsche or Freud. Others, e.g. the cultural theorists Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner, consider only the end of the twentieth century as harboring the seed of a postmodern turn[141]. In contrast to that, it seems that the majority of critics regard the second half of the twentieth century as the cradle of postmodernism (cf. Hornung 304). They see World War II as the point in time after which we can speak of Postmodernity. Viewed from

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[139] There is, for one thing, the inherent uncertainty of the term: "The word 'postmodern' is […] characterized, from its very inception, by an ambiguity. On the one hand it is seen as a historical period; on the other it is simply a desire, a mood which looks to the future to redeem the present." Cf. Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism. A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 2. For another, scholars are debating to this date whether it is justified in the first place to apply the term 'postmodern' to contemporary forms of art. In fact, many advocates of postmodernism strongly oppose the academic habit of canonizing complex phenomena by 'tagging' them with a totalizing term that does not give justice of the multiple aspects of the respective phenomenon.

[140] "The term was probably first used by Arnold Toynbee in 1939, and prefigured by him in 1934." (Docherty 1)

[141] Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997). They argue that "there is today an *emerging postmodern paradigm* [sic] organized around a family of concepts, shared methodological assumptions, and a general sensibility that attack modern methods and concepts as overly totalizing and reductionistic; that decry utopian and humanistic values as dystopian and dehumanizing; that abandon mechanical and deterministic schemes in favor of new principles of chaos, contingency, spontaneity, and organism; that challenge all beliefs in foundations, absolutes, truth, and objectivity, often to embrace a radical skepticism, relativism, and nihilism; and that subvert boundaries of all kinds." (19)

this angle, and regardless of whichever starting point we assume, the term "Postmodernity" denotes primarily a period of time whose end is not yet discernible[142].

This postmodern age is characterized by a number of social, cultural, and economic changes that designate it as fundamentally different from the age of modernity. Volker Caysa offers a suitable description of these changes:

> Die Postmoderne hat den Übergang von der modernen Industriegesellschaft, die ihre infernalistische Dialektik erst in der totalen Mobilmachung des Nationalsozialismus erfuhr, zur hochtechnisierten Dienstleistungsgesellschaft vollzogen. Die Postmoderne ist das Ende der Moderne in der Gestalt einer industrialisierten Maschinerie. […] Sie ist die Selbstproblematisierung der mechanisch-industriellen Hypermodernität unseres Jahrhunderts."[143]

[Postmodernity has completed the transition from modern industrial society, which only in the total mobilization of National Socialism experienced its infernalistic dialectic, to a highly technicized service-oriented society. Postmodernity is the end of modernity in the form of industrialized machinery. It is the auto-problematization of the technological-industrial hypermodernity of our century. (K.D.)]

The passage quoted here refers to Daniel Bell's notion of the post-industrial age. It is also in accord with cultural theorist Fredric Jameson, who holds that postmodernism is the "cultural logic", or consequence, of the contemporary socioeconomic situation he has identified as "late capitalism"[144].

Postmodernity needs to be distinguished from postmodernism, a term we usually employ to designate a specific development in literature (Hornung 326), or an aesthetic style. A number of scholars have tried to define this style by focusing on the difference between other aesthetic forms and literary modes, such as realism or modernism. In a well-known and much-attacked essay, Ihab Hassan, for instance, has enumerated characteristics of this aesthetic style that mark it as fundamentally different from the modernist style.[145] Despite such a distinction, the age of Postmodernity and the literary expressions of the postmodern are linked, of course: "[A]esthetic postmodernism is always intimately imbricated with the issue

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[142] Thomas Docherty points to an interesting conflict within this understanding: "[T]here is a tension between, on the one hand, thinking of the postmodern as a chiliastic historical period which, 'after modernity', we either have entered or are about to enter, while on the other hand realising that we are condemned to live in a present, and adopting a specific – some have said schizophrenic – mood as a result of acknowledging that this present is characterised by struggle or contradiction and incoherence." (3)

[143] Volker Caysa, "Ethik im 'Nach' der Postmoderne. Eine ostdeutsche Problematisierung", *Nach der Postmoderne*, ed. Andreas Steffens (Düsseldorf: Bollmann, 1992) 105.

[144] Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *Twentieth Century Literary Theory. A Reader*, ed. K.M. Newton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) 267-275.

[145] Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism", *Postmodernism. A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 146-156.

of a political postmodernity." (Docherty 3) It is with some of the issues relating to postmodernity and postmodernism that I am concerned in the following.

The various theoretical positions that have contributed to the philosophical assumptions about and literary answers to life in *post*-modern times are abundant. Philosophers as diverse as Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Charles Jencks or Jacques Derrida, literary critics as Roland Barthes or Linda Hutcheon, and cultural theorists like Fredric Jameson or Hayden White have attempted to confront the question Lyotard famously put: "What is postmodernism?"[146] For Lyotard, postmodernity's crucial element is an "incredulity towards metanarratives", accompanied by a general "jouissance", i.e. the celebration of the assumption that all language allows us to do is play language games. Hence, Lyotard's well-known conclusion: "Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name." (82) His fellow theorist and philosopher of the postmodern condition, Jean Baudrillard, holds a more pessimistic view. While Lyotard focuses on the impossibility of representation in language, Baudrillard contemplates the loss of representation in the social world. For Baudrillard, the postmodern age is the victory of the simulacrum over the real. Today's world is characterized by what he calls the 'hyperreal', which is generated "by models of a real without origin or reality"[147]. Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal has been very influential to postmodern fiction writers; so has Lyotard's invitation to play language games. As we shall see in chapter 5.2.2, Don DeLillo is one of the authors to draw on both concepts in his family novel *White Noise*.

Regardless of what position in the debate we take, it is possible to argue that Lyotard's question has not yet been, and will probably never be, fully answered. What seems to matter more is the variety of attitudes with which it is addressed. A number of scholars, for instance, regard postmodernism as a consequent application of the philosophical positions and aesthetic innovations of modernism. Others, like Ihab Hassan or Linda Hutcheon, not only see postmodernism as a literary movement that goes beyond the modernist avant-garde's elitism[148], but also argue that postmodernist literature is dramatically different from modernist texts. Hutcheon has introduced an influential term to refer to a particular strand of this new

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[146] Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?", *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 71-84.

[147] Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra", *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001) 1-42.

[148] "The avant-garde is elitist because the artist is the hero who has seen the future in advance of everyone else, and whose task is to risk her or his greater powers on behalf of the tardy masses." (Docherty 17)

kind of literature: 'historiographic metafiction'[149]. She distinguishes modernist texts from historiographic metafiction by hypothesizing that novels of the latter category "both install and then blur the line between fiction and history" (113). Her understanding of postmodernist novels as historiographic metafiction is insightful:

> I have been arguing that postmodernism is a cultural enterprise, one that is heavily implicated in that which it seeks to contest. It uses and abuses the very structures and values it takes to task. Historiographic metafiction, for example, keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here - just unresolved contradiction […]. (106)[150]

Although Don DeLillo's eighth novel *White Noise* does not belong to the 'category' of historiographic metafiction, my discussion of the novel attempts to show that even so, we can understand it in terms of a work "heavily implicated in that which it seeks to contest".

As the title of this chapter indicates, I hold with those who see postmodernism as a literary movement in its own right. Even though I am aware of the limits (if not the sheer impossibility) of trying to define "the classic realist novel" or "the typical postmodernist novel", it is safe to maintain that postmodernist novels of very diverse character share some basic assumptions about language, representation, literature, and the limits of human perception(s)[151]. Some of these assumptions are manifest in a more or less radical way in the themes and topics a novel addresses. While such novels may be written in a realist mode, their plot (or the very lack of a plot) often does not allow for a conclusive interpretation. Rather, meaning is negotiated, and there is at the core of such novels what literary critics have called 'fundamental undecidability'. Others are written in a radical style, throwing overboard all

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[149] Cf. Linda Hutcheon's monograph *The Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988).

[150] In the meantime, Hutcheon's approach has been much criticized for its exclusiveness, i.e. for practically equaling 'postmodernist literature' with 'historiographic metafiction'.

[151] It would extend the scope of this chapter to engage in a detailed discussion of the features of postmodernism, or postmodern philosophies. Nevertheless I wish to mention, for the sake of completeness, just a few positions held by postmodern(ist) and/or poststructuralist thinkers. At the center of their philosophies are issues related to language and representation. Ferdinand de Saussure, the famous structuralist, had convincingly argued that the connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary. Going beyond de Saussure's assumptions, poststructuralist critics, such as the recently deceased Jacques Derrida, have claimed that there is no connection between signifier and signified, and that meaning is inherently and unchangeably instable. For them, "there is nothing outside of text", as Derrida famously put it. That is to say that we cannot perceive the world other than by means of language. Therefore, our perception of the world and its phenomena is extremely limited. Deconstructionist critics applied these ideas to the interpretation of fiction. They hold that the meaning of a piece of fiction is fundamentally undecidable. Their new interpretative technique, the tools of which were soon spread and perfected, allowed for radically new and astonishing insights into classical as well as contemporary texts. Postmodernist authors acquainted with the new philosophies (purposefully) inscribed voids into their texts. Ambiguity, a quality of every good text, gave way to supreme ambivalence. This supreme ambivalence may well be the most prominent feature of postmodernism. As I will show later, it certainly applies to DeLillo's *White Noise.*

conventional notions of time, plot, character, the sequence of events, or even sentence or paragraph coherence. As I shall explain later, DeLillo's *White Noise* occupies a position in the middle of these postmodernist aesthetic forms.

As far as the radical aesthetics of postmodernist fiction (like, for instance, that of a Donald Barthelme) is concerned, critics like Alex Callinicos may be right in assuming that it contains nothing that the modernist avant-garde had not demonstrated before[152]. Multiple points of view, polyphonic storytelling, textual fragments, pastiche, transgression of boundaries, etc. – have not the great modernists themselves already accustomed us to them? What seems to matter, then, is the attitude the text betrays: is the loss of stability or identity celebrated or lamented? Is there any way to escape a fundamentally hostile and absurd world? Is there anything that can provide our pointless lives with meaning? What is the function of art in our world? More precisely: does it still have a function at all?

It is safe to suggest that modernist and postmodernist texts address these and related questions quite differently. Clearly many modernist texts (authors like T.S. Eliot and James Joyce come to mind) are highly elitist. Not only does understanding their art require great knowledge; also, so critics have argued repeatedly, art itself is often seen as the only escape from the dreary industrialized times in which it originated. Therefore, only the highest artistic/aesthetic standards could meet the (modernist) avant-garde's expectations. Postmodernist theorists such as, notably, Leslie Fiedler, have then famously asked writers to "Cross the Border, Close the Gap!"[153], in other words, to transcend the boundaries between high and low art, and to no longer look down on supposedly minor genres. Many of the demands made by postmodern cultural critics like Fiedler need to be considered in the context of the political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Those movements, to some of which I shall turn now, are not only crucial because they constitute the socio-cultural context in which postmodernist novels originated and to which they respond. They have also influenced the development of the family in North America to a significant extent.

When it comes to the fundamental changes the American family underwent in the 1970s and 1980s, obviously many of them are linked to the Women's Liberation movement. As I have outlined in the preceding chapter, woman's scope in society was rather limited. Expected to be concerned only with the (emotional) well-being of their families, a

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[152] "I doubt very much that postmodern art represents a qualitative break from the Modernism of the early twentieth century." Cf. Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism. A Marxist Critique.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989) 5.

[153] Leslie A. Fiedler, " Überquert die Grenze, schließt den Graben! Über die Postmoderne", *Wege aus der Moderne. Schlüsseltexte der Postmoderne-Diskussion*, 2nd ed., ed. Wolfgang Welsch (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1994) 57-74.

professional career was long out of the question for the majority of (married) women. In fact, the general expectation was that women should *want* to marry and raise a family. Until the 1960s, only few women worked. Those who did prefer to work instead of raising a family met with a clear-cut role differentiation in Canada and the USA. For example, general (misogynic) opinion had it that women possessed greater communicational skills than men did, a view that not only marked women as "gossipers"[154] but also led to a gender bias on the job market: "Die berufliche Rollenzuteilung führte in Nordamerika zu bestimmten Monopolbildungen. Unter 2760 Telefonangestellten in der kanadischen Provinz British Columbia war nur ein Mann." (Raeithel 401) As this example shows, a restricted number of jobs were considered to be adequate for women, while they were excluded from others. That such a constellation belongs to the past is the achievement of the activists in the Woman's Liberation Movement[155] who fought to change the situation of women.

The foundation of associations such as the still active NOW (*National Organization for Women*) in the US, or even the much more radical *Society for Cutting Up Men* (SCUM) in Britain, testify to the new political consciousness of women in the Western world. Most of these associations advocated sexual freedom and demanded legislative changes to improve the conditions for women (Raeithel 404). Women's organizations also had to face a great deal of resistance, since many people believed the Women's Liberation movement to be dangerous to society. As we have seen in the previous chapter, John Cheever's portrait of Sarah in *The Wapshot Chronicle* reveals a refusal to go along with emancipation as well.

More important for the development of the family were groups such as the US-based National Organization for Non-Parents (NON). Their arguments against what they called the 'baby trap' and the social obligation to raise children left indelible traces in the structure of the contemporary family.

The efforts of the Women's Liberation movement affected the traditional nuclear family in various regards. Because of the liberties gained in the sexual revolution, women started marrying later. The number of married women declined. More and more babies were born out of wedlock. More married women decided to get a job and leave their kids at kindergarten. Women had fewer children or no kids at all. The divorce rates rose. The consequence of these and similar developments was the transformation of the family. The

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[154] Cf. Suzanne Romaine, *Communicating Gender* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999) 153.
[155] According to Romaine, the official beginning of the women's rights movement in the United States is generally perceived to be a conference on women's issues organized by women in Seneca Falls in 1848. (25)

typical 1950s breadwinner/homemaker family[156] increasingly lost its appeal. The so-called post-familial families (i.e. a family in a post-divorce situation (Cheal 65)) and the patchwork family (two or more families brought together by the second or more marriage of the parents) have been gradually replacing the nuclear family (Barabas/Erler 191). In fact, other new types of family are now competing with the old concept of the married couple with children: Ward names the binuclear family as "an arrangement where both father and mother act as parents to their child(ren) following divorce while they maintain separate homes" ((189). A reconstituted family, yet another new family form, is "a remarriage family" (205), where the nuclear family formation has been (at least temporarily) re-established. As I will explain in the next chapter, Don DeLillo's postmodern family novel *White Noise* draws extensively on these new family forms.

While the changes in the traditional male breadwinner/female homemaker family granted women more freedom and independence than ever, they have also brought about disadvantages for the children. With divorce rates continually rising, it is not uncommon for people marry a second or third time, thus creating multinuclear families. It is a well-known fact today that any kind of family breakup and subsequent re-formation has dramatic effects on the emotional well-being of the children, affecting their sense of identity and even their social skills. These individual problems can eventually influence society as a whole. As my discussion of *White Noise* will reveal, it can also be quite the opposite: society can influence individual life to an uncanny extent. As we will see, notions of collective and individual identity are problematic in *White Noise* no matter from which angle of the complex interaction between individuals and society we approach them.

Owing to the fundamental changes in the structure of the contemporary family, many people seem to feel that the family has lost its original function of providing love, shelter, and values. They consider the (post)modern family as devoid of sense and meaning[157]. In a way, then, we could argue that despite new liberties such as the social acceptance of divorce, of working women, and a much more open attitude to sexuality, Women's Liberation has brought along new problems, especially in the realm of the family, that have yet to be tackled. In addition to that, Women's Liberation, although still far from achieving its goal of establishing absolute equality between men and women in all levels of society, may have suffered the fate of practically all the political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s:

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[156] David Cheal, *Sociology of Family Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 12.

[157] Paul B. Hill and Johannes Kopp, *Familiensoziologie. Grundlagen und theoretische Perspektiven*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2002) 48.

it has lost its sway. Gerd Raeithel's summary of the effectiveness of these movements, which started out with so much idealism and verve, is as poignant as it is justified:

> Die Rebellion wurde als "radical chic" absorbierbar, verlor über Entfremdungsdiskussionen bei Cocktails an Bedeutung und ließ sich beinahe mühelos kommerziell ausschlachten. […] Die Untergrundzeitschriften waren nur ein kurzer Spasmus in der Geschichte des amerikanischen Journalismus; sie gingen nach und nach ein. Jerry Rubin verdingte sich an der Wall Street, Timothy Leary sah die Bewusstseinserweiterung neuer Art in der Computerindustrie. Bob Dylan, der ein Lied gegen die Unmenschlichkeit der Wolkenkratzer gesungen hatte, kaufte sich selbst einen. […] Bobby Seale, Mitautor des Manifests der Black Panthers, veröffentlichte *Barbecuing with Bobby*, ein Kochbuch. (400)

[Considered as "radical chic", the rebellion soon became absorbent, its significance was lost in cocktail party discussions on alienation, and it became a seemingly easy target of commercial interests. […] The underground magazines were only a short spasm in the history of American journalism; one after another went down. Jerry Rubin started working on Wall Street, Timothy Leary saw mind extension of a new kind in computer industry. Bob Dylan, who had once sung a song about the inhumanity of skyscrapers, bought one for himself. […] Bobby Seale, co-author of the Black Panthers' Manifesto, published *Barbecuing with Bobby*, a cookbook. (K.D.)]

As these examples show, in today's world, values have deteriorated, ideologies have failed, and the only area that seems to merit our interest and efforts is the market. Ambivalence has replaced idealism. Capitalism and consumer society have beaten the flower power generation's dream of a better world.

It is not my intention to destroy confidence in the achievements of a vital socio-political force. From today's point of view, Women's Liberation may of course have proven the most vigorous and effective of all social and political movements in the 1960s. My reason for citing Raeithel's account of the corrosion and softening of formerly radical groups and ideas is to shed some light on the postmodern world devoid of ethic principles the Gladney family inhabits in *White Noise*. When ideologies fail and idols betray their former beliefs, meaning gives way to irony and an ,anything goes' attitude. These tendencies contribute to the general tone, and also much of the social criticism, in DeLillo's eighth novel. The development of a new variation of the family novel is based on the social changes of its day. As Abraham Moles explains: "Die Kunst ist nichts anderes als die empfindsame Spiegelung der Werte in unserem Umfeld. Wenn dieses Umfeld sich verändert, dann ändern sich die Werte, folglich ändern sich auch die Kunst und ihre Werke."[158] As we will see, the world of *White Noise* is one where no metanarrative, be it of political, religious, philosophical, or

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[158] Abraham Moles, "Gibt es eine spezifische Kunst des elektronischen Zeitalters?", *Nach der Postmoderne*, ed. Andreas Steffens (Düsseldorf: Bollmann, 1992) 227.

aesthetic nature, fits any longer. In this superficial world, the form and function of the family are radically subverted.

5.2 Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985)

The world is full of abandoned meanings.
In the commonplace I find unexpected themes and intensities. (White Noise 184)

If one were to name the five most influential – and most unsettling – American novelists today, it would be difficult to get around Don DeLillo. The native New Yorker is not only a prolific author and playwright, his numerous works (thirteen novels, two plays, and a fair number of essays and other non-fictional writings) have also time and again held up the mirror to an America haunted by the postmodern condition. It is safe to maintain that Don DeLillo has earned a permanent place in the American Literature Hall of Fame. The various prizes he has won, among them the American National Book Award for *White Noise* (1985), the PEN/Faulkner Award for *Mao II* (1992), the Jerusalem Prize[159] in 1999, and the William Dean Howells Medal for the most outstanding literary work of the past five years in 2000, stand testimony to his attainment. As John Duvall rightly comments, the manifold awards the New York writer has received reveal the "canonical status DeLillo's work has begun to achieve in the last decade" (7).

The responses to DeLillo's works – be they from journalists or scholars – vary greatly. Having famously been attacked as a "bad citizen" for his depiction of Lee Harvey Oswald (as well as the conspiracy theory he advocates) in his much discussed *Libra*[160], DeLillo is well aware of his role as critical commentator on American society and, in turn, of the broad range of responses his works elicit. His ideas about life in Americana have always been disconcerting. DeLillo's themes reach from baseball (as in *Underworld*) to Rock'n'Roll (*Great Jones Street*), from mathematics (*Ratner's Star*) to international terrorism (*Mao II)*, from family (*White Noise*) to fascism (*Running Dog*). Different as his various novels and plays are, they share a critical depiction of the numbing impact of the media (especially television), multinational capitalism, and excessive consumerism on the self as well as on

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[159] Strikingly, Don DeLillo has been the first American recipient ever of this prestigious prize, which is awarded every two years to honor a writer "whose body of work expresses the theme of the individual's freedom in society." See John Duvall, *Don DeLillo's Underworld. A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2002) 7.
[160] See Frank Lentricchia, "The American Writer as Bad Citizen", *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 3. Like many of DeLillo's other works, *Libra* was also received an award: the 1989 *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize.

society as a whole. Don DeLillo has an astonishing feeling for the economic and cultural developments in US-American society, and has chronicled them in his works for more than 30 years now[161]. Since his writings seem to concentrate more on certain themes than on the development of individual characters, they have often been categorized as novels of ideas[162]. To write a family novel was an innovative enterprise for Don DeLillo when he returned to the United States after three years in Europe and the Middle East[163]. The quote from *White Noise* at the beginning of this chapter, although borrowed from the novel's narrator, Hitler specialist Jack Gladney, may well be understood as Don DeLillo's motivating force for writing, at the peak of postmodernism, a novel about family.

In this and the following chapters, I wish to expound my hypothesis that Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is a paradigmatic postmodern family novel. Scholars and critics have detected traces of the detective novel, the campus novel, the novel of ideas, the postmodern pastoral, the domestic social satire, the ecological novel, the systems novel, and the disaster thriller in *WN*. However, barely a critic has explored in detail the obvious yet: *White Noise* as a family novel[164]. Second, interpreters have been debating the question whether *WN* is a postmodern novel at all. For although a postmodern, postnuclear family is at the center of the novel, many consider it written in what Osteen calls "the novel's highly textured realism" (ix). This debatable fact has prompted interpreters like Scott Rettberg to assume that "[a]lthough Don DeLillo is not a conventional realist or naturalist in any sense of the word, I would not rush to say that DeLillo is a postmodern author. He is not trying, structurally, technically, or otherwise, to jump into any such camp."[165] The issue Rettberg addresses is one that I will revisit towards the end of my analysis. Suffice it to say at this point that my hypothesis deviates from Osteen's opinion as I hold *WN* to be a novel that disrupts realist narrative techniques by stretching conventional ideas of verisimilitude as well as by occasionally recurring to postmodernist language games.

The focus of this chapter will be on the impact of technology, consumerism and postmodern constructions of the self. I will discuss problems of identity together with

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[161] DeLillo published his first novel, *Americana*, in 1971.

[162] See Adam Begley, "Don DeLillo: *Americana*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld*", online, Internet, http://web4.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/206/476/20477040/purl=rc1_EAIM_0. 12.02.2002.

[163] Leonard Orr, *Don DeLillo's White Noise. A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2003) 14.

[164] Orr is the only one to mention the term 'family novel' in combination with *WN*, although his explanation remains short: "[*WN*] is a family novel, even if that family is dispersed and the result of multiple marriages and divorces, with ex-spouses and children around the world, with half-siblings and step-children and step-parents in the household." (15)

[165] Scott Rettberg, "American Simulacra: Don DeLillo's Fiction in Light of Postmodernism" (http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~undercurrent./uc7/7-rettberg.html. Accessed 24.7.2001).

changed notions of subjectivity in the context of the new form(s) of family life and structures that Don DeLillo drafts in *White Noise*. As in the preceding chapter on the post-war family novel, I shall call special attention to the assessment of contemporary culture we can derive from the novel's treatment of family. We will see that *WN*, while playing with postmodernist aesthetic devices such as parody, pastiche, and textual fragmentation, uses these strategies to disapprove of consumer society and of the construction of reality by the media. The characters' existential problems, as we will see, are depicted ironically, but their confusion and helplessness is real and therefore a useful critical tool. In other words: my working hypothesis is that *WN* is postmodern in form, but anti-postmodernist in intention.

The title of Don DeLillo's eighth novel, *White Noise*[166], refers to a technological phenomenon generated in the middle of the twentieth century:

> White noise is, scientifically speaking, a simultaneous combination of equally intense but random sound wave frequencies within a wide band width. In other words, it's a haphazard assortment of many different frequencies within the audio spectrum, ranging from the very high to the very low, and producing a fairly constant sound with no pitch at all. This unremarkable phenomenon, which resembles radio or television static, gets its name […] through analogy to white light, a combination of all the frequencies of the light spectrum.[167]

That is to say, white noise makes it impossible to discern any clear acoustic signal. Graphically speaking, it is simply a huge 'blur' of all kinds of different noises. Aubry adds significantly: "White noise masks other noises; it is […] a *simulation* of silence. [italics mine]" (150) This is an important observation as the notion of simulacra and simulation in a Baudrillardian sense is one of the novel's most arresting motifs, and, as well we see in chapter 5.2.2, is a vital part of DeLillo's characterization of contemporary America.

Due to the "simulated silence" of white noise, it soon became a sought-after 'commodity'. Because white noise absorbs all sounds, companies were interested in installing so-called white noise generators in their offices so that no sound would prevent employees from committing themselves fully to their work. As Aubry explains, this has led to a significant change in meaning since the term's first occurrence: "In its original conception in 1943, white noise was considered an unfortunate, inevitable side-effect of new technology, but, within ten years, companies had appropriated and transformed this side effect. In doing

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[166] Mark Osteen offers a detailed discussion about the significance of the novel's working title, which was "The American Book of the Dead". Cf. his chapter on *White Noise* in *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*. Also see p. ix of his introduction to the novel.
[167] Timothy Aubry, "White Noise Generation", *Critical Matrix* 12.1-2 (2000/01) 148.

so they resignify the term 'white noise'; it comes to refer, in certain contexts, to soothing, useful sounds rather than irritating ones." (152f.) This ambiguous meaning of the term 'white noise' is crucial as it offers a constructive approach the novel, to which I will return at a later stage of the argument. In a more general sense, as Cornel Bronca has it, "[w]hite noise is media noise, the techno-static of a consumer culture that penetrates our homes and our minds (and our serious novels) with […] brand-name items […] and fragments of TV and radio talk shows."[168] In short, we can say that the title ambiguously alludes to technology, mass media, and simulation. Besides its technological denotation, however, the term 'white noise' is also used in esoteric circles to refer to messages from the beyond. Adherents of the idea that communication with the dead is possible apply this term to the signals from the beyond they claim to hear on their tape players. The connection of white noise with death is also crucial with regard to DeLillo's novel. As we shall see, the connotations of the term 'white noise' all connect with the novel's most important themes and the most relevant forces affecting its protagonists, the Gladney family.

There is another layer of meaning to the title: the adjective "white" also refers to the ethnicity of the Gladneys. Here they equal most of DeLillo's characters, who share what Tim Engles evaluates as "a persistent whiteness" (171). It is indeed curious to note that although Don DeLillo, the son of Italian immigrants, grew up in a racially mixed neighborhood in the Bronx (Duvall 8), his novels and plays barely suggest a non-white dimension. With the exception of the short story "Spaghetti and Meatballs" (published in 1965, when he had not yet decided to devote himself to full-time writing), and parts of *Underworld* (1997)[169], DeLillo's novels depict life in mainstream WASP North America. *White Noise,* his "breakout book" (Osteen in *WN* vii), is no exception. In the center of the novel stands the Gladney family, consisting of Jack, the father figure, Babette, the mother figure, and various children from various previous marriages. We follow the story through the eyes of Jack, the first-person narrator. Jack and his wife have no children together, but act as parents to the children living in their household. Overall, six people of diverse origins live in the Gladney home in the little town of Blacksmith.

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[168] Cornel Bronca, "Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species", *White Noise. Text and Criticism*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin, 1998) 463.

[169] In these two works, Don DeLillo depicts various hues of an Italian neighborhood in the Bronx where he himself grew up. The rest of his works remains curiously un-ethnic, unless we consider the whiteness of his male, middle-class protagonists an ethnic variation in its own right, as some critics strongly suggest. See Tim Engles, "'Who Are You, Literally?' Fantasies of the White Self in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*", *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo,* eds. Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 2000) 171-95.

Like St. Botolphs, Blacksmith is not a real place; it represents a typical postindustrial Midwestern American town. Its symbolic quality is underlined by the fact that readers are not given a specific historical context. We can simply guess the time and conclude from the omnipresence of mass media and the absence of personal computers that *WN*'s plot is set some time in the 1980s. There are no references to political developments or historical events. As in *TWC*, time and place are consciously blurred in order to highlight the symbolic quality of the Gladney family, their conflicts and experiences. While idyllic St. Botolphs is supposed to remind readers of *TWC* of the glorious New England seafarer past, Blacksmith stands out for different reasons. They are connected with the college, whose telling name is College-on-the-Hill. It evokes the Founding Fathers' idea of a City-on-the-Hill to be set up in the new world, a city that would become the New Jerusalem. The spiritual implications in the name are evident: it suggests America's Puritan heritage, a combination of idealism and unyielding faith. Despite the Puritans' good intentions, though, their relentless faith could take on fundamentalist qualities, the sad climax of which was reached in the Salem Witch trials. These two implications in the college's name reverberate in reality. On the one hand, the College-on-the-Hill is introduced as an all-American institution right at the beginning of the novel. Here is how Jack describes the day the students are back to school:

> The station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus. […] I've witnessed this spectacle every September for twenty-one years. It is a brilliant event, invariably. The students greet each other with comic cries and gestures of sodden collapse. Their summer has been bloated with criminal pleasures, as always. The parents stand sun-dazed near their automobiles, seeing images of themselves in every direction. […] They feel a sense of renewal, of communal recognition. The women crisp and alert, in diet trim, knowing people's names. Their husbands content to measure out the time, distant but ungrudging, accomplished in parenthood, something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage. This assembly of station wagons […], more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritual akin, a people, a nation. (*WN* 3f.)

As the passage suggests, the College-on-the-Hill is an institution for the more affluent students. It evokes civility, comfort, and concord. Nevertheless, there is a shadow lurking over this all-American harmony: the specter of Hitler. Ironically, the College-on-the-Hill is famous throughout the academic world for a department protagonist Jack Gladney founded at the beginning of what would become an impressive academic career: "I invented Hitler studies in North America in March of 1968. […] When I suggested to the chancellor that we might build a whole department around Hitler's life and works, he was quick to see the possibilities. It was an immediate and electrifying success. The chancellor went on to serve as

adviser to Nixon, Ford and Carter before his death on a ski lift in Austria." (*WN* 4) The satire of this combination is an instance of the dark humor that informs the whole novel. 1968, the seminal year of flower power and student revolt, is the origin of a department that takes advantage of America's fascination with fascism. The College-on-the-Hill's telltale name also mocks the idea of the transcendence of knowledge and the 'sanctity' of science and scholarship. As my further analysis will demonstrate, Don DeLillo is not afraid to lampoon sanctified American institutions, be it American history, the family, the university, or even the church.

DeLillo confronts his readers with the uncomfortable problem of how Hitler and the foundation myth(s) of America go together. Possible clues for answering this question lie in a principal theme in *WN*, namely that of fascist impulses in contemporary American (consumer) society. Jack's career, for instance, relies on the interest of his fellow citizens in Hitler and the Holocaust. The huge number of students graduating in Hitler studies, as well as the admiration Jack receives from his colleagues, confirm this interest. His friend and colleague Murray Jay Siskind admits: "You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler. You created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own. Nobody on the faculty of any college or university in this part of the country can so much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in your direction […]." (*WN* 11) It is important to note that Gladney completely neglects the atrocities of the Shoa. The only class the chair of the department of Hitler Studies still teaches focuses on aesthetic features of Nazism instead:

> […] Advanced Nazism, three hours a week, restricted to qualified seniors, a course of study designed to cultivate historical perspective, theoretical rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny, with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms, three credits, written reports." (*WN* 25)

In this passage, Jack not only discloses that his country is characterized by what must seem to us an uncanny attraction to fascism. What is more, he uses this lamentable fact to boost his academic career and make money. Yet he is not even the only one. Siskind, an ex-sportswriter who had appeared in one of DeLillo's earlier pieces[170], confesses that he wants to copy Jack's strategy:

> He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler. It must be deeply satisfying for you. The college is internationally known as a result of Hitler studies. […] You've evolved an entire system around this figure, a structure with countless substructures and interrelated fields of study, a history within history. I marvel at the effort. It was

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[170] As Tom LeClair notes, Murray Siskind, whose name rings of Jewish ancestry, is a character of the 1980s novel *Amazons*, which DeLillo wrote under a pseudonym with a collaborator. Cf. *In the Loop. Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987) 220.

masterful, shrewd and stunningly preemptive. It's what I want to do with Elvis." (*WN* 11f.)

In the world of *White Noise*, Hitler is just another object of popular and academic interest, nothing more and nothing less of a celebrity than a dead rock star from Tennessee[171]. The terrible consequence is that "[t]o merchandise Nazi evil is cynically to accept it as normal, and to appropriate Hitler's aura is to deny its evil."[172] Gladney and Siskind understand very well the dangers implicated in such an approach, but they simply no longer care. Their supreme ambivalence is the most shocking aspect of Don DeLillo's treatment of Hitler in *WN*[173], and should be read as a significant instance of DeLillo's cultural critique. An excellent example of the cold-bloodedness with which Gladney and Siskind use and abuse Hitler to advance their own careers is the 'showdown' they perform in front of their students. Murray needs Jack to help him get a foot in the American Environments faculty's door, and Jack uses 'his' Hitler to comply. Focusing on similarities in Elvis' and Hitler's personal life, such as their devotion to their mothers, or their hypnotic effect on masses of people, Gladney and Siskind's dialogue makes Hitler seem like one of us. Instead of constructing him along the lines of a cultural "other", the discussion instead emphasizes the very resemblance of Hitler and American (pop) culture, as a symbol of which Elvis serves. Siskind's academic subject is elevated because of Gladney's support[174]. DeLillo's message is clear. Since Hitler provides the matrix for Siskind's interpretation of America's most famous rock star, and supplies the basis of Jack's social status, American culture appears in an extremely unfavorable light.

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[171] Marie-Christine Leps sees this situation as a consequence of the late capitalist economy that dominates *WN*: "Objects of knowledge are interchangeable: a fascist dictator who is always on television or a rock star who never dies equally work to maintain the process of mass commodification, the normalization of domains of knowledge and forms of subjectivity." See "Empowerment through Information: A Discursive Critique", *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995) 180.

[172] Roland Boling, "Escaping Hitler in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*", *Philological Review* 28.2 (2002) 64.

[173] Bruce Bawer, who harshly attacks Don DeLillo for his depiction of Jack's method of teaching Hitler Studies, would disagree: "DeLillo's point, throughout, is unmistakable. Hitler is just like us. We are all Hitler. Am I alone in finding this whole business extremely offensive? DeLillo's offense, to my mind, is that he refuses to make distinctions." Cf. Bruce Bawer, "Don DeLillo's America", *The New Criterion* 3.8 (1985) 40f. Bawer is on the right track in considering the comparison between Hitler and Elvis (and its uncanny implications) offensive. But he fails to see that it is not Don DeLillo who advocates such a point of view, but his characters who fail to make distinctions (a point that has also been highlighted by Paul Cantor in his essay "Adolf, We Hardly Knew You" in *New Essays on White Noise*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Cambridge: CUP, 1991) 39-62). Jack and Murray know very well about the distinction they are concealing in front of their students. Consequently, we need to view their dangerous appropriation of Hitler as an instance where Don DeLillo shows the dangerous consequences of postmodernity's 'anything goes' attitude.

[174] Significantly, Jack worries about the consequences of supporting Murray: "[Murray's] eyes showed a deep gratitude. I had been generous with the power and madness at my disposal, allowing my subject to be associated with an infinitely lesser figure, a fellow who sat in La-Z-Boy chairs and shot out TVs. We all had an aura to maintain, and in sharing mine with a friend I was risking the very things that made me untouchable." (*WN* 73f.) Not only does Jack openly admit here that he is constructing an image of Hitler he himself does not even believe in, but that his whole academic career is based on an "aura" he needs to maintain in order to elevate his social status, i.e. that it is not grounded in serious academic interest as such.

DeLillo's comment on the state of contemporary American society gains momentum when Jack proves to be susceptible to fascist lures himself. In a scene I shall scrutinize in chapter 5.2.2, he acts like a cold-blooded murderer in the absurdly comic confrontation with his wife's pathetic lover, the obscure Mr. Gray (a telltale epithet Babette uses to veil her lover's real name, Willie Mink). Not only does Jack's affinity to and appropriation of Hitler's aura make readers question his reliability as a narrator, a doubt which is increased by Jack's susceptibility to the temptations of Siskind, this advocate of all things postmodern[175]. What is more, a character who needs to arm himself with *Mein Kampf* whenever he feels threatened (by an ex-husband of his wife's or by a colleague who might find out about his non-existent skills in the German language) is not a trustworthy narrator.

The uncanny combination of Adolf Hitler and Elvis Presley as fetish objects of academic study reveals the serious disruption of traditional concepts of identity. This disruption permeates all levels of *White Noise*. Nothing is as it seems in DeLillo's family novel. Jack Gladney, humorous husband and fond family father, changes into J.A.K. Gladney, the famous Hitler scholar (and Hitler's secret admirer!) with dark glasses and menacing bulk, whenever he slips into his black academic robe[176]. Babette, hefty homemaker, loving (step)mother, and volunteer reader to the blind, admits to have committed adultery and lied to her children in order to get a drug she believes will help her overcome her fear of death. Jack's cuckolder Mr. Gray, the mysterious man in the background, turns out to be a pitiable postmodern creature, a mere shadow of a man. Jack and Babette's respective children are impersonations of commercial- and TVspeak, yet they know more about life in postmodern America than their parents, and occasionally even prove to be more skillful, mature, and less insecure than Jack and Babette. These and other instances make *WN* a novel that continuously casts doubt on identity.

As frequent as these identity re-formations occur in the text, they are not critically reflected upon by the characters themselves. That is to say, the people in *WN* never explicitly problematize their identity. DeLillo makes it a point not to have characters look for 'who they

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[175] For Duvall, "Siskind is the true villain of *White Noise*", a sort of postmodern Mephistopheles". Cf. John N. Duvall (3), "The Supermarketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Meditation in DeLillo's *White Noise*", *White Noise. Text and Criticism*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin, 1998) 443.

[176] Jack admits to have constructed the persona of J.A.K. Gladney to advance his career: "[T]he chancellor had advised me, back in 1968, to do something about my name and my appearance if I wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator. Jack Gladney would not do, he said, and asked me what other names I might have at my disposal. We finally agreed that I should invent an extra initial and call myself J. A. K. Gladney, a tag I wore like a borrowed suit." (*WN* 16)

really are'[177], whereas he constantly confronts his readers with characters whose identity is unstable and ambiguous. This instability of identity appears to be derived from consumer society, the mass media, and the postmodern 'Lebenswelt' (Hans Blumenberg) in general the Gladneys and their fellow citizens inhabit. TV, which represents America's media-saturated society, and the supermarket, which stands for consumer society, are the most striking emblems of the Gladneys' *Lebenswelt*. In the next chapter, we will see how these two instances strongly influence family life in Americana. I want to focus on the structure of the family as a whole as well as on the relations between its individual members. In addition to that, rituals and conflicts will be discussed in order to show how Don DeLillo's novel differs from previous literary conceptualizations of the family.

5.2.1 The Postnuclear Patchwork Family: A Fearful Symmetry?

"More so than any of his novels before or since, *White Noise* is a traditional, realistic, domestic novel, focused on a single, middle-class family, a typical American town." (Orr 20) Leonard Orr's assessment of *WN* names the most important features of a family novel according to my definition in chapter 2.3. However, some of his criteria do not quite seem to agree with DeLillo's novel. Especially the characterization of *WN* as "traditional" or even "realistic" is problematic, but I will postpone a discussion of this issue until the following chapter. Here I wish to focus on the structure of the family that stands at the center of the novel. This time I agree with Orr, who holds: "[…] DeLillo's American family of the 1980s is far removed either from the Victorian tradition or, what might come more immediately to mind, the television sit-com family of the 1960s and 70s. The Gladneys straddle the traditional and the contemporary family situation in complex ways." (20) That is to say, in *White Noise*, Don DeLillo deconstructs long-established notions of the family. By radically subverting the different roles within the family in particular as well as the function of the family for the individual and society in general, DeLillo undermines our expectations of the genre, and consequently revolutionizes the parameters of traditional family novels.

The family portrayed in *WN* is an exaggerated example of the postmodern (postnuclear) family. Its structure is radically different from that of the traditional nuclear

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[177] In Senna's family-centered novel *Caucasia*, for example, the problem of identity is explicitly mentioned. The characters in *Caucasia* have different strategies to either avoid the question of who they are, or to spend all their energy trying to find it out. DeLillo's characters in *White Noise* never even think about their splintered identities. Cf. Danzy Senna, *Caucasia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).

family. Jack has been married four times, Babette three times. They have each brought a son and a daughter into their marriage. Jack's daughter Steffie, aged nine, and his son Heinrich Gerhard, aged fourteen, get along well enough with their stepsister Denise, who is eleven years old, and their stepbrother Wilder, a toddler of two years. *WN* is not a book that exploits the 'Cinderella' topos, i.e. a portrait of stepsibling and/or stepparents quarrels. That there are no strong coalitions or bad fights may be attributable to the fact that none of the children in the Gladney household has a directly related sibling living with them[178]; they all are, essentially, strangers to each other. To make the confusion even worse, Jack and Babette each have more children who live with their respective ex-spouses. Jack's daughter Bee, aged twelve, resides with her mother Tweedy Browner; his oldest daughter Mary Alice, who never even appears in the novel, is staying with her mother, Jack's first and fourth wife Dana Breedlove. Babette's son Eugene, who is eight years old, lives with his father somewhere in the Australian outback. As the unusual family constellation (Ferraro calls it "a fearful symmetry" (16)) shows, the various members of the Gladney family are separated not only genealogically, but also culturally. This dual gap between them seems unbridgeable.

Not only does the polygenic Gladney family impede a traditional way of identity formation of the children, their sense of belonging is complicated further by the various 'cultures' one or the other of their respective parents chooses for a 'lifestyle'. The case of Heinrich Gladney, Jack's oldest son, is particularly striking. While his first name appears to be a garish allusion of his Nazi-obsessed father to Heinrich Himmler[179], his maternal heritage is quite the opposite as his mother, Janet Savory, has changed her name into "Mother Devi". She lives in an ashram where she "runs the business end of things" (*WN* 24). The ashram is situated in Dharamsalapur, a town formerly known as Tubb, Montana. If Heinrich were to look for a role model, he could turn to his father for Nazi aura, and to his mother for a watered-down Buddhism where making money is an important part of the lifestyle. It is little surprising that Heinrich starts losing his hair in the middle of puberty and has taken to playing chess by mail with a convicted mass murderer.

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[178] Thomas Ferraro has figured out meticulously the average percentage of kinship between the members of the Gladney household: "*Each* adult lives […] with five other people whose average relation to him or her is only 20 percent; *every* child lives with five other people whose average relation to his or her is only 15 percent; and *everyone* in the household lives with five other people, *each of whom* is related on average by no more than (the same) 20 percent to *everyone else* in the house. Not a single child whom Babette has borne or Jack has fathered, whether in their custody or not, is living with both parents or even a full brother or sister." Cf. "Whole Families Shopping at Night!", *New Essays on White Noise*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Cambridge: CUP 1991) 17.

[179] Cf. Albert Mobilio, "Death by Inches", *White Noise. Text and Criticism*, ed. Mark Osteen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998) 370.

The remarkable lack of involvement of Jack and Babette (or his biological mother, for that matter) in view of Heinrich's dubious behavior is startling. They simply observe and comment on Heinrich's hobby, but do not interfere. Neither do they try to influence him by suggesting that he choose other spare time activities. When Jack asks his son about his precarious chess partner, he does so not in an attempt to save his son from harmful influences, but merely to confirm his stereotypes about mass murderers. Did Tommy Roy Foster make tapes, did he hear voices, did he shoot with a rifle, and did he make deals with the media? Heinrich patiently replies to his father's tabloid curiosity, smartly evading Jack's weak reminder of what Heinrich's mother would say about her son's chess friendship with a killer.

Tolerance and non-involvement mark Jack's educational policy. However, as Jack fails to teach values to his son, his tolerance has negative consequences. Lack of direction has turned Heinrich into a radically skeptical boy, who finds himself incapable of answering a question as simple as whether he would like to visit his mother in the summer: "Who knows what I want to do? Who knows what anyone wants to do? How can you be sure of something like that? Isn't it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex? How do you know whether something is really what you want to do or just some kind of nerve impulse of the brain?" (*WN* 45) His father, a professor in the humanities after all, has no answer. DeLillo grants the neuro-determinist Heinrich the last word: "It's all this activity in the brain and you don't know what's you as a person and what's some neuron that just happens to fire or just happens to misfire. Isn't that why Tommy Roy killed those people?" (*WN* 46) Jack's silence in view of this radical justification of Foster's terrible killings shows his lack of ability to pass on moral and ethical principles to his son – a fact that DeLillo uses to subtly incite his readers' disagreement.

The connection between violence and the radical skepticism of his day is one of DeLillo's strongest means of social critique. Contrary to John Cheever's Wapshot novels, no one in DeLillo's novel mourns America's lost innocence, or suffers from the status quo. In *WN*, there are no 'good old times' that could serve as a contrast to the Gladneys' world. The characters have arranged themselves more or less successfully with the circumstances.[180] They are either indifferent to their surroundings, or return to technology and consumerism for comfort and reassurance. Hence Jack's reaction to his son's radical neuro-determinism: "I

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[180] In fact, the only characters who do not succeed in this are the Treadwells, an old pair of siblings. They are acquaintances of the Gladneys because Babette reads to blind Mr. Treadwell from the tabloids once a week. At one point in the novel, they get lost in the mall for several days. After their rescue, they are in a state of profound shock, which eventually results in the death of Gladys Treadwell. Dreadful as this incident is, it does not leave any impression on the Gladneys; it merely blends in with the white noise of events in the novel.

went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate […]. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval." (*WN* 46) Pathetically, Jack does not have any principles of his own to cling to in these times of insecurity; he needs the comforts of technology to confirm the parameters of his existence. He turns out to be a questionable role model, for his children as much as for his students.

As a father, Jack fails more often than he succeeds. Liberal as Jack's educational principles are, they inhibit him from dealing with a problem directly. He simply does not rise above a stage of speculation: "Heinrich's hairline is beginning to recede. I wonder about this. Did his mother consume some kind of gene-piercing substance when she was pregnant? Am I at fault somehow? Have I raised him, unwittingly, in the vicinity of a chemical dump site, in the path of air currents that carry industrial wastes capable of producing scalp degeneration, glorious sunsets?" (*WN* 22) Not only does Jack here paint a picture of the postmodern landscape that surrounds him and his family, he also refuses to take action. A more responsible father would take his son to a doctor to inquire about his condition, which could be the symptom of a dangerous disease, after all. Alternatively, he could ask Heinrich's mother about the substances she took while she was pregnant, find out about other possible effects, and prepare for possible future corollaries. Jack, however, considers none of this. The future does not interest him, he prefers to forget the past and to remain exclusively in the present: "Let's enjoy these aimless days while we can, I told myself, fearing some kind of deft acceleration." (*WN* 18) Jack's thoughts are emblematic for his parental passivity. As such, they are a sign of the postmodern indifference and supreme ambivalence that mark all the characters in *White Noise*.

Like his (step-)siblings, Heinrich has developed a thoroughly postmodern understanding of the world. He constantly questions things and ideas that his parents still take for granted, such as a belief in the Cartesian subject, in truth, in the flow of time, etc. This 14-year-old kid, a veritable postmodern philosopher, outsmarts his father whenever the occasion arises. One of the funniest scenes in the novel is a dialogue between Heinrich and his progenitor as they are driving through the rain:

> 'It's going to rain tonight.' 'It's raining now,' I [Jack] said. 'The radio said tonight.' […] 'Look at the windshield,' I said. 'Is that rain or isn't it?' 'I'm only telling you what they said.' 'Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses.' 'Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory. […] The so-called laws of

motion are a big hoax. Even sound can trick the mind. Just because you don't hear a sound doesn't mean it's not out there. […].' 'Is it raining,' I said, 'or isn't it?' 'I wouldn't want to have to say.' 'What if someone held a gun to your head?' 'Who, you?' 'Someone. A man in a trenchcoat and smoky glasses. […] All you have to do is tell the truth […].' 'What truth does he want? Does he want the truth of someone traveling at almost the speed of light in another galaxy? Does he want the truth of someone in orbit around a neutron star? […]' 'He's holding a gun to *your* head. He wants your truth.' 'What good is my truth? My truth means nothing. […] He wants to know if it's raining now, at this very minute?' 'Here and now. That's right.' 'Is there such a thing as now? 'Now' comes and goes as soon as you say it. How can I say it's raining now if your so-called 'now' becomes 'then' as soon as I say it?' […] (*WN* 22f.)

As hard as Jack may try, he cannot convince his son that it is in fact raining while they are driving to school. In the end, Jack gives up irritated, turning to sarcasm as his last resort: "'First-rate,' I told him. 'A victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos. Science's finest hour.'" (*WN* 23) Heinrich, however, remains indifferent. He is already living comfortably in a world his father has yet to grasp[181].

The passage cited above can also be read as an instance where Don DeLillo plays with the philosophical discourse of his day. By having a fourteen-year-old kid mouthing the radical uncertainty a poststructuralist would advocate, he satirizes postmodern theorizing. By showing, additionally, how an internationally acclaimed professor loses the battle between theory and reality, DeLillo mocks American academia as well. The stance he takes in the discussion, however, remains ambiguous. He takes neither Heinrich's nor Jack's side in the matter, leaving it for his readers to decide whether they approve of this new philosophical turn of events or not. This ambiguity makes the scene as unsettling as its apparent lack of choice. All of Jack's logic exercises fail; the world of *White Noise* provides no alternative to Heinrich's claims. In this regard, the novel is clearly postmodern, although DeLillo counts on the possibility of an alternative world in his readers' minds.

The case of Heinrich is emblematic for the reversed relationship between parent figures and children as well. For although Jack and Babette try to fulfill their roles as good as they can, they turn out to be weaker than, and desperately in need of, their (step)children. While there is no doubt that Jack and Babette love their children, readers quickly realize that their love is naïve. For Jack, family life is enchanting. Watching Babette and Denise interact

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[181] The conversation between Heinrich and Jack needs to be read as a signal for the epochal change Jack experiences, a shift from the order of the world as he knows it to a postmodern world whose meaninglessness frightens him. Jack is becoming obsolete: "Der Sohn ist, so gesehen, der neue Typ. Und so gesehen ist der Vater weder der Gute, noch der Gekränkte, noch der Inbegriff der höchsten Ordnung, sondern das Fossil, der Überlebte, der Mann der versinkenden Epoche, der nicht wahrhaben will, daß sich das welthistorische Blatt gewendet hat." (von Matt 69)

silently, he thinks happily: "It was these secondary levels of life, these extrasensory flashes and floating nuances of being, these pockets of rapport forming unexpectedly, that made me believe we were a magic act, adults and children together, sharing unaccountable things." (*WN* 34) It is ironic that Jack and Babette's love and their wish to protect the children are completely out of place in the world they live in. Their parental feelings are nothing more than a nostalgic remainder of something in which the children themselves are no longer interested. After losing the intellectual battle against Heinrich, Jack watches his son "walk through the downpour to the school entrance. He moved with deliberate slowness, taking off his camouflage cap ten yards from the doorway. At such moments I find I love him with an animal desperation, a need to take him under my coat and crush him to my chest, keep him there, protect him." (*WN* 25) Thoughtful and loving as these remarks seem, they become a farce when Jack muses about how his son, who "seems to bring a danger to him" (*WN* 25), plays chess "with a convicted killer in the penitentiary." (ibd.) Readers get the impression that Babette and Jack need to be protected from Heinrich instead: traditional roles are inverted. Clearly, the world adults and children in the Gladney household share is more fragile than "magic".

The children no longer trust their parents. They have learned that adults can neither give them security about the present nor the future of the respective family they temporarily happen to live in. Jack daughter Steffie, who is supposed to visit her mother in Mexico, fears that her own mother (of whom she does not even know the age (*WN* 47)) might kidnap her and refuse to send her back to Blacksmith. Steffie's anxiety is based on the fact that she simply does not know much about her mother. Hence her question to Jack: "'How do I know I'll recognize my mother?' 'You saw her last year,' I said. 'You liked her.'" (*WN* 269) Steffie's anxiety underlines the shaky emotional state of the children in the Gladney household. It also highlights the corrosion of the idea of family as a shelter and safe haven.

Childhood, whose innocence has been considered sacred since the Enlightenment, is a paradise lost but not mourned in *White Noise*. The children mature early. Jack's daughter Bee from his marriage to Tweedy Browner is a case in point. Her mother proudly tells Jack:

> Every child ought to have the opportunity to travel thousands of miles alone. […] You have to start them young. It's one of the things I'm proudest to have accomplished with Bee. I sent her to Boston on Eastern when she was nine. I told Granny Browner not to meet her plane. Getting out of airports is every bit as important as the actual flight. Too many parents ignore this phase of a child's development. Bee is thoroughly bicoastal now. She flew her first jumbo at ten, changed planes at O'Hare, had a near miss in Los Angeles. Two weeks later she took the Concorde to London. (*WN* 93)

Apart from the fact that not many people could afford to live by Tweedy's advice anyway, her educational principles seem not only superficial but also cruel. She does not worry about possible dangers to her daughter, insisting that "[p]lanes and terminals are the safest places for the very young and the very old." (*WN* 93) Jack does not disagree. Just having sent his other nine-year old daughter to Mexico, Jack's liberal attitude is of the same dubious caliber as Tweedy's. Ironically, Jack's identity as Bee's progenitor is even called into question when his ex-wife no longer makes a distinction between the real father and the stepfather of her daughter. To Jack's question about his daughter's whereabouts, Tweedy answers: "'[She is] with her father.' 'I'm her father, Tweedy.' 'Malcolm Hunt, stupid. My husband.' 'He's your husband, he's not her father.'" (*WN* 86f.) Jack's irritated correction of her mix-up cannot conceal the serious disruption of identity/-ies exposed here. No wonder their daughter Bee, forced to adjust to every culture and country her mother happens to turn, is a thoroughly postmodern creature whose sense of belonging is deeply disturbed. This is how Jack introduces her earlier in the novel:

> My daughter Bee […] was just starting seventh grade in a Washington suburb and was having trouble readjusting to life in the States after two years in South Korea. She took taxis to school, made phone calls to friends in Seoul and Tokyo. Abroad she'd wanted to eat ketchup sandwiches with Trix sticks. Now she cooked fierce sizzling meals of scallion bushes and baby shrimp, monopolizing Tweedy's restaurant-quality range. (*WN* 16)

The result of all the changes Bee had to go through from an early age on is that she has lost the innocence and sense of belonging of a child her age. At age twelve, Bee is more mature than her parents: "A child of globalization, she exemplifies […] postnational identity." (Peyser 261) Therefore, Jack both admires and fears her, feeling "as if she were not my child at all but the sophisticated and self-reliant friend of one of my children." (*WN* 94) Similar to his feelings towards his other (natural or step-) children, Jack is confused about the nature of his relationship to Bee. Evidently, it is hard to build a functional father-daughter relationship over the geographical distance that separates the two, or even to keep contact at all. What Jack realizes then after taking his daughter to the airport is that her feelings toward him disclose an even greater distance: "I realized Bee was watching me carefully, importantly. […] The look was one of solemn compassion. It was a look I did not necessarily trust, believing it had little to do with pity or love or sadness. I recognized it in fact as something else completely. The adolescent female's tenderest form of condescension." (*WN* 97)

Jack's observation encompasses much of the subversion of traditional family conflicts that *WN* offers. The father is neither a figure of authority the children rebel against, nor is he

the wise teacher and/or loving protector. In *WN*, the father is curiously detached from his children, who seem to like him, but who also simply do not care to take him seriously. DeLillo's novel thus undermines traditional or archetypical images of the father. Although Jack does not like his situation, he is unable to change it. In an increasingly confusing world, he depends on the children for emotional stability.

Jack is in need of his children whenever he is not at the college, i.e. whenever he is not able to slip into his shielding role as J.A.K. Gladney, the ugly-looking Hitler specialist. Such occasions arise whenever the family is out shopping. The following scene between Jack and his nine-year-old daughter reveals his insecurity: "Steffie was holding my hand in a way I'd come to realize, over a period of time, was not meant to be gently possessive, as I'd thought at first, but reassuring. […] A firm grip that would help me restore confidence in myself, keep me from becoming resigned to whatever melancholy mood she thought she detected hovering about my person." (*WN* 39) The roles are inverted here, as the adult seems to be weaker than the child. Such a reversal of roles is a striking characteristic of the Gladney family. It applies to the intellectual/educational interaction within the family as well. The children know more about life in their contemporary American environment than their parents do[182]; they dispose of the necessary survival skills their parents are lacking. Jack and Babette's awareness of this lack is a possible reason for their attachment to family: "Much of the main characters' devotion to the family is predicated on their desire to compensate […] for the loss of other kinds of cultural boundedness. This loss of broader form-giving entities, however, is itself one of the chief disablers of the family." (Peyser 268) In other words, the postmodern condition is a severe impediment to a functional family life.

Jack and Babette are unable to take full responsibility for their children. Even when they try, they remain unhelpful, as their imprudent reaction the "airborne toxic event" reveals. Jack learns from Heinrich that a tank has derailed outside of Blacksmith, emitting poisonous smoke that is coming their way. Jack's response is outright denial: "'It won't get here.' 'How do you know?' 'Because it won't.'" (*WN* 111). Instead of finding out more about the unsettling situation, Jack stubbornly defends his unsubstantiated claim. He even considers his foolish refutation of the danger as a perfectly responsible reaction, believing that it adds "the balanced weight of a mature and considered judgment to [his son's] pure observations", which he finds to be "a parent's task, after all." (*WN* 115) In the end, Jack and Babette's silly

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[182] "The children are more willing to face threats to existence than are their parents." See Tom LeClair, "Closing the Loop: *White Noise*", <u>*White Noise. Text and Criticism*</u>, ed. Mark Osteen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998) 396.

attempt to shield their children from danger by simply ignoring it not only jeopardizes their rescue, but also causes Jack to be exposed to the toxic cloud of Nyodene D. during their evacuation.

As much as Jack and Babette need the children for comfort, the kids also constantly confront them with the hostile reality from which both are trying to hide: "Es beginnt wie ein heiterer Familienroman, [doch] plötzlich erweisen sich die Kinder als abgebrühte Realisten, die ihren Eltern noch die letzten Illusionen rauben. Gnadenlos reißen sie die Fassade ein, mit der sich ihre Erzeuger um böse Wahrheiten, um Angst und Tod herumzudrücken versuchen."[183] A case in point is the family dinner at the moment of the toxic disaster. The children are nervous, while the parent figures refuse to believe that they should take the dangerous situation seriously. Their almost obsessive concentration on the food on the table is ridiculous. Jack is convinced the situation cannot be dangerous because it simply does not fit his social status: "I'm a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country […]." (*WN* 117) Like his wife, he keeps eating calmly, ignoring the air sirens all around the neighborhood. Only when the children start to react to the sirens, Jack and Babette follow. The traditional roles of parents and children are overturned.

There is an epistemological hiatus between parents and children in *WN*. At one point, Babette remarks: "The world is more complicated for adults than it is for children. We didn't grow up with all these shifting facts and attitudes. One day they just started appearing. So people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way, at least for the time being." (*WN* 171f.) While Babette's innocent remark reveals a dangerous fascination with fascist structures, they also stress the parents' intellectual inferiority. This is confirmed by a 'knowledge contest' between parents and children (among the latter, Heinrich is taking the lead). Jack and Babette recur to what they hold to be unshakeable truths ("The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the two sides." (*WN* 176)) in order to counter Heinrich's uncanny information about the possible dangers of the waves and radiation surrounding the family. The children's eerie ability to adjust to the highly technicized world around them is the key to the gap between younger and older generation, and makes them very unusual figures. Uwe Wittstock notes: "Das Unheimliche an diesem Buch sind die Kinder." (n.p.) They happily arrange themselves with the order of the simulacrum that rules their universe. Nine-year-old Steffie is

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[183] Uwe Wittstock, "Demonstrativ leserfreundlich. Ein Porträt des amerikanischen Erzählers Don DeLillo", *literaturkritik* 6 (Juni 1994), http://literaturkritik.de/txt/1999-66-55.html.

a good example of this strategy. Her behavior in the context of one of the book's most central events, the spill of toxic gas eventually called "the airborne toxic event", is a thorough manifestation of the postmodern condition and the Baudrillardian simulacrum[184]. Whenever the obscure state program SIMUVAC, which organizes simulated disasters in order to train for the real event, "rehearses" a catastrophe, Steffie plays one of the victims. Jack is uncomfortable seeing his daughter like that: "Is this how she thinks of herself at the age of nine – already a victim, trying to polish her skills? How natural she looked, how deeply imbued with the idea of sweeping disaster." (*WN* 205) For the little girl, there is indeed nothing scary or unnatural about her participation in the exercise. Like Heinrich or Bee, but unlike Jack and Babette, she is at ease in the postmodern world that surrounds her. That a little girl like her should feel this way is, however, a strategy of DeLillo's to make readers uneasy and obtain a critical distance to the world presented in *WN*.

Due to the absurd nature of SIMUVAC, Steffie's involvement in their rehearsals is highly ironic. During the real disaster of the toxic cloud, for instance, they use the event to rehearse their own simulation[185]. A little later, at the occasion of another disaster, and one that they have actually trained for, no one appears:

> The next day there was [a simulated] evacuation for noxious odor. SIMUVAC vehicles were everywhere. […] Three days later an actual noxious odor drifted across the river. […] There was no sign of official action, no jitneys or ambulettes painted in primary colors. People avoided looking at each other directly. […] There were those who professed not to see the irony of their inaction. They'd taken part in the SIMUVAC exercise but were reluctant to flee now. (*WN* 270f.)

To the meaninglessness of SIMUVAC's preparations Steffie is astonishingly well accustomed. Her bodily reactions to the toxic cloud are a case in point. She adjusts her physical response to the "airborne toxic event" according to the warnings on the radio. First she complains of sweaty palms, but after the radio describes vomiting and nausea as the new effects of the toxic cloud, she develops exactly these symptoms. Moreover, when the symptoms are announced to have changed into *déjà vu*, Steffie claims to have experienced the

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[184] Leonard Wilcox, who holds that the "world of simulacra" DeLillo presents in *White Noise* is uncannily similar to that depicted by Jean Baudrillard", also argues this point. See "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative", *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, eds. Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles (New York: G.K. Hall &Co., 2000) 196.

[185] As Jack finds out in the course of the disaster, SIMUVAC stands for "simulated evacuations". Talking to a SIMUVAC employee, Jack wonders why they use a spillage of toxic gas to rehearse a real event: "'But this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real.' 'We know that. But we could use it as a model.' 'A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation?' 'We took it right into the street. […] You have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real. There's a lot of polishing we still have to do. But that's what the exercise is all about." (*WN* 139) SIMUVAC's strategy is nothing but Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum, i.e. the idea that signs of the real have replaced the real itself, so that it is no longer possible to make a distinction between the real and its replacement - a simulacrum.

situation before. While it is not completely clear whether Steffie understands the concept of *déjà vu*, i.e. whether her reaction is real or fake, her conduct allows at least for one interpretation: she retrospectively tries to justify the 'information' or rumors transmitted by the radio with her own actions. Her behavior can be read as an attempt to endow the world around her with meaning. This presupposes that Steffie is aware of - and even in tune with - the totalizing meaninglessness around her, an insight Jack and Babette fear and therefore try to deny.

Similar to Jack, her inability to cope with the reality around her makes Babette a contradictory figure. She embodies (as well as undercuts) traits of the nurturing mother as well as of the dangerous (erotic) mother[186]. Most of the time, she looks after the children carefully and lovingly, but she fails in her efforts when she lets her own fear of death overcome rational thinking. This is especially evident in her reaction to the 'airborne toxic event' discussed before. Babette is more in need of her children than they are in need of her. She is especially fond of Wilder, her two-year-old. Her fondness is almost an obsession since she is incessantly looking for him and panics when he is out of sight. Wilder provides Babette with a security of which her life is devoid otherwise. She uses the child as a "protective charm" (LeClair (2) 396). Her desire to have the toddler around is so immense that she does not want him to grow up at all: "Here are the two things I want most in the world. Jack not to die first. And Wilder to stay the way he is forever." (*WN* 236) As an explanation of Babette's need of a forever-young Wilder, most interpreters maintain that she secretly longs for his innocence, his state of inexperience with the dangers and desires of consumer society, and especially his complete ignorance of death (and the resulting lack of the tanathophobia that haunts his mother's life). This fact betrays that Babette is not at all the strong and selfless mother she appears to be at first sight. She needs Wilder because he is the only one who can offer her the consolation and comfort that otherwise only Dylar, the drug designed to suppress fear of death, provides. She confesses to her husband: "Wilder helps me get by. […] The fear hasn't gone, Jack. […] Active helps but Wilder helps more." (*WN* 263) Because she depends on Wilder, Babette does not, for instance, encourage his development in speaking. While the relationship between mother and son is loving at the surface, Babette's need reveals her selfishness more than an actual concern for her little son's development.

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[186] Because she is entangled in an extramarital affair, Babette is an erotic mother figure. This very erotic side of her is mocked, however, when we learn that she had been wearing a ski mask during intercourse with Mr. Gray. Similarly, DeLillo deconstructs Babette's nurturing side by juxtaposing it with her obsessive need of a forever-young Wilder. The novel thus undercuts archetypical images of the Mother.

Apart from revealing Babette' weaknesses, Wilder also serves the purpose of illustrating the situation of the other family members.[187] He is unaffected by the age of simulation that so heavily influences his half siblings: "Wilder stands as the pinnacle of innocence and naïveté – he has not yet been corrupted by his complex society. It is to his state that Babette and Jack wish they could return." (Rump 10) While their behavior can be explained in terms of television and the order of the simulacrum, the toddler's strange conduct stays enigmatic. DeLillo uses him as a contrast to the rest of the Gladney bunch as well as to inscribe purposefully fundamental undecidability into his novel. At one point in the novel, Wilder starts ululating wildly for hours without reason. Nothing can stop him, which leaves the family in a state of profound helplessness. For Jack, who is desperate to find traces of transcendence in his utterly materialistic world, Wilders cries ring of a mystic, almost archetypal quality, a clue to the human condition:

> […] I realized his crying had changed in pitch and quality. The rhythmic urgency had given way to a sustained, inarticulate and mournful sound. He was keening now. These were expressions of Mideastern lament, of an anguish so accessible that it rushes to overwhelm whatever immediately caused it. There was something permanent and soul-struck in this crying. It was a sound of inbred desolation." (*WN* 77)

After several hours, Wilder suddenly stops crying, leaving the other characters even more bewildered. The reason for his strange behavior remains in the dark. The other children regard the little boy with awe. The adults envy Wilder for his access to "some remote and holy place […] which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions." (*WN* 79) Wilder is the last of family members who does not yet take things for granted, who has a voice of his own that is not yet influenced by media messages. The scene harbors social criticism as well: if the wailing of a child is considered transcendental, the world of *WN* must be completely meaningless.

Since Wilder is only two years old, the "'family' cannot have been together more than two years; moreover, not one child is living with a full sibling" (Osteen viii). This fact points to another curious deviation from the post-war family novel, let alone the family chronicle: there do not seem to exist any other relatives pertaining to the extended Gladney family. DeLillo spares us the confusing number of grandparents, aunts and uncles the Gladneys' family constellation would have produced. Were all grandparents alive (all we get to know is that Babette's mother has died, and only one other grandparent appears), both Jack and

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[187] Cf. Keiran Rump, "The Wilder State in Delillo's [sic] *White Noise*", *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 30.2 (2000) 10.

Babette's marriages would have produced as many as sixteen grandparent figures. The one grandparent we meet is Vernon Dickey, Babette's father (and consequently full grandfather to all of her children). Vernon is a relic from a pre-postmodern time. He is refreshingly unsentimental, dryly responding to Babette's surprise at his unexpected visit in the middle of the night: "Here I am. Big deal. Toot the horn." (*WN* 247) Although Vernon's deadpan commentaries make him a comic character, his role in Jack's life is not to be taken too lightly. Vernon gives Jack the gun he should later use in is plot to kill his cuckolder Willie Mink. Healthy, unsentimental, and fearless, he is a character that is diametrically opposed to Jack.

Vernon Dickey's purpose within the novel is to underline the difference between his own unsentimental no-nonsense life and Jack's manic fear of disease and death. With the exception of Wilder, Vernon is the only character in the novel that is "real", i.e. whose sense of reality and life has not yet been, and is unlikely to be, colonized by the mass-mediated order of the simulacrum. Vernon is a real man with real diseases and a real grip on life. Unlike Jack, he knows how to repair things, considering this the only manly and useful activity. He represents the American ideal of the diligent do-it-yourself man, the simple man who disposes of physical strength and skill. Consequently, he looks down on his son-in-law, the ineffectual academic. The ever-insecure Jack feels threatened by Vernon's presence:

> There were times when he seemed to attack me with terms like ratched drill and whipsaw. He saw my shakiness in such matters as a sign of some deeper incompetence or stupidity. These were the things that built the world. Not to know or care about them was a betrayal of fundamental principles, a betrayal of gender, of species. What could be more useless than a man who couldn't fix a dripping faucet – fundamentally useless, dead to history, to the message in his genes? I wasn't sure I disagreed. (WN 245)

In contrast to Jack, who knows he is nothing but "the false character that follows the name around" (*WN* 17), Vernon knows his place in the world. If Jack resembles "a modernist displaced in a postmodern world" (Wilcox 197), Vernon is pre-modern, a man from a past so remote from postmodern Blacksmith he seems to have been taken out of an old movie. Vernon's presence in the house threatens Jack on various levels. Apart from the feeling of inadequacy in the face of Vernon's practical skills, Jack also envies his father-in-law for being firmly rooted in the world of objects. Moreover, Vernon introduces disease in the house, a messenger of death Jack fervently tries to keep at bay. To the death-fearing Jack, Vernon's state of physical deterioration is a nightmare. He repeatedly mentions Vernon's coughing and smoking, his loose teeth and shaky limbs. Vernon's health problems are real, yet in contrast to Jack and his simulacrum disease (see chapter 5.2.2), he does not care about them at all.

Neither does he care too much about family. He is not sentimental about his role as a grandfather; in fact, his crude language and promiscuous lifestyle make anything but a stereotypical "grampa". Despite his age, for instance, Vernon enjoys the company of unusual women – although he does not like to be too involved: "Just so you know where I'm at, Jack, there's a woman that wants to marry my ass. She goes to church in a mobile home. … [But] I'd have to be crazy to marry a woman that worships in a mobile home." (*WN* 246) Vernon is the only one in the novel who possesses what could be called, in old fashion, 'common sense'. He sees through the superficiality of his peers when he comments to Jack: "Were people this dumb before television?" (*WN* 249) Vernon's unconventional attitudes, and his merely cursory interest in his grandchildren, are in tune with the peculiar reluctance of the children to build up emotional bonds to any relative of theirs. Vernon is one more example of the Gladney (postnuclear) family's tendency to conceptualize their relationship to other family members as a rather loose bond.

Family ties are not important in *White Noise* universe. Steffen Hantke describes this lack of bonding as a typical trait of the postmodern family novel[188]. The children have no or very little contact with their siblings who do not live with them. Other relatives never appear and are only mentioned with respect to the gifts they have left. They are present only in the family photo albums as well as in the material goods Jack and Babette have accumulated throughout the years. The Gladney home seems cluttered with material goods and packaging, more storage room than family home[189]:

> Babette and I do our talking in the kitchen. The kitchen and the bedroom are the major chambers around here, the power haunts, the sources. She and I are alike in this, that we regard the rest of the house as storage space for furniture, toys, all the unused objects of earlier marriages and different sets of children, the gifts of lost in-laws, the hand-me-downs and rummages. Things, boxes. (*WN* 6)

What is more, the wrappings of the diverse goods, as well as the waste they eventually become, play an important role. From Jack's initial description of his house, we get to know as much about the garbage on the lawn as about the house itself: "Our house looked old and wan at the end of the street, the porch light shining on a molded plastic tricycle, a stack of three-hour colored-flame sawdust and wax logs." (*WN* 27) The sorry state of the Gladney

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[188] Steffen Hantke, *Conspiracy and Paranoia in Contemporary American Fiction. The Works of Don DeLillo and Joseph McElroy* (Frankfurt/.Main: Lang, 1994) 40.

[189] This point has also been underlined by Heinz Ickstadt, who holds that the Gladney home is "where the acquired goods are consumed, stored, or processed into garbage. But it is also the favorite locus of family communication, […] where family life is staged as a dissonant ensemble of polyphonic voices, […] while the TV is incessantly running and the radio turns itself on and off for no apparent reason." See Heinz Ickstadt, *Faces of Fiction. Essays on American Literature and Culture from the Jacksonian Period to Postmodernity*, eds. Susanne Rohr and Sabine Sielke (Heidelberg: Winter, 2001) 379.

home signals the obsolescence of its owner's family-oriented way of life as well as it serves as metaphor of the family's general state of corrosion and decay. Similarly, family meals are marked by a striking attention to wrappings and packaging:

> Soon it was time for lunch. We entered a period of chaos and noise. We milled about, bickered a little, dropped utensils. Finally we were all satisfied with what we'd been able to snatch from the cupboard and refrigerator or swipe from each other and we began quietly plastering mustard or mayonnaise on our brightly colored food. The mood was one of deadly serious anticipation, a reward hard-won. The table was crowded and Babette and Denise elbowed each other twice, although neither spoke. Wilder was seated on the counter surrounded by open cartons, crumpled tinfoil, shiny bags of potato chips, bowls of pasty substances covered with plastic wrap, flip-top rings and twist ties, individually wrapped slices of orange cheese. (*WN* 6f.)

The narrator's careful description of the packaging of the food signals that something is wrong with the relationship between the people at the table. The silence of the family members, who do not even get up to turn off the smoke alarm that had suddenly started, indicates problems as well.

An important family ritual, meals are symbolic of the family's happiness and unity – or the lack thereof. As John Frow notes, "[m]eals in this house lack the monumental solidity of the meals in *Buddenbrooks* or even in the James Bond novels; they are depthless, physically insubstantial. At times the staple junk food is opposed to the 'real' (but never achieved) lunch of yogurt and wheat germ, but the truth of the matter is that eating has entirely to do with surfaces."[190] Waste, which is a favorite theme of DeLillo's on which he also draws extensively in his later novels *Mao II* and *Underworld*, represents for him the dark underside of consumer culture. The waste that dominates the Gladneys' family meal indicates their deep immersion into consumerism. It is also a comment on the 'wasted' time of the family gatherings. Not only do the meals reveal shallowness in terms of *what* people eat, the lack of harmony at the heart of the Gladney family is also reflected in *how* they eat. All family meals in *WN* have in common a peculiar silence that falls upon the family members. No one seems to enjoy these occasions. The following scene from "Dylarama", the third part of the novel, brilliantly exposes the Gladneys' deep immersion into postmodern culture:

> No one wanted to cook that night. We all got in the car and went to the commercial strip in the no man's land beyond the town boundary. The never-ending neon. I pulled in at a place that specialized in chicken parts and brownies. We decided to eat in the car. The car was sufficient for our needs. We wanted to eat, not look around at other people. We wanted to fill our stomachs and get it over with. We didn't need light and space. We certainly didn't need to face each other across a table as we ate, building a

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[190] John Frow, "The Last Things before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*", *White Noise. Text and Criticism*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin, 1998) 429.

subtle and complex cross-networks of signals and codes. We were content to eat facing in the same direction, looking only inches past our hands. […] We ate fully dressed, in hats and heavy coats, without speaking, ripping chicken into parts with our hands and teeth." (*WN* 231f.)

The family here resembles a primitive form of existence more than the sophisticated twentieth century American family we would normally expect them to be. The stark contrast between their primitive eating habits (eating with their bare hands, in complete silence, chewing and swallowing as fast as possible, not looking beyond their food) and the highly industrialized environment ("the never-ending neon", the fast-food restaurant, the parking lot of the commercial strip where they find themselves) suggests their degeneration. Like animals, the immediate satisfaction of their bodily needs is the family's only goal. Eating provides the Gladneys with a happiness their lives are lacking otherwise: "We sent Denise to get more food, waiting for her in silence. Then we started again, half stunned by the dimensions of our pleasure." (*WN* 232) The satire in this comment is combined with social criticism. DeLillo is far from longing for traditional, formal family dinners. However, his message seems to be that for all the technological and epistemological progress of which the Gladneys, this typical American family, take advantage, they and their peers are more primitive than ever before.[191] It is crucial to note, however, that the difference between the Gladneys' primitive eating habits and the seemingly advanced environment is not genuine: what Don DeLillo really suggests is that the homogenized landscape of shopping malls and fast food restaurants is symbolic of America's cultural erosion as well.

Apart from the awkard family meals, the Gladneys spend no time with each other except for watching TV together on Friday nights, and shopping. The family usually goes to the supermarket together, where Babette and Jack reconfirm themselves about their sense of identity. Shopping makes them feel more authentic:

> It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls – it seemed that we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening. (*WN* 20)

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[191] DeLillo makes the same point in Jack's description of a lunchtime scene between the faculty members of the department of American Environments. These highly adorned academics take any occasion to throw food at each other, threatening one another with questions like, "Did you ever crap in a toilet bowl that had no seat?" (*WN* 67), or "Where were you when James Dean died?" (*WN* 68). DeLillo directs his mordant satire here against the contemporary tendency of an increasing trivialization of knowledge that the growing interest in popular culture scholars has triggered in the humanities.

As this quote demonstrates, Don DeLillo's conception of the supermarket in *White Noise* differs fundamentally from that of John Cheever. In *The Wapshot Chronicle*, the supermarket represents an illusory world whose freedom of consumer choice, unfriendly clerks and row after row of products silently menacing the lonely housewives only highlight the characters' feelings of alienation and imprisonment. The supermarket is an artificial and hostile world, *TWC* suggests, it is a threat to people's sense of identity and is emblematic of the emergent post-industrial age. In *WN*, however, there would be no sense of identity at all without the supermarket. The inhabitants of Blacksmith need their supermarket for comfort and reassurance. It seems to one of the few places unaffected by the general decay:

> Some of the houses in town were showing signs of neglect. The park benches needed repair, the broken streets needed resurfacing. But the supermarket did not change, except for the better. It was well-stocked, musical and bright. This was the key, it seemed to us. Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip. (*WN* 170)

In Cheever's world, the alternative of a wholesome and natural Thoreauvian America is still looming in the background, and it is the tragedy of the new generation that they can no longer gain access to it. In DeLillo's Americana, however, there is no such nostalgia anymore[192]. Therefore, the characters' search for meaning and identity through shopping ('I shop, therefore I am') is not tragic but ironic.

All the family's activities are grounded in consumer culture. When they eat out, they go to fast food restaurants. When they go out, they go only to the mall, the supermarket, or the airport. The Gladneys live in a sealed world from which they never reach out to do sports, play music, attend church service, etc. Each individual focuses his or her life either on the workplace (school, university, the church basement where Babette gives lessons in posture) or on the family home. International as their surroundings are (the mailman is a Pakistani, the doctor an Indian, the girl next door comes from the Ivory coast, the crowd at the airport is international, and the ethnicity of Heinrich's friend Orest Mercator cannot even be determined), the Gladneys seem forever imprisoned the local, i.e. the global village of the postmodern age.

Considering the confusing genealogical background as well as the cultural environment of the children, it is no surprise that their sense of subjectivity is disturbed. The company of a technological 'family member' increases this sad fact. TV, with its omnipresent voice, is the house's "focal point", as Jack muses, it is "where the outer torment lurks, causing

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[192] Cf. chapter 5.2.2 on DeLillo's postmodern landscapes in *White Noise*.

fears and secret desires." (*WN* 85) It contributes to the white noise that surrounds the Gladneys. There are several TVs in the household that 'participate' in conversations. Whenever there is a dialogue between family members, TV interrupts with an absurd yet strangely fitting 'message' or comment. The conceptualization of television as another family member is unmistakable as Jack anthropomorphizes the medium in repeated comments such as 'the TV said', etc.

In *WN*, television is ubiquitous. Its impact on the children is immense. Denise imitates a TV by wearing a green visor "fourteen hours a day […]. She would not go out without it, would not even leave her room. She wore it in school, […] wore it to the toilet, to the dentist's chair, the dinner table." (*WN* 37) While Jack's interpretation of Denise's behavior is that "[s]omething about the visor seemed to speak to her, to offer wholeness and identity" (*WN* 37), Murray Jay Siskind's assessment hits the nail on the head: "'It's her interface with the world.'" (*WN* 37) In other words, Denise 'acts' like a TV. The medium has conquered her sense of subjectivity and agency.

In his depiction of television, Don DeLillo wanted to take issue with the increasing commercialization of society: "I lived abroad for three years, and when I came back to this country in 1982, I began to notice something on television which I hadn't noticed before. This was the daily toxic spill – there was the news, the weather, and the toxic spill. This was a phenomenon no one even mentioned. It was simply a television reality." (Orr 14[193]) Instead of developing a personality of their own, the children are mere echo chambers of media messages. Far from finding this alarming, Jack sees it as communication of transcendental values. In a much-quoted scene in *WN*, Jack is watching Steffie sleep when he witnesses an unusual incident: "Steffie turned slightly, then muttered something in her sleep. It seemed important that I know what I was. […] She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. *Toyota Celica*." (*WN* 155) The little girl's unconscious is beleaguered by the language of television. Where the old Freudian "It" supposedly dwells, Steffie only disposes of a repertoire of advertisement slogans.[194] To Jack, this is a revelation, a shield against the transcendental void he experiences in his life: "A long moment passed before I realized this

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[193] Leonard Orr has taken the quote from an interview of Rothstein with Don DeLillo, the specific source of which he does not mention.

[194] To this point, Stephen do Carmo adds: "Where Steffie's most authentic self ought to be (the Freudian unconscious, with its dreams, pulsions, and repressed desires), there is only this 'supranational' and 'computer-generated' […] emblem of her objectness, or her disappearance into Baudrillard's 'impenetrable and meaningless' masses." Cf. "Subjects, Objects, and the Postmodern Differend in Don DeLillo's White Noise", *Literature Interpretation Theory* 2.1 (2000) 11.

was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. […] Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence." (*WN* 155) A world where the repetition of a commercial slogan in a child's dream is the main character's only access to transcendence is not very attractive. In effect, his strategy to cause repulsion at the Gladneys' world is a powerful critical tool of DeLillo's.

It is important to realize that the Gladneys are portrayed as a normal family. There are no other families in *WN* to which they could be compared; and as none of the characters sees even the slightest irregularity in their family constellation, readers are encouraged to assume that there is no alternative to the postnuclear family, at least not within the perspective of the book. DeLillo does not openly celebrate this development, although his criticism remains subtle. The adults are already accustomed to the situation, and the children have learned to cope with the numerous separations and remarriages. However, their confidence in family is spoiled. They no longer trust adults and are reluctant to build a relationship towards a relative for fear of the pain that losing the respective person could mean for them: "They were suspicious of all relatives. Relatives were a sensitive issue, part of the murky and complex past, the divided lives, the memories that could be refloated by a word or a name." (*WN* 249) While this quote uncovers the psychological damage the children have suffered, it also points to an important characteristic of Gladney family life that has already emerged a few times here – the notion of surface. In the passage quoted above, Jack refers to the "murky and complex past" of each family member, a past that remains strikingly in the dark throughout the whole novel. Except for the appearance of Babette's father and a small number of remarks on Jack's ex-wives, there is almost no reference to the individual family members' past (cf. also Ferraro 15).

The Gladneys are living a fundamentally superficial live. Occasionally, however, readers catch a glimpse at the insecurity lurking beneath the surface. The children have different ways of coping with this insecurity. Denise, for instance, collects things from her childhood: "She is the kind of child who feels a protective tenderness towards her own beginnings. It is part of her strategy in a would of displacements to make every effort to restore and preserve, keep things together for their value as remembering objects, a way of fastening herself to a life." (*WN* 103) As we have seen above, Heinrich, by contrast, totally subscribes to neuro-determinist and constructivist ideas. His conviction of the meaninglessness of human actions and the futility of communication is, ironically, the only sense-giving force in his life.

Like the colorful packaging Jack so often describes, the Gladneys' life seems bright and joyful on the outside. Beneath this facade, however, the family members feel isolated, unhappy, and confused. This is most evident after they have participated together in events intended to promote feelings of family unity and harmony, such as Christmas. Instead of enjoying the gift-exchanging time together as any ordinary family would, some family members retreat to their own rooms "to investigate their gifts in private." (*WN* 95) If even a holiday like Christmas (which, in the Gladney household, is a day like any other) cannot stir up the wish to be together, little else can. For the Gladneys, Christmas is mainly about trading consumer goods.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Gladneys should enjoy their finest hours of unity and harmony at a shopping spree in the mall. After a discouraging encounter with a colleague who exposes Jack as "a big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (*WN* 83) without his academic robe and dark glasses, Jack needs to build up on "existential credit" (Duvall) by shopping relentlessly. Gratefully, he notices the support from his family: "My family gloried in the event. I was one of them, shopping, at last. They gave me advice, badgered clerks on my behalf." (*WN* 83) As this passage indicates, consumerism and kinship, shopping and identity are inextricably connected. There is, however, yet another aspect to Jack's sudden urge to shop. Upset by his colleague's observation, Jack needs to reassure himself of his worth as an individual by spending huge sums:

> I shopped with reckless abandon. […] I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. […] I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me. (*WN* 84)

By immersing himself in the huge crowd of shoppers, Jack is able to overcome his feeling of isolation and insignificance. Here he is remarkably similar to the subjects of his course in Advanced Nazism, i.e. the individual supporters of Hitler that formed the "crowds, rallies, and uniforms" (*WN* 15) on which Jack teaches his students. Intense as the harmonious family shopping spree is, it does not last long. After excessive consuming, the Gladneys have nothing left to say to each other: "We drove home in silence. We went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone. A little later I watched Steffie in front of the TV set. She moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken." (*WN* 84) Not only has the joint activity failed to establish a lasting connection. Steffie's behavior also shows that the motives behind the individual family member's participation in and support of Jack's urge to shop

result from a TV-generated consumer consciousness. While consumerism helps to establish a temporary unity, it ultimately destroys the possibility of functional family relations.

The marriages depicted in *WN* are also far from 'functional'. Underneath the façade of marital bliss, the two married couples DeLillo presents are unhappy. Despite their attempts to believe in the contrary, the partners are estranged from each other. An especially striking example is the marriage between Jack's ex-wife Tweedy Browner and her new husband, Malcolm Hunt. Tweedy admits to Jack:

> When Malcolm goes into deep cover, it's as though he never existed. He disappears not only here and now but retroactively. No trace of the man remains. I sometimes wonder if the man I'm married to is in fact Malcolm Hunt or a completely different person who is himself operating under deep cover. It's frankly worrisome. I don't know which half of Malcolm's life is real, which half intelligence. I'm hoping Bee can shed some light. (*WN* 88f.)

As this passage shows, Tweedy is also weaker than her own child, whom she needs to help her decode the mysteries of her complicated life. In contrast to *TWC*, where the disagreements between Leander and Sarah are narrated with empathy for the pain they both feel, *WN* brilliantly satirizes marital problems. Cheever's two narrating voices, the omniscient third-person narrator as well as Leander, are deeply involved in the Wapshots' lives, rendering the story with a touching sensitivity. Don DeLillo's narrator Jack remains curiously detached from his story. He keeps a distance to events and characters that illuminates the superficiality of his postmodern world. Therefore, readers are not likely to take the characters' troubles seriously. Jack and Babette's marriage, for instance, is dominated by their constant mutual worry of who will die first. Every spouse wants to be the first to die merely for egoistic reason, since each spouse needs the other for warmth, comfort, and protection. However, both are possessed by a fear of dying that is so strong that Babette takes drugs and even prostitutes herself to get the drug, while Jack arms himself with *Mein Kampf* and hides behind Hitler in order to overcome the fear. Readers soon learn that Jack and Babette, who pretend to share every secret, live a life whose apparent harmony turns out to be fake. This in itself is barely worth mentioning. The fact, however, that the central conflict between the spouses – Jack cannot forgive Babette for having cheated on him to get a drug he himself would secretly like to have – has no consequences, is much more remarkable. Jack and Babette do not force themselves and their children through yet another divorce – as we might have expected them to do. They simply ignore what has happened, concentrating on everyday life with its postmodern sunsets instead.

However harmoniously the Gladneys' marital life seems to proceed, however, a general atmospheric change at the end of the book indicates that things have become worse. People's level of confusion, irritation and anxiety has increased dramatically. Whereas some people had occasionally wondered about the intensity of the sunsets after the 'airborne toxic event' before, now a great number of them, including the Gladneys, go to the scenic view site regularly, but with ambiguous feelings:

> We go to the overpass all the time. Babette, Wilder and I. We take a thermos of iced tea, park the car, watch the setting sun. […] We find little to say to each other. More cars arrive, parking in a line that extends down to the residential zone. […] The sky takes on content, feeling, an exalted narrative life. The bands of color reach so high, seem at times to separate into their constituent parts. […] It is hard to know how we should feel about this. Some people are scared by the sunsets, some determined to be elated, but most of us don't know how to feel, are ready to go either way. […] We don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don't know what we are watching or what it means […]. (*WN* 324)

The fact that Jack and Babette do not care to bring the older children along reveals their reluctance to be confronted with the hostile truth about these sunsets – that they are simply a sign of the environmental damage caused by the various toxic spills that happened in Blacksmith, that their beauty means nothing at all, and that their pilgrimage to see the sunsets may be yet another empty ritual in their lives. Taking along only little Wilder, the couple chooses to ignore possible answers to their questions. In addition to their confusion about the origin and meaning(lessness) of the sunsets, their visits highlight the emotional gap between the couple, as they have nothing to say to each other any more. They also no longer like to go out. They have retreated into privacy, still afraid of death, but now robbed of any possible way to overcome their fear. Jack is not even interested into his possible disease anymore (cf. the following chapter). He has given up completely: "Dr. Chakravarty wants to talk to me but I'm making it a point to stay away. He is eager to see how my death is progressing. […] But I am afraid of the imaging block. Afraid of its magnetic fields, its computerized nuclear pulse. Afraid of what it knows about me. I am taking no calls." (*WN* 325) Jack has surrendered to the totalizing dominance of technology.

At the end of *WN*, the family's condition as a whole, as well as the situation of each family member, has deteriorated. The confusion, detachment and superficiality that characterize their postmodern postnuclear family, which has proved to be a truly fearful symmetry, have only increased. The world DeLillo depicts in *White Noise* is one where the family has lost its function of providing shelter, guidance, and security. It has given in to the

overwhelming order of the simulacrum, the influence of consumerism, and the appeal of the tabloids. The family, and with it the family novel, it seems, have reached the end of history.

5.2.2 The Family (Novel) at the End of History

Art is built around violence, around death; at its base is fear.
The absolute dream, if dreamed, must deal with death,
and the only way toward death we understand is the way of violence. [195]

In this chapter I will illustrate the essential pieces of the postmodern puzzle Don DeLillo constructs in his novel. Using the themes of disease, violence, and death to direct his readers' attention to the hollowness of the lives his characters lead, DeLillo paints an uncomfortable picture of contemporary America. The family no longer provides shelter from society's demands; in fact, it is completely infiltrated by the superficiality, materialism and ambivalence of consumer culture. Most characters, however, have arranged themselves with the new eclecticism and do not seem disturbed by it. That they are still negatively affected by it, however, is visible in the interest people take in classes such as "Eating and Drinking – Basic Parameters" (*WN* 171). Apparently people feel a need to reassure themselves about the basic elements of their existence: "Knowledge changes every day. People like to have their beliefs reinforced." (*WN* 171) Cases in point are the elderly people in Babette's class on posture. Teaching her students how to stand, sit, and walk correctly, Babette draws on various cultural traditions. Jack wonders about her students' favorable reception of this eclectic mixture: "[Babette] makes references to yoga, kendo, trance-walking. She talks of Sufi dervishes, Sherpa mountaineers. The old folks nod and listen. Nothing is too foreign, nothing too remote to apply. I am always surprised at their acceptance and trust, the sweetness of their belief. […] It is the end of skepticism." (*WN* 27) In fact, *WN* is about the end of skepticism in general. Within the sphere of the novel, Jack's development from critical observation and distance to unquestioning approval of the postmodern condition is paradigmatic for the development of his culture. DeLillo's social critique, however, is never moralistic; nor is his position easily determinable. The text's oscillation between farce and alarm does not allow for simple answers. Its ultimate ambiguity speaks for the quality of the novel. It also posits DeLillo's text within the postmodern world it depicts.

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[195] Joyce Carol Oates, *The Edge of Impossibility: Tragic Forms in Literature*. 1972. Quoted in: Alfred Hornung, "Postmoderne bis zur Gegenwart", *Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte*, ed. Hubert Zapf (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1996) 329.

Postmodernity or postmodernism, so the argument goes, is the end of political, social, cultural, economic, and philosophical innovation and change. Humankind has reached a stage of development where every alteration from convention is merely a repetition of something that has in some way or other already happened before. Literary postmodernism, or in fact all (postmodern(ist)) art, celebrates the repetition and reconsideration of former themes, forms, and ideas[196]. We have arrived at a circle of repetition from which there is no escape. This standstill is the death of originality, or the end of history, to use Francis Fukuyama's famous phrase. Postmodernity and the idea of death, then, are curiously connected[197], and DeLillo draws much on this idea in *White Noise*.

Although the relationship between art and death is a recurrent theme in Don DeLillo's novels, especially the notion of death and dying is probably most explicit in *WN*. Osteen explains: "[E]verywhere and nowhere, death is the white noise of the title." (182) The following conversation between Jack and Babette is the key to their concept of death: "'What if death is nothing but sound?' 'Electrical *noise*.' 'You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.' 'Uniform, *white*.'" (*WN* 198; my italics) Already surrounded by white noise, Jack and Babette are America's living dead. Its constant generation of white noise marks their society as a lethal influence.

The novel deals with death in manifold ways, all of which are satirically related to constructions of postmodern identity. Despite this satirical edge, DeLillo does not shy away from the dark underside of the surfaces world of *WN*. There are instances where death occurs quite literally: as many as seventeen people die in the course of the novel. Jack and his colleague Murray Jay Siskind try to forget them immediately. Murray's way of coping with the death of a colleague is to go to the supermarket and to rejoice in the thought: 'Better him than me!' Jack's reaction is not as crude, but he obsessively notices every fatality around him. However, he never goes beyond the mere chronicling of information; his fear of death does not make him change his life. He does not, for instance, give generously to charity, nor does he try other ways of becoming a better human being. Jack is paralyzed, and this paralysis is emblematic of life in postmodern America. People do not act, they only react, or even remain totally passive. Knowledge and information do not advance; they move in circles whose scope they never exceed. As the medical 'treatment' of Jack's potential disease shows, diagnosis has turned into a mere exchange of trivialities, a negotiation of mutual interests.

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[196] Julia Kristeva has argued this point already in the 1960s.

[197] Alfred Hornung (2) also underlines the curious correlation of death and postmodernism. Cf. "Postmodern – post mortem. Death and the Death of the Novel", *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Kristiaan Versluys (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992) 93.

The end of history is the end of knowledge, and Jack's comical encounters with medical staff throughout the course of the novel exemplify this. During the family's evacuation, Jack consults a SIMUVAC M.D. to find out about the consequences of his exposure to the poisonous cloud. He learns that "anything that puts you in contact with actual emissions means we have a situation" (*WN* 138). When Jack insists to know more about his ominous "situation", he hears that he is "generating big numbers" in the computer, the meaning of which he is advised to ignore. To his direct question "'Am I going to die?'", the M.D. responds: "'Not as such. […] Not in so many words.'" (*WN* 140) At the end of the absurd consultation, Jack learns only that he is "the total sum of [his] data" (*WN* 141), and that he is 'tentatively scheduled to die'. DeLillo's satire is complex here: Jack's fear of death is increased by the information – or better, non-information - that he will die eventually, a fact of which he should have been aware already. Also, the M.D. does not care about Jack's worries; he is only interested in the surface, i.e. the fact that the numbers and figures the computer generates. Their interpretation is no longer relevant. As Jeremy Green notes, Jack's "worrying condition marks the indeterminacy of the social pervasiveness of technology."[198] The scene is kafkaesque to the extent that the core of his problem, i.e. the meaning of it all, is never revealed to the protagonist; it goes beyond Kafka's dreadful modernist universe, however, because the protagonist is actually *content* not to know more.

As Kafka impressively inscribed the terrors of modern existence into the bodies of many of his characters[199], Don DeLillo inscribes the parameters of a postmodern existence in Jack's body. The dubious diagnosis after his exposure to Nyodene D signals Jack that his body does not show tangible symptoms, which could be treated by a particular therapy. Jack no longer trusts his own feelings, the bizarre consequences of which are apparent during later consultations with his doctor. After a computerized check-up, the doctor asks Jack about his general condition. Utterly confused, and afraid to hear bad news about his health, Jack is not able to give any definite answer. The following dialogue between doctor and patient stands for many 'postmodern' conversations throughout the novel:

> 'We usually start by asking you how you feel.' 'Based on the printout?' 'Just how do you feel', [the doctor] said in a mild voice. 'In my own mind, in real terms, I feel relatively sound, pending information.' 'We usually go on to tired. Have you recently been feeling tired?' 'What do people usually say?' 'Mild fatigue is a popular answer.' 'I could say exactly that and be convinced in my own mind it's a fair and accurate

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[198] Cf. Jeremy Green, "Disaster Footage: Spectacles of Violence in DeLillo's Fiction", *Modern Fiction Studies* 45.3 (1999) 582.

[199] What comes immediately to mind are Kafka's famous short pieces "In the Penal Colony" or "The Metamorphosis".

description.' He seemed satisfied with the reply and made a bold notation on the page in front of him. 'What about appetite?' he said. 'I could go either way on that.' 'That's more or less how I could go, based on the printout.' 'In other words you're saying sometimes I have appetite reinforcement, sometimes I don't.' 'Are you telling me or asking me?' 'It depends on what the numbers say.' 'Then we agree.' 'Good.' 'Good,' he said. (*WN* 277f.)

In completely distrusting, even downright rejecting his own sense of physical well-being, Jack renounces the last trace of authenticity still active within him. After that, he can safely leave the 'real world' behind (like the rest of his family) to surrender completely to his desire to construct his own world. Throughout the course of the novel, Jack discards more and more of his critical perspective and rational thinking. The man who had told his son to always trust in the evidence of his senses instead of believing media messages does now not even rely on his own senses anymore. Neither does he accept the truth. When his doctor tells him that exposure to Nyodene D. could "cause a person to die", Jack angrily returns: "Speak English, for God's sake! I despise this modern jargon." (*WN* 280) Jack's postmodern mind resides in a postmodern body, "a curiously disembodied thing [that] no longer makes itself known by means of apparent symptoms that can be diagnosed by a doctor, nor by means of feelings that can be decoded by the organism it hosts."[200]

The unreliable postmodern body goes well with the postmodern landscape(s) portrayed in *WN*. Blacksmith, the town where the Gladneys reside, and the nearby (also fictive) Iron City, form a standardized landscape dominated by expressways, fast-food restaurants, supermarkets and shopping malls. The two scenes outside of *WN*'s urban space therefore carry special importance. The one symbolizes the characters' entrapment in postmodern culture, the other the only possible escape from it. In the first scene, Jack takes his colleague Siskind into the country to a place called Farmington. The name rings of romantic rural life, but the attraction they visit is thoroughly postmodern: it is "THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA"[201]. This barn is famous not for historical, political or aesthetic reasons, but simply because so many people have already taken pictures of it. Having arrived at their destination, Murray and Jack watch the picture-taking crowd.

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[200] Dana Phillips, "Don DeLillo's Postmodern Pastoral", *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment*, ed. Michael Branch et al. (Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1998) 242.

[201] As Joseph S. Walker explains, DeLillo had a model in reality for his 'most photographed barn in America': "[It] resembles nothing so much as the 'Field of Dreams' outside Dyersville, Iowa, another site at which the attempted evocation of nostalgia for America's rural past is ironically undercut by the obviously simulated and commercialized nature of the enterprise. Presenting itself as an authentic American baseball field, the site actually commemorates nothing more real than the filming of a movie based on a novel about baseball by a Canadian writer." Cf. "Criminality, Reality, and the Story of America: The Case of Don DeLillo", *The Centennial Review* 43.3 (1999) 464.

Murray observes: "Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception." (*WN* 12) The barn, of course, is DeLillo's application of the Baudrillardian idea of the simulacrum, the principles of which are also at work in the operations of SIMUVAC discussed before. That America's rural space is dominated by the simulacrum in *WN* is part of DeLillo's sharp cultural critique. To move in and around Blacksmith means always to move within the coordinates of commercialism and the simulacrum. The only exception from this vicious circle is "THE OLD BURYING GROUND", the second important non-urban space in the novel. It is the only place where Jack feels at peace. The irony lies in the fact that the man haunted by tanathophobia finds comfort from the anxieties of daily life at a graveyard. Like the real-world white noise, which can be perceived as disturbing as well as soothing, death is ambiguous here: on the one hand, it is Jack's biggest fear, but on the other hand, he finds the silence of the graveyard comforting. There is no escape for Jack in life. On the one side of his life lurk cultural death through commercialism and simulation, on the other side there is physical death. A detachment from either pole is impossible.

In *WN*, nature no longer differs from culture and as such it is fundamentally hostile: "Neither culture nor nature are what they used to be." (Phillips 245) Most people die because of environmental disasters, such as toxic spills or the contamination of materials and/or nature. The rest are the victims of fatal accidents. The randomness of their deaths contributes to Jack and Babette's profound feeling of insecurity in an unpredictable and antagonistic *Lebenswelt*. They both try to counter this insecurity by eventually recurring to violence. Babette's violence is more subtle than Jack's; she violates expectations of her role as wife and mother when she trades sex for Dylar. Jack's violence is more open as he plots to kill his cuckolder Mr. Gray alias Willie Mink, the manufacturer of the fear-of-death erasing drug.

Thus, the most obvious appearance of the themes of violence and death is linked to the tanathophobia from which Jack and Babette suffer. Although there is nothing to worry about, Jack routinely wakes up in the night "in the grip of a death sweat. Defenseless against [his] own fears." (*WN* 46) As I have noted above, Jack's way of countering his fear is to study (and even, to a certain extent, appropriate) the aura of Hitler. His colleague Siskind smartly comments: "Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you." (*WN* 287) In fact, Hitler is the one unchanging object in Jack's life, who finds him "[f]ine, solid, dependable." (*WN* 89) Since he is obsessed with death and dying,

Jack's whole life, even his way of telling the story, is shaped by and dependent on Hitler.[202] Jack's construction falls into pieces, however, when he learns that Babette, on whose comfortable heft and nurturing body Jack depends as well, has betrayed him. After this disappointment, even Hitler is not large enough anymore to help Jack overcome his feeling of insecurity, so he tries to get the drug his wife has been taking to stop *her* tanathophobia. Babette had answered a tabloid ad and become guinea pig in the testing of a substance named Dylar designed to fight fear of death. The crucial point here is that the very existence if this drug, as well as the research on tanathophobia, signals that Jack and Babette's fear is, in fact, a widespread phenomenon. Babette eventually agrees to sleep with Mink/Gray in exchange for Dylar. Babette's sexual commitment shows her desperation, and the intensity of her fear. At no point in the novel, however, do readers get an explanation of the origin of this fear. Jack and Babette's frequent panic attacks are not grounded in any real physical or mental diseases; nor is their quiet and comfortable lifestyle the cause of their sorrows. Therefore, their panic is merely ridiculous. The lack of a definitive cause of the fear, as well as the apparent extensive distribution of it, leaves only postmodern society in general as an explanation of the tanathophobia in *WN*.

The postmodern condition leads to confusion and rootlessness, which in turn causes all kinds of fears, including tanathophobia. Fear of death eventually leads to violence. In this context, Jack's meeting with his rival is a brilliant example of the postmodern world DeLillo constructs in *WN*. Diabolically encouraged by Murray Jay Siskind ("To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up." (*WN* 290)), and armed with the fire gun provided by his father in law, Jack enters Mr. Gray's shabby motel room with the firm intention to kill him. Convinced by Siskind that "[t]o plot is to live" (*WN* 291), Jack has devised a plot to find and execute Gray/Mink in a motel in the old German (!) part of the city. He keeps repeating his simplistic, TV-like "plot" like a mantra: "This was my plan. Enter unannounced, gain his confidence, wait for an unguarded moment, take out the Zumwalt, shoot him three times in the viscera for maximum slowness of agony, put the gun in his hand to suggest a lonely man's suicide, write semicoherent things on the mirror, leave Stover's car in Treadwell's garage." (*WN* 306) The man he finds, however, is nothing but a pathetic victim of the negative effects of postmodernity[203]. Watching TV all day long in the

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[202] In a mostly far-fetched interpretation, Roland Boling notes several parallels between Hitler's life and events in Jack's story, e.g. the fact that Jack hides in his office during a three-day international conference at the College-on-the-Hill he himself has organized: "Here Jack parodies Hitler in his bunker." (70)

[203] For Leonard Wilcox, Gray/Mink is "the personification of a new order"; therefore he sees "Gladney's confrontation with Mink [as] an allegorical confrontation with postmodern culture itself." (204)

shabby motel room, and subsisting on enormous rates of Dylar, Gray/Mink has lost his identity, which Jack finds hard to determine in the first place: "He wore a Hawaiian shirt and Budweiser shorts. Plastic sandals dangled from his feet. […] Did he speak with an accent? […] His nose was flat, his skin the color of a Planter's peanut. What is the geography of a spoon-shaped face? Was he Melanesian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Surinamese, Dutch-Chinese? Was he a composite?" (*WN* 307) Mink/Gray is a "supranational" individual. His brain has been affected dramatically by Dylar – he is "a living schizogram" (Osteen 186). He speaks almost entirely (if unwittingly) in the language of television (uttering ludicrous phrases such as, for instance, "The heat from your hand will actually make the golf-leaving stick to the wax paper" (*WN* 308), or "Some of these sure-footed bighorns have been equipped with radio transmitters." (*WN* 306)) Gray/Mink's identification with television is so total that he watches without sound, filling in the comments himself. He has reached the scary final stage of a development at which Steffie, who earlier in the novel attempted to match the words as they were spoken on TV, will also arrive eventually. Jack takes pity with this shadow of a human being, who brags about "American sex, let me tell you, this is how I learned my English" (*WN* 309). However, this does not stop him from carrying out his murderous plan.

The most violent scene in the novel, when Jack attacks his rival, is also the funniest. It exposes Jack's dark side, his fascist impulses, and mocks traditional crime scene narratives as well. Jack neither is the brutal avenger nor is Mink/Gray the evil betrayer. Both characters are mere caricatures of a jealousy drama. Knowing about Dylar's side effects (as his wife had told him, one of the strongest side effects is the mistaking of a word for its content), Jack attacks Gray/Mink with words, using phrases like "falling plane" or "hail of bullets" to make his opponent tremble and collapse. The scene is a comical interrogation of the poststructuralist idea that there is no connection at all between a word and its meaning. DeLillo's postmodern character has a very clear idea about the meanings of words, as he experiences them as tangible and real. In fact, as Osteen rightly observes, he "can no longer distinguish between signifier and signified." (187) Eventually, Jack turns from words to bullets and shoots his pathetic rival. His feelings about the dreadful deed, however, are merely aesthetic: "I watched blood squirt from the victim's midsection. A delicate arc. I marveled at the rich color, sensed the color-causing action of non-nucleated cells." (*WN* 312) These thoughts show Jack's dangerous fascination with the aesthetic features of violence, on which he also focuses in his class on "Advanced Nazism". Since he acts it out, he appears an "Advanced Nazi(st)" himself.

The bloody confrontation between the two opponents constitutes a moment of transcendence for Jack.[204] It proves to be the only possibility for him to break out of his shallow life. As he fires the first shot, Jack feels "looming, dominant, gaining life-power, storing up life-credit" (*WN* 312). He rejoices in the experience of seeing his bleeding victim lying helplessly on the floor. Dreadful as it sounds, the scene is full of mordant humor, for Jack's moment of triumph does not last long. The new world he seems to have gained collapses as soon as Mink/Gray defends himself by shooting Jack in the wrist. Jack's subsequent feeling of remorse, however, is not real. Reflecting on his deed from his later position as the narrator of the story, Jack asks himself: "Is it better to commit evil and attempt to balance it with an exalted act than to live a resolutely neutral life? I know I felt virtuous, I felt blood-stained and stately, dragging the badly wounded man through the dark and empty street." (*WN* 314) Jack is completely at loss about the meaning of his deed, and DeLillo is far from providing an answer. He does not condemn Jack, nor does he downplay what has happened. He simply shows how far into postmodern ambivalence Jack has descended, so that his crime, which does not even have negative consequences for Jack, illustrates the stage of his 'postmodernization'. As Joseph S. Walker notes: "Bigger Thomas kills and discovers his identity; Jack Gladney attempts to kill and proves that he has none." (439)

By way of dark and acid satire, DeLillo prevents simple solutions to and interpretations of his characters' problems. He shows a world where redemption is not possible. When Jack reaches a hospital run by Catholic German nuns where he drops his victim off, he is shocked to learn that the God of which he thought he had just gotten a glimpse is something not even the nuns themselves believe in anymore: "The nonbelievers need the believers. They are desperate to have someone believe. But show me a saint. Give me one hair from the body of a saint." (*WN* 318) Hearing this, Jack realizes there is no hope anymore for an escape from death. There is no paradise, not even one the nuns believe in. For the nuns, "pretense is a dedication" (*WN* 319), as the only thing they really believe is that if they "did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse." (*WN* 318) With this remark of Sister Marie Hermann, the Jack's life cycle comes full circle: the world of *White Noise* proves to be a sealed world, a veritable vicious circle. God is not dead, as this would presuppose He once existed. Instead, God himself "is reduced here to simulation […]" (doCarmo 18); God is part of the white noise surrounding Jack and his family. That there is

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[204] For Roland Boling, Jack's shooting of Mink/Gray triggers his "moral awakening, a different kind of escape from Hitler, actually an escape from the postmodern inability to call Hitler evil, and for Jack an escape from the taint of seeking to be seduced by Hitler's aura in the first place." (65)

no longer the possibility of "real" hope and redemption – clearly a dreadful situation - is countered by the fact, however, that none of Jack's deeds has any consequence anyway. His neighbors do not wonder about their bloodstained car, nor does Jack's shooting of Mink have any effect. Stephen doCarmo rightly assesses "Jack's monstrously meaningful transgression" in the shooting of his rival as eventually "hollow and pointless" (17). Jack and Babette continue living their lives as if nothing had happened. They have reached the end of history because they have learned - and accepted - that their world is ruled by supreme ambivalence.

Everything is interchangeable in *White Noise*, everything seems to lack a center. The characters live in a universe that is truly "*jenseits von Gut und Böse"* in a Nietzschean sense. History is reduced to mere show, identity is constantly questioned, and the transcendence of knowledge is mocked. The superficiality of the world depicted in *WN* is mirrored in the novel's narrative strategy.

At this point, then, I would like to revisit the question I have raised in the preceding chapter, namely whether *WN* is a realistic *or* a postmodern novel. I wish to contend, in fact, that those who conceive of *WN* in terms of this binary opposition fail to grasp the novel's complex character. A more suitable way of describing it is Christophe Den Tandt's concept of "the paradoxical coexistence of postmodernism and referential discourse", or postmodern realism.[205] At first sight, the novel seems written in a conventional realist way, compared, at least, to the more radical and experimental forms of modernist or postmodernist texts. The plot, for instance, is rendered in traditionally chronological fashion. However, as it proceeds, Jack's narrative becomes more and more episodic, a development that parallels his own subtle psychological disintegration. Similarly, the family, which at the beginning seemed relatively normal, proves dangerously susceptible to the forces of consumerism and television. This ultimately leads to numbness and isolation of the family members. Unlike protagonists of modernist novels, they are not alienated by society but sucked into its anesthetizing and homogenizing flow. As their numbness increases, the superficiality of their relationships, and even their personalities, rises as well. This superficiality is typical of postmodernist fiction, which, according to Stephen Baker, displays "a new depthlessness that repulses or repudiates the sort of hermeneutic enquiry, based on multitudinous layers of signification, for which the modernist work of art seemed to cry out." (92) In addition to increasingly depthless characters, Don DeLillo also disrupts the narrative flow by means of seemingly random

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[205] Christophe Den Tandt, "Pragmatic Commitments: Postmodern Realism in Don DeLillo, Maxine Hong Kingston and James Ellroy", *Beyond Postmodernism. Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*, ed. Klaus Stiersdorfer (Berlin: deGruyter, 2003) 123.

triadic insertions – a nod to the Lyotardian concept of communication through language games. "Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex (*WN* 52), "Krylum, Rust-Oleum, Red Devil" (*WN* 159), "Leaded, unleaded, super unleaded" (*WN* 199), "Clorets, Velamints, Freedent" (*WN* 229) – these and other triads interrupt Jack's story and connect his thoughts with the highly technologized consumer culture they live in. Mark Osteen is correct in maintaining that "DeLillo ventriloquizes the voices of the culture through [these] triads that have no clear origin. They are not simply quoted by the narrator, Jack Gladney; rather, he seems to be a medium manipulated by some distant source." (Osteen 166f.) Although these insertions interrupt the narrative flow only at a few occasions, they are an important metatextual means as their juxtaposition with Jack's account serves as an ironic comment on the latter's implication in the consumerism of postindustrial America. Disrupting the realism of Jack's narrative, they add a postmodernist aesthetic dimension to the novel: *White Noise* "betrays itself as formally postmodernist […] through the prevalence of pastiche or suspensive irony." (Baker 94) In intention, however, *WN* is a novel against postmodernism. The crucial point is that DeLillo's intention, his social criticism, can only work because, as Den Tandt puts it, "no realist art form, however postmodern, can elude the issue of the relation of discourse to the real" (123).

Although Baker sees *WN* as a postmodernist novel, too, his interpretation does not assume that DeLillo fails to stay true to realist and realistic norms because he lacks the skill to do so. That is the opinion of Bruce Bawer, however, who in his mostly negative assessment of *WN* claims that "[r]epresentation of reality is not DeLillo's strong suit."[206] Considering the elaborate way the children speak, for instance, such a comment seems justified. Bawer goes even further, claiming that "[i]t is impossible, in the end, to accept his characters as human beings, or to take his novels seriously as representations of reality. All they amount to, really, is documents in the history of nihilistic chic." (41) Vis-à-vis such (groundless) disapproval, Leonard Orr's assertion that *White Noise* is a realistic novel does not quite seem to agree with the novel's nature. Neither is Bawer's polemic wholly justified. Heinz Ickstadt's careful tackling of the question whether or not *WN* is a postmodernist novel, or whether or not DeLillo is a (neo)realist author, comes much closer to the novel's peculiar character. He reminds us that

> […] realism was an attempt to reconstruct symbolically a reality anchored in shared beliefs at a moment precisely when the existence of such a basis had come into doubt. Although DeLillo stresses the sharedness of experience that underlies the isolated

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[206] Bruce Bawer, "Don DeLillo's America", *The New Criterion* 3.8 (1985) 35.

worlds of individual fantasies, one could describe his writing as a form of realism without ontological anchor – a realism that has lost faith in what DeLillo himself has described as 'manageable reality'. (383)

In accordance with poststructuralist principles, *White Noise* is not 'either/or', but 'both/and'. That is to say, DeLillo works with realist techniques only to disrupt them, if rarely, thus keeping his readers aware of the construction of his tale. The commercialized, random, and superficial reality of *White Noise* becomes, paradoxically, all the more credible because of these interruptions of the narrative flow; it reaches a stage of "supreme ambiguity" (doCarmo 2).

With no easy exit at hand, readers are invited to come up with their own solutions to the problems the text poses. Within the novel itself, all metanarratives fail. Outside of it, however, DeLillo's belief in the power of fiction and in the ability of his readership to decode *WN*'s complex messages reveals his hope in the transformative function of literature: "By refusing to provide his readers with the anesthetic of violent resolution or melodramatic resurrection, DeLillo prevents his fiction to be thoughtlessly consumed like Dylar […]. If fiction is not merely Dylar, DeLillo suggests that it nonetheless possesses a privileged power to transfigure the real, to make us listen again." (191) Although art has lost its function within the novel, it is still effective outside of it.

5.3 Synopsis: The Subversive Family Novel

"In the eyes of many critics, the narrative work of Don DeLillo amounts to nothing less than a cultural history of contemporary America." (Ickstadt 375) Ickstadt's praise definitely applies to *White Noise*, a novel whose many hilarious scenes and general tone of mordant humor defy the prejudice shared by some critics that a family novel is necessarily conservative, predictable, and sentimental. The opposite is true for DeLillo's eighth novel, which constantly if subtly undercuts traditional notions of character development and plot. Using the frame of a traditional family – breadwinner-dad, homemaker-mom, and a few children – Don DeLillo's postmodern family novel is subversive as it exposes the randomness and fragility of the postnuclear family as well as its loss of function in a world of surfaces.

White Noise's Jack Gladney transcends traditional portraits of father figures. In contrast to most family novels, the father figure in *WN* does not die – at least not literally. In a

metaphorical sense, however, Jack's development from occupying a critical distance towards postmodernity (and even arguing against it in his discussions with Heinrich) to his eventual uncritical acceptance of his postmodern life world may be understood in terms of the death of his identity. At the end, Gladney is utterly confused, even paralyzed by his ever-stronger fear of death. He is becoming a pitiable postmodern creature. DeLillo thus deconstructs the topos of the powerful father: "This postmodern family is no longer organized around the *nom du père*; rather it is utterly decentered and globally dispersed. Gladney's string of ex-spouses and his collection of children from previous marriages are connected through time and global space by electronic networks." (Wilcox 206) Jack is neither completely weak nor authoritative. His position within the family is ambiguous. On the one hand, he earns the money that pays for their bills, i.e. he acts as provider. On the other hand, however, his role as provider does not automatically lead to a superior position in the power structure of the family. He loves his children, yet remains detached from them. He not try to pass on his values to them because he does not seem to have any.

The ambiguity of Jack's position is matched by Babette, who despite her qualities as a loving and caring mother also betrays their children by taking a drug of whose dangerous side-effects she is aware, and because she irresponsibly neglects to act in the face of imminent ecological disaster. Other mother figures, such as Tweedy Browner or Janet Savory, appear dubious and act irresponsibly. DeLillo's highly ironic portrait of the various mother figures in *WN* undermines archetypical images of the Mother. Like the father figures (besides Jack, Denise's jittery and detached father Bob Pardee appears in the novel), the mothers are weaker than their children. Since the children possess the knowledge necessary to get along in their postmodern world, they often seem more mature than their respective parents, and therefore are often the ones to initiate or even take decisions.

The Gladney family experiences none of the traditional conflicts and developments. Due to the careful distance the characters keep between each other, there is no struggle between one generation and the next. In fact, the knowledge about the way life in postmodern America works already lies in the generation of the children. They initiate the parent figures to the new order – the order of the simulacrum. As a result, the plot in *WN* ultimately arrives at a standstill. None of the happenings described in the novel, neither the ecologic disaster of the 'airborne toxic event' nor Jack's crime - seem to have any consequence. The only thing that can still shock people is the rearrangement of the shelves in the supermarket. The universe of *White Noise* is ruled by superficiality, randomness, and insecurity. Although his social critique is not moralistic, Don DeLillo paints a disturbing picture of contemporary

America. His novel takes on an ironic stance towards familial norms and can, therefore, be counted among family fiction written in what Jonnes calls the 'disjunctive' mode (250).

The family in *WN* serves as a microcosm of American society, i.e. it takes on a symbolic quality which any good family novel employs. The author uses the Gladney family to develop his criticism of the social changes caused by late capitalism with its excessive consumerism, its media-saturated society, and its growing lack of meaning. The Gladneys do not interact with the community. They are strikingly unsociable. They never throw parties and rather turn down invitations. If their neighbors call to ask if they could come over, the family members' unanimous reaction is: "'We don't want them.' […] 'Keep them out.' […] 'They're boring.' 'Tell them to stay home.'" (*WN* 43) There is no solidarity within the family either. When they decide to 'eat out', they only get take-out food and devour it silently in their car. The only public place they go to is the supermarket or the airport. Besides the kitchen, shopping centers are the places where they spend time together as a family. DeLillo's vision of the nature of the postmodern family is bleak. Eating in silence, watching TV together uncomfortable, and gaining their only pleasure from shopping excessively underlines the Gladneys' complete surrender to late capitalist culture. Since they do not seem to be particularly happy, yet even display serious dysfunctions, we are encouraged to understand their capitulation as a fatal consequence of postmodernity. As Steffen Hantke explains, the family in *WN* is "deeply compromised by the contemporary condition of society; lineage is inconsecutive and discontinuous, 'bonds of blood and marriages' are fragmented. […] [F]amilies are even more compromised by their respective responses to these symptoms of fragmentation." (53) Their silent acceptance of and compliance with the postmodern condition, in other words, is the greatest threat to the family structure.

Is DeLillo's vision ultimately conservative? His cultural critique seems to suggest that the ideal of the traditional isolated nuclear family is still looming in the background of his postmodern family novel. However, since DeLillo shows no alternatives to the postnuclear patchwork family in *WN*, he indicates that there is no way back. Moreover, since none of the family members long for other family forms, in fact, since everyone is happy with the way things are, neither DeLillo nor his characters display such a nostalgia for the past as had informed Cheever's post-war family novel. The past does not play a role in *WN*, and what the future brings, no one can say: the Gladneys' life world is the eternal present. Correspondingly, the nuclear family has vanished forever, and how the future family will look is unclear: there is nothing beyond the postnuclear patchwork family, whether we like it or not. To say, then, that *WN* is essentially conservative would be inadequate.

WN picks up tendencies already mentioned in post-war family novels, and expands on the description of their influence, their dangers, as well as on the social criticism offered in former novels. However, *WN*'s approach to these issues is fundamentally different from that of preceding family novels. Yi-Ling Ru had identified three characteristics of the family novel – realistic depiction and style, conflict, and eventual decline of the family. DeLillo's *White Noise* subverts all these categories. While Jack narrates the events in a chronologically faithful and often convincing manner, we have seen that the realism of his descriptions suffers damage on various levels. For one thing, Jack's narration is repeatedly interrupted by a voice that seems to come out of nowhere and that introduces triads of brand or product names seemingly randomly into the narrative flow. For another, characters remain curiously superficial. Bruce Bawer complains: "There is hardly a natural moment in the whole book. Characters do not think, they cogitate; they do not talk, they engage in dialectic and deliver endless monologues about the novel's major themes. It is often difficult to tell them apart when reading a stretch of dialogue, because they all sound exactly alike." (37) Clearly, the overly smart and mature children are different from conventional depictions of children in fiction, and from our own conventional experiences with real children as well. This is the point of DeLillo's cultural critique in *WN*, a novel that is "not meant to be [a] true-to-life tale […]" (Bawer 35). By way of farce and satire, he wants us to become aware of the dangerous effects of postmodernity on human nature.

If DeLillo's postmodern family novel sets an example against the supposed necessity of realistic depiction, it also goes beyond Yi-Ling Ru's notion of conflict as a central theme in a family novel. In *WN*, there is very little inner-family conflict. As Ferraro has pointed out, the family members get along surprisingly well with each other: "All the Gladneys 'interact' by any standard criteria extremely well with one another, cooperatively and in concert, with admirable degrees of both mutual insight and self-irony." (18) That this very lack of conflict is in itself a problem because it demonstrates the benumbing effect of postmodernity on the family is in accord with DeLillo's satirical depiction of contemporary society. Even the critical instance of marital conflict, Babette's affair with Mr. Gray, disappears in the black hole of the postmodern condition. Although Jack, the cuckolded husband, tries to restore his damaged honor by killing Willie Mink, his deed is motivated more by an attempt to get hold of Dylar in order to fight his fear of death rather than to avenge the cuckoldry. The shooting does not even have any consequences. Jack and Babette go on with their marital life as if nothing had happened; the Stovers never miss their stolen car, Old Man Treadwell never

wonders about the blood-stained car in their garage, and the nuns never ask what happened to their wounded patient. Therefore, the conventional notion of "conflict" that Ru had in mind, namely a destructive force, is subverted in *WN*. The conflict within the family simply ends up in a vacuum, not causing any effect on family life at all.

And decline? Yi-Ling Ru postulates that the downfall of a family (dynasty) is an essential component of any family novel. Again, *WN* diverges from her hypothesis. At the end of the novel, nothing has changed. The family is the same as it was, its members spending their time watching Blacksmith's "postmodern" sunsets. The future of the family is completely open; whether or not Jack and Babette will remain married or add yet another divorce to their respective marital histories is left to the reader to guess. The novel does end on a distressing note, however, with the rearrangement of the shelves in the supermarket. This change in what customers saw as their only safe haven deeply upsets them: "There is agitation and panic in the aisles, dismay in the faces of older shoppers. They walk in a fragmented trance, stop and go, clusters of well-dressed figures frozen in the aisles, trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic, trying to remember where they'd seen the Cream of Wheat. They see no reason for it, find no sense for it." (*WN* 325f.) At the end of *WN*, there is utter confusion and helplessness.

DeLillo does not try to create empathy for his characters' feelings of fear and denial of death. He exaggerates what he perceives to be a dangerous tendency in contemporary America. His ironic depiction of contemporary social developments is DeLillo's weapon as a novelist writing from within the times he criticizes. "[W]hen tradition becomes too flexible, irony enters the voice" (*WN* 88), one character muses. This is DeLillo's agenda as well, who relies on heavy irony to depict a world where anything goes, i.e. where tradition has become infinitely flexible. While DeLillo does not offer any solutions, he creates an awareness of the entrapment of his characters in their world; he conveys their fundamental limitation in a world of immeasurable freedom of product choice and consumer options. "DeLillo's insistence on our ignorance", Thomas Peyer confirms, "may be the supremely moral act." (271) *WN* is written from within the postmodern condition, and its social criticism is both strengthened and weakened by this position. On the one hand, it is more effective because it is never moralistic or didactic; on the other hand, it concedes to being part of the vicious cycle of consumerism. While the narrator struggles with this aspect of postmodernity, the novel itself plays with it. As Stephen Baker rightly comments, *WN* expresses the "conventions, values and assumptions of a postmodernist, consumerist culture and a late capitalist, commodity-saturated social configuration." (99)

Unlike post-war family novels, *WN* does not operate with binary oppositions any longer. What was formerly separable into old America vs. new America, nature vs. civilization, and other dichotomies, is now completely subverted. There is no center anymore. The story of the Gladneys is dominated by supreme ambivalence. The author's task is simply to record the changes in the family structure as he or she witnesses it. Whether or not these changes are for the better of society is a problem that remains for the reader to solve. The text itself no longer provides any satisfactory or final answer. The irony DeLillo employs, however, and his way of satirizing postmodern America, provide the distance necessary for social criticism: "DeLillo's writing […] reveals a belief that fictional narrative can provide critical distance from and a critical perspective on the processes it depicts." (Wilcox 210) DeLillo trusts in the potential of art to make a difference. This, then, is the faint note of optimism *White Noise* offers.

VI. THE FIN DE MILLENNIUM FAMILY NOVEL

6.1 After Postmodernism

> *Gerade die Krisen an Jahrhundertwenden scheinen die Kettenglieder zu bilden,*
> *durch welche die Kulturperioden aneinander gereiht werden.*
> *Es sind die Zeiten der intellektuellen Fermentation.* [207]

To talk about the new millennium, and to describe the current changes in literature it seems to have triggered, is to acknowledge the crisis of an old paradigm. Terry Eagleton, well-known opponent of postmodernism, sardonically writes about its protagonists: "Fate pushed Roland Barthes under a Parisian laundry van, and afflicted Michel Foucault with Aids. It dispatched Lacan […], and banished Louis Althusser to a psychiatric hospital for the murder of his wife. […] It seems that God was not a structuralist."[208] Whether God, declared dead by a precursor of postmodernity, is resurrected, and whether it is now postmodernism itself that is dead, is the current topic of academic dispute.

Inspired by these debates, the central question of this chapter is: Should we see the beginning of the new millennium in terms of an end – the end of postmodernism? In the early 1990s, the spirit of postmodernism was already weakened; critics noted that it had become "a commercial feature and a laughing stock in cartoons" (Hornung (2) 94). Apart from the fact that postmodern relativism "necessarily implies its own deconstruction" (Hornung (2) 90), the appropriation and inflated use of the term by even the advertising industry has led to its corrosion.

As Christopher Butler points out, "the period of [postmodernism's] greatest influence is over."[209] His observation echoes earlier comments in various histories of literature, which generally define postmodernism as a movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Not surprisingly, then, the number of critics finding fault with postmodernism has risen in the past decade. Fervent attacks were lanced by Marxist critics. For instance, Alex Callinicos writes against what he calls postmodernism's "strange mixture of cultural and political pessimism and light-minded playfulness".[210] He accuses the shapers of postmodern theories of disagreeing with each other:

> The abiding impression left by the various claims made for Postmodern art […] is
> their contradictory character. Postmodernism corresponds to a new historical stage of

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[207] Jattie Enklaar, "Literatur an Jahrhundertschwellen: Kulturbruch oder Wende*?", Kontinuität und Wandel, Apokalyptik und Prophetie. Literatur an Jahrhundertschwellen*, ed. Dietmar Jacobsen, (F.a.M.: Lang, 2001) 10.
[208] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allan Lane/Penguin Group, 2003) 1.
[209] Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 127.
[210] Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism. A Marxist Critique* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989) ix.

social development (Lyotard) or it doesn't (Lyotard again). Postmodern art is a continuation of (Lyotard), or a break from (Jencks) Modernism. Joyce is a Modernist (Jameson) or a Postmodernist (Lyotard). Postmodernism turns its back on social revolution, but then practitioners and advocates of a revolutionary art like Breton and Benjamin are claimed as precursors. No wonder that Kermode calls Postmodernism 'another of those period descriptions that help you to take a view of the past suitable to whatever it is you want to do.' (25)

Apart from distancing himself from postmodern theories because of their inconsistency, Callinicos even blames postmodernists and poststructuralists for lacking the necessary academic qualifications – a popular strategy of anti-postmodernist arguments:

I deny the main theses of poststructuralism, which seem to me in substance false. I doubt very much that Postmodern art represents a qualitative break from the Modernism of the early twentieth century. Moreover, much of what is written in support of the idea that we live in a postmodern epoch seems to me of small calibre intellectually, usually superficial, often ignorant, sometimes incoherent." (5)

Callinicos sees postmodernist fiction as a repetition of the techniques of the modernist avant-garde. He also criticizes postmodernist texts for their nihilism and superficiality, which he considers socially irresponsible and even destructive. Ultimately, Callinicos' aesthetics insists on the necessity of art's social relevance. While he demands a renewed artistic interest in global politics, Callinicos does not discuss possible aesthetic expressions beyond postmodernism, however. In this regard his stance resembles the critiques of Terry Eagleton or Jost Hermand. The latter condemns the peculiar one-dimensionality of the postmodern perspective, its 'merciless contemporaneousness'.[211] He observes:

[I]nnerhalb der gesellschaftswissenschaftlichen Theoriebildungen [setzte] ein lähmender Stillstand ein. Die bekanntesten Schlagwörter der darin zum Ausdruck kommenden ideologischen Alternativlosigkeit begannen deshalb bezeichnenderweise alle mit der Vorsilbe ‚post'. Dafür sprechen Begriffe wie Poststrukturalismus, Postmarxismus, Postfordismus, Postfeminismus, Posthumanismus, Postsozialismus, Postidealismus sowie Postmoderne oder Posthistoire, welche nur noch das postideologische, weil angeblich ideologieunbedürftige Hier und Jetzt zu kennen scheinen. Mit anderen Worten: in vielen philosophischen, kulturwissenschaftlichen und kunsttheoretischen Diskursen, die lange Zeit als besonders progressionsbetont galten, verbreitete sich […] seit den achtziger Jahren […] ein unübersehbarer Postismus. (6)

[Theory formation in the humanities and social sciences arrived at a paralyzing standstill. The best-known expressions demonstrating this lack of alternatives, therefore, all began with the telling prefix 'post'. This is illustrated by terms such as poststructuralism, post-marxism, post-fordism, post-feminism, post-humanism, post-socialism, post-idealism as well as postmodernism or post-histoire, all of which seem to know only the post-ideological 'here and now', which allegedly is not in need of ideology. In other words: many discourses in philosophy, cultural studies, and aesthetic theory, which for a long time were held to be

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[211] Jost Hermand, *Nach der Postmoderne. Ästhetik heute*. (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2004) 6.

especially progressive, came to be dominated, since the 1980s, by a conspicuous postism. (K.D.)]

In Hermand's opinion, postmodernism's critical potential is prone to disappear in the vacuum of academic self-adulation; having shed all ideological ballast, postmodern theorists are running on the spot. The basis of all art, according to Hermand's aesthetics, should be its 'humanizing function', i.e. the expression of an attitude that, in a repressive society, defends liberal, radically democratic, communitarian or even socialist ideals (11). Like Callinicos, Hermand demands the consideration of social aspects and political ideas in art. His approach is problematic, however, because he justifies censure: "[…] Sadistisches, Sexistisches oder Gewaltstimulierendes dürfte sich nicht ungehemmt entfalten können. Infolgedessen wird eine an humanistischen Prinzipien orientierte Kulturpolitik, die einen gesellschaftlich ‚eingreifenden' Impuls unterstützt, nie ohne gewisse Zensurbestimmungen auskommen." (40) [Works with sadistic, sexist, or violence-inciting contents should not be allowed to expand without restrain. Consequently a cultural politics that is informed by humanistic principles and supports an impulse of social intervention will never manage without certain regulations of censure. (K.D.)] Obviously, such an attitude is bound to by contradictory. In the face of the manifold achievements of the second half of the twentieth century, Hermand's position is nothing short of regressive.

Between an uncritical support of postmodern theories and art and their downright rejection, then, a middle position seems more constructive. Such an approach is taken by Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner, who distinguish between two streams of postmodernism. The first, 'oppositional postmodernism', is judged favourably because of its political implications; the second, lucid postmodernism', is rejected because of its overly playful approach to reality. Best and Kellner define a politically motivated postmodernism as follows:

> An oppositional postmodernism […] is a product of social movements and the impulse to oppose and resist existing society. Oppositional postmodernism strongly opposes the established society and culture and seeks new forms of critique and opposition. Distancing itself from modern theory and politics, oppositional postmodernism seeks new forms of resistance, struggle, and social change. In this sense, it is continuous with modernism in its seriousness and commitment to critique, struggle, and opposition.[212]

Such a postmodernism achieves what Callinicos demands, namely a serious political, cultural and socioeconomic involvement – without Hermand's moralistic straightjacket. Comparing it

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[212] Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997) 27.

to oppositional postmodernism, Best and Kellner criticize lucid postmodernism as "highly ironic, playful, and eclectic, advocating a pluralism of 'anything goes' and excessive relativism and subjectivism." (27) The new generation of postmodern critics, among which Best and Kellner can be counted, is as aware of the negative sides of postmodern theory as is the growing number of its opponents. These critics make it a point to avoid "excessive relativism and subjectivism" but do not entirely discard postmodern views either. Such an attempt to reconcile theory and reality (or, to take it a step farther, realism and postmodernism) is a striking feature of contemporary American family fiction as well. As Freund and Graf tentatively suggest: "Es könnte sein, daß die Literatur mit Franzen, Eugenides, mit Wallace oder Powers einen 'social turn' vollzieht, daß der Roman zurückkehrt in eine Gesellschaft, die den Roman mittlerweile marginalisiert hat."[213] [It is possible that with the works of Franzen, Eugenides, Wallace of Powers literature has completed a 'social turn', that the novel returns to a society that has come to marginalize it. (K.D.)]

The question whether the fin de millennium novel[214] is fundamentally different from its predecessors has become increasingly significant in the past few years. Hence Hans-Wolfgang Schaller's postulation: "Der amerikanische Roman des 20. Jhs. umfasst die Entwicklung von den Anfängen der Moderne […] am Beginn des Jhs. bis zur Überwindung des Postmodernismus […]." (7) In the US, many authors have been abandoning radical postmodernist narrative strategies in the past decade and turned to realism again. However, it seems that the new interest in realism is not simply a return to old times, but a re-thinking of realist depiction with the background of postmodern insights into the nature of representation. This new strategy marks a period the fin de millennium novelist Jeffrey Eugenides has called "reconstruction" (Freund/Graf 681); a point I will recur to in chapter 6.3.3. Schaller assesses this new development in the history of the novel as positive: "Die Geschichte des Romans im 20. Jh. ist [an ihrem Ende] damit beinahe an ihren Anfang zurückgekehrt, aber nur beinahe. In der Vorstellung einer progressiven Entwicklung befindet sich der heutige Roman auf einer höheren Bewusstseinsstufe, und die früheren schimmern prägend durch." (161) General as

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[213] Wieland Freund and Guido Graf, "Die Korrektur der Korrekturen. Vier amerikanische Erzähler", *Merkur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken* 8 (August 2003) 681.

[214] When I use the term 'fin de millennium', I consider the beginning of the period to be in the late 1980s and early 1990s; its end is not yet visible. The year 1989 seems an appropriate threshold since it marked the end of the Cold War. Consider also Martin L. Davies' comment: "It is late in the world; we shall leave the twentieth century and it will be later still. Perhaps it has left us already, this wretched era which, arguably, began late (in 1914?) and finished early (in 1989?) so that the shadow of the latest age, the third millennium […] falls upon us the sooner." Cf. "The Lateness of the World, or How to Leave the Twentieth Century", *Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture*, ed. Michael St John (Brookfield: Ashgate, 1999) 255. Davies' demarcation points go back to a comment by the late Susan Sontag: "1914 Sarajewo als Anfang – 1989 Ende und Wende." (Enklaar 12)

these remarks are, they indicate a paradigm shift. My hypothesis is that the fin de millennium marks a decisive step on the way from postmodern writing and thinking to a post-postmodern era. This entails the necessity of asking how these new values, convictions, and theories manifest themselves in fin de millennium family novels.

It is difficult to think of an art beyond postmodernism's interpretation of contemporary culture as the end of history, ideology, meaning and progress. Jattie Enklaar's attempt to do so provides a useful transition to the post-postmodernist writing on which I will focus in this chapter:

> Dadurch, dass wir nicht länger in Totalität denken wollen, hat sich auch die schöne Literatur überlebt. Spekulierend könnte man fragen, ob die Kunst unserer Welt wieder ein 'sanftes Gesetz' liefern könnte, eine neue Form der Kreativität, in der Natur, Vernunft und Ästhetik sich wieder zu einer neuen Sinngebung vereinigen. (26)

[Literature has become a thing of the past because we no longer want to think in totalizing terms. One could speculate now whether art could, once again, furnish the world with a 'soft law', a new form of creativity in which nature, reason, and aesthetics would be united to a new meaningful whole. (K. D.)]

The new meaning in fiction that Enklaar speculates about can be derived, as we shall see, from a dialogue with the past in general and a fresh interest in the legacy of a mode of writing that had already been declared obsolete: realism[215].

While literary postmodernism was already considered dead at its height in 1975 (Hornung (2) 93), such a declaration must certainly be considered premature. Nevertheless, Hornung's mentioning of it is an important signal for the growing interest in fiction after postmodernism that gathered momentum in the early 1990s. Critics started speaking of a "new literature, enhanced by the postmodern – post mortem practices" that "shows signs of the re-emergence of the author, the recovery of the subject, and neo-realistic tendencies." (Hornung (2) 97) A statement like that can be misleading in its totalizing view of postmodernism as dominating the entire literary market. Yet it must be stressed that despite the success of postmodernist fiction in academic circles, realism was never dead – at least not in the general public's reading taste.

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[215] Amy Kaplan's insightful study astutely describes the changing perception of realism (and its gradual loss of prestige) up to postmodern literary theory: "The fate of realism in American literary history has undergone dramatic reversals on theoretical, political, and historical grounds. From an objective reflection of contemporary social life, realism has become a fictional conceit, or deceit, packaging and naturalizing an official version of the ordinary. From a style valued for its plain-speaking vernacular, realism has adopted a rhetorical sophistication that now subverts its own claims to referentiality. From a progressive force exposing the conditions of industrial society, realism has turned into a conservative force whose very act of exposure reveals its complicity with structures of power." Cf. *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: The University if Chicago Press, 1988) 1.

Four years before Don DeLillo had in print a family novel depicting America's postmodern condition, John Irving published such a bestselling realist novel. In contrast to *White Noise*, John Irving's family novel *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981) is far from displaying the radical aesthetics of postmodernism. *The Hotel New Hampshire* (*THNH*) tells the mesmerizing story of an unusual New England family[216] from the decade before World War II until the 1980s. The Berrys' odyssey[217] from the little town of Dairy, New Hampshire, through a communist-infested post-war Vienna to their final (romantic) destiny on the coast of Maine is an emotional roller-coaster. Because it is written in a highly realistic style with moments of romantic humor, Irving's family novel can be seen as a bridge between John Cheever's marvelous tale of the New England-based Wapshot family and the novel to be discussed in this chapter, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001). With the former, *THNH* shares the sometimes melancholic, often financially unsuccessful, but always hopeful father figure: like Leander Wapshot, Win Berry of *THNH* is a youthful, adventurous, loving and much-loved father. With the latter, Irving's novel shares its realist depiction and an atmosphere oscillating between comedy and tragedy. In fact, its enthralling combination of hope and despair, love and death, humor and disaster not only make *THNH* a page-turner like *The Corrections*, it is also an premature example of what Jonathan Franzen, in a much-quoted essay, would later identify as the fin de millennium's answer to postmodernism: the concept of tragic realism.

Franzen's concept is a rethinking of the role of fiction, and that of the writer of fiction, in contemporary society. In his essay "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels" (PtD), which is generally referred to as 'the Harper's essay', Franzen laments what he feels to be a serious cultural crisis in America. He expresses his despair about the novelist's inability "of connecting the personal and the social."[218] Because of the increasing dominance of the mass media, the novel of social reportage is no longer interesting to readers, Franzen suspects[219]. Trying to change culture by writing a social novel therefore seems out of

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[216] The civil rights movement's achievement of opening up American society for alternatives to the sexual norm has influenced the nuclear family at the center of Irving's novel. While it had been virtually unthinkable in a 1950s family novel to include openly homosexual characters into normal family life, *The Hotel New Hampshire* portrays a sexually open family. The homosexuality of Frank, the eldest son, is overtly mentioned, but not problematized; neither are Franny's frequent sexual allusions or her incestuous relationship with her younger brother, the narrator, judged negatively.

[217] The novel's most striking allusion to Homer's odyssey is a character dubbed Freud, whose prophecies and later blindness suggest Tiresias, the blind seer.

[218] Jonathan Franzen, "'Perchance to Dream': In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels", *Harper's Magazine* (April 1996) 36.

[219] In this aspect Franzen diverges from Tom Wolfe, who, in his much-quoted essay "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel" had expressed his desire to wake from the dead the

date to Franzen, who thinks that those novels best engage with culture that are not too openly didactic:

> The American writer today faces a totalitarianism analogous to the one with which two generations of Eastern bloc writers had to contend. To ignore it is to court nostalgia. To engage with it, however, is to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over again: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine …. (PtD 43)

Implicitly, then, Franzen suggests that the days of novels such as DeLillo's *White Noise* are over. If traditional social novels, as well as the dubious subversion of postmodern novels[220], have become obsolete, a new form of writing is needed. As we will see, with *The Corrections*, a National Book Award winner, Jonathan Franzen has set an impressive example for this new, post-postmodern, type of fiction.

The new literature Franzen has in mind moves away from the surfaces of surfiction and the *nouveau roman*, and abandons Lyotardian language games or excessive demonstrations of the Baudrillardian simulacrum for the sake of content. His answer to Roland Barthes' well-known concept of "the literature of exhaustion" is: "The fact that critics […] have lately discovered a 'crisis' of form may not mean that printed fiction has exhausted itself, but simply that an era of (critically privileged) formal innovation is coming to an end, and that the time has come for form's dialectical counterparts, content and context, to return as the vectors of the new." [221] By context Franzen means a recurrence to place, if not a whole-hearted devotion to regions as suggestive as Nathaniel Hawthorne's New England, Mark Twain's Southwest, or William Faulkner's deep South. The thoroughly postmodernized and therefore unrecognizable landscapes we find in DeLillo's *White Noise* have become as outmoded as postmodernism's flat characters. Underlining the importance of content as well, Franzen prefers plot over metafictional comments; he argues for the reintroduction of complex personalities instead of characters that are merely echo chambers of certain ideas, and for deep insight into characters' torments and troubles rather than a superficial or distant

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realist novel of social reportage: "It is not merely that reporting is useful in gathering the *petits faits vrais* that create verisimilitude and make a novel gripping and observing, although that side of the enterprise is worth paying attention to. My contention is that, especially in an age like this, they are essential for the very greatest effects literature can achieve. […] At this weak, pale, tabescent moment in the history of American literature, we need a battalion, a brigade, of Zolas to head out into this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hogstomping Baroque country of ours and reclaim it as literary property." Cf. *Harper's Magazine* (November 1989) 55.

[220] As Franzen points out, "Strange, too that postmodernism, which is multiculturalism's counterpart among the tenured creative-writing avant-garde, should celebrate as subversive the same blending of Hi and Lo culture that *The New York Times Magazine* performs every Sunday between ads for Tiffany's and Lancôme." (PtD 47)

[221] Jonathan Franzen (2), "I'll Be Doing More of the Same", *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 16.1 (1996) 38.

relationship between narrator(s), characters, and reader(s). For the fin de millennium novelist, it is important to "shift from depressive realism to tragic realism, from being immobilized by darkness to being sustained by it" because it entails "believing in the possibility of a cure, though this 'cure' is anything but straightforward". (PtD 53) In contrast to postmodern ambivalence and the end of all metanarratives, a fine balance between hope and melancholy appear to be the way out of the self-referential, disconnected world(s) of postmodernist fiction. Such a careful optimism is anything but idyllic, as Franzen explains: "Tragic realism preserves access to the dirt behind the dream of Chosenness – to the human difficulty beneath the technological ease, to the sorrow behind the pop-cultural narcosis: to all those portents on the margins of our existence." (PtD 53) Tragic realism is not a totalizing concept or style; rather, Franzen sees it in a broad context: "I hope it's clear that by 'tragic' I mean just about any fiction that raises more questions than it answers: anything in which conflict doesn't resolve into cant." (PtD 53)

The concept of 'tragic realism' is an open rejection of literature written to gratify an academic taste. Franzen complains about "the picturesque arroyo of fiction produced and consumed by academics – a desertscape of nostalgia, mediocrity, and pomo brow-furrowing, the vast bulk of it neither more harmful nor less skippable than the poetry that fills our smaller journals." (Franzen (2) 36) Franzen bases his criticism on his academic experience.[222] Like Rick Moody, Jeffrey Eugenides, and David Foster Wallace, Franzen belongs to a generation of writers with first-hand knowledge of the poststructuralist, post-colonial, and postmodern theories the humanities have subsisted on in the past few decades. His encounters with postmodern thinking and writing has led him to conclude: "But when the avant-garde is all that remains – when the rebels who kept the establishment honest are themselves enshrined as the establishment – we're left without an opposition. I see academy (and foresee a national literature, produced by academics) lost in fantasies of transgression and subversionthat are likely only to confirm for young people, who have a keen sense of bullshit, the complete irrelevance of literature." (Franzen (2) 36) [223] Franzen's dismay with more negative sides of postmodernity and postmodernism is of many voices in a growing chorus of anti-, or post-postmodernists.

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[222] Jonathan Franzen attended Swarthmore College, where he graduated in the Humanities. In 1981 he was granted a Fulbright scholarship, which he spent to study in Berlin. (cf. Marshall, n.p.)
[223] Here Franzen refers to a peculiar situation that Butler characterizes as follows: "The postmodern period is one of extraordinary dominance of the work of academics over that of artists." (7)

While its challengers agree that postmodernism has become obsolete, they differ in their suggestions of the nature of its successor(s). The unanimous recurrence to realism – accompanied by varying prefixes – is striking, however. As we have seen, Franzen speaks of 'tragic realism'; others coin phrases such as 'crackpot realism', 'pragmatic realism', 'postmodern realism', 'radical realism', 'critical realism', 'transcendental realism', or simply Neo-Realism. In fact, most scholars name 'Neo-Realism', or 'new conventionalism' in fiction as the new and post-postmodern style. However, there are different opinions on the nature of Neo-Realism as well. Some hold it to be the 'dirty realism' of the late Raymond Carver[224], whose minimalist style and narrow narrative perspective on the daily lives of ordinary people is also known as 'K-mart realism'. Others apply it, in a very broad sense, to any kind of realist fiction after postmodernism.

In my opinion, the various prefixes to the realism to which fin de millennium authors return more and more are useful to a certain extent only. Certainly the prefix 'Neo' with its implication of radical change does not seem necessary. Rather, as Kristiaan Versluys rightly underlines, we need to realize that even at the peak of postmodernism, realism was never inherently backwards: "The realist writer functions as subversive in his own right."[225] Language games, simulacra, and meta-fictional self-referentialism are not required to make a text subversive. Vice versa, even the most anti-referential postmodern text depends on a minimum degree of realism: "And yet aesthetic responses, most particularly negation, depend upon an ontologically persistent 'reality principle', or a realist dialectic."[226] It seems that fin de millennium fiction is characterized by the attempt to re-introduce meaning, the author, and the subject, while at the same time authors refuse to return to simplistic notions of referentiality or verisimilitude. This area of tension is an invigorating departure from highly theoretical postmodernist fiction as well as from the irrelevant triviality of minor fiction.

In this process of shifting notions about the role of fiction and the nature of representation, family has become a popular and successful means of probing the possibilities for re-inscribing meaning into fiction. In fact, Franzen describes it as the logical consequence of the end of ideology:

> It seems […] to me that in a particularly disillusioned age, with hardly a semblance of
> hope that our critical apparatus can make even a minor dent in the machinery of the

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[224] Cf. Robert Rebein, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists. American Fiction after Postmodernism* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001).

[225] Kristiaan Versluys, *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992) 8.

[226] Philip Tew, "A New Sense of Reality? A New Sense of the Text? Exploring Meta-Realism and the Literary-Critical Field", *Beyond Postmodernism. Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*, ed. Klaus Stiersdorfer (Berlin: deGruyter, 2003) 48.

technocracy and the consumer state, we're left with the death of certain kinds of hope or idealism, and also the death of religion as a sufficient provider of meaning (as opposed to an occasional momentary provider of meaning). By default, family rises up. […] It's not surprising to see in my own work, looking back, and in the work of some of my peers, an attention to family. It's nice to write a book that does tend toward significance and meaning, and where else are you sure of finding it?[227]

To offer readers instances of self-recognition, and thus stability and support in an increasingly dehumanized world, but without the pedagogical or moral cudgel of naturalism or sentimental fiction - this is Franzen's vision of the central task of post-postmodern narratives. Not only is his novel *The Corrections* a superb manifestation of Franzen's concept, it is accompanied by similarly successful family novels. The oft-derided genre has recently reached an unprecedented summit of both popular and critical attention. Jeffrey Eugenides, Rick Moody, Rohinton Mistry, Jane Smiley, Toni Morrison, Akhil Sharma, Donald Antrim, and many more celebrated authors have published award-winning family fictions in the past few years. This development is not incidental, but certainly a significant moment of post-postmodern writing.

At the same time, the question arises which real-world version of the Western family these family novelists can take as their model. Since the old breadwinner / homemaker family of the 1950s has been succeeded by a variety of post-divorce, multi-nuclear patchwork families, a sociological development mirrored by the novels discussed in the preceding chapters, it is justified to ask whether the fin de millennium family novel goes back to the roots, i.e. the traditional nuclear family, or whether it moves beyond the family models so far mentioned to introduce a new model (the 'millennium family?). In what follows I will roughly outline contemporary sociological perspectives on the form and function of the family in our day, as well as on the future of the family as a social institution whose functionality is increasingly cast into doubt.

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[227] Cf. Franzen's conversation with Dave Weich, "Author Interviews at powells.com. Jonathan Franzen Uncorrected", http://www.powells.com/authors/franzen.html, (accessed 06.07.2003), n.p. Franzen is making a similar point in his interview with me; cf. p. 223.

6.2 The Contemporary Family. Renegotiations of a Model

In the preceding chapters, we have tracked the development of the "Western family" (Jones 28) from its sealed nuclear version of the post-war era to more open forms in the aftermath of the social and cultural changes triggered by the civil rights and women's liberation movements[228]. These changes are often held to have had "a destructive effect on the family as well as on other important institutions."[229] Segalman goes even so far as to claim that "[t]he matter has progressed to the point that it has had a serious and deleterious effect on the civilization in which democratic society operates." (2) Sociological findings specify the break in the traditional family structure: "Married couples with children, who used to comprise the majority of families in the United States, now make up less than half of all American families […]." (Hill/Kopp 19) What is more, the number of people who never marry has risen from a ten-percent ratio of the population (Ward 63) to an expected new all-time high of thirty percent (Barabas/Erler 77). The increasing number of singles is not only problematic in view of the fact that especially in Western European countries birth rates are declining, but also because a growing percentage of these unmarrieds is constituted by single mothers. Segalman condemns this development by stressing that "much of the sociopathology and dysfunctionality of society is directly tied to the single parent family and alternative familial version of childrearing which have been substituted for the traditional two parent family of the past." (15) For Segalman, the post-1960s intellectual elite are to blame for the crisis of the Western family. He is escorted by traditionalists like Dennis O'Keeffe, who maintains that "[t]oday the intellectuals, so-called, are often to be found furthering and encouraging the aesthetic as well as the moral corruption of the young. […] [T]he Post-modernists and Politically Correct spirits are not hostile to modern mass culture."[230] For conservatives like Segalman or O'Keeffe, the solution to the problem lies in making divorce difficult to obtain and thus raise, once again, the social stigma attached to it[231], or in improving the moral, cognitive and aesthetic education of children and adolescents to "repair [the] moral ruin"

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[228] Kurt Lüscher underlines the gravity of these changes of the Western family in the aftermath of the 1960s. Cf. "Familie und Postmoderne", *Familie im Brennpunkt von Wissenschaft und Forschung*, ed. Bernhard Nauck and Corinna Onnen-Isemann (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1995) 3-15.

[229] Cf. Ralph Segalman, "Introduction: the Problem of Broken Families in the Western World", *Reclaiming the Family*, ed. Ralph Segalman (St. Paul: PWPA, 1998) 2.

[230] Cf. Dennis O'Keeffe, "The Philistine Trap: Family, Education, and Culture in Western Society", *Reclaiming the Family*, ed. Ralph Segalman (St. Paul: PWPA, 1998) 103.

[231] Ralph Segalman (2), "What Can Be Done to Reclaim the Family", *Reclaiming the Family*, ed. Ralph Segalman (St. Paul: PWPA, 1998) 216f.

caused by postmodern intellectuals (O'Keeffe 107). The positions put forward by these conservative critics are often too generalizing and simplistic, if not atavistic, to assess the complex situation of the contemporary Western family. Only the changes they record are of interest; their interpretation of these changes, however, is deficient.

Due to ever-rising divorce rates and the growing number of alternatives to the nuclear family, most family sociologists generally assume that the family has lost its basic function in society (cf. Hill/Kopp 80; Barabas/Erler 37; Ward 333). These sociological findings are supported by popular accounts of contemporary forms of family. In a series of articles later made into a book, Ethan Watters has coined the catchy phrase "urban tribes" to describe a phenomenon he sees as the replacement of the traditional family: "Writing for the esteemed *New York Times Magazine*, I described the urban tribe as 'a tight group with unspoken rules and hierarchies, whose members thought of each other as "us" and the rest of the world as "them"'."[232] In essence, Watters maintains that a person's close circle of friends takes the place of conventional nuclear families of procreation[233]. Marriage and children are no longer appealing to career-oriented, single thirty-somethings, who look for stability, fun and emotional support in times of crisis in their intimate urban circle of friends.

Despite those and similar findings and observations, many sociologists also point out, however, that the changed format of the family does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the family is 'dead'. In contrast to the opinion of traditionalists, divorces are often regarded as functional as they can help regain individual freedom and well-being; moreover, many divorcees marry again: "Insbesondere ist darin keine Krise der Ehe oder Familie zu sehen, da der Großteil der Geschiedenen über die Wiederverheiratung weiter in Ehen und Familien eingebunden bleibt." (Hill/Kopp 265; cf. also Ward 100). That is to say, many people still believe in the idea of marriage as an arrangement that is preferable to a more loose relationship. It also shows that the social and cultural prestige of marriage has not vanished yet. Barabas/Erler, therefore, specify the hypothesis of the family's loss of function and point out that we need to see the changes in the family as positive because they have led to a variety of functions that the family can still fulfill. Instead of simply condemning the contemporary family as 'dysfunctional', as Barabas and Erler highlight, we need to understand the changed and changing family structures as multi-functional. While even conservative family sociologists like Segalman admit that "[i]t is fatuous and unreal to argue for a return to the

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[232] Ethan Watters, *Urban Tribes. Are Friends the New Family?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003) 40. Watters admits this definition to be insufficient and improves it throughout the course of his book.

[233] Hill/Kopp distinguish between the family of orientation, i.e. the family we are born into, and the family of procreation, i.e. the families we found ourselves.

conditions of the past when the family was generally secure and safe in Western nations" (20), recent publications on the future of the family tend to underline the reconstructive potential of contemporary forms of family. Barabas and Erler foresee the eventual victory of the patchwork family (191), an assessment shared by the Canadian family sociologist Margaret Ward, who judges that the answer to whether the family will survive

> […] depends on how we define the family. If we consider the traditional patriarchal family, the answer may well be no. […] Throughout history, the family has proven itself highly adaptable. It has taken many forms, but it has never disappeared. The family thus far has been the most efficient way of meeting individual means. […] Although the family of the future may be quite different from that we have known to date, yes, the family will survive. (333f.)

For a conclusion we might say, then, that both the conservative faction's sometimes hysterical calls for the restoration of an institution they see under heavy attack, as well as the more optimistic views on the future of the contemporary family that liberal sociologists hold, are a clear sign of the importance still ascribed to the family in our day. The recently increased interest in the family is also, however, an indicator for the feeling of insecurity that our globalized ways of living may have caused. At the threshold of what some perceive to be an impending clash of civilizations between the Arab world and Western societies, people may feel the need to reconsider family as a way of escaping both consumer society's emphasis of 'hedonistic individualism' as well as globalism's blurring of identity. Such reconsideration is among the motivating forces of fin de millennium family novels such as *The Corrections*.

6.3 Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001)

I have already mentioned briefly, in chapter I, the overwhelming praise that Jonathan Franzen's third novel *The Corrections* received in the weeks and months following its publication. Although Franzen had already been given much applause for his previous works, and had also published a good deal of non-fiction in prestigious East coast magazines[234], the success of *The Corrections* (*TC*) was new for him (Marshall n.p.). Franzen, who was born in the Midwest in 1960 and raised in a suburb of St. Louis, the city that inspired his first novel,

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[234] Franzen has been publishing in *Harper's Magazine* and *The New Yorker*, the latter employing Franzen as "a regular contributor". Cf. Christoph Ribbat, "Handling the Media, Surviving *The Corrections*: Jonathan Franzen and the Fate of the Author", *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 47.4 (2002) 556.

had started his career with the ambition to write fiction that would transform society. After the disappointing realization that his first two novels[235] received much critical acclaim but did not seem to reach a wider reading public, Franzen felt ostracized by media-saturated American consumer society: "But the biggest surprise - the true measure of how little I'd heeded my own warning in *The Twenty-Seventh City* – was the failure of my culturally engaged novel to engage with culture. I'd intended to provoke; what I got instead was sixty reviews in a vacuum." (PtD 37f.) After this experience Franzen abandoned the concept of the social novel and developed, in the eight years it took him to conceptualize and write *The Corrections*, the post-postmodern aesthetics of 'tragic realism' examined above.

The success of his third novel, however, was shadowed by his much-discussed misunderstanding with Oprah Winfrey. Franzen's initial reluctance to be excited about an invitation to the famous television show of Oprah Winfrey, who had selected *TC* for her Book Club, needs to be seen in the context of his wariness of consumer culture. When Franzen expressed "reservations about seeing a 'corporate logo' on the cover of his book" (Ribbat 556f.), Oprah reacted by withdrawing her invitation, a reaction that would, ironically, boost sales just as her previous selection of the novel did. Needless to say, Franzen's unfortunate and misinterpreted remarks caused much turmoil among readers and fellow authors, who quickly dismissed him as elitist (Ribbat 557). However, as Franzen has written with passion against the vicious circle of his country's culture industry and the dominance of television over the novel, his reaction (exaggerated though it was) is understandable. In fact, as Ribbat convincingly argues,

> […] the moves made by Franzen in the first months of his existence as a celebrity author do not seem to have been guided by a sense of cultural elitism. Instead, a post-postmodern sensibility can be observed – a sensibility that is influenced by the realization that takes the world created by the visual media into account […]. Franzen's 'poor handling' of the media, in hindsight, could be seen as an almost conceptual move to trigger discussions of literature's position in a post-postmodern world. (558f.)

Franzen's reluctance to appear on Oprah's show is comparable to the shyness of Thomas Pynchon, the famous recluse, or even Don DeLillo, who once famously handed an interviewer a card saying "I don't want to talk about it." (Orr 7). Like DeLillo, Franzen trusts more in the written (and premeditated) word than in the spoken word.

In his refutation of the lures of consumer society, Franzen is influenced by Don DeLillo, a sort of literary father figure whom Franzen admires "more than anybody else in

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[235] *The Twenty-Seventh City* was published in 1988, and *Strong Motion* came out four years later, in 1992.

every way." (Birkerts n.p.) Fighting the same adversary, Franzen chooses a different strategy, however. "Some of the valences that could motivate a book in the sixties or seventies, the notion of social resistance or political change, feel very dead to me now; not because those aren't still important questions to be asking about the world, but because we can't have the same level of idealism that we might have about a parent or a sibling or a lover or a child. And it's hard for a book to have passion without some idealism." (cf. appendix p. 223) Using the microcosm of the American family as a locus to both investigate and critique American culture, Franzen revives an ostensibly obsolete model: the nuclear family.

The nuclear family in its various forms dominates *The Corrections*. Considering the sociological assessments of the contemporary American family discussed in the preceding chapter, the exclusivity of this family model in *TC* is striking. From the elderly Midwestern couple Alfred and Enid to Gary's family in Philadelphia, from Chip's late family bliss at the end of the novel to Denise's involvement with the family of her lovers Brian and Robin, the American white middle class portrayed in *TC* consists solely of nuclear families. A crucial difference to earlier associations of this traditional twentieth century family form with either a sanctuary and the reassurance of the norm *or* a prison and painful rebellion against that norm, however, is that Franzen's fin de millennium families implicate both degeneration as well as regeneration. As I intend to demonstrate, his nuclear families are not meant to invoke immediate associations, such as "safe haven" (cf. the 1950s) or, conversely, "petty bourgeois tradition" (1960s/70s) or "superseded model" (1980s). In contrast to *The Wapshot Chronicle*, where the break-up of the nuclear family is associated with the increasing alienation of the individual in society, and in contrast to *White Noise*, where the loose ties of the patchwork family represent the superficiality of postmodern American consumer society, *The Corrections* links the nuclear family both with alarming dysfunction and moments of comfort and redemption. An investigation of Franzen's ulterior motif in employing the nuclear family promises, therefore, to net crucial insights into the nature of fin de millennium, post-postmodern fiction.

At the center of the novel is the Lambert family, consisting of Alfred and Enid, the St. Jude-based parents, their children Gary, Chipper and Denise (all of whom have moved to the East Coast), and Gary's family of procreation in Philadelphia. A typical family novel, *The Corrections* takes into consideration the points of view of all its immediate members. It is divided into six parts that Franzen had designed as novellas[236]. The first and the last chapter

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[236] Initially Franzen had planned *TC* as "a five-part book. There were five main characters, and I decided there were going to be five novella-size sections with a beginning and ending tacked on." (Murphy, n. p.)

serve as prologue and epilogue to the remaining chapters, three of which focus on one of the three Lambert children respectively. While in the first and fourth chapters ("St. Jude", "At Sea"), their parents Alfred and Enid are at the center of attention, the last chapter ("The Corrections") brings the whole family together. As we will see, it settles the conflicts described in the past chapters and paints a hopeful picture of the future of the Lamberts. Like *The Wapshot Chronicle*, *TC* ends on a harmonious note with only the tragic demise of the father as a poignant addendum.

It is crucial to note that in contrast to the family novels discussed before, *TC* does not parallelize actual socioeconomic developments with the structure of the family in question. Instead of explaining the breakup of the nuclear family with the increasing alienation of the individual in the modern world, or relating the splitting of the nuclear family into patchwork to consumer society and the postmodern tendency of 'anything goes', Franzen is interested in the conflicts and dynamics *within* the family. To narrate the breakup of the nuclear family is not his point. The families portrayed in *TC*, at least in their external formation, remain intact. Franzen's approach is new in that the novel's sharp social criticism does not affect the *structure* of the family as such; rather, it shapes the behavior of the respective characters, and their *internal relations* with each other. The Lamberts' most striking reaction to the various culture- as well as family-related problems is to construct a 'corrected' version of their daily realities. These 'corrective constructions' aggravate the personal relations within the family. In the subsequent chapters I will probe the intricate systems of 'enchantment' the Lamberts use to make their reality more attractive, and the processes of disenchantment they undergo in the course of the novel.

6.3.1 Enchanted Worlds: Corrective Constructions

Life is hard for the various members of the Lambert family at beginning of *The Corrections*. Both the aged parents as well as their middle-aged children are facing serious problems. Their diverse tribulations have driven the characters into self-made prisons. In an attempt to come closer to their individual dreams and desires, each character has constructed an 'enchanted' version of the life he or she is leading, a version that blends out the strains, disappointments and problems of reality. In other words, each of them employs a variety of corrective constructions in order to make his or her life more bearable. Like magic, these corrective

constructions put their creators under a spell. In their enchanted state, the characters fail to react adequately to the obstacles with which they are confronted. As a result, they gradually lose control over their lives until they reach a point of no return that forces them to change their strategy. In this chapter I wish to show the extent as well as the consequences of the fine balance between hope and despair, or between dreams and reality, a balance the characters try to maintain desperately yet in vain.

The story of the Lamberts can be described as a steady movement towards an all-time low point in their lives. At this nadir, everything the characters had dreamed of, worked for, even gotten a taste of, falls into pieces. The eventual crash towards which the various plot lines lead can be read as the final meeting point between two very different realities that have been determining the lives of each family member: the surface, or 'enchanted reality' each of them has constructed; and the subtext, or the way things really are, which all of them try to ignore. Each character reaches his or her low point when the subtext eventually hits and destroys the surface.

The polarity between surface and subtext in the lives of the characters is paralleled by the novel's composition. The story of the Lambert family is complemented by frequent references to *The Chronicles of Narnia*[237]. In fact, Lewis's famous story is the most significant subtext of *The Corrections*. As we shall see, there are moments of Narnian enchantment – where fantasy beats reality – in the lives of all members of the Lambert family. While the narrator explicitly refers to *The Chronicles of Narnia* (e.g., as the book from which Alfred used to read to his children, and which his grandson Jonah is currently enjoying), it also provides the most important symbol in *TC*: Aslan, the 'benign lion', which appears in various shapes and disguises throughout Franzen's novel and stands for each character's most powerful – and most harmful – instance of enchantment. These various corrective constructions, as well as Aslan, the symbol representing them, are fundamentally ambiguous as they comprise both soothing *and* dangerous qualities. They thus tie in with the central conflict around which the story of the Lambert family evolves: "What made correction possible also doomed it." (*TC* 313) This statement, the significance of which within the novel cannot be emphasized enough, refers to the manifold traps the characters find themselves in. The prologue gives us a taste of some of the difficulties the Lamberts are facing.

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[237] C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

The first chapter, "St. Jude", introduces the novel's most important themes and problems: disorder, discontent, disease - and imminent disaster. It illuminates the present condition of the Lambert family and foreshadows the catastrophes to follow. The omniscient narrator evokes the sword of Damocles hovering over the Lamberts. The chapter's focus is on the discontent of Alfred and Enid, which stands for the situation of the whole family. The impending doom is illustrated by the anxiety that dominates the elderly couple's life:

> Ringing throughout the house was an alarm bell that no one but Alfred and Enid could hear directly. It was the alarm bell of anxiety. […] By now it had been ringing for so many […] days that it simply blended into the background except at certain early-morning hours when one or the other of them awoke in a sweat and realized that a bell had been ringing in their heads as long as they could remember […]. (*TC* 3f.)

As this quote suggests, Enid and Alfred are not a happy couple. Married in the 1950s, the two Midwesterners have been leading a traditional homemaker/breadwinner marriage safely grounded in the middle class. Their children having left the house and Alfred being retired, the two of them could be living comfortably on Alfred's pension and their savings. Yet they cannot enjoy the fruits of their decades-long labor. Alone in their disorderly house in the Midwest, "each felt near to exploding with anxiety" (*TC* 4). Despite their relative pecuniary comfort, the two spouses feel the other to be a burden. Enid deplores the fact Alfred does not seem to enjoy anything anymore. She feels he deprives her of her quality of life:

> Enid felt sure that her head would clear if only she didn't have to wonder, every five minutes, what Alfred was up to. But, try as she might, she couldn't get him interested in life. When she encouraged him to take up his metallurgy, he looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. When she asked whether there wasn't some yard work he could do, he said his legs hurt. When she reminded him that the husbands of her friends had hobbies, [...] Alfred acted as if she were trying to distract him from some great labor of his. (*TC* 5)

As this passage suggests, Alfred is troubled by Enid's presence, too. Annoyed by Enid's collective spirit and her tendency towards untidiness, he often "seem[s] to wish that she would go away." (*TC* 5) Both spouses feel alienated from each other.

Their disaffection is described metaphorically in terms of war. Enid is compared to a "guerrilla" (*TC* 6) who is constantly fighting "the governing force" (*TC* 6), her husband. The lifelong struggle for power, in which Alfred had always been the victor, has turned in favor of Enid, who takes her afflicted husband's "wrath" and "cries of rage" concerning her clutter as "the cries of a government that could no longer govern" (*TC* 7). This initial opposition between order and chaos, which the novel stages as a "tension between collapsing systems of

order"[238] affects all Lamberts throughout the course of the novel. In fact, the untamable and ever-increasing clutter in the Lambert domicile constitutes the first clash between surface and subtext, or between construction and reality.

Neglected, cluttered, and slowly falling apart, their house stands for the condition of the two spouses. It is the battleground for Enid and Alfred's conflicts: "Although Enid's ostensible foe was Alfred, what made her a guerrilla was the house that occupied them both. […] Unfortunately, Enid lacked the temperament to manage such a house, and Alfred lacked the neurological wherewithal." (*TC* 7) The house is filled from bottom to top with junk such as long-expired bonus coupons, spoiled ancient food, souvenirs from trips to Europe, shampoo samples from hotels Enid and Alfred visited decades ago, old toys, and countless more rotten, corroded, or otherwise useless items. All this rubbish signals that Enid, who is unable to throw anything away, lives too much in the past; also, it symbolizes the chaos and corrosion that characterize the Lamberts' present situation[239]. Like their house, the Lamberts' relationship is clogged with reminiscences of a past long gone. One of Enid's corrective constructions is to simply ignore the clutter in her house, and, as a result, to evade Alfred's anger.

Within the house, the basement epitomizes the corrosion of Enid's and Alfred's relationship, i.e. their alienation from each other. There are clear signs of marital conflict as well: "The Ping-Pong table was the one field on which the civil war raged openly." (*TC* 8) The eastern end is occupied by Alfred's things, the western end by Enid's. The division of the basement according to gender-based roles in the household insinuates the constrictions of an unequal conventional marriage. Enid's part is dominated by the washer, dryer, and ironing board. In Alfred's part, his metallurgical lab is located where, in better times, he conducted experiments that gained him two US patents. While Enid has been wishing all her life for some help from her husband in her domain, her presence, conversely, is not wanted in Alfred's realm: "Every morning, as soon as Alfred had downed his cup of hot milky water, he went to the basement and focused on evacuation. Enid wasn't welcome to speak to him during this peak hour of his anxiety […]." (*TC* 545) An indicator of the couple's deeply rooted discontent, Alfred's lab is also a place of disorder:

> The gray dust of evil spells and the cobwebs of enchantment thickly cloaked the old electric arc furnace, and the jars of exotic rhodium and sinister cadmium and stalwart

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[238] Susanne Rohr, "'The Tyranny of the Probable' - Crackpot Realism and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*", *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 49.1 (2004) 92.
[239] The theme of waste in *TC* betrays the influence of Don DeLillo on Franzen, who shows in his novels *White Noise*, *Mao II*, and especially *Underworld*, various depictions of waste as the dangerous underside of consumer culture.

bismuth, and the hand-printed labels browned by the vapors from a glass-stoppered bottle of aqua regia, and the quadruled notebook in which the latest entry in Alfred's hand dated from a time, fifteen years ago, before the betrayals had begun. (*TC* 9)

The dusty room is Alfred's only private place in the house; here he can forget the troubles of the present. The old man's laboratory is reminiscent of a magician's old working place, a Narnian 'place that time forgot'. His retreat allows him to descend to a magical world that provides him with the enchantment he otherwise only derives from sleep. Alfred is indifferent to the bad condition of his lab. He does not mind that it is also the home to "a colony of mute, dust-colored crickets" (*TC* 8). He feels so comfortable in his realm that he does not bother to use the bathroom next door, but instead pees into the Yuban cans stored there. It is indicative of Enid's character as well as of the condition of their marriage that she chooses to turn a blind eye to this. The urine-filled Yuban cans are an obvious sign of Alfred's disease: one of the symptoms of Parkinson's is Alfred's increasing incapability of controlling his bodily functions[240]. Enid's choice not to acknowledge the existence of the urine-filled Yuban cans speaks for her failure to recognize her husband's serious condition. Her decision to ignore the "increasingly olfactory evidence" (*TC* 9) is a further instance of Enid's corrective constructions, which makes her maintain the facade of a normal family life and keeps her from confronting the unpleasant sides of her marriage. Instead of facing Alfred's disease, she evades the topic and calls it "a very mild condition" or simply "his affliction". This euphemism, which Alfred also adopts, is yet another corrective construction.

According to Freudian theory, the basement stands for the unconscious of a person. In the case of the Lamberts, it stands for the collective unconscious of the family, the things they choose to ignore by means of their corrective constructions. The symbolic quality of the Lamberts' condition is underlined once again when the narrator relates their situation to the condition of the whole nation: "And so in the house of the Lamberts, as in St. Jude, as in the country as a whole, life came to be lived underground." (*TC* 12) To live underground is to hide from reality, a strategy the whole family has adopted.

The signs of disorder and disease *chez* Lambert match the general atmosphere of decay evoked in the first chapter. "The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through. You could feel it: *something terrible was going to happen*. [italics mine]" (*TC* 3): the novel's opening sentences suggest destruction, chaos, even apocalypse. The allusion to

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[240] Alfred's increasing loss of control over his body reflects the loss of authority the *pater familias* is experiencing otherwise, and which is connected to the metaphorical conception of Alfred's position as 'a government that could no longer govern' mentioned earlier.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (cf. italics above) corroborates such a reading.[241] The season, autumn, is symbolic of the Lamberts, who have both reached the 'autumn' of their lives. We encounter the Lamberts in their old house in one of the "gerontocratic suburbs" (*TC* 3) in the (fictional) city of St. Jude.[242] The Lamberts' suburban environment is conceptualized in terms of disease. Neighborhood clatter and activities in St. Jude are sketched as "the drone and hiccup of a clothes dryer, the nasal contention of a leaf blower" (*TC* 3), and Alfred's free time is described as "a sinus in which infections bred." (*TC* 3) In view of Franzen's statement that "a novel is like a painting" (cf. Murphy, n. p.), we can understand the first chapter to be composed like a painting that could be titled "The Silence before the Storm": the narrator makes us see, in our mind's eye, the empty streets, abandoned-looking houses, and the dark, menacing clouds at the horizon. The metaphors of disease also stimulate our acoustic sense: the narrator's description of the neighborhood noises evokes a person suffering from a serious cold. Everything throughout the first chapter points to an impending catastrophe. This is emphasized by the last sentences of "St. Jude"; as at the beginning, the weather serves as an important image of foreshadowing doom: "She berated him then, and [...] outside the wind was blowing, and it was getting very cold." (13) The last 'shot' of the prologue leaves us with an aged couple, left confused and angry in a cold world. Its message epitomizes the tenor of the whole chapter: the Lamberts seem to be facing their inevitable decline.

The increasing erosion of the Lamberts' world is further supported by allusions to old age and death, the fact that there are "no children in the yards here" (*TC* 3), but also by descriptions of their house and its furnishings. Alfred's big leather chair in the basement is a case in point. Emblematic of its owner, the chair is a monument to his need of comfort (*TC* 10) as well as "the only sign he'd ever given of having a personal vision of the future" (*TC* 11) The chair is blue, matching Alfred's everyday mood. Like the basement, the chair belongs to Alfred's corrective constructions, it is one more of his Narnian hiding places; the naps he takes in it "deepened towards enchantment" (*TC* 10). As no one else sits in it except for Alfred, the description of the chair foreshadows the old man's death: "It was made of leather, but it smelled like the inside of a Lexus. Like something modern and medical and impermeable that you could wipe the smell of death off easily, with a damp cloth, before the next person sat down to die in it." (*TC* 9)

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[241] In the opening paragraphs of Woolf's text, Clarissa Dalloway looks at the fine morning, "feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen." Cf. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Vintage, 1992 (1925)) 1.

[242] As in *TWC* and *WN*, a fictional city serves to underline the symbolic quality of the Lambert family and their story.

While Alfred needs his corrective constructions, i.e. his enchanted lab and the naps in his chair, to escape the clutter in the house and to avoid Enid's constant attempts to correct him, his wife has spent years hiding from the truth of an unhappy marriage. Deliberately blending out, during their courtship, the apparent signals of Alfred's rigorous will and melancholy disposition, Enid finds herself married to an authoritarian ruler. In fact, Alfred, the tyrannical provider, not only punishes his wife for rebelling against his decisions, but also for touching upon subjects he does not want to discuss:

> Made happy [...] by pregnancy, she got sloppy and talked about the wrong thing to Alfred. Not, needless to say, about sex or fulfillment or fairness. But there were other topics scarcely less forbidden, and Enid in her giddiness one morning overstepped. She suggested he buy shares of a certain stock. Alfred said the stock market was a lot of dangerous nonsense best left to wealthy men and idle speculators. Enid suggested he nonetheless buy shares of a certain stock. Alfred said he remembered Black Tuesday as if it were yesterday. Enid suggested he nonetheless buy shares of a certain stock. Alfred said it would be highly improper to buy that stock. Enid suggested he nonetheless buy it. Alfred said they had no money to spare and now a third child coming. Enid suggested that money could be borrowed. Alfred said no. He said no in a much louder voice and stood up from the breakfast table. He said no so loudly that a decorative copper-plate bowl on the kitchen wall briefly hummed, and without kissing her goodbye he left the house for eleven days and ten nights. (*TC* 280)

Alfred's position of power in the marriage is signaled here by the sheer dominance of his voice. While Alfred supplies the financial means to support the family, he fails to satisfy Enid's emotional needs.

Alfred's lack of consideration of his wife is best illustrated by their sexual life. A Puritan at heart, Alfred considers sexuality as sinful. Plagued by the frequent demands of his more sensual wife, Alfred complies with his Puritanical principles by means of a corrective construction. He accepts sex only when Enid is completely silent and motionless: "Alfred in middle age had invented [...] venial deceptions. A decade-plus of marriage had turned him into one of the 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." (*TC* 278) The comparison of Alfred with a predator and of Enid with a carcass vividly depicts the distribution of power in this marriage: Alfred is the dominant partner, Enid the passive one. In their sexual interactions, Alfred treats his wife as an object, and she has learned to live by his rules: "Her stillness and self-containment, [...] her purely vulnerable objecthood, made him pounce. And feeling his padded paw on her ribs and his meat-seeking breath on her neck she went limp, as with prey's instinctive resignation. [...] He had her, and to some extent she wanted to be had, like an animal: in a mute mutual privacy of violence."

(*TC* 278f.)[243]   The association of Alfred with a lion – the novel's most important symbol – is particularly remarkable. The King of the Beasts is a symbol of the father, the master, and the monarch (cf. DoS 611) – images that certainly apply to Alfred. However, the more destructive aspects associated with the lion, as they show in Alfred's sexual strategy, are tyranny, uncontrolled strength, an imperious will, as well as a headless, angry appetite.

The description of Alfred's sexual behavior signals, on the one hand, his attempt to 'enchant' the sexual act; on the other hand, it also exposes the brutality of his behavior. Therefore, Enid needs a corrective construction as well. Her way of 'enchanting' the unpleasant reality of sex with Alfred is to derive pleasure from picturing the becoming conclusions others might draw from her pregnancy about her marriage: "The changes in her body were incontrovertible, and she imagined so vividly the flattering inferences about her love life that Bea and Esther and Honey might draw from these changes that soon enough she drew the inferences herself." (*TC* 280)   A consequence of Enid's corrective construction, of course, is her incapability of addressing the problem directly. Her experience of conjugal sex remains disapproving, the sad climax of which is reached when Alfred forces intercourse upon Enid during her third pregnancy (cf. *TC* 322).

Considering Enid's and Alfred's dysfunctional marriage, it is not surprising to detect difficulties in the relationship to their children as well. The scene that epitomizes the trouble at the heart of the Lambert family is 'The Dinner of Revenge'. Far from being a solidarity meal[244], the dinner of revenge is Enid's answer to the lack of feeling of her husband, who had left her for ten days without kissing her goodbye or calling her. At the day of his expected return, Enid chooses to make a dish she knows her husband abhors[245]: they will have liver,

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[243] Enid's and Alfred's sexual life is one of the many instances that show the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy on Alfred. It seems that Alfred's reluctance to indulge in sexual pleasures is derived, on the one hand, from a fear of losing control and, on the other, from a Puritanical conception of sexuality merely in terms of procreation. Here Alfred agrees with his favorite philosopher: "Der Endzweck aller Liebeshändel [...] ist nichts Geringeres, als die Zusammensetzung der nächsten Generation." (Cf. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung II. Zweiter Band. Zweiter Teilband* (Köln: Könemann, 1997) 708) He sees individual feelings of love as a mere chimera: "Ein wollüstiger Wahn ist es, der dem Manne vorgaukelt, er werde in den Armen eines Weibes von der ihm zusagenden Schönheit einen größeren Genuß finden, als in denen einer jeden andern" (716). More importantly, Schopenhauer points out the transience of pleasure derived from sexual love, and the dissatisfaction resulting from this experience (740). Feelings of passion are a deception for Schopenhauer. Therefore, only way for Alfred o indulge in sexual pleasures is in an animal-like state where he can drop the ethic codes that otherwise determine his life.

[244] According to Alfred Wierlacher, a 'Solidarmahlzeit' is a meal that connects "die Essenden in einer unio mystica berechnungsfreier Liebe [...], die Leib und Seele für den Interaktionsmoment des Miteinanders in festlich-metaphysischer Versöhnung zusammenhält." Cf. *Vom Essen in der Deutschen Literatur: Mahlzeiten in Erzähltexten von Goethe bis Grass* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987) 118.

[245] "The liver is commonly linked to outbursts of rage, [...] to animosity and to deliberately spiteful designs." (DoS 613)

this "Promethean meat" (*TC* 291) that insinuates suffering. [246] The association of liver with pain is underlined by the metaphorical conceptualization of the meal in terms of disease:

> A dollop of mashed rutabaga at rest on a plate expressed a clear yellowish liquid similar to plasma or the matter of a blister. Boiled beet greens leaked something cupric, greenish. Capillary action and the thirsty crust of flour drew both liquids under the liver. When the liver was lifted, a faint suction could be heard. The sudden lower crust was unspeakable. (*TC* 293f.)

Connecting the images of disease, decay and garbage to the condition of the family, this passage intensifies the anguish of little Chipper, who is forced remain at the table until he has finished the disagreeable dinner, as well as the shortcomings of Enid, who deliberately makes her son suffer in order to punish Alfred for his coldness to her. Showing traits of the iron as well as of the erotic mother, Enid finds an erotic pleasure in taking out her revenge on her wayward husband and son: "She decided that Chipper was exactly like his father – at once hungry and impossible to feed. […] There was something almost tasty and almost sexy in letting the annoying boy be punished by her husband. In standing blamelessly aside while the boy suffered for having hurt her." (*TC* 302) Enid's cruelty is symbolically reinforced by her "plung[ing] a knife in the pineapple's jaundiced belly." (*TC* 302) To 'correct' her feeling of wrongness, Enid chooses ignorance and self-deception as a construction: "She reasoned that if the problem in the dining room was her responsibility then she was horrendously derelict in not resolving it, and a loving mother could never be so derelict, and she was a loving mother, so the responsibility must not have been hers." (*TC* 310) Enid's corrective construction is to blame Alfred, and to concentrate on her son Gary, the successor child who fulfills all of Enid's expectations. The harm of her attempt to 'enchant' the unpleasant events is symbolized, again, by an appearance of the lion. Seeking support, Enid tells Gary at bedtime: "Always be my little lion." (*TC* 310) Gary, who timidly agrees ("OK."), does not, however, play the "fewocious" and "wicious" beast his mother wants him to be; he remains fair and tries to stop his brother's prolonged punishment – in vain. After hours of futile waiting, his little brother falls asleep at the dinner table. That night, little Chip realizes that "[e]lective ignorance was a great survival skill, perhaps the greatest." (*TC* 307) In his adulthood, he will make it, similar to his mother, one of the corrective constructions to live by. His older brother has already internalized the necessity of maintaining an illusion for the sake of making life

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[246] According to Morgan, "[f]amily practices are, to a very large extent, bodily practices." The 'Dinner of Revenge' is an example of how the body can be "implicated in many […] systems of control and punishment including the deprivation of favoured foods or the use of such foods as inducements, the restriction on liberty or physical movement and, less directly, various forms of emotional control." Cf. David J. Morgan, *Family Connections. An Introduction to Family Studies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) 113f.

more tolerable: "Every night after dinner [Gary] honed this skill of enduring a dull thing that brought a parent pleasure. It seemed to him a lifesaving skill. He believed that terrible harm would come to him when he could no longer preserve his mother's illusions." (*TC* 304) Representative of the family's past, the 'Dinner of Revenge', then, reveals some of the reasons for the disastrous present situation of all the family members.

Guilt, frustration, and punishment are the decisive characteristics of the 'Dinner of Revenge'. Chip's punishment is symbolically accompanied by the prison his brother Gary has built of popsicle sticks, which he is eager to show his father. The toy prison is also a parallel to Alfred's feeling of his whole life as a prison, an idea he has adopted from his favorite philosopher, Schopenhauer: *"If you want a safe compass to guide you through life . . . you cannot do better than accustom yourself to regard this world as a penitentiary, a sort of penal colony*. [sic]" (*TC* 294) For Alfred, the only place to escape the constrictions of family life is, of course, his laboratory. Yet his corrective constructions, the experiments he is conducting with the intention of dominating the chaos and disorder of the natural world, clash with reality. Failing in his attempt to "force the atoms of a metal to behave themselves" (*TC* 312), Alfred cannot transfer the order and security to his family, either. The various corrective constructions are not only transferred to Enid and Alfred's children; they also impede honest and deep relations between the family members.

The Lamberts' loneliness and unhappiness during and after the 'Dinner of Revenge' are mirrored, once again, by their house. If we agree with Morgan's statement that "the home, both as an address and as a site for domesticity, is a key element in the construction of a self" (182), the description of the Lambert "lifeless" home is a bad sign for the condition of the family: "Maybe the futile light in the house with three people separately absorbed in the basement and only one upstairs, a little boy staring at a cold plate of food, was like the mind of a depressed person." (*TC* 310) The metaphorical conceptualization of the Lambert family in terms of disease, which we have seen at the beginning of Franzen's novel, is reiterated here.

Disease, especially depression, is a decisive factor in Gary Lambert's life as well. Trying hard to be as different from his parents as possible, Gary in middle age has maneuvered himself into the dead-end street of dysfunctional family life. He is trapped in an unhappy marriage, feels ostracized from his technology-spoiled eldest sons, and shows an increasing inclination towards the numbing effects of alcohol. Since he does not want to admit his failures, Gary needs many corrective constructions to make his life more bearable. One of them is his

fervent denial of the indicators of clinical depression he is developing. An investment banker, Gary reflects on his mental health in economical terms: "Declines led advances in key indices of paranoia (e.g., his persistent suspicion that Caroline and his two older sons were mocking him), and his seasonally adjusted assessment of life's futility and brevity was consistent with the overall robustness of his mental economy. He was not the least bit clinically depressed." (*TC* 160)) The irony in this statement is obvious. The fact that Gary is trying so hard to convince himself that he is not clinically depressed suggests the opposite.

Gary's exclusive focus on the surface of things prevents him from tackling the troubles and difficulties that have developed beneath the surface. He finds comfort in looks – his own impressive appearance, the beauty of his wife, their expensive taste, their luxurious house in one of the best neighborhoods of Philadelphia. Gary takes pride in being advantaged and pampered, in short: in being rich. The effort that dominates his life, that makes him overlook the many emotional and psychological strains it has caused, is surpassing the lifestyle of his parents: "[H]is entire life was set up as a correction of his father's life […]" (*TC* 207). Having suffered from Alfred's authoritarian regime, Gary has decided to be a loving father and considerate husband who enjoys life and happily seizes whatever material advantages there are to be seized. Although Gary has achieved these goals, his corrections have not helped him lead a better life than his parents. His care never to bully his wife have allowed her to bully him; the effort not to be "a shouter and a punisher" like his father have led him to allow his sons to be spoiled by his wife; his firm determination to see life not as a prison but as pleasure have caused him to be obsessed about having fun and feeling good.

Some of Gary's corrective constructions have been influenced by his wife. Over the years, he has collected certain statements of her in a mental "All Time Caroline Ten to which he privately referred for strength and sustenance" (*TC* 211). This list includes remarks such as "You're nothing at all like your father", "Let's buy both", or "You're an incredibly good-looking man" (*TC* 211), and more flattering comments on Gary's materialist and surface-oriented way of life. Gary uses this 'personal Decalogue' as a way of enchanting his otherwise unsatisfactory situation. Similarly, he likes to think of his neighborhood as enchanted: "The surrounding neighborhood, Chestnut Hill, was not un-Narnian. […] The Land That Time Forgot, Gary called it." (*TC* 164)

Surface and reality clash, eventually, when his parents ask him and his family to spend Christmas in St. Jude. In the subsequent war with his disagreeing wife, which is remarkably similar to the struggle for power in his parents' marriage, Gary's corrective constructions break down. Caroline's physical beauty does not conceal her manipulative nature, and Gary's

"well-contained" resentment of her starts to overwhelm him. As a result of their disagreement about Christmas, the façade of their seemingly happy marriage collapses. In their effort to defeat each other, Gary and Caroline try to influence their children to take their respective sides. Here Franzen's social criticism operates full force. Showing Gary's painful but futile efforts to ignore the incredible amount of luxurious consumer goods his eldest sons Aaron and Caleb have heaped up in their rooms, Franzen critiques contemporary consumer society: "Gary let his gaze drift into corners of the boy's room that he ordinarily took care not to look at. Neglected in piles, like the loot in a thief's apartment, was new photographic and computer and video equipment with an aggregate retail value possible exceeding the annual salary of Gary's secretary at CenTrust. Such a riot of luxury in the lair of an eleven-year-old!" (*TC* 181f.) Helpless about the tactics of his cunning wife, who encourages their sons in their limitless TV sessions, expensive hobbies, junk food indulgences, and general 'hedonistic individualism', Gary is forced to acknowledge that his dream of an intact family with caring parents and responsible and grateful children has failed. He is also forced to see that the relationship to his wife is dominated more by sex and power than by love. During the 'war' with Caroline, Gary develops a "'sense' that he survived from day to day by distracting himself from underground truths that day by day grew more compelling and decisive." (*TC* 182) His despair about these insights, together with the increasing pressure of trying to uphold his corrective constructions, drives him to an outbreak at a family dinner that epitomizes the discontent at the heart of Gary's life.

The disastrous family dinner in question is the peak of a series of disappointing meals in the Philadelphia Lambert's household. Traditional family meals, which Gary longs for, have never been customary in his family of procreation. This lack of regular family activities points at the lack of solidarity and harmony that characterizes Gary's family. In an effort to combine his wish for more family solidarity with a 'fun' pastime activity, Gary has taken to cook several times a week. No one, excepting his youngest son, however, cherishes Gary's effort. As his wife reminds him:

> 'You're the one who's bent on having these sit-down dinners. The boys couldn't care less.' '*I* care about it. It's important to *me*.' 'Fine, but, Gary: it's not important to me, it's not important to the boys, and we're supposed to cook for you?' […] [T]o 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. (*TC* 189f.)

Family life has in fact changed, and it has changed for the worse, as Franzen is intent on showing here. While the Gladney family in *White Noise* displays similar eating habits, i.e. a

preference for fast food and the immediate satisfaction of their bodily needs over family solidarity, they are, at least, united in their mutual acceptance of the situation. The Lamberts' difference to the Gladneys lies in the awareness of one member of the family that the meals are deficient, his attempts to change this, and the sadness of his subsequent ostracism. Gary's sons exchange sarcastic glances at his comments, his wife gives them secret signs under the table, and Gary eventually finds out that she has been telling his sons behind his back that he may suffer from clinical depression. The dinner ends in a tragicomic finale, with Gary being so drunk that he spoils the food, curses his wife and yells at his sons, and hurts himself in his ludicrously desperate attempt to trim the hedge. That the wounded, desperate, and isolated Gary gives in to his wife in the end underlines the final defeat of the values he had tried to defend – solidarity and respect. Completely disregarding Gary's opinion on yet another luxury toy for his son, Caroline lets Caleb install an expensive surveillance system in the kitchen. The panoptical gaze of the moving camera symbolizes Gary's total loss of authority. The parental equilibrium of power is overturned. As Morgan explains: "Parents routinely exercise surveillance over their children, an activity which is not simply an expression of concern but also, implicitly at least, a statement of the rights of parents to gaze upon their children's activities at all times and in all places. The family setting is a panoptical setting." (115) Exposed to the panoptical control of his son, Gary is deprived of however little parental power he had left.

Ultimately, then, Gary's corrective constructions have proved to be as unreliable as those of his parents. In fact, Gary is remarkably similar to his parents in various regards. Despite his aim to be different from his father, who he considers maddeningly old-fashioned, Gary secretly wishes for more deference from his children. Alfred's authoritarian education has caused his sons to rebel against him; Gary's permissive style, however, has led his children to disrespect him. Both Alfred and Gary are losing their authority, the former because of his disease, the latter because he is exposed to the panoptical gaze of the camera his son has installed in the kitchen. A further similarity between Philadelphia and St. Jude is Gary's basement, which is as cluttered as that of his parents:

> The old playroom in the basement, still dehumidified and carpeted and pine-paneled, still *nice*, was afflicted with the necrosis of clutter that sooner or later kills a living space. […] Aaron and Caleb's old toys were in five big bins and in a dozen smaller bins. Nobody but Jonah ever touched them, and in the face of such a glut even Jonah […] took an essentially archaeological approach […], and so the toys whose profusion should have been a seven-year-old's heaven went basically unplayed with, another lesson in ANHEDONIA [sic] for Gary to ignore as well as he could. (*TC* 192)

While the segregated chaos in the St. Jude basement reflects the alienation between Enid and Alfred, the overabundance of expensive goods in the Philadelphia basement highlights the negative effects of a contemporary consumerism-influenced individualism.

It is especially noteworthy that Alfred, whom Gary condemns so much, is the judge over his son's life. Convinced to be leading a much better life, Gary takes every opportunity to criticize the old man. Accusing his father of denying his clinical depression, Gary faces the bleak judgment of the man who sees through the façade of happiness and success Gary has constructed:

> 'It's because you're depressed, Dad. You're clinically depressed—' 'And so are you.' […] 'Dad, really, no, what are you talking about? I'm not the one who sits in a chair all day and sleeps.' 'Underneath, you are,' Alfred pronounced. 'That's simply false.' 'One day you will see.' 'I will not!' Gary said. My life is on a fundamentally different basis than yours.' 'Mark my words. I look at your marriage, I see what I see. Someday you'll see it, too.' (*TC* 202)

Gary cannot escape his father's verdict: defeated by his wife, ostracized by his sons, opposed by his siblings, and condemned by his father[247], Gary has eventually reached the all-time low-point in his life his numerous corrective constructions have failed to keep at bay. From a promising successor son, he is turning into that which everyone considers his younger brother to be: a failure.

Chip Lambert, the little boy so cruelly kept at the dinner table, has chosen an intellectual career to enchant the dismal reality of a St. Jude upbringing. Like his siblings, he has fled to the East coast. The chip on Chip's shoulder is his upbringing in the traditionalist, old-fashioned Midwest; his corrective construction is a deep involvement with poststructural and postmodern theory. Hiding behind Foucault, Derrida and Baudrillard, Chip, his intellectual capacities notwithstanding, is prone to ignore the dark undercurrent of desire within him. Like Gary, Chip has set up his life as a correction of his father's life: "Chip had grown up listening to his father pontificate on the topic of Men's work and Women's work and of the importance of maintaining the distinction; in a spirit of correction, he stuck with Tori for nearly a decade." (*TC* 38) Chip's relationship with Tori Timmelman, a feminist theorist unable to finish her dissertation because she is too "enraged with the patriarchal system of accreditation and its phallometric yardsticks of achievement" (*TC* 37), foreshadows the fate awaiting him

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[247] Alfred's verdict – a common topos in literary parent-child relations - confirms Gary's change from successor son to failure: "Verkommene Söhne und mißratene Töchter kann es nur geben, wo eine lebendige Person im Rückgriff auf ein geltendes Gesetz dieses Urteil fällt und daraus Konsequenzen zieht. Das Phänomen des mißratenen Kindes ist zwingend gekoppelt an das Ereignis des Urteils und damit an ein Gerichtsgeschehen. Die Familie wird zum Tribunal." (von Matt 39)

as a teacher (and devotee) of cultural theory; it also initiates Franzen's challenge of the theory-crazed American academia. Driven by male guilt, Chip helps Tori with her dissertation *and* cleans their apartment. When Chip moves on to a tenure-track position in the department of 'Textual Artifacts' at a small liberal arts college, he has not only firmly established himself in his corrective construction of cultural theory, he has also exhausted his former feeling of male guilt to the extent that he starts a dangerous liaison with a student. His male desires return with a vengeance when Chip's theory-based house of cards collapses. Chip's feeling that "[e]ach year, it seemed, the incoming freshmen were a little more resistant to hardcore theory than they'd been the year before" (*TC* 46) is cruelly confirmed in the last class of his course 'Consuming Narratives', where he fails to excite his students about applying their knowledge of critical theory to deconstruct a popular TV commercial. His most promising student (and secret crush) Melissa is the spokesperson of her fellow students when she attacks everything Chip believes in:

> 'This whole class,' she said. 'It's just bullshit every week. It's one critic after another wringing their hands about the state of criticism. Nobody can ever quite say what's wrong exactly. But they all know it's evil. […] And it's impossible to radically critique society anymore, although what' so radically wrong with society that we need such a radical critique, nobody can say exactly.' (*TC* 51)

The standstill in contemporary theory, exposed by critics like the above-mentioned Jost Hermand, is reflected here. To Chip, Melissa's blows are devastating as she confronts him with the uselessness of his corrective construction, his futile fascination with what she derides as "some lame problem about signifiers and signifieds" (*TC* 51). When the chips are down, Chip's knowledge of theory fails him; being unable to defend his views to Melissa and the class, Chip withdraws into silence and depression. Melissa's words are significant because they inform part of Franzen's post-postmodern agenda in *TC*. By having a student point out the flaws of postmodern and poststructural criticism, and showing the professor to remain mute and helpless, Franzen satirizes postmodern theory.[248]

The one corrective construction sustaining him having disintegrated, Chip's downfall gathers speed. After his attempts to be useful to society by critiquing its flaws have failed, Chip starts an affair with Melissa and blends out the many problems it entails. The danger of this corrective construction of intentional ignorance is symbolized, again, by Aslan the lion, who appears to Chip in the form of a little golden tablet Melissa offers him. This drug, called

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[248] The showdown between Melissa and Chip is reminiscent of the conversation between Jack Gladney and his son Heinrich in *White Noise*. In DeLillo's postmodern family novel, Jack's defeat symbolizes the end of his modernist hope of possible redemption through meaning. In Franzen's post-postmodern family novel, Chip's defeat symbolizes the closing stages of postmodernism's radical uncertainty and playful circularity.

"Mexican A" (A stands for Aslan, as readers are told much later), erases Chip's remaining worries and elevates him to a state of supreme enchantment, where all his inhibitions and feelings of shame disappear. Surface and reality clash when Chip's sexual trysts with Melissa terminate in his discharge from teaching. The problems he had tried to ignore have come back to haunt him.

Yet Chip soon comes up with another corrective construction: an undeniably autobiographical screenplay intended to shock his former colleagues by confronting them with his tragic fate. Having moved to Manhattan after his painful dismissal, Chip plays the hip intellectual. He wears leather, satisfies his carnal desires with his beautiful girlfriend, and writes sassy articles for the alternative *Warren Street Journal*. For making money, he proofreads at a law firm; to avoid trouble with his parents, he encourages Enid to believe he works at the *Wall Street Journal*; to overcome the professional damage, he puts his hope in his suspiciously theoretical screenplay. Yet his attempt to enchant his rather bleak life is doomed to failure. Chip's professional sellout is reiterated, quite literally, when he is forced to sell the works of his favorite theoreticians in order to afford another weekend with his demanding girlfriend. In what Franzen intended as another sideswipe at theory, Chip gives away his cherished books for a ridiculously low price. Chip has become an accomplice of the capitalist, pleasure-driven society he had spent so much time on condemning:

> He turned away from their reproachful spines, remembering how each of them had called out in a bookstore with a promise of radical critique of late-capitalist society, and how happy he'd been to take them home. But Jürgen Habermas didn't have Julia's long, cool, pear-tree limbs, Theodor Adorno didn't have Julia's smell of lecherous pliability, Fred Jameson didn't have Julia's artful tongue. By the beginning of October, when Chip sent in his finished scrip to Eden Procuro, he'd sold his feminists, his formalists, his structuralists, his poststructuralists, his Freudians, and his queers. To raise money for lunch with his parents and Denise, all he had left was his beloved cultural historians and his complete hardcover Arden Shakespeare; and because a kind of magic resided in the Shakespeare […], he piled his Foucault and Greenblatt and Hooks and Poovey into shopping bags and sold them all for $ 115. (*TC* 106f.)

Chip's all-time low point is reached when he finds himself out of a reasonable job, out of money, out of a girlfriend, and out of hope that Eden Procuro will ever market his screenplay. Since Chip's ideological framework has failed him, he accepts the offer of his ex-girlfriend's ex-husband, a Lithuanian politician, to accompany him to his home country and help him maintain a website intended to illegally eliciting money from American investors. Free of all pressures from home, Lithuania is a playground for Chip, who enacts his biggest enchantment

with the help of his doppelganger, Gitanas.[249] Chip is in his element when he created a bogus website advertizing the 'sale' of Lithuania and manages to make American investors pay incredible sums for the privilege of, for instance, the "appointment of selected local magistrates and judges" or "the legally enforceable right, whilst on Lithuanian soil, to such titles and honorifics as 'Your Lordship' and 'Your Ladyhip' and 'Your Grace', with non-use by service personnel punishable by public flogging and up to sixty days in jail" (*TC* 504f.), and other such statements that, the more ludicrous, the more profitable they are.[250] For the first time in years, Chip is really happy: "[F]inally, in the realm of pure fabrication, he'd found his métier" (*TC* 506). The dangers of his 'enchantment' of reality, however, surface soon. It is not the deceived investors that threaten Chip, it is an angry Lithuanian mob that makes him and Gitanas pack up all their money and flee. The easy money Chip has made is as easily lost when they are robbed by dubious police forces and Chip, deprived of his fortune, his clothes, and his honor, finds himself on a gravel road on the way to Poland to get a flight back home - to the dreaded Christmas with his family in St. Jude.

So far, the impressions of the American white middle-class nuclear family to be derived from *The Corrections* are mostly negative. The St. Jude Lamberts suffer from the law of Alfred, the authoritarian ruler, whose relationship to his sons is dominated by obedience and punishment rather than affection and confidence. This is poignantly evident when his little sons rush to greet him after a ten-day absence from home: "It was their nature to throw their arms around him, but this nature had been corrected out of them. They stood and waited, like company

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[249] The doppelganger image is based on several striking parallels between Gitanas and Chip. For one thing, they closely resemble each other: "In almost every respect – coloration, shape of head, height and build, and especially the wary, shame-faced smile that he was wearing – Gitanas looked more like Chip than anybody Chip could remember. He looked like Chip with bad posture and crooked teeth." (*TC* 123) For another, Chip has had a long-term affair with Julia Vrais, Gitanas' American wife. Both are inclined to bad luck and sarcasm, and share a well-fed hatred of capitalist society. Moreover, they even share the same fate as both return bruised but otherwise safely to their mother's shelter – after the unrest in Vilnius and their subsequent experience as victims of an armed robbery, both Gitanas and Chip long to get home to their mothers. The doppelganger motif is stressed again when Chip says goodbye to Gitanas: "Chip put his arms around his friend and squeezed him. […] He felt as if he were hugging himself, feeling his own private shoulder blades, the scratch of his own woolen sweater. He also felt his friend's gloom […] and it made him, too, feel lost." (*TC* 524)

[250] Franzen satirizes American investment strategies and his contemporaries' hunger for money and questionable privileges throughout the novel; the description of Chip's "job" in Lithuania is a particularly hilarious example. The following passage demonstrates the more earnest aspects of Franzen's sharp social critique: "Chip was struck by the similarities between black-market Lithuania and free-market America. In both countries, wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few; any meaningful distinction between private and public sectors had disappeared; captains of commerce lived in ceaseless fear of being fired and ceaseless confusion about which powerful private interest owned which formerly public institution on any given day; and the economy was fueled largely by the elite's insatiable demand for luxury. […] 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 entertainments and gadgetry and pharmaceuticals, while in Lithuania the powerful few subdued the unpowerful many by threatening violence." (*TC* 511)

subordinates, for the boss to speak." (*TC* 289f.) Although Alfred loves his children, he believes in rigid discipline and reacts to disobedience with severe punishment. Enid's relationship to her children is shown to be problematic as well. She is not impartial, but prefers whoever supports her agenda. Furthermore, her powerful tool of elective ignorance prevents a honest and deep relationship; she simply does not want to know about her children's problems or failures, and whitewashes any hint at a situation she does not approve of. Thus, she proudly tells everyone that Chip works at the *Wall Street Journal* despite a strong suspicion that this is not the case; she refuses to learn about the reasons for which her daughter was fired from a promising job, rightly assuming that they might clash with her values; and she refuses to acknowledge the increasingly damaged relationship to Gary and his family. Similarly, the Philadelphia Lamberts show obvious signs of conflict and dysfunction. Gary and Caroline's permissive educational policy has turned their children into spoiled brats. Both Gary and his wife manipulate each other as well as their children in order to get their ways. Their marriage is described to feed as much on sexual attraction as on "resentment" (*TC* 160) or even mutual hatred (*TC* 222). There is, moreover, a third nuclear family whose problems are mainly connected with Denise Lambert, Alfred's and Enid's bisexual daughter. When Brian Callahan, a *nouveau riche*, hires Denise to run the kitchen in an exclusive Philadelphia restaurant, she soon notes difficulties between him and his unstylish wife, Robin Passafaro. Taking advantage of both Robin's and Brian's conjugal frustrations as well as exploiting the confidence and trust each spouse has in her, Denise ends up having and affair with both Robin and her husband. What had flourished as a "family of five" (*TC* 470) – Brian, Robin, their two daughters, and Denise – ends up in the separation of the Callahans and their subsequent fight for the custody of their daughters.

The nuclear family, which is the normative model of family in *The Corrections*, is depicted as an arrangement that suggests the stability, comfort, and fulfillment each character secretly or openly longs for; on the other hand, most of the characters' serious troubles are linked with family. To answer the question how and why Franzen, a fin de millennium novelist with the same agenda that his contemporaries Douglas Coupland, Rohinton Mistry, or Jeffrey Eugenides promote in their respective post-postmodern family novels, deviates from depicting the superficial connection of the group of individuals that represents the post-nuclear family in Don DeLillo's postmodern family novel *White Noise*, we need to bear in mind the transformative potential of the family in *TC*. Considering the various self-made prisons and one-way streets into which the characters have maneuvered themselves, it is difficult to imagine an improvement of their situation. However, as the next chapter will

show, there is the possibility of reconciliation and redemption, which is a crucial feature of fin de millennium writing as well.

6.3.2 Disenchanted Worlds: Constructive Corrections

In the preceding chapter, we have seen how the members of the Lambert family have each approached a nadir in their lives. The corrective constructions they have lived by eventually collide with reality, leaving each character at a crossroads. This crossroads offers the possibility of severing all ties to the characters' former lives as well as to other family members; to choose this possibility means to choose the road of individualism, which so far has proved to be problematic (cf. the selfishness of Caroline's hedonistic individualism, or the often painful consequences of Alfred's authoritarian individualism). There is also, however, the possibility of choosing the path of solidarity at this crossroads - this would entail a process of disenchantment, i.e. the realization that the various corrective constructions of the characters have failed and need to be replaced by a new lifestyle, which would be more honest and realistic, and possibly less self-important or ambitious. As we will see, the disenchantment preceding the decision which way to choose at the crossroads is agonizing for the characters. Each gain is combined with a loss. Nevertheless, the pain brought about by the characters' recognition of their problems can have a cathartic effect. Therefore we can regard the changes some of the Lamberts choose to make as constructive corrections.

These constructive corrections are preceded by disease, disorder, and disaster. A case in point is Enid and Alfred's cruise experience. Underestimating the seriousness of Alfred's disease, both spouses have booked a luxury cruise to which Enid had been looking forward as an escape from her dreary daily life in St. Jude. Enid's high expectations are bound to be disappointed. The title of the cruise chapter, "At Sea", indicates the disorientation both spouses are exposed to. Away from the security of their accustomed environment, Enid and Alfred experience a worsening of their condition. Alfred's nights are haunted by hallucinations of an aggressive speaking turd[251], by his general loss of orientation, and by the disorder his trembling limbs cause. Alfred's days are troubled by his constant fear of publicly wetting his pants, and his resulting decision to visit the bathroom every thirty minutes. It is striking that Alfred, the Puritan-at-heart, "is preoccupied with the lower part of his body and

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[251] As Rohr points out, the speaking turd of Alfred's hallucinations is a case of 'the return of the repressed', i.e. the carnal desires Alfred has been repressing all his life. (Cf. Rohr 99)

with the bodily functions over which he no longer has control." (Rohr 99) While Alfred is no longer capable of comprehending his situation, Enid is forced to finally admit the gravity of her husband's disease. Confronted with even more anxiety than in St. Jude, and infected by the honesty with which a fellow traveler confides the terrible story of her life to her, Enid realizes the frailty of her previous corrective construction(s):

> To Enid at this moment came a vision of rain. She saw herself in a house with no walls; to keep the weather out, all she had was tissue. And here came the rain from the east, and she tacked up a tissue version of Chip and his exciting new job as a reporter. Here it came from the west, and the tissue was how handsome and intelligent Gary's boys were and how much she loved them. Then the wind shifted, and she *ran* to the north side of the house with such shreds of tissue as Denise afforded: how she'd married too young but was older and wiser now and enjoying a great success as a restaurateur and hoping to meet the right young man! And then the rain came blasting from the south, the tissue disintegrating even as she insisted that Al's impairments were very mild and he'd be fine if he'd just work on his attitude and get his drugs adjusted, and it rained harder and harder, and she was so tired, and all she had was tissue… (*TC* 357)

Despite the force of her vision, Enid is not able yet to confront reality and change her attitude. In order to feel more relaxed, and to be able to bear her husband's increasingly 'disappointing' behavior, Enid asks the ship doctor for help and receives a drug called "Aslan Cruise". As before, the appearance of Aslan the lion signals short-term pleasure (in fact, Enid feels much better after having taken the drug) as well as imminent danger. Since Enid's anxiety and her habit of keeping an eye on Alfred are completely blended out by Aslan, the disaster involving Alfred can take its unhindered course. While Enid is sitting, remarkably calm, in a lecture on investments (with the telling title 'Surviving the Corrections'), her husband falls eight stories down into the Atlantic ocean.

The great disenchantment of the cruise experience slowly causes Enid's corrective constructions to crumble. She needs to face one more disappointment, however, to bring her newly gained insights to fruition. Her cruise expectations having been bitterly disappointed, Enid sets all her hopes on a last family Christmas together. It is not after various confrontations with Gary and Denise that Enid begins to change her point of view. Suddenly she is no longer afraid to confront reality: "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. But she was doing her best to adjust to the new reality." (*TC* 549) Enid's realization is the first step to avoid the tempting corrective constructions, a decision which is the first constructive correction of her way of life. Her next step is to refuse the "Aslan Cruise", this great temptation, a friend had gotten her. Her refusal

demonstrates that Enid has learned that the enchantment of a corrective construction ultimately leads to an even bigger problem. Hence her announcement to Denise: "I want the real thing or I don't want anything." (*TC* 609) Having made this resolution, Enid is able to confront Alfred's worsening disease and to deal with his eventual death. The new sincerity Enid has gained from the process of disenchantment also affects positively the relationship to her children, especially to her formerly wayward and eventually dutiful son Chip.

For Chip, fear of death during an armed robbery in Lithuania is the big disenchantment that makes him give up his corrective constructions[252]. Stripped of most of his worldly goods and left all by himself, Chip realizes that his life in New York, including the version of it he had expressed in the screenplay, was not 'cool', 'alternative' or 'mature', but merely ridiculous. The self-pity that had dominated Chip's life vanishes and he realizes that he had failed to recognize that his screenplay, as well as his way of life, was not tragic but farcical (cf. *TC* 618). With this revelation, Chip returns to St. Jude and manages, in due course, to rid himself of the troubles of the past and to start a new, more honest and down-to-earth life. The reward of Chip's constructive correction is the promise of conjugal bliss (he marries for love), paternal pleasure (he will be the father of twins) as well as professional restitution (he obtains a teaching post at a private high school).

A reward awaits those characters that are able to make constructive corrections. Like her brother Chip, Denise profits from her process of disenchantment. Having maneuvered herself into a dangerous liaison with both her boss and her boss's wife, she is fired from the prestigious, promising, and lucrative job she had always wanted. At this nadir, Denise realizes that she had been enchanting her life: "Returning home by Amtrak, she regretted having hidden for so long in Philadelphia. […] The urban vacancy of Philadelphia, the hegemony of wind and sky here, struck her as enchanted. She loved Philadelphia the way she loved Robin Passafaro. Her heart was full and her senses were sharp, but her head felt liable to burst in the vacuum of her solitude." (*TC* 581) After this disenchantment – her realization that she is lonely and caught in a self-constructed love trap – Denise leaves her enchanted Philadelphia to start a new life in New York. Her constructive correction is rewarded, as we learn through

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[252] The disintegration of civil peace in Lithuania Chip experiences is paralleled with the worsening condition of his father: "The decline of the tiny Baltic nation, the increasing chaos, and the final takeover of the government by Mafia-like organizations constitutes yet another narrative level that negotiates the novel's subject of collapsing order and growing disorientation. The various narrative levels are, however, intricately intertwined as global disintegration translates into personal decline and vice versa: both Alfred and Lithuania fall apart – as do the Lambert children and, later, the financial markets." (Rohr 101)

Enid's impression that her daughter looks "so much happier" in her new restaurant in Brooklyn (*TC* 649).

At first sight, the positive developments in *TC* ring of a suspiciously conservative tendency towards harmony. All the processes of disenchantment in the lives of the various characters seem indeed to have turned out, eventually, to be beneficial. Like a romance, *TC* seems to suggest that a happy end awaits those who repent, even if repentance comes at the very last minute. In their support of Alfred during the two years of his disease, both Enid and Chip show that they have abandoned their former selfishness to choose the path of solidarity at the crossroads in their lives. Franzen's fin de millennium family novel would correspond to the prejudices uttered in secondary literature about the 'predictability' of events in family fiction, and about their placatory and conventional ulterior motifs, in short, about their shallowness, if the characters' latest harmony was not set off against darker moments. True to his plea in favor of tragic realism's preservation of "the dirt behind the dream of Chosenness", Franzen does not suggest a simple cure to the Lamberts' manifold problems.

The happiness of some characters is the cause of the misery of others. That things are never as simple as they seem speaks for the quality of Franzen's novel. 'What makes correction possible also dooms it' - this Catch 22 also applies to Enid's and Chip's newly found bliss. Sadly, their happiness is based on Alfred's suffering and death. Chip falls in love with a doctor at the hospital where his father suffers terribly from the effects of Parkinson's; Enid only gains freedom (and re-gains her optimism, hope, and happiness) when her husband dies. The constructive corrections of their lives are combined with pain.

A further indicator against the novel's seemingly naïve and romantic strategies is the fact that not all characters manage to reach the stage of constructive correction. Gary, for instance, cannot escape his self-made prison. He is not able to reconcile his roots (his family of orientation in St. Jude) with his technology-crazed, spoiled sons Aaron and Caleb or his egoistical wife (his family of procreation). Gary's unchanged fixation on material things makes him accept a Rolex from his wife on Christmas but pester his mother about a couple of dollars he had 'lent' her months ago. The most forceful sign of Gary's failure to escape his corrective constructions is his final incapability of being different from his father. Unwillingly helping Alfred to slip into a diaper, Gary involuntarily steps into his father's shoes:

> […] Gary himself was infected, there in the middle of the night, by his father's disease. As the two of them collaborated on the problem of the diaper, […] Gary, too, had a sensation of things dissolving around him, of a night that consisted of creepings and shiftings and metamorphoses. He had the sense that there were many more than

two people in the house beyond the bedroom door; he sensed a large population of phantoms that he could glimpse only dimly. (*TC* 577)

The verdict Alfred had passed over Gary has come true; Gary's attempt to live a better life than his father has failed. His inevitable decline is further accentuated by the fact that he, alone in his room at night, pees in a decorative beer stein – a reiteration of Alfred's habit to pee in the Yuban cans stored in his lab. The instance of disenchantment in Gary's life – his realization that his kids are spoiled brats, that his wife has some truly problematic traits of character, that his marriage is not better than that of his parents, and that he is clinically depressed – has not led him to change anything. There is no reward for Gary, then; an investment mistake, which signals the failure of the sense for financial opportunities for which he has always prided himself, hits him hard and deepens his feeling of inferiority towards and dependence on his financially much more potent wife.

Since the repenting characters are rewarded and the non-repenting characters are punished, the interpretation is likely that the universe Franzen creates in *TC* is mechanistic and follows a religious (in all probability, Christian) logic. Seen from that angle, the disease afflicting several Lamberts appears to be a form of punishment. By extension, characters who contract a disease must appear 'bad', those who remain healthy must appear 'good'. Such a simplistic connection proves to be untenable, however, in view of Alfred's peculiar disposition. Although he is a strict and authoritarian father figure, whose sons know him to be "a shouter and a punisher" (*TC* 25), Alfred harbors in his heart an enormous feeling of love and affection for his children. This love shows most poignantly in his loyalty to his daughter Denise, who had betrayed Alfred's confidence in her by having a secret affair with a much older subordinate of Alfred's. Instead of confronting his daughter with the pain of admitting the embarrassing affair, and to prevent her lover from blackmailing him, Alfred resigns from his job earlier than necessary, thus losing a significant amount of money. When the Parkinson-afflicted Alfred finally discloses his knowledge about Denise's betrayal, Denise realizes for the first time the complexity of his character:

> She'd never really known her father. With his shyness and his formality and his tyrannical rages, he protected his interior so ferociously that if you loved him, as she did, you learned that you could do him no greater kindness than to respect his privacy. Alfred, likewise, had shown his faith in her […] by declining to pry behind the front that she presented. […] The odd truth about Alfred was that love, for him, was a matter not of approaching but of keeping away. (*TC* 605)

Since Alfred has proved to be a loving father underneath, the interpretation of his disease as a punishment seems reductionistic. Alfred, perhaps the most complex character in *TC*, remains

an ambiguous figure; the 'reasons' for his disease are unclear as well. Similarly, Enid, who has committed as many mistakes in the education of her children as Alfred, is not 'punished' by a disease like Alfred. By inscribing ambiguity into his novel, Franzen escapes the confines of the mechanisms of 'crime and punishment', repentance and redemption that apply to the rest of the Lamberts. He does, however, paint an image of hope and admits the possibility of improvement, which is, after all, one of the various implications of the title of his novel.

Here Franzen's novel differs fundamentally from the post-war and postmodern family novels discussed in the previous chapters. In the world of Cheever's Wapshots, hope and the possibility of improvement or the idea of progress all belong to a past the narrator(s) as well as most of the characters nostalgically long for. In their present day, the Wapshots are facing the gloomy and increasingly meaningless life in a colder, more artificial, and more individualistic society. The tragedy of the Wapshots consists in their futile attempts to safe some of the values of the past, and in their helplessness in view of a more and more hostile environment. By contrast, the Gladneys in DeLillo's *White Noise* have no memories of 'the good old days', and consequently harbor no feelings of nostalgia. In fact, the world of surfaces, consumer goods and useless infotainment the Gladney inhabit erases the difference between good and bad, right and wrong, a fascist dictator and a famous rock star. There are no values the Gladneys could stick with; there is only the vicious circle of consumerism and the meaninglessness of the simulacrum. In contrast to that, *The Corrections* reintroduces values and meaning. In the next chapter, I will delineate the nature of these values and the different strategies Franzen uses to inscribe meaning into his novel.

6.3.3 The Return of Meaning

Meaning returns in *The Corrections* on a compositional as well as on a thematic level, i.e. it is reflected in the form as well as in the content of the novel. On the level of content, the development from disease, disorder and discontent through disenchantment to honesty, hope, and happiness is a development from catastrophe towards new meaning in the constructively corrected lives of Enid, Chip, and Denise. The clash between surface and reality, and the subsequent insights of the respective members of the Lambert family has not led to the destruction of the family. In contrast to the argument of Yi-Ling Ru, who had identified the family's inevitable decline as a necessary characteristic of a family novel/family chronicle,

Franzen's fin de millennium family novel allows for a different interpretation. Although the death of Alfred is lamentable, although his suffering makes the old man a tragic figure, there is clear sign of hope and optimism at the end of *The Corrections*. Those who have survived the constructive corrections profit from their cathartic effect. The atmosphere at the end of the book, therefore, is one of redemption and reconciliation. Old conflicts are solved, new beginnings promise success. This positive development is mirrored by the dissolving dichotomy between East and West that had symbolized the difference between the old St. Jude couple and their offspring.

Throughout the course of the novel, each of the Lambert children is confronted with their Midwestern origins, and each one goes through a different process of coming to terms with them. The intensity of their hatred of the Midwest mirrors their attempt to 'rebel' against their parents, their goal to be as different from them as possible. The various degrees of willingness to accept their roots reflect the level of maturity each Lambert child has achieved. This level of psychological maturity is reversely reciprocal to their age. For instance, Gary, former successor son and ever-stronger antagonist of his parents, is the one who has been least successful at coming to terms with his Midwestern origins, and who is therefore least mature in his interaction with his parents.

Gary, the eldest, draws much satisfaction out of having "made it" to the East coast. To him, the East stands for success, wealth, taste, and coolness, qualities he also ascribes to himself. The Midwest, according to Gary, has nothing to offer but outdated values and naïve beliefs: "What Gary hated most about the Midwest was how unpampered and unprivileged he felt in it. St. Jude in its optimistic egalitarianism consistently failed to accord him with the respect to which his gifts and attainments entailed him." (*TC* 204) Gary's increasing inclination to forget about his roots matches his increasing impatience with and condescension towards his parents. His elitism, which is continually fed by his wife, turns into more or less open cruelty; he insists on being paid back every cent of his family shopping expenses, joins his wife and sons in making fun of his parents, and eventually sabotages the family's last Christmas together by starting a fight.

By contrast, Denise, the youngest Lambert and most efficient in supporting her parents, has overcome a pubescent resentment of her Midwestern upbringing quite early. For her, 'midwestern' stands for "hopeful or enthusiastic or community-spirited." (*TC* 465) Much more easily and early, therefore, than her brothers, Denise musters the necessary patience, strength, and affection that dealing with her parents entails. In contrast to Gary's plan to sell his parents' house as soon as possible for maximum gain, and to Chip's decision to ignore the

mess his parents deal with every day, Denise solves the problem of disorder by starting to clean the cluttered basement. In this regard, Denise resembles a Freudian psychoanalyst. Getting rid of the junk her mother has allowed to accumulate in the basement, she digs right into the family's unconscious. Denise's clean-up stands for the psychological uprooting the family is about to experience during their last Christmas at St. Jude. It is one of the constructive corrections under way in the Lambert family:

> She dragged a trash can in from the garage and began to fill it with her mother's crap. […] She threw away the brandy-pumpkin 'spread' that had turned a snottish gray-green. She threw away the Neolithic cans of heart of palm and baby shrimps and miniature Chinese corn cobs, the turbid black liter of Romanian wine whose cork had rotted, the Nixon-era bottle of Mai Tai mix with an oozing crust around its neck, the collection of Paul Masson Chablis carafes with spider parts and moth wings at the bottom, the profoundly corroded bracket for some long-lost wind chimes. (*TC* 588)

Denise's maturity is reflected in her cleaning: she demonstrates the necessary psychological force to tackle the problems in St. Jude. Denise does not need the elaborate attempts of her brother Chip to increase the distance between himself and his parents. By dressing in leather, sporting long hair and hip ear piercings well into his thirties, Chip had made it a point to visibly differ from his parents.

Chip's process of maturity is reflected in his changed attitude towards his Midwestern origins. Returning from his arduous Lithuanian adventure, everything he had despised about his hometown comes to be uplifting for Chip:

> A holly wreath was on the door. The front walk was edged with snow and evenly spaced broom marks. The Midwestern street struck the traveler as a wonderland of wealth and oak trees and conspicuously useless space. […] The old street with its oak smoke and snowy flat-topped hedges and icicled eaves seemed precarious. It seemed mirage-like. It seemed like an exceptionally vivid memory of something beloved and dead. (*TC* 620)

The Christmas in St. Jude Chip had so much dreaded back in Lithuania turns out to become the motor of a positive change in his life. Chip turns out to be a chip off the old block. Significantly, he puts on the clothes of his father (he escaped from Lithuania without a suitcase) and feels comfortable in them. Chip's gesture indicates his new attitude towards the Midwest in general and his parents in particular. In a development opposite to Gary, Chip changes from rebellious son to successor son. He resolves to reorganize his life, get rid of his debts, look after his parents, and leave the sphere of postmodern theorizing for a more solid footing in reality. His metamorphosis is complete when moves back west, to Chicago, teaches at a high-school and founds a family. Chip's return to the Midwest reconciles East and West, progressive thinking and family, autonomy and responsibility.

Most of the Lamberts have managed to make their lives meaningful, and a huge part of this meaning is derived from a functional family life. This is certainly true for Chip, but also for Enid, who changes the 'corrective spirit' by which she had tried to push their children into a direction that would please her and her friends in St. Jude. A functional family life, as *TC* suggests, entails honesty and tolerance in the individual family members to each other, and Enid does not fail to carry out what she has learned during her process of disenchantment. That meaning can be derived from family as well as from other 'old-fashioned' values such as empathy and commitment, tolerance and community, and altruism and modesty, is in fact a radical deviation from the meaninglessness, fragmentation, ambivalence of many postmodern representations of life. Meaning on the level of content in *The Corrections* is not an abstract concept; it is taking responsibility for oneself and each other, it is acting instead of theorizing.

The post-postmodern restitution of meaning is also reflected in the form of *The Corrections*. Franzen reinstates the omniscient third-person narrator, which modernists and postmodernists had rejected as a totalizing and inherently conservative voice. In this regard, *TC* stands apart from earlier forms of the family novel. John Cheever had used two narrating voices in *The Wapshot Chronicle* to reflect the increasing meaninglessness caused by the separation of a more humane past and a hostile present; Don DeLillo employs the limited point of view of an unreliable first-person narrator, whose account is frequently interrupted by commercial slogans and the voices of radio and television, in order to mirror the impossibility to ascribe meaning in a postmodern world, and to demonstrate the characters' uncritical adoption of the textual fragments of the superficial world of consumerism they inhabit.

To fall back upon the omniscient narrator like Franzen is to follow a fin de millennium trend, which National Book Award winner Jeffrey Eugenides has defined as "reconstruction":

> Ich glaube, die meisten Autoren meiner Generation, ungeachtet der Unterschiedlichkeit ihrer Werke, fühlen sich hingezogen zu allwissenden Erzählerstimmen. Wir kommen nach einer Vielzahl großer Autoren, die den Ich-Erzähler perfektioniert haben. Im Anschluß daran scheint es viel interessanter, den Rahmen zu vergrößern und aus sich selbst herauszutreten. Wir folgen einer Art gesteigerter Autobiographie. Ich denke, wir wollen die Bedeutung unserer selbst verringern und zurück zur Gesellschaft kommen und in die Köpfe der Leute.[253]

Eugenides mentions two aspects that apply to Franzen as well. The first aspect is the post-postmodern aim to write novels that are socially and culturally relevant. The second aspect concerns the autobiographical influences of a novel. The story of Alfred's illness in *TC* is

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[253] Quoted in Freund/Graf 681; the original source of Eugenie's remarks is not mentioned.

inspired by Franzen's experience with the disease and death of his Parkinson-afflicted father[254]. His tragicomic yet poignant depiction of the effects of Parkinson's, both from Alfred's internal point of view and from the external perception of his family, require the resuscitation of realism as a literary mode.

A renewed interest in realism is part of the post-postmodern agenda of fin de millennium novelists. As Rohr reminds us:

> The realist construction of the novel and the further life course of the Lamberts are certainly instances of the new conventionalism in literature which literary criticism has been quick to witness in many recent novels. I find this new conventionalism hardly surprising. After so many decades of laborious efforts in both literature and literary criticism to undermine subjects and subject positions in every imaginable way, attempts to resurrect the subject, especially since the 1990s, seemed a plausible move. (102)

Rohr's remarks echo some of Franzen's ideas about the role of the novel and the novelist in contemporary society that I have discussed earlier. Her concept of 'the new conventionalism' matches Franzen's opinion that "The day comes when the truly subversive literature is in some measure conservative." (Franzen (2) 38). This new conservativism, however, should not be regarded as a naïve dismissal of modernist and postmodernist narrative strategies and philosophical assumptions. Therefore, using prescriptive terms such as 'conventionalism' or 'conservative' in order to describe the recent developments in American fiction is not entirely adequate since these terms imply an (unintentional?) assessment of realism. This assessment associates realism with conformism, predictability, and banality – a reductionistic and erroneous perspective of the potential of contemporary fiction.

As the numerous references to postmodern theories in *The Corrections* demonstrate, to write post-postmodern fiction is to know about the limitations of language, the construction of reality through language, and the ultimate fallibility of generalizing concepts of 'truth', 'reality', etc. This knowledge is reflected in a key passage in the novel - the arduous 'Dinner of Revenge'. Examining the little jail with electric chair his son Gary has built, Alfred has an insight that can be understood as a metatextual bow to constructivism:

> It came to him now, more forcefully than ever, that maybe *every* 'real' thing in the world was shabbily protean, underneath, as this electric chair. Maybe his mind was even now doing to the seemingly real hardwood floor on which he knelt exactly what it had done, hours earlier, to the unseen chair. Maybe a floor became truly a floor only in his mental reconstruction of it. The floor's nature was to some extent inarguable, of course; the wood definitely existed and had measurable properties. But there was a

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[254] Franzen has described some of his experiences in essayistic form. Cf. "Das Gehirn meines Vaters", *Anleitung zum Einsamsein* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2002) 16-50.

second floor, the floor as mirrored in his head, and he worried that the beleaguered 'reality' that he championed was not the reality of an actual floor in an actual bedroom but the reality of a floor in his head which was idealized and no more worthy, therefore, than one of Enid's silly fantasies. The suspicion that everything was relative. That the 'real' and 'authentic' might not be simply doomed but fictive to begin with. (*TC* 315f.)

The ultimate impossibility to separate the 'real' from the 'fictive', an insight most grippingly brought to fruition, perhaps, by those postmodernist texts known as 'historiographic metafiction', is reiterated here. As this passage demonstrates, post-postmodern fiction does not naively fall back behind the insights of postmodern theory; however, it goes beyond postmodernist fiction's paralyzing obsession with formal innovation and its repetitious relativism. It seems, then, that fin de millennium fiction's transcendence of postmodernism has indeed led the contemporary American novel to an unprecedented altitude because it encompasses realism's depth of reflection with the philosophical insights of modernism and postmodernism.

6.4 Synopsis: After Postmodernism

In striking contrast to postmodern family novels, *The Corrections* returns to the conventional model of the nuclear family. Back in St. Jude, the nuclear family is the norm; Enid's friend Norma Greene and her unhappy involvement with a married man in Florida serves as the exception from the rule, the warning example Enid uses to keep Denise from the affair with a married man Enid correctly suspects her daughter to have. Everyone Enid and Alfred are acquainted with in St. Jude seems to be leading a (first) marriage with two or more kids, wife as homemaker, husband as breadwinner. In Cheever's *TWC*, this constellation was the ideal looming in the background, and the increasing impossibility of achieving this ideal, be it because of the emancipation of women of because of the growing superficiality of society, was the kernel of Cheever's social criticism. By contrast, *TC* does not support an androcentric longing for the traditional role differentiation of a conventional nuclear family. In fact, the disadvantages of the traditional nuclear family, as the narrator does not fail to point out, prevail over the advantages: equality between the spouses is impeded, and conjugal happiness is based on the obedience of the weaker spouse to the rules of the partner 'in power'.

Although the nuclear family is the norm in *TC*, each family suffers from a severe internal crisis. The Lamberts in Philadelphia, despite the progressive ideas about marriage and

children on which Gary and Caroline have agreed, experience an unequal distribution of power as well. While Gary's family confirms the traditional nuclear model of the family on the outside – Gary works as an investment banker, his wife works part-time and for a very low salary at the Children's Defense Fund and is otherwise focused on her own kids – the internal structure of the Philadelphia Lamberts renders a different picture. Gary and Caroline are neither exclusively breadwinner nor homemaker. Therefore, their divergent values clash when it comes to domestic responsibilities. Intent on creating (if need be, even enforcing) family solidarity, Gary does most of the cooking when he returns from work. A similar indicator of his inferiority to his wife is the fact that his own salary cannot match the financial wherewithal of Caroline. Moreover, the rules of conduct he tries to teach his children are constantly sabotaged by the aggressively permissive parenting style of his wife. The third nuclear family portrayed in *TC*, the Callahans, are a further example of the nuclear family in an internal crisis, as by the end of the novel, their marriage is in shambles and a divorce to be expected.

The picture Franzen paints of the American nuclear family, therefore, is neither sentimental nor traditionalist or moralistic. However, he does not juggle with postnuclear forms of family either. Instead of concentrating on fragmentation and loss of identity, Franzen is interested in processes of psychological entanglements and disentanglements as they mirror the intricate interactions between individuals, family, and society. In contrast to *TWC* and *WN*, however, *TC* portrays a family whose members move from disharmony to harmony, from illusion to reality, from isolation to new forms of solidarity. These processes of healing never appear sappy because they are connected with pain, defeat, and even death. It is important to recognize, however, that contrary to former family novels, the family is not shown as bereaved of its function. By contrast: its function, as *TC* makes clear, lies in supporting each other in hard times, in tolerating difference, and in negotiating as well as passing on values. Unlike *TWC*, where the pursuit of individual fulfillment was seen as impeded by a hostile society, and ultimately destructive to the community, and to *WN*, where there is no alternative to the media-directed pursuit of personalized consumer happiness, *TC* balances the idea of individual success with a feeling of responsibility for others despite destructive social forces. Gratification and fulfillment awaits those family members who are willing to confront their own faults and weaknesses, and who invest into family.

What are the reasons for this return to the nuclear family? Obviously, it does not match the sociological data discussed earlier. Therefore, the fin de millennium novel, be it Franzen's *TC*, Douglas Coupland's *All Families Are Psychotic*, or Rohinton Mistry's *Family*

Matters[255], does not seem to be keen on reflecting the current sociological condition, but to provide a vision that restores the family and revitalizes our awareness of its manifold functions. That is not to say, of course, that post-postmodern family novels are didactic. Their depiction of ways out of family conflicts may have transformative potential though: "[It is] defensible to propose that family structure and conflict resolution formatively influence the direction of society." (Klein/White 192) This could be related to the wish to provide stability in a globalized world[256]. Without returning naively to the image of family as a "haven in a heartless world", fin de millennium family novelists are intent on providing meaning without enforcing norms and rules. They achieve this goal by showing the various problems raised by family, and by describing alternatives to family life that are also attractive. A case in point is Denise Lambert.

Of all the Lambert children, Denise is the most deviant, both as concerns her career choice (she is the only child without an academic degree) as well as her sexual orientation (she is bisexual). In contrast to her parents and brothers, Denise is more interested in alternative forms of family, if not even alternatives *to* family. In her choice to focus on career and her decision not to marry again, Denise is the first happy single woman and non-mother in the family novels discussed so far. Here is an instance where Franzen's novel responds to an actual current sociological trend (cf. 6.2). Besides her deviation from traditional gender-based conceptualizations, i.e. the fact that a character like Denise occurs in a family novel in the first place, the narrator's approving stance towards Denise's lifestyle is also remarkable. Yet in one aspect, Denise complies with stereotypical female role ascriptions: In agreeing to nurse her parents, she too is dutifully meeting the expectations of her own nuclear family.

Ultimately, the nuclear family is restored in *TC*. The fact that Chip, the intellectual and fan of contemporary cultural theory, also chooses the conventional marriage with children, corroborates this interpretation. Divorce, which is unacceptable in *TWC* and widespread in *The Wapshot Scandal* and *White Noise*, does not play a part in *TC*. This is because Franzen is less interested in the forces that drive family apart (although they do play a role in his novel), but rather on the potential that keeps them together, i.e. the transformative

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[255] Both Coupland's and Mistry's novels are further examples of the post-postmodern family novel. While the structure of Coupland's *All Families Are Psychotic* is strikingly similar to that of *TC* – various members of a Canadian family move to various points of disaster in their lives, are united in the most important moment of crisis, and overcome the crisis morally and physically healed, Mistry's *Family Matters* shows the failure of a Parsi family to rise above their family crisis. The values of a functional family life are presented *ex negativo*. All three novels have in common that the disease of a family member (always a parent figure) causes the crisis and offers the possibility of redemption and catharsis, although not all family members achieve this state.

[256] Rohr sees the fin de millennium novelists' "withdrawal into the confines of family life and family matters […] as a reaction to the threats of globalization." (102)

potential of society. Of all the authors of the family novels discussed here, Franzen is most optimistic in this regard. Even so, his cultural critique is no less sharp. The negative consequences of late capitalism, excessive individualism, the preference of egoistic values of responsibility for the community, the abuse of power of the wealthy elite, these are all aspects of Franzen's critical agenda. There seems to be a post-postmodern reconsideration of humanism at the heart of Franzen's novel, however, since he emphasizes his characters' potential to change for the better. By implication, society's transformative potential is added to the cultural vision Franzen puts forth in *TC*. His vision is neither idealistic nor pessimistic, as the numerous instances of tragedy and pain in *TC* reveal. The cultural relevance of his novel lies in its realistic depiction.

It is important to recognize that Franzen is only concerned with a very specific social and cultural layer, namely white middle-class Americans of Protestant origin. Even though Chip marries into a Jewish family, this touch of deviation does not change the fact that in *TC*, the normative family is not only nuclear, but also monocultural. In that the Lambert family matches the Wapshots and the Gladneys. Like Toni Morrison's African American families, like the Latino families of Sandra Cisneros or the Parsi families of Rohinton Mistry, *TC* and the other family novels discussed here have a very specific ethnic dimension. This WASP dimension, due to its centuries-old dominance of American culture and society, rings of conservativism. Such alleged conservativism, to which I will recur in the following chapter, is accompanied by another seemingly conservative instrument: realism.

Realism and the omniscient narrator are revived in Franzen's fin de millennium family novel. The postmodern 'anything goes' has not led, as Franzen shows in *The Corrections*, to freedom and an a true end of Lyotard's metanarratives, but to a deeply rooted anxiety that concerns almost every aspect of our postmodern lives. It is indicative of the post-postmodern condition, therefore, to look for ways out of this anxiety-ridden reality, to look for stability and comfort rather than undecidability and a fractured picture of 'realities'. For Franzen and his fellow fin de millennium novelists, this stability (which is conceived of as an ideal towards which people strive, but are rarely able to get) can be found in family. In its distinct tone of optimism, *TC* clearly differs from earlier forms of the family novel.

VII. THE FAMILY NOVEL THEN AND NOW: TRASH, TRENDS, TRADITIONS

At the beginning of my attempt to illustrate the generic development of the family novel in America in the second half of the twentieth century stands the general observation that studies on the genre are scarce, often biased, and deficient in that they fail to define properly the subject of their criticism. A scrutiny of various approaches to the family novel has revealed that interpreters critically assess a genre to which they confusingly refer as family romance, sentimental fiction, family saga, domestic fiction, family chronicle, and family novel. The erratic and thus philosophically unsound use of these diverse terms erases the differences between the respective forms of family fiction they denote. A preliminary classification of various types of family fiction has therefore been necessary in order to arrive at a working definition of the family novel proper.

As my discussion has attempted to show, the numerous prejudices against the genre prevalent in secondary literature are groundless. The image of the family novel as literary trash is one that is based on the assumption that all family fiction follows the structure of a romance, is restricted to the domestic sphere, and corroborates the existing social order. That is to say, while using the term 'family novel', most scholars actually direct their criticism at domestic fiction or the family romance, both of which were genres more popular in the nineteenth century than today. Yi-Ling Ru's study is among the first unbiased approaches to family fiction. However, although she claims to analyze family *novels*, her discussion is centered on family *chronicles* in the first half of the twentieth century. Besides, Ru's structuralist taxonomy – the only systematic generic approach to family fiction to date – focuses on European and Asian genealogical novels. With its microscopic approach to novels about the American nuclear family and its (post-)postmodern variations, my study marks a first step into as yet uncharted territory.

Based on the assumption that the family novel emerged as a consequence of the twentieth century's emphasis on the modern nuclear family, focuses on the family as a gestalt rather than on a single protagonist, and is concerned with issues of greater social and cultural relevance than a marriage plot and an exclusively domestic setting, I have examined how the family and its conflicts are functionalized for the respective author's cultural critique. From post-war to post-millennium, family novelists have sketched the American family in various precarious conditions, and their texts are critical assessments of the socioeconomic and cultural developments of their day. The approach of being traditionalist, therefore, rarely

applies to high-quality family novels. In Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle*, the increasing alienation of the characters from each other as well as from their surroundings make the seemingly happy end (both Coverly and Moses marry and found a family) highly questionable. Moreover, despite the nostalgia for the good old days that pervades the lives of the male Wapshots and informs the general tone of the novel, this nostalgia is not to be confused with sentimentalism. The laconic tone of the novel, as well as the onmiscient narrator's often ironic distance to the nostalgia of some of the characters, prevents a dominance of the sentimental. The past had its flaws and terrors as well, as both narrative voices point out. Sentimentalism is also avoided in the end when Moses and Coverly's newly found conjugal bliss is set off against the dark underside of their marriages. Marital trouble is likely to await the Wapshot boys, an interpretation which is confirmed by their bleak future as depicted in *The Wapshot Scandal*. The condition of the Wapshots reflects the increasing isolation of modern life. In that regard, *TWC* ties in with a dominant theme of 1950s American fiction: the expulsion from paradise.

In contrast to subsequent forms of the family novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle* is constructed along lines that can be considered more conventional and traditional. On the one hand, and in accord with 1950s ideology, the ideal model underlying the family portrayed in *TWC* is the traditional breadwinner/homemaker family. Although this ideal is not achieved because Leander's wife is an emancipated woman who cares for more than homemaking, and because the wives of Coverly and Moses lack the quality of character to make for perfect housewives, Cheever's social criticism is not directed against the traditional nuclear family as such. In *TWC*, a hostile society is the enemy that intrudes upon the family from the outside and destroys its structure. There are obvious misogynist tendencies in *TWC*, and in that regard, its author may be regarded as a conservative from today's point of view. However, to avoid the fallacy of presentism, it is important to realize that *TWC* was an innovative approach to family. Cheever's open descriptions of sexuality (e.g. his sexually explicit language) as well as his candid sketch of homosexual longings can be considered revolutionary for the times when his first novel was published.

Nevertheless, on a structural level, *The Wapshot Chronicle* is more conventional than its successors in the realm of the family novel because its cast of characters complies with certain topoi, i.e. consists mostly of archetypical figures. Aunt Justina, for instance, represents the evil stepmother. Other characters are romantically elevated as well. Moses' courtship of his future wife Melissa is based, as we have seen, on the quest motif, or the 'rescue-the-princess-from-the dragon' topos; Leander eventually falls into the arms of Venus when he

drowns in the ocean; Sarah is introduced as a lonely goddess on her wagon during the Fourth of July Parade in quaint old St. Botolphs. However, it would be reductionistic to conclude that the structure of Cheever's novel, as well as the story being told, is predictable or devoid of cultural depth, as scholarly prejudice on the family novel has it. *TWC* renders a gripping picture and critical assessment of 1950s WASP America; it is a realistic novel with moments of romantic elevation.

The world in DeLillo's postmodern family novel is radically different from the 1950s reality depicted in *TWC*, and so is the composition of the novel. *White Noise* hardly employs conventional topoi at all; in fact, DeLillo uses archetypes only to undermine them. A case in point is Babette Gladney, who displays traits of the nurturing as well as of the erotic mother. However, the topos of the good mother is challenged, for instance, when Babette is unable to act responsibly in the face of ecological disaster (she refuses to acknowledge the danger presented by the 'airborne toxic event'), and when her need of baby Wilder is shown to take on obsessive features. The motif of adultery is similarly undermined in *WN*: Babette's affair with Mr. Gray is not shocking or sad but merely ridiculous as she insists on wearing a ski mask during intercourse with her lover, who is a ludicrous victim of postmodernity himself. The fact that their affair remains inconsequential corroborates such a reading. The ultimate triviality and emptiness of life in postmodern America affects the structure of the family as well. The isolated nuclear family of Cheever's Wapshot world no longer exists in DeLillo's Americana. Together with its traditional hierarchies, conflicts and functions, it has vanished forever in a past in which nobody is interested any longer: postmodern ahistoricity at its best. The typical postmodern American family is postnuclear, polygenic and multicultural, though not multiracial. That both *WN* and *TWC* are centered on a WASP family is the only thing they have in common. The whiteness of the Gladney family does not, however, constitute a major factor in their identity construction. In contrast to the Wapshots, who take pride in being the descendants of an old Puritan New England seafarer tradition, the Gladneys have no such genealogy to help them determine their identity/-ies. In fact, as my discussion of DeLillo's novel has demonstrated, identity is problematic for the Gladneys, especially the children. Steffie, Denise and Heinrich are eerily influenced by radio and television, whose 'otherworldly babble' ceaselessly accompanies the family. Unable to maintain a critical distance to the media, the children are revealed to be completely manipulated by them. Steffie develops physical reactions to the toxic disaster according to the expected symptoms described by the radio; her unconscious is beleaguered by commercial language (cf. her 'Toyota Celica' dream); Denise has taken to wearing a green visor as her interface with the

world, signaling the impossibility of an unmediated access to 'reality'; Heinrich is a postmodern philosopher who denies the existence of 'truth', 'reality', or 'identity'. Split up and fragmented, the structure of the Gladney family is mirrored by the structure of the novel. Jack's narrative is incessantly interrupted by comments from the television, the radio, or the commercials in the supermarket. What is more, the narrative flow is disrupted by triads of brand names or consumer products that seem to come from Jack, as if he were a medium for consumer society's 'messages'. The complexity of the novel's title is obvious here: commercial slogans from the radio, TV or the background loudspeaker announcements in the supermarket are the white noise of consumer society by which the Gladneys are surrounded. By way of Jack's acting like a medium, the connotation of 'white noise' with messages from the beyond is also evoked. Significantly, the novel's last sentences bring the various dimensions of 'white noise' together: "Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead." (*WN* 326) The tabloid racks in the supermarket signal the final victory of shallowness and fabrication over critical distance, reality or truth. Consumerism and death are eerily connected.

Although none of the characters in *WN* feels deprived or nostalgic, it is obvious that the Gladney's world is deficient. Don DeLillo's cultural critique is directed against the effects of late capitalism and a general postmodernization, which he portrays as impeding a functional family life. In contrast to *TWC*, however, society in *WN* does not *destroy* the family (which is fragmented in the first place), but *invades* it completely. The family cannot break apart because it is already split multiple times. The postmodern family is far from a conventional collective of solidarity whose members are tied to each other by marriage, kinship, and mutual affection. The members of the Gladney family maintain polite and friendly, yet distant relationships to each other, a fact that is not surprising considering the short time (less than two years) the family has been living together. Unlike *TWC*, whose eminent father figure, Leander, passes on to his sons the values of a rural society as well as the humanist legacy of the family edition of Shakespeare's collected works, Jack Gladney has no values to teach his children. Separated from some of his children by geographical distance and to others by an epistemological hiatus, the Hitler scholar is slowly succumbing to the postmodern meaninglessness and triviality surrounding him. A dubious figure himself, Jack's problem is not the tragedy of teaching skills and values to his children that they cannot use, as in the case of Leander. His increasing helplessness in a world that negates and subverts

everything Jack ever believed in (cf. his encounter with the postmodern nuns) prevents him from being the teacher and protector of his children he would like to be. DeLillo's social criticism is obvious: by showing the negative effects of postmodern life on the family and on the individual, as well as by exposing the problematic sides of radical postmodern discourse, he distances himself from postmodernism. For all his criticism, however, DeLillo never recurs to the ideal of the isolated nuclear family that had still hoveres about the Wapshot world. *WN* portrays no nostalgia for good old times, although the problematic lifestyle of the Gladneys emphasizes the need for a change. The perpetual present in which the Gladneys live, which is dominated by the supermarket and the simulacrum, does not suggest an optimistic picture of the future.Yet DeLillo's awareness of the participation of himself and his work in the society he is criticizing prevents him from offering an easy way out of the dilemma he presents in *WN*. By employing postmodernist narrative strategies such as language games, radical ambiguity, and disruptions of the narrative flow through absurd juxtapositions, DeLillo criticizes postmodern discourse from within. The irony that pervades *WN* keeps DeLillo's novel at a safe distance from moralism, nostalgia, or sentimentalism – without diminishing the critical impetus of his novel.

DeLillo's postmodern family novel differs from the post-postmodern message of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. Focusing on the internal conflicts of the Lambert family, whose members are trying to ignore the troubled reality of their daily lives, Franzen's novel emphasizes the cathartic effect of these conflicts and their eventually healing potential. In this context, the functionalization of disease in *TC* is worthy of note. In all three family novels analyzed here, the absence or presence of disease points to a central aspect with respect to the father figure, who represents the old order. In *TWC*, Leander stands for the healthier, purer, and more natural American way of life of the past. He is not afflicted by disease, therefore, and dies a painless if sudden death during a swim in the ocean. His death signals the end of the wholesomeness of the past and the victory of the anxieties, stress, and increasing artificiality of the present. In *WN*, by contrast, Jack Gladney suffers from a disease whose ominous character mirrors the dominant parameters of his postmodern world. Exposed for a short time to a toxic cloud emitted in the course of an ecological disaster, Jack is told by a medical assistant that he is in a "situation" and that he is tentatively scheduled to die. However, the precise nature, symptoms, or effects of Jack's 'disease' are never revealed in the novel. All Jack learns is that he is "the total sum of his data" as calculated by a computer. Jack is affected by the postmodern condition itself, a dominance of the simulacrum over the real. His disease is as ambivalent and inconsequential as the world he and his family inhabit.

Contrary to that, the disease with which Alfred Lambert in *The Corrections* is afflicted (he suffers from Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease) is terrifyingly real. The narrator's poignant descriptions of the old man's sufferings are set off against comical passages rendering the absurd consequences of Alfred's condition. Thus avoiding sentimentality, Franzen uses disease to underline the shakiness of the world from which the members of the Lambert family are trying to hide. That their worlds eventually crumble finds its parallel in Alfred's agonizing demise. Alfred's disease can be regarded as typical of fin de millennium fiction:

> In der Literatur der 90er Jahre des 20. Jahrhunderts ist die Konfrontation der erwachsenen Kinder mit dem Vater oder der Mutter im Zustand des dramatischen Verfalls wieder zu einem herausragenden Thema geworden. Es scheint fast, als ob die Alzheimer Demenz jene symbolische Schlüsselstelle übernommen hätte, die im Erzählen der 70er und 80er Jahre der Krebs einnahm. Die Funktion nämlich eines *morbus sacer* der Epoche. (von Matt 140)

Symbolizing a person's increasing incapability of endowing the world with meaning, Alzheimer's disease signals a crucial feature of post-postmodern writing. As contemporary authors are faced with the fractured worlds, fragmented identities, and self-conscious texts that are the remnants of postmodernist writing and thinking, to go beyond postmodernism means to return to meaning without disregarding the problems entailed. In fin de millennium novels such as *All Families are Psychotic* (*AFP*) or *Family Matters* (*FM*), like in *TC*, the disease of a parent is a catalyst which forces the family to confront their problems and to try to solve them. Thus, the structure of fin de millennium family novels is inversely proportional to that of its post-war predecessors: while in *TWC,* the initial harmony of the nuclear family is gradually damaged, novels like *TC* and *AFP* begin with a problematic situation and portray the family's gradual restitution. As a consequence, Ru's statement that family "novelists tend to concentrate on the chronological history of the family from its rise to its fall" (125) no longer applies to fin de millennium family fiction. Instead, we can say that there is no fall but a crisis that has a cathartic effect, which involves the possibility of the family's transformation. Post-postmodern family novels differ from their postmodern precursors in that they reintroduce universal values. The appeal for honesty, tolerance, empathy, and altruism in *TC*, *AFP*, and *FM*, whether the characters live according to these values or not, is an obvious change from postmodern ambivalence and superficiality. The return to meaning on a thematic level is reflected in the return to realism and the omniscient narrator on a compositional level.

To look at contemporary family novels, then, is to recognize several shared qualities: they are all narrated according to realist premises, and tell of the constraints and fears, adventures and longings of the human heart in conflict with itself and others. We meet characters that are deeply human, we recover feelings and values long thought lost. It is no coincidence that fin de millennium family novels such as *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley or Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* recurs to the most popular poet of the human condition: William Shakespeare. In post-postmodern novels, poststructuralist sophistries are as irrelevant as the conjuring up of an all-levelling relativism. Rather, they probe the possible conflicts within the family and argue for a more compassionate and responsible coexistence. That this aim is not achieved by sentimental means or a political-ideological overdose can be regarded as a result of authors' experience with postmodern theories. Fin de millennium family novels try to achieve the quadrature of the circle: the creation of verisimilitude and referentiality with an awareness of the (philosophical) problems entailed. The reason for the success of fin de millennium family novels could be located in the general insecurity that a postmodern *Lebenswelt* has created; people want more than endless discussions about "some lame problem about signifiers and signifieds", as Chip's rebellious student Melissa puts it. The trend in contemporary family novels is towards tradition. As Jonathan Franzen had predicted: "The day comes when the truly subversive literature is in some measure conservative." (Franzen (2) 38).

Taking into consideration the changes in the realm of the family novel in America in the second half of the twentieth century, my working definition of the genre as presented in chapter 2.3 requires fine-tuning. As my analysis of *White Noise* has revealed, family novels are not necessarily written in a realist style. Other postmodern family novels, such as Russell Banks' *Family Life* (1974), a novel much more radical in form and content than *WN*, corroborate this observation. Also, not all family novels portray the decline of a family. Fin de millennium family novels in the USA and in Canada are a case in point. Trying to combine the insights of modernism and postmodernism with realism, post-postmodern novelists are working on a "Wiederaufbauprojekt nach den Zweifeln an der Realität und ihrer Beschreibbarkeit." (Freund/Graf 683)   Neither is conservativism an inevitable element of family novels. Novels such as Stephen McCauley's *The Object of My Affection* (1986), a story about a homosexual's involvement with his pregnant roommate's feminist plan to raise her child with him instead of the real father, depict alternatives to the traditional family. My study

has concentrated on family novels by white male Americans depicting white Anglo-Saxon Protestant families of the middle class. There is, however, a variety of other family novels well worth investigating. The African-American family novels of Toni Morrison and others, for instance, display significant deviations from the white nuclear family that seems to be or have been the model for mainstream American culture; the contrast between the African-American family and the white family is particularly emphasized in Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1975). As the African-American family fictions of Morrison and her fellow writers demonstrate, due to the fatal effects of slavery, many families in African American fiction lack a father figure, and are much more diverse than the sealed white middle-class nuclear family. Deprived of their human rights, their pride, and the pursuit of happiness and equality, such families are exposed to fundamentally different conflicts. Similarly, family novels depicting the life of an immigrant family, as in the Chicano fiction of Christina Aguero, for instance, constitute yet another branch of the genre. In fact, the list of forms of the family novel in the second half of the twentieth century seems endless: besides the African-American family novel and the Chicano family novel, there is also the Jewish family novel (works such as Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* come to mind) with its matrilineal descent to be investigated, etc. A study cultural and ethnic variation in the family novel could be complemented by an investigation of absurd family novels such as Donald Antrim's *The Hundred Brothers* or Russell Banks' *Family Life*. Also, recent developments in the Canadian family novel, as impressively demonstrated by Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*, Douglas Coupland's *All Families Are Psychotic*, or John Bemrose's *The Island Walkers* (2003), would add to the findings presented in this study.

Due to the great variety of family novels described above, a final definition of the genre will only be able to cover its most elemental features. That much we can say: A family novel is generally focused on the conflicts of a two- (or three-) generational (post)nuclear family. These conflicts are connected to a wide range of contemporary socioeconomic, cultural, and even academic developments and discourses. The protagonist of a family novel is the family as a whole, i.e. the perspectives of its central members are portrayed. Representing a microcosm of society, the family is functionalized for the author's social criticism. Often, but not necessarily written in the realist style, family novels expose those aspects of society that authors find fault with most. The cultural critique in family novels can be expressed in different ways: it can be revealed by an ironic distance to the characters and their way of life; it can be shown by the appreciation or lamenting of a family's decline; it can also be expressed by sketching an idealist version of what is in fact a much bleaker reality.

Consequently, family novels always also have an ethical message.

The significant changes and developments of the family novel in the second half of the twentieth century demonstrate the need for a continuous reassessment of the genre, and in that respect, my project is merely a beginning. The current revivification of the family fiction, after it had been pronounced dead, reveals the genre's potential to rise like a Phoenix from the ashes, and to adapt to novel cultural paradigms. With regard to the genre's future, therefore, it is worthwhile to stick with László Földényi's motto: "The family novel is dead! Long live the family novel!"[257]

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[257] This citation by the Hungarian essayist and critic is quoted in Müller, p. 669.

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IX. APPENDIX

9.1 A Conversation with Jonathan Franzen

KD: "Your third novel *The Corrections* has repeatedly been called the first masterpiece of the twenty-first century. How do you live with the pressure or the responsibility accompanying such statements? Does it affect your work?"

JF: "Well, it doesn't make it any easier to write the next novel. On the other hand, it is so hard to write a good book that that little bit of extra difficulty that comes from the pressure is like a drop in the bucket. It's not what is making it hard to write the book. And responsibility? You could argue that *The Corrections* relieves me of responsibility. I think of literature as a somewhat threatened pursuit, it's like a volleyball that we're all trying to keep aloft; and when you're lucky enough to have a big success and have things go well with a book, like I did with *The Corrections*, then I feel like I've done my bit to keep the ball up and, you know, someone else can be the next to hit it."

KD: "What is your attitude to literary criticism? In *The Corrections*, Chip Lambert is portrayed in a satirical context, as a professor of English who is talking about postmodernism and poststructuralism while failing to live up to the ideas his professional life is based on. And that resembles some of what you wrote in your non-fiction as well."

JF: "I find most of these theories that Chip subscribes to very persuasive myself. I don't take any particular credit for this insight, but being right in theory doesn't have much to do with managing your life well, and this is the tension with Chip. I'm not sure I would say I'm satirizing those theories, since I do feel a great affection for them. In general I would say *The Corrections* is not satirically intended. There are satirical moments, but I was more just trying to have fun with various tensions, like the one between theory and practice…"
"I have a lot of impatience with a certain kind of critic – the non-academic critic who pretends that this theory doesn't exist. I even have a certain impatience with novelists who disdain that theory, because I think a lot of the Foucaultian and Derridean and feminist insights, and certainly the Freudian, are incredibly powerful in helping account for the world we see, and you make yourself stupid and irrelevant if you completely ignore that stuff."

KD: "I agree, I don't see *The Corrections* as a satirical book, either, I see it as something very different indeed, and that brings me to the question of form and content in the contemporary American novel. *The Corrections* is a novel that conveys a lot of meaning, and this ties in with what you've said in another interview, namely that family is one of the few pillars of meaning in today's world. You've also said that it's hard to find meaning nowadays, and that reminded me of another plea for commitment to meaning that has been made by Jedediah Purdy in his book *For Common Things*."

JF: "I've read more about the book than I have of Purdy himself."

KD: "He's basically arguing that the irony that he sees as pervading everyday life is dangerous to a certain extent because it prevents us from being 'original' or 'real'. If

we could connect that thought, or philosophy, to the way meaning is represented in literature, do you think that things have changed in the past decade? In other words: postmodernist literature is consciously evading a traditional notion of meaning – for various reasons. Do you think that has changed now, that authors like you are more interested in telling the world that there is something like meaning, that it's important and that we need to go back to certain things that make our lives meaningful?"

JF: "I'm too troubled and morally suspect as a person to feel I have any right to tell someone else what they should or shouldn't be doing. So I don't see the fiction in socially useful terms like that. The reason meaning is nonetheless important to me is that I'm bored by a novel that doesn't mean anything. And I'm bored by a novel that has a dumb, obvious, simple meaning. I'm poststructuralist certainly to the extent of seeing meaning as an interconnecting field rather than a reductive substrate. What I meant about being drawn to family because it's one of the few remaining bedrocks of meaning - now that religion is suspect, progress is suspect, politics is certainly very suspect - is simply that I'd like to tell a story within a field of meaning which feels still alive. Some of the valences that could motivate a book in the sixties or the seventies, the notion of social resistance or political change, feel very dead to me now; not because those aren't still important questions to be asking about the world, but because we can't have the same level of idealism that we might have about a parent or sibling or a lover or a child. I don't know if this is making any sense…"

KD: "It is, absolutely."

JF: "Okay. What Purdy is responding to is also what Dave Eggers and, to a lesser extent, in a much more subtle and interesting way, Dave Wallace are also worried about, by the way. 'Irony' is maybe not the best word to use to talk about it. But Eggers is the most interesting pure case of somebody wrestling with – for want of a better word, 'irony'. He's also failing, I think, but not for want of trying. He's watched TV, he's grown up in a celebrity culture, and he has an experience of fraudulence, he's always second-guessing himself, because he's tracking, 'How do I look? How do I appear? Am I doing this because I try to promote myself and have some of that celebrity myself?' That's a field of meaning which is alive. The problem is that when you do what Eggers and Purdy sometimes do, when you inveigh directly against irony or an obsession with appearance or celebrity, you start sounding really stupid. [Pause] When you suddenly try to be sincere as an antidote to irony or an antidote to ambiguity, you face a great and almost insoluble rhetorical problem. One of the reasons that *Infinite Jest* is as long as it is, and as brutal and grueling as it is, is that Wallace had to do hundreds of pages of work in order to set up almost a fortress within which it might be possible to have an authentic and sincere feeling, because he and his presumed reader were so suspicious bogus 'sincerity' that, if you just start right in on page one being sincere, it's not gonna work. That's really the problem, that's the reason I didn't get very far with Purdy; it's the reason I'm suspicious of Eggers when he flies a little too wildly between the self-skeptical, self-hating mode of irony and then this ridiculous, passionate sincerity. I don't think it's quite working yet rhetorically. He may yet get a handle on it.

KD: "I'm interested in your assessment of the American novel today. Assuming for a moment that there is such a thing as THE American novel, where do you think it stands, where do you think it's going, and how do you think it's different from 'the'

novel of the seventies or eighties? What is your assessment of what has been written, in comparison to what is being written today?"

JF: "I'm a bad person to ask about the novel today because I tend not to like very much stuff. So I tend to be kind of an ungenerous critic. What happens is that I am able to name so few novels from the last, say, five years, eight years that I really think are good, that they sit there isolated as individual instances rather than adding up to a sample set that you can actually make generalizations about. Let me– here, I'll take this with me, and then we'll go to the bookshelf; here, come along. [*goes to his bookshelves*] Actual novels from the last decade- so that would be 1993 – now, we'd definitely include this one. I think Mr. Johnson's book is quite good, *Jesus' Son*, top rate on that, you can't quite call it a novel, but it IS the best book published by an American in the last twenty years. Best book of fiction, I think. In 1992- this almost qualifies, right? *Jesus' Son*. Do we have anything else here from that period that I would live and die for? We've mentioned David Foster Wallace, Donald Antrim, *The Hundred Brothers*. Denis Johnson, *Jesus' Son*. Akhil Sharma, *An Obedient Father*. What else? Those are some of the highlights for me. What else?"
"A lot of good short stories, so it's hard, I mean, I'm not allowed to be pulling out short stories because that was not the question. Oh, here's another one. See, no one's heard about this book, Tom Drury, *Hunts in Dreams*, a book no one has read, no one will read. Family novel, by the way! Tom Drury, *Hunts in Dreams*, it's kind of a sequel to his first book, which was called *The End of Vandalism*. Haven't read *Mason and Dixon*; what else do we see here… everything else is a little bit older than ten years, I'm afraid. You see now, if I were allowed to bring in short stories…"

KD: "How about *Underworld*?"

JF: "*Underworld*? *Underworld*, well, I'm gonna just praise a different bunch of DeLillo novels instead."

KD: "Okay."

JF: "You see now if we are talking short stories, then we've got Lydia Davis who's some kind of genius; we have Alice Munro, Canadian, the good Canadian, the brilliant Canadian; we have Lorrie Moore lurking about here, more elsewhere. Oh, Jane Smiley – these books, I think they're a little older, *Age of Grief, Ordinary Love and Good Will*; I would definitely rank Smiley's novellas up there. This is – nah, '89. Too old!"

KD: "We don't want to be too strict though…"

JF: "Chris Ofutt wrote some wonderful short stories, David Means id kind of a master of the form … of course, some of Wallace's short stories are terrific. Joy Williams is always doing good work. Yeah, it's a lot of stuff; it just doesn't, I don't know if it quite… okay, so I'm gonna pull some of these out and say: here are the novels. Why are we mentioning these? Some of Vollman's stuff is very fine. These are all family novels. I think you're on to something. Wallace is about a lot of other things, but at the very center of it, there's a Hamlet-like family: father, brother, mother, Hamlet. Tom Drury: family. Antrim, *The Hundred Brothers*: family. *The Obedient Father*, Akhil Sharma: family. There you go. *Middlesex*, a rather interesting book: family! So you're on to something."

KD: "I know, and of course that applies to your own book, too."

JF: "Yeah, all of my books, actually. Especially the second and the third."

KD: "Yeah. That's actually what strikes me, the return of family, because the family novel as a genre is often despised by literary critics or by academia. Some of these people think family novels are always melodramatic and their structure is stupid and simple. So I'm trying to argue in my thesis that there are family novels that have emerged in the postmodern 'era' (if you want to put it that way), and in the postpostmodern era (the 'fin de millennium', that is, approaching the year 2000 and after) are everything but simple and stupid. Oh – what was my question?"

JF: "You were asking me to make generalizations but I think I basically just said that you're on to something; you could say that family is actually a rather striking character of the most successful (to my mind) American and Canadian fiction of the last ten years."

KD: "My question is, do you think that contemporary North American fiction is responding to certain tendencies in society, such as a tendency to move away from the questions and issues that were being asked in the seventies and eighties, and that now people are thinking about different things?"

JF: "I've argued this in a number of my essays, and you've probably seen it in the interviews as well. In my essay about Gaddis, certainly, I talk about that very turn. Some of it is simply that there was a rich vein, but it's been mined out. In the Mr. Difficult essay, the Gaddis essay -- and I'm just gonna cite myself, because I'd much rather write than speak -- you can argue that when the bomb went off in Hiroshima and the camps opened up and the Russians counted their dead, and so on; a lot of really bad, bad, bad stuff happened in Europe in the first half of the 1940s. Meanwhile, in the United States there was this tremendous boom; the country had always been incredibly commercial, but with the perfection of radio and the introduction of television, that commercial spirit suddenly felt radical and pervasive in a way that it never had before. And the result of those two rather apocalyptic feeling trends, one of them the mass death that we've witnessed in the early forties, and then this mass entertainment and mass communication that was coming along in the twenties and thirties and then burst into full flower in the fifties – there is a sense of, 'What am I gonna do writing a family novel? Tolstoy already wrote the family novel, Kafka already wrote the family novel, why would I do that? Here's this urgent, horrifying stuff which seems to be undermining our very concept of what it means to be a human being, let's set down everything and go man the barricades!' And that was I think the right thing to do; that was the right thing for Gaddis to do, that was the right thing for Heller to do, it was the right thing for Pynchon to do, it was the right thing for Böll and Grass to be doing, in their own way. But fifty years go by, you know, we still could get incinerated as we speak by a nuclear device; TV certainly hasn't gone anywhere, that whole dimension of the world is more worrisome than ever; and yet it's no longer possible to pretend that it's an emergency. You know, it's been there fifty years, okay, so in my twenties I worry about it but what am I gonna do with the rest of my life? And I think that's a big part of it; what else is there to say? TV is bad, mass death is horrible, you know, yes it is, but like, this is news? Whereas what's happening

in the private realm, in the family realm in response to these larger global pressures, this really is new. This is fresh. And what's more, it's unstable and inherently dramatic in a way that's appealing to novelists, and we'd be foolish not to be interested in it."

KD: "In the foreword to his famous family novel *The Forsyte Saga* John Galsworthy said that family is a microcosm of contemporary society – at least that's how he wanted people to read his novel. Would you like people to see the Lamberts as exactly that- a microcosm of American society today?"

JF: "I couldn't care less, really … To frame a question about a novel that way seems to presuppose that a novel is about representing something or is about capturing something, and I personally feel novels are experiences. They're much closer to … having a good dinner or spending the evening in bed with somebody you like, or playing football, things which are fun in and of themselves and you wouldn't say, Well, does that meal represent this or that or did that sex represent this and that? It doesn't have to! It's fun in and of itself. Of course, I'm not gonna stop anyone from reading the Lamberts that way; certainly I can admit that when I'm working on a book, I'm trying to – I like cities, I like the variety of cities, I like the different palettes, and the same certainly applies when I'm working on a novel, I do like to get different kinds of experience, and different facets of the world there, but that's not because of some ambition to capture America today, it's because, well, we just spent a hundred pages in Philadelphia, now let's go somewhere else, why not, if you can do it, and it's fun, do it!"

KD: "So you wouldn't agree with Jesse Berrett of *The Village Voice*, who has called you a 'social anatomist'?"

JF: "Social anatomist … I take compliments wherever I can get them. [*laughs*] I'm not sure whether it's meant as a compliment."

KD: "What is your attitude towards your predecessors and contemporaries in the realm of the family novel?"

JF: "The short answer, the much heavily abridged answer to this question is – no, I don't think of myself as a family novelist, I don't identify myself with a family novelist. When I look at literature past, what I'm interested in is people who seem most attuned to what was happening in their world. It may be that family now is of particular interest to me and my contemporaries, for whatever reason, but if you go back to the mid-fifties, if you look at the really good books of that time in America, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *The Recognitions*, *The Adventures of Augie March*, well, those were not family books. They were responding to, in the case of Bellow, the immigrant experience of America, and in the case of the others to this perceived onslaught of an alienating modernity, as it intersected with other values, religion, art. And yet these are the books we look to. These are the people I see as my predecessors, not somebody like Sloan Wilson, whose *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* came out at the same time. Mediocre book! Family novel, though.

KD: "Disease in *The Corrections* is for all of the family members, except Alfred, a cathartic rather than a catastrophic element. Looking at the representation of disease in

literature, especially at the fin de siècle, why did you choose to present it as something eventually beneficial, but as something that is not a sign of decay so much as it is a sign of hope, of a new start, of a cleansing, of – catharsis?"

JF: (takes a book from the bookshelf) "I'll make sure I get the quote exactly right. It's the epigraph to *The Brothers Karamazov*, John 12:24: 'Verily, verily I say unto you: except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it dies, it bringeth forth much fruit.' That's pretty much all I have to say on the topic. I would disagree a little bit that the disease in *The Corrections* is cathartic. I'm loath to do your interpreting for you, since I wrote the book, but I would point out that Alfred's suffering is considerable. The catharsis, such as it is, comes late and is preceded by a great deal of painful anxiety on the part of the other four Lamberts. Regarding Alfred, I'm tempted to quote a baseball outfielder name Andy Van Slyke, who played for the Pittsburgh Pirates in the late eighties. Smart guy. The Pirates lost two years in a row the seventh game of the seven-game championship series, very painfully. After the second loss, Van Slyke said: 'We feel worse than they feel good.' I would also point out that, yes, there's Parkinson's in the novel, but there's also a great deal of other pathology - neural pathology of all kinds, very much one of my subjects, one of the things that got me going. In the case of someone like Gary Lambert, for instance, much of the argument he's having with his wife is, 'Is this disease or is this life?' So the whole notion of what disease is is problematic. We could also certainly cite Italo Svevo, or even Mann and *Magic Mountain,* on the subject of disease being intrinsic to being alive, this idea that there is even such a thing as health. It's an older and more tragic and worldly way of looking at the world. We live in dumber, simpler, and more reductive times, where in America at least we have some peddled notions of health as an absolute achievable state, as opposed to a relative and ambiguous state. So all of these things are floating around there."

KD: "Where's the connection between family and representing disease in the way you did in literature?"

JF: "Well, there's some practical connection in that when you get sick it's usually your family who's on the front lines of the caretaking. I'm not sure I have much to say thematically on that subject. You can float an interpretation and I'll subscribe – or desubscribe."

KD: "In a way, you present disease as another sign of optimism."

JF: "Oh, good news, bad news, who knows? I think there's a hard little kernel of pessimism at the core of every optimist and vice versa. These are all problematic terms. I feel like my job– to the extent that I accept any social role for a novelist nowadays –might be to get in there and make a mess, a complicated mess, out of things that you thought were relatively simple. If I could leave you more confused about categories, that would be a useful social accomplishment. This is making sense, right?

KD: "Yes, it's absolutely making sense."

JF: "Okay."

KD: "Okay. Alfred Lambert is a contradictory figure. On the one hand, he represents the moral and ethic codes of America's 'Great Generation'; on the other hand, he believes in Schopenhauer's philosophy, which is usually seen as a very non-American kind of philosophy. Could you comment on that tension, on that contradiction?"

JF: "When it comes to a character, to say that he or she is contradictory, I think most novelists find that a compliment. I think anyone who's worth the damn is contradictory. Without beginning to do the interpretative work here, I don't have much to say. But certainly, you can't call a book *The Corrections* without hoping that someone might think about it in terms of American notions of progress, particularly personal progress. Next question? [*laughs*]"

KD: "Alright. Do you see yourself in a particular tradition of American literature, both as concerns form and content?"

JF: "I don't see myself as being in any particular tradition of American writing. I think that the American novel has been a very healthy thing for the last century because, first of all, we have an interesting subject to write about. The United States has been a happening country, in its size and its wealth and its increasing centrality in world affairs, its diversity, its newness- there's a lot to write about. But there's also the odd circumstance, there are two circumstances. First of all, people don't give a damn about art in this country. A source of frustration when you're interested in art, but also sort of liberating, too. You're not gonna get any status, the way you might in France or Germany, by falling back on your grandness as an artist. So you might as well go for fame. You might as well try to actually reach an audience. Fitzgerald, one of my favorite American writers, embodied this most painfully and vividly. He was in love with serious literature and he produced one towering example of it in *The Great Gatsby*. But there was always this possibility of having it both ways. *Gatsby* didn't do very well but other stuff he wrote, inferior stuff, stuff he knew to be inferior DID do well. And the Grail for him was, 'Maybe I can actually manage to participate in a conversation with the literature I love and admire AND also score the way America wants me to score, by having a nice house'. That certainly motivated Steinbeck, Mailer, Hemingway even, and Bellow and Roth and Updike. It was this great exciting thing, that you could actually do work that you felt to be serious and still have an audience, because there are so many people with enough money to spend on books here. I think this is exertive of the very useful discipline on American writing in that it's kept the door open to entertainment. So, to this extent, I feel fortunate to be part of what I see as one of the central American traditions of writing, if not THE central tradition, which is: Try to write serious books that are also fun to read."

KD: "Thank you very much for the interview."

The interview was conducted on August 4, 2003, in New York City.
Kerstin Dell, M.A., M.A.

IX. ZUSAMMENFASSUNG DER ARBEIT IN DEUTSCHER SPRACHE

Im Zentrum meiner Arbeit steht die Frage nach der Entwicklung eines Genres, das bisher von der Forschung vernachlässigt wurde. Ausgehend von der dürftigen Forschungsliteratur zum Familienroman im allgemeinen versuche ich, Vorschläge zur bislang mangelhaften Systematisierung dieser Gattung in Nordamerika in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts im besonderen zu formulieren. Die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit den verschiedenen Positionen der Forschung hat gezeigt, dass diesen eine eigentümliche Distanz zum Familienroman gemein ist. Dabei werden die vermeintliche Oberflächlichkeit, Voraussagbarkeit und mangelnde ästhetische Qualität von Familienromanen besonders häufig beanstandet. Auffällig ist die durchgängig synonyme Verwendung heteronymer Begriffe (Generationenroman, Familienromanze, etc.) zur Bezeichnung eines nicht genauer definierten Genres, die darauf schließen lässt, dass sich die Kritik womöglich gar nicht auf den Familienroman als solchen bezieht, sondern auf unterschiedliche Genres, die auf mehr oder weniger deutliche Weise Familie thematisieren. Die philologisch unsaubere Verwendung von Begrifflichkeiten hat zu einer Verwischung der Gattungsgrenzen innerhalb des weiter gefassten Feldes 'Familienliteratur' geführt. Eine generelle Klassifizierung der in der Forschungsliteratur verwendeten Begriffe sowie der Bestimmung des Gegenstandes, auf den sie sich im einzelnen beziehen, erschien daher notwendig, um anschließend zu einer ersten, für die folgende literarische Analyse verbindlichen, Definition des Familienromans als eigenständiger Gattung zu gelangen.

Ausgehend von der Annahme, dass sich der Familienroman aus der Etablierung der Kernfamilie im 20. Jahrhundert heraus entwickelt, als Protagonisten die ganze Familie (bzw. die Perspektiven der zentralen Figuren) berücksichtigt, und sich mit wichtigeren sozioökonomischen und kulturellen Aspekten befasst als mit Eheschließungen und dem häuslichen Glück einer bieder(meierlich)en Existenz, untersucht meine Studie die Funktionalisierung der Familie für die Gesellschaftskritik des jeweiligen Autors bzw. der Autorin. Im letzten halben Jahrhundert haben amerikanische Familienromanciers verschiedene Formen der amerikanischen Familie und die Konflikte in ihr porträtiert, um gesellschaftliche Entwicklungen und Diskurse kritisch zu reflektieren. Eine Analyse des Familienromans in der nordamerikanischen Literatur kann also eine aufschlussreiche Perspektive auf die gesellschaftliche Befindlichkeit der amerikanischen Gesellschaft eröffnen. Mein Ansatz ist von dem Bestreben getragen, den Familienroman und seine Wechselwirkung

mit der Gesellschaft sowohl diachron als auch synchron zu verorten. Ausgehend von der grundsätzlichen Überlegung, dass Familie ein auf vielfältige Art auf den gesellschaftlichen Makrokosmos verweisender Indikator und Seismograph für Veränderungen sein kann, analysiere ich die Literatur von der Nachkriegszeit bis zur Jahrtausendwende.

Untersuchungsgegenstand meiner Arbeit sind Familienromane der amerikanischen Autoren John Cheever, Don DeLillo, und Jonathan Franzen. Zunächst ist diesen drei Autoren gemeinsam, dass sie über Familien aus der „WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant)"-Schicht der amerikanischen Gesellschaft schreiben. Während meine Auswahl nicht suggerieren soll, die Romane zeichneten das Bild der typischen amerikanischen Familie, die es so aufgrund der kulturellen Vielfalt in den USA ohnehin nicht gibt, so bietet sie dennoch die Basis für die Möglichkeit, diese Werke in ihren verschiedenen Entwürfen amerikanischen Familienlebens miteinander zu vergleichen. Um die Einbindung der einzelnen Texte in ihre Zeit zu verdeutlichen, geht jeder eigentlichen literarischen Analyse eine kursorische Beschreibung der wichtigsten politischen, sozioökonomischen, kulturellen wie literaturgeschichtlichen Koordinaten voraus.

Im Zentrum meines Kapitels zum amerikanischen Familienroman der Nachkriegszeit steht John Cheevers Erstlingswerk *The Wapshot Chronicle* aus dem Jahre 1957. Cheevers Roman folgt dem eher konventionellen Muster der Darstellung des Verfalls einer Familie, wenn auch das scheinbar glückliche Ende der Geschichte, in deren Entwicklung sich die Wapshot-Söhne in der zunehmend feindlichen Welt eines ausschließlich auf Leistung ausgerichteten Amerikas behaupten und ihre eigenen Familien gründen, eine andere Interpretation zumindest nicht ausschließt. Analog dem politischen Dualismus der McCarthy-Ära zeigt *The Wapshot Chronicle* jedoch die Spaltung einer traditionellen neuenglischen Familie auf. Der Roman entwirft zwei unvereinbare Welten, in deren Aufeinandertreffen die positiv besetzte Welt des ursprünglichen, natürlichen, Thoreauvianischen Amerikas, die durch die Vaterfigur Leander Wapshot repräsentiert wird, von der negativ besetzten, künstlichen und individualistischen Welt eines Amerika (in Teilen symbolisiert von den Frauenfiguren) auf der Schwelle zur Postmoderne verdrängt wird. Hier zeigt sich mit der Vertreibung der Wapshot-Söhne aus dem Paradies ihrer Kindheit zudem ein klassisches Thema der amerikanischen Literatur der 1950er Jahre. Mit dem Tod Leanders sind die jungen Wapshots der Entfremdung, Kommerzialisierung und Bürokratisierung der Zukunft ausgesetzt. In diesem Punkt weisen sie auffällige Gemeinsamkeiten zu zahlreichen Charakteren aus den berühmt gewordenen Kurzgeschichten des als „Dante of Suburbia" bezeichneten amerikanischen Literaten auf. Cheevers Kritik an der Dehumanisierung der amerikanischen

Gesellschaft erhält eine besondere Note durch das Erbe Leanders an seine Söhne: er hinterlässt einen Zettel mit Überlebenstipps aus seiner alten Zeit, die er signifikanterweise in der Familienausgabe von Shakespeares gesammelten Werken deponiert. Damit wird die Bedeutung des Humanismus (im Sinne von ‚Menschlichkeit' angesichts einer zunehmenden Technisierung der Wirklichkeit) noch einmal deutlich von Cheever hervorgehoben.

Gegenüber nachfolgenden Formen des Familienromans zeigt sich *The Wapshot Chronicle*, das man zumindest aufgrund seiner expliziten Verweise auf (Homo-)Sexualität als seiner Zeit durchaus voraus betrachten darf, als vergleichsweise konventionell. Die klassische nukleare Familie mit ihrem tradierten Geschlechterparadigma ist das dominante Modell in Cheevers Roman, deren angedeutete Schwierigkeiten mit den veränderten gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen erklärt werden. Viele Figuren entsprechen Archetypen und ihre Handlungen folgen Topoi wie etwa der Befreiung der Prinzessin aus den Klauen einer bösen Macht u.ä.. Diesen traditionellen Erzählmustern zum Trotz wäre es reduktionistisch zu schließen, der Tenor von *The Wapshot Chronicle* sei traditionalistisch und die dargestellten Entwicklungen von geringem ästhetischem Wert. Sowohl Cheevers realistische Schilderung der urbanen Welt Nachkriegsamerikas als auch der eindringliche Humor der lyrisch-lakonischen Tagebucheinträge des alternden Leanders bestätigen das Gegenteil.

Die Wandlungsfähigkeit des Familienromans wird deutlich an Don DeLillos 1985 erschienenen postmodernem Familienroman *White Noise* (deutscher Titel: *Weißes Rauschen*). DeLillos formalästhetisch wie inhaltlich subversive Geschichte einer amerikanischen Familie im Zeitalter einer von den Medien und Umweltkatastrophen dominierten Konsumgesellschaft ist nicht nur völlig verschieden von der in *The Wapshot Chronicle* dargestellten Welt der 1950er Jahre, sondern widerlegt auch die gängige Annahme der Forschung, der Familienroman müsse konsequent realistisch erzählt werden und folge starren Kompositions- und Handlungsprinzipien. Mit seiner ironischen Darstellung einer postnuklearen Patchworkfamilie im Teufelskreis von Konsumwahn und Tanathophobie gelingt dem New Yorker Autor eine zwischen Satire und Dystopie oszillierende postmoderne Gesellschaftskritik.

Im Zentrum von *White Noise* steht die bunt zusammen gewürfelte Familie Gladney, die erst kürzlich (und bereits zum fünften bzw. vierten Mal) verheirateten Elternfiguren Jack und Babette und die vier Kinder aus vorherigen Ehen, dessen Sorgerecht sie haben. Die Mischung aus verschiedenen Genpools und Kulturen, die die Familie Gladney darstellt, verweist auf einen zentralen Aspekt des Romans: die Problematisierung von Identität in einer postmodernen Welt. Die Patchwork-Familie Gladney kann die in der traditionellen nuklearen

Familie idealerweise geleistete moralische und geistige Erziehung nicht mehr erfüllen. Die Kinder wissen wenig von dem nicht sorgeberechtigten Elternteil, mit dem sie oft nicht einmal den Kontakt pflegen. Auch zu anderen Verwandten stehen sie in keinerlei Verbindung. Ganz auf sich allein gestellt, fallen die Kinder den Verlockungen der Konsumgesellschaft anheim, richten ihr Weltbild nach radikal konstruktivistischen Ansichten aus und sind von dem ununterbrochenen weißen Rauschen audiovisueller Medien so stark beeinflusst, dass sie sowohl körperliche wie seelisch-geistige Symptome dieser Beeinflussung aufweisen. Damit sind sie ironischerweise jedoch nicht die Opfer ihrer postmodernen Lebenswelt, sondern die dieser am besten Angepassten. In dieser Hinsicht haben die Kinder ihren Eltern etwas voraus. Die traditionelle Familienhierarchie ist in *White Noise* gänzlich umgestürzt: die Elternfiguren halten sich an ihre (Stief-)Kinder in ihrer Suche nach Halt in einer von fundamentaler Ambivalenz geprägten Umgebung. Die letztendlich vergebliche Sinnsuche der Elternfiguren ist jedoch keineswegs tragisch, sondern wird angesichts der Oberflächlichkeit aller Konflikte zur Farce. Passend zur der narkotisierten Umgebung der Gladneys zeitigen keine ihrer Handlungen Folgen. DeLillos Gesellschaftskritik besteht in der Schaffung von ironischer Distanz zu den Charakteren und deren bereitwilliger Angleichung an die Autorität des Simulakrums.

Auf der formalästhetischen Ebene weist der Roman zahlreiche spielerisch anmutende Beispiele von 'juxtaposition' und Pastiche auf. Die realistische Darstellung des personalen Erzählers wird durch absurde Kommentare aus dem ständig laufenden Fernseher sowie durch triadische Aufzählungen von Produktnamen oder fragmentarische Werbeslogans unterbrochen. Da die Quelle dieser Aufzählungen verborgen bleibt, tritt eine letztlich unbestimmbare neue Erzählinstanz auf, die aus dem Innersten der amerikanischen Konsumgesellschaft gespeist zu sein scheint. So reflektiert die Struktur von *White Noise* die auf inhaltlicher Ebene dargestellte Fragmentarisierung der Gesellschaft sowie die kulturelle Erosion eines konsumabhängigen Amerikas. DeLillos Darstellung einer am Ende der Geschichte angelangten und damit in der ewigen Gegenwart der Postmoderne gefangenen Familie mutet wie ein Abgesang auf die Möglichkeit funktionalen Familienlebens an. Mit DeLillos postmodernem Familienroman scheint sowohl das Potential der amerikanischen Familie ausgereizt wie auch die Stoßkraft des Familienromans erschöpft zu sein.

Dies wird jedoch von einigen um die Jahrtausendwende entstandenen preisgekrönten amerikanischen Familienromanen eindrucksvoll widerlegt. Ausgehend von meiner Diskussion von Familienromanen der amerikanischen Nachkriegszeit sowie aus der Epoche postmoderner Literatur versuche ich zunächst, den Familienroman des Fin de Millennium in

einen größeren Zusammenhang einzuordnen und Traditionslinien zu erkennen bzw. kritisch zu bewerten. Unter Miteinbeziehung von Theorien zur Wirklichkeitsrepräsentation definiere ich dann den zeitgenössischen Familienroman als kritischen Erben des Realismus, dessen Anspruch letztlich im Überwinden postmoderner Erzählstrategien liegt, ohne dabei jedoch hinter diese zurückzufallen. Schreiben zur Zeit der Jahrtausendwende, so meine These, verabschiedet die Postmoderne und entwirft fiktionale Welten unter dem Vorzeichen eines Neo- oder auch Kritischen Realismus.

Werke wie Jonathan Franzen *The Corrections* (deutscher Titel: *Die Korrekturen*), das im Zentrum meines Kapitels zum zeitgenössischen Familienroman steht, setzen sich auf innovative Weise mit der Funktion der Familie im beginnenden 21. Jahrhundert auseinander. Dabei fällt zunächst die Rückkehr zur Form der traditionellen nuklearen Familie ins Auge, die jedoch durch die gleichzeitige Akzeptanz alternativer Lebensentwürfe (z.B. gleichgeschlechtliche Partnerschaften) nicht mehr, wie bei Cheever, absolut gesetzt wird. Ebenso wenig aber zeigt sie sich, wie bei DeLillo, als obsolet. Die Konflikte der einzelnen Familienmitglieder miteinander und mit sich selbst bergen kathartisches Potential. Nach der Entwertung aller Werte im postmodernen Familienroman treten im Familienroman des Fin de Millennium Tugenden wie Solidarität, Toleranz und Verständnis, Ehrlichkeit und Offenheit wieder in den Vordergrund. Ohne Sentimentalität oder Nostalgie zeigt Franzen in *The Corrections*, dass im Zeitalter der Globalisierung und der damit verbundenen Unsicherheit Familie als sinn- und bedeutungsstiftende Einheit genutzt werden kann. Die Rückkehr von Bedeutung auf inhaltlicher Ebene trifft sich mit dem Verzicht auf postmoderne Metafiktionalität oder radikale formalästhetische Experimente. Dass diese von vielen als 'new conventionalism' bezeichnete Form des Schreibens bei Franzen keineswegs konventionell ist oder gar in die Banalität abdriftet, liegt vor allem an der eindringlichen Schilderung der Verstrickungen und Probleme der einzelnen Mitglieder der Familie Lambert in *The Corrections*. Momente tiefster Verzweiflung (etwa in der Darstellung von Alfreds Krankheit) sind gepaart mit satirischen Aspekten, die als 'comic relief' wirken. Trotz Franzens Betonung der Innenperspektive der einzelnen Figuren weist sein post-postmoderner Familienroman auch eine deutliche gesellschaftskritische Komponente auf. Statt jedoch die Vergangenheit nostalgisch von der beängstigenden Gegenwart abzusetzen wie Cheever, oder die sinnentleerte Gegenwart absolut zu setzen wie DeLillo, schließt sich Franzen mit seinem leisen, doch unablässigen Insistieren auf der Fähigkeit (und Notwendigkeit) der positiven Entwicklung des Menschen an das Erbe des Humanismus an.

Meine Untersuchung des Familienromans in Amerika in der zweiten Hälfte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts hat gezeigt, dass Schriftsteller auf gesellschaftlichen Wandel mit veränderten Funktionalisierungen des Motivs der Familie reagieren. Dabei setzen sie sich kritisch mit den zentralen Diskursen ihrer Zeit auseinander. Entgegen der in der Forschungsliteratur häufig vertretenen Ansicht gehen Familienromane dabei nicht auf starre, konventionelle oder gar traditionalistische Weise an kulturelle Entwicklungen heran. Der Familienroman der Gegenwart und Zukunft muss daher immer wieder neu und im Kontext seiner Zeit bewertet werden.

9.3 ERKLÄRUNG ÜBER DIE VERWENDETEN HILFSMITTEL

Hiermit versichere ich, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit eigenständig und ohne Zuhilfenahme anderer als der von mir angeführten Hilfsmittel verfasst habe.

Trier, im März 2005   Kerstin Dell

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 - Ort, Datum -   - Unterschrift -