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## MASCULINITY BEYOND REPAIR: AGING, PATHOLOGY, AND THE MALE BODY IN JONATHAN FRANZEN'S *THE CORRECTIONS*

### Abstract

This article explores representations of male aging in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) by looking at theories of aging, pathology, and hegemonic masculinity. While, in general, academic discourses about aging tend to link old age to pathology, the focus on gender stereotypes adds another layer to the perception of aging in Franzen's novel. *The Corrections* is constructed around an aged patriarch who is not only struck by the illnesses of old age but, more importantly, he keeps clinging to an idealized masculine identity he is no longer able to maintain as an old man. Drawing on the difficulties of identity construction concerning Aging Studies and the lack of what Gabriela Spector-Mersel defines as "masculinity scripts," my article illustrates how literary representations can construct male losses as symptoms of a silent virus that appears to break out in the aged body. The article will show that these (lived) hegemonic concepts of masculinity establish the male as a dominant collective but simultaneously constitute the inevitable failure of the individual. Hegemonic masculinities then have a disabling impact on the old man as is mirrored in Franzen's doomed protagonist who becomes the victim of his own concepts of masculinity.

**Keywords:** Aging, masculinities, scripts, gender, hegemony, Jonathan Franzen, contemporary U.S. American fiction

## Introduction

Considering that death has been a central topic throughout the twentieth century, it is only towards the end of the century that the need for aging narratives started to increase, not least due to the rise of life expectancy.<sup>1</sup> This advancement initiated changes in the perception, social organization, and public portrayal of old age, which also meant that stories foregrounding old age gradually found access into mainstream culture. Compared to the recent growth of aging narratives in popular media,<sup>2</sup> literature may not have experienced a similar awakening, but it has certainly noticed an expansion of texts that, above all, illuminate the difficulties of aging. Moving into the twenty-first century, aging narratives have become even more frequent, due to biomedical as well as social and cultural research about Alzheimer's disease and dementia, which has resulted in a growth of non-fiction literary work.<sup>3</sup>

While my paper intends to touch on established research on illness in old age, it concentrates primarily on representations of aging masculinities and explores, on the example of Jonathan Franzen's fiction novel *The Corrections* (2001), how hegemonic masculinities textually emerge as pathologies in old age. In masculinity studies, we observe that the general discourse surrounding hegemonic or "toxic" types of masculinities has been expanding within Western cultural contexts with scholars like Michael S. Kimmel, Bob Pease, and E. Anthony Rotundo at the forefront. However, the necessity to relate (toxic) masculinities to the challenges of aging and old age somehow remains at the margins of scholarly scrutiny—even if some of the most widely read U.S. authors have contributed to creating a large body of work that favors male aging.

Writers as acclaimed as Philip Roth, John Updike, Saul Bellow, Paul Auster, and others have with growing maturity become interested in writing fictional portrayals of aging characters, preferably from a masculine viewpoint.<sup>4</sup> Their

<sup>1</sup> See Mary Meghan Ryan, *Vital Statistics of the United States: Births, Life Expectancy, Deaths, and Selected Health Data* (2011) for the twentieth century U.S. mortality statistics.

<sup>2</sup> A quick glimpse into media representations reveals that aging characters have been on the rise since the millennial shift. Judging by the number of recent *Netflix* productions only, it is noteworthy that the demand and therefore also the relevance of aging-related topics has increased in U.S. culture. Aging topics, one could say, have arrived to popular U.S. media.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Martina Zimmermann, *The Poetics and Politics of Alzheimer's Disease Life-Writing* (2017).

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed analysis of late writing, see Alex Hobbs' *Aging Masculinity in the American*

stories thus take up aged perspectives to address old age issues and symptoms such as the lack of social interactions, depression, suicide, and, of course, various bio-medical and pathological challenges that occur more commonly in advanced age. Jonathan Franzen, even if excluded from David Leverenz's list of maturing authors,<sup>5</sup> has—with *The Corrections*—produced a popular novel that was influential in bringing about new ways of considering gender roles in prescriptive patriarchal environments. And in light of current gender studies disputes brought forth by movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up, the role of Franzen's main character and aging family patriarch, Alfred Lambert, takes on particular importance and highlights the difficulties to uphold ideal forms of dominant masculinities in old age. Franzen's patriarch, once actively participating in enforcing and maintaining hegemonic masculine structures in society, suddenly becomes the victim of his own social order—a patriarchal order that is increasingly challenged towards the end of the twentieth century and onwards.<sup>6</sup>

Taking aging studies observations about old age and pathology as a starting point for my discussion of *The Corrections*, I argue that the central character, Alfred Lambert, needs to be re-read allegorically as the bodily representation of heteronormative (or traditional) family values that refuse to be reconciled with modern developments. These include, of course, the undoing of previously dominant gender roles. Alfred cannot merely be analyzed as a sufferer from old age, that is, another male post-retirement depiction of the aging male victim. Instead, he should also be considered a symbolical old age figure whose decline makes visible the pathology of systematic gender inequality and the self-destructive nature of American hegemonic masculinities.

## 1. Narrating Pathologies of Masculinities and Old Age

Despite the growing interest in establishing more affirmative perceptions of aging as, for instance, in popular literature,<sup>7</sup> the fearful notions that foreshadow

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*Novel* (2016) or Josep M. Armengol's recent essay publication "Aging as Emasculation? Rethinking Aging Masculinities in Contemporary U.S. Fiction" (2018).

<sup>5</sup> David Leverenz, "Aging Beyond Masculinities, or, the Penis as Failed Synecdoche" (2014).

<sup>6</sup> Third (and fourth) wave feminist endeavors and principles are visibly affecting all characters in *The Corrections*, male and female. In Chip's case (who teaches Theory of Feminism at college (TC 52)) it is more overt than in others, nonetheless, female emancipation has left traces in all character's lives.

<sup>7</sup> Both *A Man Called Ove* (2012) by Frederik Backman and *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* (2009) by Jonas Jonasson, though originally Swedish, **471**

old age as disease-ridden and death-prompting can hardly be diminished. Pathology and old age intertwine and are displayed most urgently on a bio-medical level, which recognizes the decrease in bodily functions and the rising risks of irreparable conditions. Nonetheless, aging is (always) lived out in social and cultural contexts, which pave the way for assumptions and behaviors that are developed in relation to aging individuals. As Rüdiger Kunow explains: “old age’ marks a subject position in which biology and culture, the corporeal materiality of human life and the set of representations which a community recognizes itself, intersect and interact in important ways” (“Chronologically Gifted?” 24). Katharina Zilles reaffirms Kunow’s position, bringing together cultural and bio-medical aspects of aging and gender by calling on the authority of disability studies scholar Rosemary Garland-Thomson:

When examining masculine corporeality with regard to age(ing), the intersection of age and gender with the category of ability becomes obvious and poses another challenge to hegemonic masculinity. Old age and disability potentially overlap since age-induced disease and physical decline can lead to decrease in mobility and ability: if the aging process is not interrupted by sudden death, some kind of disability will probably affect everyone at some point in later life. (213)

Thus, pathology and/or the representations of pathological and medical circumstances have found a home in literary illustrations of aging. With this, the language and the means of representing the predicaments of old age have primarily remained melancholic and hopeless, following in the footsteps of a male-dominated genre that is bound to conceive negative metaphors of aging.

Zilles further explains that “[f]or aging men, traditional images of masculinity as based on (economical) productivity, virility and agency provide specific challenges to identity. As the aging man encounters the loss of social roles or physical abilities, his masculine self-identity needs to be reshaped and renegotiated” (213). In turn-of-the-century literature,<sup>8</sup> such re-formulation of identity appears largely impossible for aging male characters. These suffering protago-

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are recent examples for comic depictions (that work with narrative strategies of comic relief) of aging male characters. Translated into English, the novels became internationally acclaimed and were both made into feature films.

<sup>8</sup> The focus here lies on male-authored fiction that depicts white, heteronormative, middle to upper-class environments of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

nists, who are unexpectedly struck by the medical realities of bodily reductions, remain locked in the tragic cycle towards destruction, which is, in many cases, quite literally death. This highly formulaic literature that is unequivocally dominated by Philip Roth's large body of work in which aging male experiences are foregrounded, needs to be potentially recognized as its own genre or else as a sub-category of what Kunow terms the "master narrative of 'old age'" ("Chronologically Gifted?" 27). Pathological fears, which are in these texts often sketched with ever-recurring internal engagements as well as re-surfacing symbolism relating to illness and demise, overshadow the narrative flow and do not allow the characters to break out of a death-paralysis (or death-cycle). Philip Roth's *Everyman* (2006), one of his late novels, serves as a primary example for this category and offers an insight into how aging, masculinity, and anxieties coalesce on textual levels as explained by Alex Hobbs in "A Gendered Approach to Ageing in Contemporary American Fiction: A Portrait of the Old Man in Philip Roth's *Everyman*." Illness and aging become central to such narratives and this strict combination forecloses the ability to rethink aging in a more constructive light as has been anticipated in recent studies of aging.<sup>9</sup>

The aging male body, once experiencing the severe loss of bodily functions, becomes disconnected from its previous self, no longer able to fulfill stereotypical and normative male roles as prescribed by patriarchal scripts.<sup>10</sup> The acting subject then continues to grow estranged from his own fabricated core, unable and unwilling to recognize the evolving (present and future) body from the inside as part of a previously constructed self—one that has hardened and solidified over the course of decades through maintenance and repetition, a familiar body that is capable and not restrained by increasing pathological conditions. In "Never-aging Stories: Western Hegemonic Masculinity Scripts," Gabriela Spector-Mersel explains how crucial these scripts (or plots) are for men to establish their identities as men. "These are cultural exemplary-plots," Spector-Mersel suggests, "that draw social clocks for masculinity, determining diverse contents of

<sup>9</sup> Some of the critical work on positive aging includes "Images of Positive Aging" (2005) by Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth, "Age-Related Disability Believing is Seeing is Experiencing" (2013) by Sharon-Dale Stone, and *Alive and Kicking at All Ages* (2014) by Ulla Kriebner, Roberta Maierhofer, and Barbara Ratzenböck.

<sup>10</sup> Here, it is important to note that the body is understood as a bio-medical organism that guarantees physical as well as mental functions, which certainly includes cognitive processes that influence self-recognition. This understanding of the body stands in line with more recent phenomenological notions of corporeality and discards previous assumptions of a mind-body dualism.

desired manhood at different points in a man's life" (71). Following the scripts then secures a dominant role in society, which is challenged with the advance of age and the addition of age-related losses. Consequently, it means that "Western masculine scripts are not designed for elderly men, and thus are concluded somewhere before 'old age'" (Spector-Mersel 73).

Incapable and impaired, further maturing biologically, the aging male body, which is beginning to antagonize itself due to the growing inability to recognize a former self in the emerging self, simultaneously finds itself ostracized by the outside and pushed into societal spaces, among those that are considered Other, queer, or effeminate. Drawing on Michel Foucault, Kathryn James explains that in a heteronormative patriarchal society "sexual irregularity is annexed to pathology" (17). The loss of sexual prowess is certainly included in bodily decline and substantially obstructs the maintenance of hegemonic masculine self-perception, as has been repeatedly noted in academic work of male aging sexualities.<sup>11</sup> Here, Roth's fiction again serves as the prime example. Josep M. Armengol explains that "his novels depict, once and again, his protagonists' direct association of aging with what they perceive as the inevitable demise of masculinity and virility,"—forever chasing after young women "to prove their manhood" (358).

Extending this thought, Michel Foucault's observations about sexuality and bodily productivity also contribute to a discussion about the financial worth of aged bodies. In his study of sexuality, economically-driven systems take up a major role in shaping the value of (aging) individuals which still holds true today.<sup>12</sup> Under these circumstances, every variation that stands outside of the Western rule (male, Caucasian, heteronormative, between adolescence and retirement, middle-class and higher) is perceived as an abnormality or deviation; the aging male body, even if superior once, now falls into this category of the politically and socially marginalized. Linking this theoretical approach directly to Aging Studies, Rüdiger Kunow contends:

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Raewyn Connell, "The Social Organization of Masculinity" for a comprehensive understanding of hegemonic masculinities and the maintenance of patriarchal societies in which sexual practice is one of three main components to uphold the system.

<sup>12</sup> In *The History of Sexuality* (1987), Michel Foucault states that "[a] normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life" (144). Consequently, "bio-power" or "biopolitics" are the terms he coins to demonstrate the "subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (140). Oppression, nonetheless, can only be applied in a system that has established and formulated a "norm" against which deviations are recognized.

Human life is being understood in terms of economic effectiveness. In other words, human life becomes human capital. Measured by these standards and failing, ‘old age’ can then be used to ground forms of comparative biopolitics and can in this way become a key factor in the theoretical scaffolding of globalization processes. (“The Biology of Community” 275)

Within this discourse, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age* (1970) perhaps most notably outlines the inhumane consequences the aged had to bear in the past almost across all cultures and well into the twentieth century. In her study of aging, ageism is uncovered as a systemic and institutionalized problem, for old age is received as a pathological condition that finds only little support on social or governmental levels. De Beauvoir places a very strong focus on male aging and is one of the first scholars to acknowledge the difficulties of aging in Western cultures. Discussing socio-economic factors more concretely, she claims that “[r]etirement brings a radical break into a man’s life; he is entirely cut off from his past and he has to adapt himself to a new status” (de Beauvoir 262). And though female aging has been addressed in academic discourse, most prominently also by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), male issues seem to gain more attention in the public sphere. This may be the case because in patriarchal, heteronormative households the difference between pre- and post-retirement age is still highly exaggerated and linked to the rapid accumulation of physical impairment and pathological impossibilities. An exaggeration then creates the assumption that male aging is more challenging in comparison.<sup>13</sup> And though gender roles have experienced a substantial shift in the past decades, social studies still support de Beauvoir’s findings.<sup>14</sup> They still find reason to believe that the transitional phase into retirement bears severe challenges for men to this day,—which then may, in general, explain the high suicide rates.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Susan Sontag’s acclaimed article “The Double Standard of Age” (1972), which uncovers the harsh complexities of female aging in a male-dominated society, needs to be considered at this point. While she acknowledges that middle-aged men who cannot achieve professional and personal success age more stressfully than their accomplished counterparts, Sontag has no doubt that aging in Western societies has more severe disadvantages for women.

<sup>14</sup> On the discussion of masculinities and retirement, see, for instance, Edward H. Thompson, Jr. and Kaitlyn Barnes Langendoerfer’s recent study “Older Men’s Blueprint for ‘Being a Man’” (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Suicide rates for middle-aged males and men of advanced age are and have been substantially higher than the rates for aging females. For a general overview, see the suicide section of the National Institute of Mental Health website.

Social expectations, self-perception, and identity construction remain pivotal in moments of transitioning from one stage of life into another. Consequently, more often than not, the aging subject is moved into spaces of social rejection, degrading and discriminating spaces, where the aging man has to settle eventually due to the growing inability to perform a dominant role and ultimately becomes a victim of his own social regime as he matures into old age. And while female aging needs to be further examined academically in and outside of *The Corrections*, for my study it is necessary, for the time being, to concentrate on masculinity and treat female aging on the side—as a potential topic for further analysis. This way, I aim to arrive at a closer understanding of how the textual representations of hegemonic masculine structures unfold individual male abilities/attempts to come to terms with the limits and losses of advancing age.

## 2. The Rule of Patriarchy—Alfred Lambert, the Personification of Masculine Decline?

Due to its length and complexity, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* invites a large and diverse amount of possible readings, most of which, to this day, have acknowledged Alfred as a waning authority within Franzen's fictional world. Considering recent changes and developments in gender discourse and how the twenty-first century has opened up new ways of imagining aging male characters, the actions and depictions of Franzen's male protagonist gain meaning and momentum. The heated Oprah-Franzen disputes about low- and high-quality literature<sup>16</sup> have perhaps slightly taken away from considering the patriarch's role in greater detail. And while Alfred Lambert has mostly been analyzed in light of his connection to the other family members (his two sons, Chip and Gary, his daughter, Denise, and his wife, Enid), Alfred, as an aging subject who not only negatively affects everyone around him but finally fashions his own downfall, has remained largely untouched.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Especially important, here, is the discourse about gender, high- and lowbrow literature, and how internet-related media has shaped the understanding of categorizing and perceiving literary works.

<sup>17</sup> One productive example in terms of masculine aging is Teresa Requena Pelegrí's "Negotiating a Masculine Bloc: Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*" (2013). Her essay offers a more nuanced interpretation of Alfred Lambert by bringing in R.W. Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" as well as Demetriou's "masculine bloc," recognizing the hegemonic web in which all other characters remain caught despite the growing, aging-related fragility of the ruling patriarch.



There are numerous textual indicators that foreshadow Alfred's approaching death; these are apparent in each individual storyline and create a long thread through the entire novel, until the very end, where Alfred's death is offered somewhat as a resolution to all conflicts, or the ultimate "correction" next to many corrections that are implied on numerous occasions.<sup>18</sup> Ralph J. Poole is among the scholars who suggest that Alfred's demise is perhaps the most significant correction that may have been overlooked by characters and readers alike. He asserts that "there is a logical and final correction that no family member has thought of: the deteriorating physical state and ensuing slow but steady passing away of father Alfred" (Poole 280). Poole further explains that this notion becomes especially visible at the end of the novel where mother and wife, Enid Lambert, is particularly emphasized (280), which will be illuminated in more detail in the second part of this paper.

The concise first chapter, "St. Jude," which provides the main arguments for this analysis, lays bare the base for all developments that follow on the next several hundred pages and predicts the tragic ending of the Lambert drama. On the very first page, the stage is set for this Midwestern spectacle. Using an aerial view, the spectating eye zooms into a seemingly secluded and deserted suburban landscape to find that the remaining residents have not yet been hit, minding their own business, unaware of the approaching catastrophe—which is foreshadowed in a tension-building scene description:

The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through. You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen. The sun low in the sky, a minor light, a cooling star. Gust after gust of disorder. Trees restless, temperatures falling, the whole northern religion of things coming to an end. No children in the yards here . . . Storm windows shuddered in the empty bathrooms. And the drone and hiccup of a clothes dryer, the nasal contention of a leaf blower, the ripening of local apples in a paper bag, the smell of the gasoline with which Alfred Lambert had cleaned the paintbrush from his morning painting of the wicker love seat. (Franzen 3)

<sup>18</sup> The novel illuminates each character individually in five long chapters that are framed by a short introductory ("St. Jude") and a closing ("The Corrections") part which predominately depict Alfred's role as an aging (dying) father and husband. While each chapter bears its own significance, giving insight into the lives of children and wife, the first and last part (especially their alignment) are characteristic of Alfred's enclosing influence on this family.

The terminology applied in the opening paragraph is strongly suggestive of what have been recognized as negative metaphors of old age within Aging Studies. Whether relating to the process or state of aging (autumn, falling, ripening), to possible pathological bodily decline and consequences, mental or physical, fatal or seemingly insignificant, (smell, madness, low, restless, hiccup), or alluding to eerie notions of imminent doom (cold front, going to happen, storm, end, shuddered windows, no children), it is self-evident that decline or failure, but equally, old age and death take a central position in this narrative. More importantly, presented by an observing third-person narrator who appears to caution the reader directly at an early occasion as well as the characters who, nonetheless, remain unsuspecting (“You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen”), Alfred Lambert is introduced without physically entering the narrative stage. Instead, only the remains of his morning activity are displayed (another eerie moment) and the question of how the “wicker love seat” may relate to the previous dense imagery of decay for which the narrative does not offer an immediate explanation.

Following this first outline of setting and central character, the text soon reveals that suburban St. Jude is slowly moving towards collapse due to the preponderantly greying population that inhabits these, in Franzen’s terms, “gerontocratic suburbs of St. Jude” (3). This characterization reveals that Alfred is caught in a post-retirement state, where “three in the afternoon was a time of danger” because there would be “no local news until five o’clock” and where these “[t]wo empty hours were a sinus in which infections bred” (Franzen 3). Pointing at the dangers of old age that are embedded in the temporalities of retirement, which clearly reverberate de Beauvoir’s assumptions about male retired identities and Foucault’s notions of unproductive bodies, Alfred is, on the very first page, established as a doomed man. Thus, he is introduced as a man who continues his daily battles against bodily losses, running out of time but still determined to wield power over his heteronormative household, including his wife Enid. Accordingly, the narrative lays bare: “He struggled to his feet and stood by the Ping-Pong table, listening in vain for Enid” (Franzen 3). And with regard to this first scene where the house is suggested as a central story setting, Jesús Blanco Hidalgo claims that, in fact, here “the container stands for the contained” (137) and points out how this first mysterious and frightening depiction of the material home reflects “the fragmentation of the Lambert family” (137). He moves on to unravel the symbolisms of madness in those first pages and aligns his fin-

dings with Alfred's mental illness by drawing connections to *King Lear* (Hidalga 137). While this allusion appears essential at first reading, "the layers of the symbolism in the setting go deeper" (137), as Hidalgo claims, and the possibility stands that, while the house serves as an extension of this Midwestern American family, it can be simultaneously extended onto a larger all-encompassing patriarchal system. The house, in this case, becomes a synecdoche and stands for the stability of a social order that equally appears to be in decline.

Following this train of thought, the introductory passage is indeed exemplary of the overall narrative outcome in that it foregrounds two possible readings of Alfred's position as an aging white middle-class American man. Franzen shrouds his protagonist in ambiguity and writes an elusive character that is susceptible to both disdain and sympathy. In many instances, it is not clearly distinguishable whether (or not) Alfred is the victim who is affected by the dreary conditions of his aging body in an aging environment, "awakening" once again in a hopeless physique that is stuck in a hopeless surrounding, one with "no children" as suggested in the first paragraph, thus one with "no future."<sup>19</sup> In any case, the terminology alludes to the impairment of muscles, physical strength, possible conditions such as arthritis (or as we later learn Parkinson's disease) as well as hearing impairment. Again, the narrative brings notions of pathology to the foreground and creates Alfred as a disease-infected character.

On the other hand, the multi-layered opening simultaneously suggests Alfred himself to be the absolute source of danger, the terrifying giant that "awaken[s] in the great blue chair in which he'd been sleeping since lunch" (Franzen 3)—in other instances Alfred's blue chair is interchangeable with a royal throne—with the time to scheme and "breed" malicious plans of oppression and destruction, "listening in vain for Enid" (Franzen 3); this also raises the question: is Enid perhaps aware of the danger and already in hiding? Thus, we could just as well conclude that Alfred is not the infected but instead that he is the infection. I share Teresa Requena Pelegrí's assumption that Alfred loses control over his body due to aging-related illnesses which then induce a "process of transfor-

<sup>19</sup> While Franzen's allusion to missing children most obviously refers to growing aging populations and thus possibly the extinction of the American suburb, the indirect mention of masculine prowess and procreation cannot be disregarded. Considering Queer Theory and Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) in this context and drawing a connecting line to previously mentioned Kathryn James, the aging patriarch transforms into an infertile and thus unproductive burden of society that, as seems true in Alfred's case, has fathered three children who are conflicted to carry their social patrimony into the future.

mation from the performance of a normative hegemonic role to a subordinate one” (102). I would, however, add that in this narrative Parkinson’s disease successfully steps in as the wrongdoer, a built-in distraction from Alfred’s life-long wrongdoings. Alfred’s assumptions about the supremacy of his own (masculine) body fades into the background so that his failure is painted as the bio-medical result of uncontrollable forces, seemingly overshadowing the many small failures (which are indeed visible in the storylines of his family members) that have contributed to his downfall as man, father, and husband.

Nevertheless, I do not read Alfred as an “infectious virus” *per se* but instead suggest that some of the prominent postwar American masculinities his character embodies—head of the household, breadwinner, physically and mentally powerful, ruling his family like a kingdom by spreading the occasional fear to suppress riots—are not only consequential for the characters surrounding him but ultimately bear negative consequences for himself. “Aging—especially aging in the body—challenges masculine privilege” (Zilles 213), which, underneath the surface and beyond expression for Alfred, becomes his prime experience in the novel. In line with this observation, old age cannot merely be considered as a virus, remaining within the scope of negative metaphors of aging, that causes illnesses and impairment, but instead the narrative acknowledges that bio-medical processes of aging equally destroy lived hegemonic masculinities in revealing the limits of the masculine ideal that can no longer be upheld by an inflicted body. This heteronormative dominant masculinity displayed with Alfred as the unchangeable representative is the most effective virus in *The Corrections*. Its infectious spread becomes just as obvious in the individual stories of the other main characters (wife and children) whose lives, choices, perceptions of self, expectations of others and/or themselves are infected by their husband’s and father’s patriarchal rule and upbringing. And they inherit and then incorporate some of his traits and attitudes willingly or subconsciously into their own way of life and sense of self—possibly passing on elements to future generations.<sup>20</sup>

As the story advances, resistance in the other characters grows stronger, parallel to the decrease in Alfred’s authoritative power. His three children, each with a different level of intensity, experience firsthand the restraining effects of their father’s patriarchal rule in a hardened capitalist society and attempt

<sup>20</sup> Almost all scholarly work on *The Corrections* points at the characters’ conflicting developments in regard to their dependence on the father and husband, Alfred.

to make a number of corrections as suggested by Poole earlier (276ff). This, however, is also a notion that is voiced by Colin Hutchinson, who argues that “Alfred and Enid’s three children, Gary, Denise, and Chip, have all resolved to live their lives in a ‘spirit of correction,’ intending to right the perceived wrongs of their upbringing at the hands of an authoritarian father and subservient mother” (199f). Depression, insecurity about gender roles, the struggle to make a living and be financially independent, the inability to conform to heteronormative scripts, all these problems seem to be rooted in their upbringing and the relationships with their parents. Considering that everybody (intrinsically or extrinsically motivated) starts to develop away from Alfred’s values and time and again fails to break out, it is no surprise that most readings of the novel remain melancholic and sobering. Alfred’s impact reverberates into the future and can be considered ongoing, even after the narrative closes. Hegemonic systems, after all, can only prevail with a certain amount of consent (Connell and Messerschmidt 841), here deeply ingrained in the nature of all other protagonists.

### **3. Enid and Alfred’s Marital Struggles—or, How to Break Loose from Patriarchal Powers?**

The most promising development, implying almost complete success of liberation, is Enid Lambert’s seemingly strategic break from Alfred and his regime. With her, the narrative offers a suppressed wife who little by little transforms into a “guerrilla” (Franzen 6) in her own home—an attempt to emancipate herself from her dominant husband. Their struggles are primarily set in the family house, where little fights over domestic responsibilities stand in for a much larger and general discontent on both sides, each separately trying to gain control over the other. Enid, in one instance, manages to intercept a letter by Axon, the corporation that offers Alfred a five-thousand-dollar patent licensing fee (Franzen 83), which she believes he can bargain more profitably and thus schemes to ultimately hide the letter from her husband:

Six days a week several pounds of mail came through the slot in the front door, and since nothing incidental was allowed to pile up downstairs—since the fiction of living in this house was that no one lived there—Enid faced substantial tactical challenge. She didn’t think of herself as a guerrilla, but a guerrilla was what she was. (Franzen 6)

Evidently, their relationship is marked by post-retirement rivalries in the home-space where items and documents of both husband and wife are scattered on the Ping-Pong table, fighting to occupy table-space by adding and replacing or rearranging items. "The Ping-Pong table was the one field on which the civil war raged openly" (Franzen 8), it says, a table of which Alfred can "appropriate . . . the eastern end . . . for his banking and correspondence" (Franzen 8). The war allusions are undeniable. The table is also symbolical for what Franzen refers to as "the alarm bell of anxiety," which "was an alarm bell that no one but Alfred and Enid could hear directly" (3). In a seemingly endless sentence, with numerous subordinate clauses, commas, and semicolons, it is described as "a sound that continues for so long that you have the leisure to learn its component sounds (as with any word you stare at until it resolves itself into a string of dead letters) . . . ringing for so many days that it simply blended into the background" (Franzen 4). This "alarm bell" then seamlessly fits with the "civil war" analogy, implying that the ongoing almost habitual practice of their battles keeps raging on even undisturbed by serious interruptions and objections from outside.

Ty Hawkins also recognizes the pertinence of this uncanny note that is described in such vivid detail and aligns Alfred's anxiety with an approaching "new world order . . . which stems from his inability to narrate the nature of an America that no longer grounds itself in a material reality he can recognize" (80). While Hawkins draws the connecting line to globalization in a technologically advancing world as well as Schopenhauer's wisdoms about nature and will that appear to be Alfred's guiding philosophy in later life, he only rudimentarily insinuates (by mentioning "virility") that gender and perceptions of masculinity are equally determining Alfred's position and perception of self. Alfred's anxiety that is metaphorically displayed in this dreadful sound can then be related to Spector-Mersel's analysis of missing masculine scripts for aging identities. While many different factors indeed influence Alfred's perception of self and construction of identity, it cannot be denied that his gender identity and role as man (he was socialized into being part of the baby boomer generation) are crucial in understanding his developments in older age as well as his standing in a changing society.

Returning to the relationship between the aging couple, we see that Enid, even if forced to adjust to the occasional strategic rearrangement, "sure that her own head would clear if only she didn't have to wonder, every five minutes,

what Alfred was up to”<sup>21</sup> (Franzen 5), seems determined to emerge victorious. Her most successful coup is displayed in the stealthy and gradual takeover of the home space, which is best illustrated in the banishment of Alfred’s blue chair. Frederik Tygstrup explains, referring to Alfred’s post-retirement existence in a female domestic space in which Enid has to enforce her rule, that “[i]t is under this new regime that he retires to the basement, the lonely workroom and the blue chair” (110). Though the chair can be recognized as alluding to (the loss of) hegemonic powers, it bears a more complex meaning when notions of aging are taken into account. Babette Bärbel Tischleder suggests in *The Literary Life of Things* (2014) that “[a]s a ‘vision of the future,’ . . . the chair also foreshadows what Alfred is unable to see—his bodily decline and dementia” (222).

While hegemonic powers are further dismantled in the singular relocation of the chair from the main room to the basement, which simultaneously becomes the relocation of Alfred as head of the house (who is, too, relocated from the main room to the basement, where he tries to re-establish his reign), it is also relevant to point at notions of comfort that are immanent in the materiality of the chair. The chair was “thoroughly comfortable and intensely ugly” (100), Tygstrup notes, and becomes especially important for aging bodies. On top of that, the description of Alfred’s “great blue chair” is reminiscent of pathological depictions of age. The chair is clearly the material personification of Alfred Lambert, and as Tischleder asserts, it even reminds Alfred of “his own thingness” (222). The novel describes the chair as follows:

The chair was overstuffed, vaguely gubernatorial. 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. (Franzen 9)

This sketch of Alfred’s chair, a bodily representation of an American hegemon, ultimately uncovers the intricate complexities and heterogeneities of toxic masculinities. While regal powers are also legitimized through legal and celebrated succession, here the focus is not on the success of tenure but rather on the replaceability of the successor (“next person”). And replaceability also conjures the notion of assembly line production, which continues to manufacture the same type of authority, indistinguishable and ‘easily wipeable.’ And though

<sup>21</sup> This observation by the narrator particularly stresses the ambiguity of Alfred as both oppressor and oppressed.

the ingredients appear to be just right to generate the next male American ruler (gubernatorial, leather, Lexus, modern, medical, impermeable), seated in a chair that in a most American sense also alludes to the rise of television culture, the foregrounded vocabulary is undermined by this dominating presence of perishability, of death. “[O]verstuffed, vaguely gubernatorial” finally refers more to Alfred the hegemon in decline than the material deterioration of his chair. Alfred is no longer perceived as one of a kind, a ruler deserving of his majestic crown, but instead, he becomes the derailed product of a system that appears to dismantle itself moving further towards (and into) the new century, towards a “new world order” (Hawkins 80).

Tischleder points out that it is “[a]fter his retirement and before Parkinson’s begins tightening its grip on him, [when] he awarded himself this reassuring object” (209). And considering that the blue chair is Alfred’s retirement gift for himself, the subtextual reference to the maintenance of aging masculinity increases in significance. It becomes evident that “Alfred’s blue chair is less important as an object of emotional attachment than as an object that helps him retain his sense of being-in-the-world” (Tischleder 223-4). Thus, the novel further reveals:

He wanted something really comfortable, of course, but after a lifetime of providing for others he needed more than just comfort: he needed a monument to this need. So he went, alone, to a non-discount furniture store and picked out a chair of permanence. An engineer’s chair. A chair so big that even a big man got lost in it; a chair designed to bear up under heavy stress. (Franzen 223-4)

Considering that the chair is depicted as similarly evanescent, the irony is clearly that it succeeds to outlive its owner. Bought in a costly attempt to celebrate the transition into retirement in which Alfred could reminisce and praise himself for his life’s accomplishments as an engineer (a stable, profitable, and honorable profession in the eye of conservative viewers), the “great blue chair” is eventually moved into the basement by Enid, the wife. Enid proclaims her dislike in a determined discussion that decides the fate of Alfred’s chair: “Enid looked at the chair. Her expression was merely pained, no more. ‘I never liked that chair’” (Franzen 11). Though “Enid’s words filled him with such sorrow” (Franzen 11), Alfred gives in and allows the forceful relocation without further protest. “The chair was a monument and a symbol and could not be parted from Alfred. It could only be relocated, and so it went into the basement and Alfred



followed” (Franzen 12). And while the basement relocation of both chair and Alfred becomes a cesura, not only in the Lambert household, for “in the house of the Lamberts, as in St. Jude, as in the country as a whole, life came to be lived underground” (Franzen 12), it also serves as another symbolical crack in the continuing patriarchal system of *The Corrections*.

How heavy this patriarchal burden weighs on both Enid and Alfred is ultimately revealed in the deterioration of the Lambert home. Like the chair, the house too, as mentioned briefly in the previous section, is a material projection of larger circumstances and serves as a metaphor for the couple’s catastrophic marital relationship. “Although Enid’s ostensible foe was Alfred, what made her a guerrilla was the house that occupied them both” (Franzen 7). As displayed in this revelation, the suburban family home is used as the ground of their “civil war,” where Enid the “guerilla” is determined to beat her “foe” Alfred. Nathan Hensley explains on a more general note and omitting notions of gender: “*The Corrections* is a thickly allegorical work, one that uses a splintering family and the US economy as mutually reflecting story lines . . . Both of those intermixed allegorical ‘levels,’ . . . recapitulate at larger scale the slowly degenerating mind of the Lambert family patriarch, Alfred” (289). With Hensley’s words in mind, we can read the house as a larger allegory not only for Alfred and Enid’s relationship but, moreover, for U.S. society; the implications of self-destructive patriarchal microcosms become alarming on a much larger scale as well as the inability to continue maintaining this system in old age (whether by male or female adherents). Globalization, recognized as the most important theme in the novel to this day and grounded in patriarchal systems, is then merely a symptom of a seemingly indestructible virus that systematically creates the same conflicts in the same relationships, by continuing to reproduce the same assumptions about gender roles as if produced on assembly line belts.<sup>22</sup>

Considering once again the previously quoted passage from the novel, it is not Alfred who is recognized as the problem but instead “the house that occupied them both,” and thus it represents the larger system in which the players, Alfred and Enid, are socialized to reproduce the same harmful behavioral

<sup>22</sup> For more on the topic of globalization, see James Annesley’s “Market Corrections: Jonathan Franzen and the ‘Novel of Globalization.’” Annesley, however, fails to incorporate notions of American manhood in this discussion of capitalism and globalization and thus his analysis of *The Corrections*, unfortunately, falls short. For further insights into how masculinity and the marketplace intersect, see Edward Anthony Rotundo: *American Manhood* (1993).

patterns. Even though Enid, in the wake of feminist endeavors, develops the urge to emancipate herself especially in retirement when the two characters clash in the home space (which proves to be an advantage for Enid), only at the very end of the narrative, with her husband's death, she supposedly achieves to break out of patriarchal constraints. Though de Beauvoir does not mention emancipation in her long study of aging and focuses on the role of the grandmother, her assumptions to some extent reverberate Enid's new-found motivation. De Beauvoir writes that the aging female "does not see herself thrown into total idleness" (262) and finds new responsibilities more easily as opposed to the retired male.

After Alfred is diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, he is again relocated, this time into a care facility—which is his final destination. Attempting to take his life several times out of despair, he succeeds in the end and the novel closes with the family returning from Alfred's funeral, which suggests closure on the character-level. The care facility, another notably "gerontocratic" space in the novel (along with the suburban home and the cruise ship), finally manifests as the space in which Alfred's doom is most graspable. And the many suicide attempts further communicate the character's despair as a seemingly useless old man who remains a burden to those who outlive him. This moment in the novel mirrors both the grim reality of suicide deaths in advanced age as revealed by recent statistics as well as the favored outcome in fiction novels of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century that address male aging. De Beauvoir draws on one of America's "most masculine" novelists and notes: "Hemingway said that the worst death for anyone was the loss of what formed the centre of his life and made him what he really was" (262). This notion of loss certainly matches our protagonist's situation.

*The Corrections* similarly suggests that in spite of being the provider and homeowner, the work-space, from which he was forced to retire, was the only space in which Alfred was able to build meaning for himself. Jesús Blanco Hidalgo goes so far as to recognize Alfred's basement, following Jung and Bachelard, as "the irrational part of the building" (138) in which "metallurgic experiments [are] conduct[ed]" (138). And though his endeavors are certainly present in the struggle to keep his masculine space Enid-free (the Ping-Pong table is situated in the basement), Alfred only turns "mad" in light of his mental illness and his wife, but he does not revive his interest in engineering and creating something

new in retirement or even fully taking over the basement.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, the first chapter reveals: “[Enid] couldn’t get him interested in life. When she encouraged him to take up his metallurgy again, he looked at her as if she’d lost her mind” (Franzen 5).

Even before he is struck by bio-medical consequences of old age and removed from his patriarchal home, Alfred fails to rethink his identity as an aging man. And thus Franzen’s narrator concludes that “[t]he sorry fact seemed to be that life without Alfred in the house was better for everyone but Alfred” (651). While, as mentioned earlier, this final chapter reveals Alfred’s doom and gives birth to the possibility of liberation for the other characters, it is significant to note that only in regard to Enid a sense of liberation is overtly described—which also serves as the closing element of the overall story: “And . . . when he was dead, when she’d pressed her lips to his forehead and walked out with Denise and Gary into the warm spring night, [Enid] felt that nothing could kill her now, nothing. She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life” (Franzen 653). Most scholars, nonetheless, remain skeptical of Franzen’s implied “corrections” and agree that instead of alluding, his title is meant to deceive. They share the position that no actual correction (not even for Enid) takes place, for the novel is understood as not radical enough to predict change for the new century. Clearly, this idea remains open for discussion.<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusion: Closing Corrections

By re-opening *The Corrections* case and placing Alfred Lambert center stage, I hope to have made clear that the larger system that is in place in Franzen’s novel cannot be fully grasped without considering gender in general—and here,

<sup>23</sup> Hidalgo refers to a passage in the novel where Chip recalls his father’s duties as head of household and on top of that even operates his after-work experiments down in the basement. The text reads: “Like how his father not only had worked long hours at the Midland Pacific Railroad and read aloud to his children and done the yard work and home maintenance and processed a nightly briefcase full of executive paper but had also found time to operate a serious metallurgical laboratory in the family basement, staying up past midnight to subject strange alloys to electrical and chemical stresses” (Franzen 39). This man, however, remains a remnant of the past, buried in Chip’s memory, stagnating with advanced age and illness.

<sup>24</sup> Hutchinson provides the most diplomatic statement regarding the potential of Franzen’s novel. Contradicting most other scholarly judgment, he concludes his analysis of *The Corrections* as follows: “Although Jonathan Franzen’s fiction may not succeed in constructing a fictional representation of collective agency and transgression, it at least provides a foundation upon which such an edifice might be envisaged” (205).

I argue, that gender and aging must be thought together. While scholarly work agrees that seemingly no significant “correction” takes place in the narrative, for the possibility that the Lambert children reiterate their father’s behavior in later life is unmistakably implied, I argue that Alfred Lambert’s fate suggests otherwise. Re-reading *The Corrections* in light of current gender studies debates, in and outside of academia, there should be no doubt that masculinity and power intersect as is here made visible within the fictional universe of the Lambert family. Nonetheless, the power of patriarchy, or “institutionalized male power” (Pease 13), is deeply ingrained in both the personal, and represented by all other players subordinate to the hegemon, and the geopolitical and cannot be understood separately.

Alfred’s failure to maintain his role as hegemon offers new possibilities for the other characters in reconfiguring their own scripts, best portrayed by Enid Lambert, for whom it does not appear to be too late, even in advanced age. For Alfred, however, the ending is most tragic because he is unable to break with old ideals and cannot free himself from the rigid concepts of American manhood that he carries into retirement and old age, gradually being folded into bio-medical consequences of aging while himself functioning as a metaphor for gendered pathological behavior. Thus, he remains trapped in the socialized expectation to fulfill the role of the “hegemonic holder of power” (Kimmel 418) but cannot achieve to maintain this type of hegemonic masculinity due to bodily changes. Ultimately, Alfred falls prey to his own perception of self and the expectations he is bound to fulfill, which, of course, also informs the larger system he as man, father, husband, and provider is embedded in.

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# NEPOVRATNO UNIŠTENA MUŠKOST: STARENJE, PATOLOGIJA I MUŠKO TIJELO U *KOREKCIJAMA* JONATHANA FRANZENA

## Sažetak

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Rad istražuje prikaze muškog starenja u *Korekcijama* (2001) Jonathana Franzena s obzirom na teorije starenja, patologije i hegemonijske muškosti. I dok su, općenito gledano, akademski diskursi o starenju uglavnom skloni povezivanju starosti s patologijom, usredotočenost na rodne stereotipe otkriva slojevitost viđenja starenja u Franzenovu romanu. U središtu *Korekcija* nalazi se ostarjeli patrijarh kojega ne pogađa samo staračka bolest, već se on – što je još važnije – i dalje grčevito drži idealizirana muškog identiteta koji, kao starac, više nije u stanju utjelovljivati. Temeljeći se na poteškoćama oblikovanja identiteta u sklopu studija starenja te na nedostatku onoga što Gabriela Spector-Mersel definira „skriptama muškosti“, rad pokazuje kako književni prikazi mogu konstruirati muške gubitke kao simptome tihoga virusa koji se naoko javlja u ostarjelom tijelu. Rad pokazuje da ti (proživljeni) hegemonijski pojmovi muškosti uspostavljaju muškarce kao dominantan kolektiv, ali istodobno uvjetuju neizbježan neuspjeh pojedinca. Hegemonijske muškosti u tom smislu slabe starca, što se očituje u Franzenovu nesretnom glavnom liku koji postaje žrtvom vlastitih koncepata muškosti.

**Ključne riječi:** starenje, muškosti, skripte muškosti, spol, hegemonija, Jonathan Franzen, suvremena američka književnost