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Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* in the Post-postmodernist Era

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
1. Jonathan Franzen: Great American Novelist?	5
1.1 <i>The Essay in Dark Times</i> : writing essays is firefighters’ business	7
1.2 <i>On Purity</i>	12
2. <i>Freedom</i> : too much of a good thing.....	16
2.1 Political turmoil.....	17
2.2 The Cerulean Warbler and other stories.....	19
2.3 Geographical coordinates	22
2.4 Autobiography and the power of storytelling	23
2.5 Closure is the key	25
3. Post-postmodernism.....	29
3.1 Manifestos	29
3.2 Conservatism, compromise, realism: are we looking forward or backward?..	33
3.3 Irony, sincerity or both?	37
4. <i>Freedom</i> : an analysis of the novel	41
4.1 Family and parents-children relationships	41
4.2 Making the world a better place: the environment, politics and other troubles	57
4.3 Narcissism and American exceptionalism – a winning combination?.....	69
4.4 “In touch with the void”: reconnecting with and through others	80
5. Post-postmodernist thoughts: “If we are so free, why aren’t we happy?”	100
Conclusion	110
Works Cited	113

INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, the alleged death of postmodernism and the need for a new kind of literature has shaped the American contemporary literary scene; different writers have distinguished themselves for their different approaches towards the form and content of their works, together with their personal idea of literature. Jonathan Franzen started his career in 1988 with *The Twenty-Seventh City* and was dubbed Great American Novelist on *Time* magazine's cover in 2010, right before the debut of his fourth novel, *Freedom*. During these years, he dedicated his time to non-fiction essays which, despite being criticized, have been able to connect with the audience, focusing on (literary and non-literary) matters deemed important to convey his beliefs.

I believe that developing the existent academic discourse on Jonathan Franzen's works, specifically considering his contribution to what has been called post-postmodernism, is of high importance, as Franzen explicitly deals with what being a writer entails in today's society, as well as personal experiences which have molded his own world – his travels around the world to satisfy his bird-listing compulsion, but also his reflections about books and authors that have struck or helped him. I believe that *Freedom*, his fourth work of fiction, can be considered a representative of the literary trend that has followed postmodernism: the so-called post-postmodernism. An analysis of the novel meant to highlight the specific and unique combination of features that can be linked with this literary (but mostly cultural) trend and its on-going definition is still missing.

By focusing on *Freedom*, this study aims to answer the following questions: how is it relevant to nowadays post-postmodernist literary trend? In what unique way has Franzen joined his contemporaries to shape this new phenomenon and why can his contribution be considered significant in this instance?

In chapter 1, I will present Jonathan Franzen and his professional career as a writer, focusing not only on his novels, but also taking into account his wide non-fiction production, made up of essays that have marked – often eliciting critical reactions – his stance concerning literature, how its role has changed and what has come to represent in today's society, together with the role of the writer and his

relationship with his work and his audience. Not only are Franzen's ideas relevant to his own works, but they are also helpful to understand how to position him within the post-postmodern debate.

Freedom has been the object of extensive discussion among critics and scholars, mainly due to its realist turn, as it has been interpreted by many, and because it has signaled a sort of conversion on Franzen's part, or, more appropriately, his final rejection of postmodernism. Chapter 2 aims to sum up all the main themes and features that have already been analyzed by scholars and critics. This "map of the territory" will be the starting point for my own analysis.

Post-postmodernism is still a growing trend, changing its face as we speak, thanks to artists and writers who have reinterpreted it according to their sensibility and the influence of their surrounding environment. In chapter 3, I wish to give an essential framework of how post-postmodernism originated, how it has been defined by writers through manifestos and how it has been described so far according to its prominent features, among which a rejection of postmodernist rebellious impulse and a return to a more realist storytelling emerge. As I will emphasize, the term realism takes on a new meaning during the 21st century thanks to the rise of post-postmodernism and the need to re-appropriate the single-entendre values which went lost in postmodernist times.

On the basis of these premises, I set out to analyze *Freedom*, focusing especially on the main characters – Patty, Walter and Joey Berglund – and their psychological characterization. I am particularly interested in considering the family ties that affect their lives throughout the whole book, but also the communities in which they find themselves and the socio-political background that characterizes the United States in the first years of the new millennium. Political and environmental issues are intertwined with the personal lives of the characters, who experience a tormented sense of self and proceed to make a series of mistakes that will reveal their weaknesses. Yet, despite all the troubles they go through, reconciliation will be achieved, and they will make amends both with themselves and with others.

Freedom's closure, I will argue, is particularly relevant to link the novel to the post-postmodernist scenario. Besides looking at its realist elements, in chapter 5 I will try to show how the three so-called "symptoms" of post-postmodernism, identified by

Nicoline Timmer in her study of three contemporary writers, can be found in Franzen's work. The lack of decision-making tools, the impossibility of feeling caused by excessive and overwhelming pain, and the structural need for a we are the main elements with which she defines the present human condition. I believe that *Freedom* expresses all three of them, articulating them in a unique way, and, through a reflection upon the theme to which the title refers, it has the power to share with readers a renewed need for those values which make us human.

1. JONATHAN FRANZEN: GREAT AMERICAN NOVELIST?

In August 2010, right before *Freedom* came out, Jonathan Franzen appeared on the cover of Time magazine, dubbed as Great American Novelist – a privilege that not many writers have had in their lifetime. In his article, Lev Grossman emphasizes one of the author’s features that may be considered his trademark through his whole career, despite the shifts and turns he has been through: his self-consciousness. Being conscious of himself and even more “of your self too” (where “your” refers to the reader’s) is what makes him such a good writer, one who does not give up when he finds himself stalled, doubting whether he has chosen the right track, whether art is a viable tool to affect the world or, at least, to bring some sort of pleasure to it (Grossman). I believe that Franzen’s self-consciousness has indeed been important for his professional development, as it has undoubtedly helped him to realize what he was writing about, how he was doing it, and who he was writing for. National greatness, a significant milestone for an American writer, consists both in the writer’s ability to understand his audience and the socio-cultural context of his time and in his willingness to convey his own point of view about it, to spread a message that urges people to think about some important issues and their consequences at large. National greatness, I would argue, is a way for a writer to reach his audience deeply and inspire a change – even if a small change, one that can open people’s minds and arouse new questions. Through my analysis, I will try to show how Franzen has tried, and I believe succeeded, to do so with his novel *Freedom*.

Franzen’s work has been considered and analyzed by critics and academics mainly because of its trajectory and the success and fame Franzen gained with his third novel, *The Corrections* (2001). With his first two works of fiction, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) and *Strong Motion* (1992), he wasn’t able to reach a big audience and he failed to achieve his goal of cultural engagement, getting instead “sixty reviews in a vacuum”, as he would have later described in the famous *Harper’s* essay (Franzen, How to Be 61). Franzen called these first two books “systems novels”, referring mainly to the idea of a social novel aimed at portraying systems like politics, economics, science and religion, to urge readers to open their eyes and think critically about these issues and the society they lived in. In this mission, he certainly drew inspiration – and

he acknowledges that – from the postmodernists, the preceding generation of writers to whom he has borrowed but, at the same time, from whom he distances, too.

The debate on how and if Franzen is a member of the postmodernist tribe is probably destined to continue, as different ideas and interpretations of works of art are possible. It is certainly interesting to see how many different perceptions of Franzen's aesthetics have arisen so far and how they can all be linked to see the novelist in his global complexity. While Robert Rebein says that Franzen “carried the po-mo banner as long and as far as he could” (202), Stephen J. Burn, despite the presence of a labyrinthine plot and systems theory, finds from his very first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, elements that appeal to a post-postmodern narrative strategy (The End 20). He believes that “the conversation with the great ‘60s and ‘70s postmoderns” that Franzen mentions in his interview with Donald Antrim can be actually traced; however, the writer's engagement with that trend is overcome by his alignment with his own post-postmodern contemporaries (The End 51). Thus, Burn alerts us to handle Franzen's comments on his own fiction carefully, as they might be less transparent than they seem (The End 48-9). This, of course, can be demonstrated for each specific case, although I believe it is difficult to generalize such an assessment and one should always pay attention to the context, because, as we will see, an author's idea can radically evolve with his own personal and professional development.

The Corrections (2001) marked a turning point for Franzen, being the novel that finally brought him to light – a broad audience's light – together with the National Book Award and the Tait Black Memorial Prize. Again, Burn finds that the novel “simultaneously invokes and undermines millennial longing, so it simultaneously rejects and accepts the legacy of the postmodern novel” (The End 91). While some could think that *The Corrections* has left the world of postmodernism to retreat in an old-fashioned realist universe, Burn's analysis emphasizes that political engagement in the form of a social novel has not disappeared and it has actually taken on the mission of relating the social to the individual (The End 113). Rebein finds in *The Corrections* one of the great works of the 21st century American literature mainly thanks to Franzen's ability to “evoke questions” that first relate to the characters and then to us readers as well, successfully connecting the personal and the social for the first time – at least the two academics seem to agree on this aspect of the novel (Rebein 219).

Franzen calls it a “correction towards more traditional and humane motives for a novel” and adds to it that “the most important corrections of the book are the sudden impingements of truth or reality on characters” who are distracted by self-deception (Antrim).

During the nine years that separate *The Corrections* from *Freedom*, Franzen’s image can be perceived as having evolved, ripened, although always characterized by a specific vision of what being a writer means, that is facing two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, there is exhibitionism and the craving for attention, while on the other the fear and shame of being exposed (Burn, *The Art*). Writing allows the author to be alone; the notion of loneliness is for Franzen significant, as he sees fiction – and he agrees on this with his departed friend David Foster Wallace – as “an effective way for strangers to connect across time and distance” (Burn, *The Art*). His stance towards fiction, literature and being a writer is helpful to delineate his professional trajectory and, I believe, for my analysis it is also necessary to understand the reasons behind *Freedom* narrative and thematic choices. Franzen’s production counts various essay collections as well, which should not go unnoticed for their relevance to his career development, his moments of crisis and of realization, as well as his ideas on literary, cultural and social matters. In the following paragraphs I would like to explore the essays I reckon more relevant and interesting both for my analysis of his fourth novel and for a better interpretation of the novelist’s choices as a whole.

1.1 *The Essay in Dark Times*: writing essays is firefighters’ business

In his last non-fiction collection, *The End of the End of the Earth*, Franzen tries to elucidate his notion of what it means to be an essayist, what sort of work it entails, and he comes up with an extremely adequate – at least referred to his own experience – metaphor: “a firefighter, whose job, while everyone else is fleeing the flames of shame, is to run straight into them” (*The End* 18). In “*The Essay in Dark Times*”, he specifically refers to “*Carbon Capture*”, a *New Yorker* piece that received harsh criticism due to its speculation that measures to fight climate change could actually be counterproductive for the protection of birds. Three years later, Franzen recognizes that he could have done a better job and that the article mirrors only a part of himself who got carried away with anger. “I would have kept revising [the essay]”, Franzen

admits and what I believe can be taken as a wish of his not only in this particular instance, but rather in his whole career (The End 22). The word “revision”, in fact, is particularly dear to Franzen; in his interview with Burn, he explains that revisions are at the core of a writer’s life and that with *Freedom* his aim was that of revisiting his “old material and do a better job” (Burn, The Art). Revision, indeed, is what happens with the so-called infamous *Harper’s* essay as well.

“In the five years since I’d written the essay, I’d managed to forget that I used to be a very angry and theory-minded person,” Franzen justifies himself in the introduction of *How to Be Alone* (4) and, wishing not to be misinterpreted again, he revises the essay, trying to make his point more straightforward. Even though more than 20 years have passed since it first appeared on paper, most of Franzen’s critics and literary academics still refer to the *Harper’s* essay to understand and define his career and stance in the contemporary literary panorama. While it is undeniable that Franzen’s non-fiction production is of relevance to analyze his fiction works, it is also sensible to look at “Why Bother?” with a different approach, considering it as only one of the different milestones of the novelist’s development, and not a granitic one, as it will turn out some years later.

According to Burn, Franzen’s nonfiction is indeed not as straightforward in helping delineate the novelist’s trajectory. Even though his essays show a certain resolute trait for the issues they deal with, the solutions they offer are not to be considered reliable, or rather, they are conclusions that Franzen himself is then able to overturn with his fiction. “Why Bother?” is the perfect example, Burn notices, as it has been interpreted by most of the critics as a literary breakthrough, Franzen’s *eureka* after many attempts to follow his postmodernist precursors, whereas, in fact, what the essay preaches is not exactly what the novelist resorted to in his following work of fiction, *The Corrections* (Burn, The End 50).

Rebein is pretty much convinced that Franzen’s move towards realist fiction is due to a necessary rejection of postmodernism – necessary because of specific reasons. The first issue he recognizes as problematic for the author is his relationship with the audience, an entity that, until 1996, Franzen used to see as lost and unreachable (Rebein 205). However, in “Why Bother?”, his point of view changes drastically, as he starts to perceive readers as human beings with the same needs writers have; he sees

that distance between them “shrinking”, envisioning a new community where “nothing in the world seems simple” to its members (How to Be 90). Without speculating on the fact that Franzen’s change towards realism (the term realism will be clarified in chapter 3) could be merely a business maneuver, Rebein assigns to the author’s rejection of po-mo a key role in his reconciliation with audience and his re-found, renewed self-confidence (206-7). After a period of suffering from depression, considering also what was going on in his personal life (his marriage was coming to an end and his father started fighting with Alzheimer’s), Franzen had to decide whether to quit writing or to find a new impulse, as the weight of writing “to help solve our contemporary problems” was just too much to bear for him. His solution is what he calls “tragic realism” (How to Be 92-3), which is strictly linked to and implies a “loss of faith” in what postmodernism was dedicated to – formal experimentation, the disruption of master narratives and of single-entendre values, together with “depthlessness” in all dimensions of life (see Lewis and Jameson, Postmodernism)– resulting in a more personal approach, in which he can focus on “his true subject,” characters and places (Rebein 213). As Franzen clarifies in the essay, “tragic” stands for the opportunity to “raise more questions than answers: anything in which conflict doesn’t resolve into cant” (How to Be 91). To regain this perspective, he had to reconnect with a community of readers and writers and realize that he was part of the real world and that neither him nor the world needed any curing (How to Be 94). However, to Rebein and Green this isn’t such an original unfolding: writing about life’s problems – those that not even technology can solve – has always been the case in literature (Rebein 209).

While Rebein is sure of Franzen’s rejection, Burn feels that the novelist hasn’t made such a definitive and clear-cut move and his third work shows the unresolved dichotomy between postmodernism and a more traditional kind of fiction (The End 49). The reason why Burn identifies in the essay only a tentative resolution and not a definitive one is to be found in the making of *The Corrections*. The novel came out in 2001, while “Why Bother?” appeared on *The New Yorker* 5 years before, but in 1998 Franzen was still struggling to write his book; he did not feel positive about the work he had done so far, which dealt with completely different characters, so much so that the Lambert family wasn’t even in the picture back then. How could this be the case,

if he had found an answer to his aesthetic issue and shared it with millions of readers? Burn wonders how possibly the process of writing this book could have been so turbulent after 1996, if Franzen had already figured out his main problem (The End 50). Clearly, after figuring something out, putting it into practice entails a great deal of effort; however, in Franzen's case, he himself explains some of the obstacles that he had to overcome in another essay, "On Autobiographical Fiction", part of the collection *Farther Away* (2012). The title of the essay hints quite explicitly at the origin of these obstacles, which were not only literary, but personal – namely "shame, guilt and depression," all feelings caused by personal moments of crisis, such as the failure of his marriage and financial problems (Farther 131). At one point he openly states that "eventually it became apparent [...] that I would have to become a different kind of writer to produce another novel. In other words, a different kind of person" (Farther 133). Nonetheless, Burn believes that "the aesthetic foundations of *The Corrections* are more complex than the essay intimates" and he explicitly refers to the postmodern elements that are still present, even though hidden by the main protagonist, that is realism (The End 51). Considering both Franzen's narratological choices and his personal comments on the making of the book and Burn's analysis of the novel, we might conclude that different elements occurred to delay the completion of the novel (Burn, The End 50-1). Besides, in "The Art of Fiction" interview with Burn, Franzen states how significant had been for his writing to engage with his moments of personal crisis and "to invent characters enough like me to bear the weight of my material without collapsing into characters too much like me". Therefore, autobiography – or rather "being loyal to oneself" – plays for his fiction an unmistakably central role, since "there's no way to move forward without changing yourself. Without, in other words, working on the story of your own life" (Franzen, Farther 130).

Another widely quoted essay, "Mr. Difficult" provides several insights on Franzen's point of view on fiction and the relationship that a writer should establish with the audience. The essay attempts to distinguish novelists on the basis of two categories. The Status model, represented, among others, by Willian Gaddis and his book *The Recognitions*, which Franzen admires despite his being part of those works whose difficulty is the predominant feature, cannot but be characterized by the need of fulfilling not the audience's expectations, but rather the requirements of art. On the

other hand, the Contract model aims to create a source of pleasure for its readers, as a pact between writer and audience is the essence of a community where the two parts support one another. According to Franzen, the element of discrimination between Status and Contract is difficulty, which in the first case is a symbol of excellence, while in the second it is merely a hindrance that impedes the reader's pleasurable experience (How to Be 239-40). He unquestionably feels that he is "a Contract kind of person" (241), and he concludes the essay with a strong statement about postmodernism.

"The essence of postmodernism is an adolescent celebration of consciousness, an adolescent fear of getting taken in, an adolescent conviction that all systems are phony. The theory is compelling, but as a way of life it's a recipe for rage" (Franzen, How to Be 268). Rebein has interpreted these words as a way for Franzen to show how much he has grown up and can now present himself as a sort of "faith-reformer" who is finally able to leave behind the bigger social picture to focus on characters and places (212). On the other hand, Burn will again try to confute this idea by highlighting how Franzen's resolutions, usually reached at the end of his essays, are then rebutted by his constant dualism, the presence of a tension that surfaces only in his fiction, when the writer leaves the non-fiction environment to get his hands dirty in the messier world of novels (The End 51).

Considering the substantive number of essays written by Franzen and the different topics he approaches, I will not examine other essays in depth, although I believe that, besides the two popular essays already mentioned, some other considerations, especially in his last two collections, are relevant to better understand the writer's complexity and the relationship between fiction and non-fiction, one of his main traits.

Going back to "The Essay in Dark Times", starting from an episode in which he remembers how his mother found out that he was a smoker, Franzen reflects on the existence of different selves and he believes that "attempting to write an honest essay doesn't alter the multiplicity of my selves [...]. What changes [...] is that my multi-selved identity acquires *substance*" (The End 7). To tackle this substance, he relies both on a lesson that he learned from Henry Finder (his editor at *The New Yorker*) – "every essay tells a story" – and on his belief that "our identities consist of the stories that we tell about ourselves" (8). As the substance is linked with the actions of reading

and writing, Franzen is more and more convinced that “a fiction writer’s oeuvre is a mirror of the writer’s character” (The End 111). The same concept is dealt with in his essay about Alice Munro, where he lists some of the reasons why he considers Munro’s fiction so remarkable in the contemporary scene. The features he admires most about her fiction are the absence of historical or social issues – “her subject is people” – and her ability to go back to her own story and repeatedly find something new, as “the complexity of things just seems to be endless” (Franzen, *Farther* 285, 290).

I believe that these thoughts provide a valuable insight to read Franzen’s works not only focusing on their form and the ideology behind it, but also on the characters’ trajectories and the creation of their identities. I will try to analyze in depth these aspects to read *Freedom* from a new perspective, one that could move closer to the author’s sensibility and literary awareness.

1.2 On *Purity*

Franzen’s latest novel *Purity* came out in 2015 and did not receive the praise *Freedom* did, falling rapidly from the top places of *The New York Times* best seller list. Franzen’s story features a young woman, freshly graduated, working at a call center trying to repay her college debt and set to discover her father’s identity, which her mother has always kept hidden. Her journey intertwines with Andreas’s, her new employer, who runs the Sunlight Project, a sort of Wikileaks organization. We learn that he is a doomed man with a murder on his conscience and a troubled relationship with his mother. Andreas only revealed his secret to a man whom he met in Germany, the journalist Tom Aberant, and who helped him getting rid of the body. When Pip starts working for Andreas he understands that she is Tom’s daughter, but he is afraid that his secret is not safe in his hands; therefore, Andreas sends Pip to Denver to work as an intern in Tom’s newspaper. She will eventually find out he is her father and will try to reconcile her parents. While she exits the scene starting a new relationship with Jason, Andreas commits suicide and her parents are left in the middle of an unresolved argument.

Dealing with the search for one’s identity, psychological distress and troubled relationships, the novel adopts a new narrative strategy to depict a depressing but plausible contemporary scenario, and it includes the presence of technology and

governmental transparency, which have never been dealt with before in Franzen's fiction (Adams). *Purity* shows a search for identity driven by a void in Pip's knowledge regarding her father – “we enter existence bodily, by way of a mother and a father who are not-us but whose lives impinge on ours from cradle to grave” (Weinstein 203-4). Hence, the characterization Franzen develops in his last two novels can be distinguished first and foremost by the kind of search presented. Once she has found her father's and mother's true identities, Pip feels she has reached her aim and “has gained access to her true self” (Hidalga, Jonathan Franzen 227). This resolution seems to me slightly obvious and less deep than the search we are provided in *Freedom*. Patty, Walter and Joey Berglund all go through a lengthy process, which involves not only their families but their selves, too; even though theirs is not a manifest search, their trajectory turns out to be one of growth and self-awareness, attained through others but first within themselves. Knowing who their parents and grandparents are is not enough to understand what is going on with their lives, why they feel isolated and need to find a way how to live, as precisely in the self the source of persistent pain can be found. When Pip finds out who her father is and discovers that her mother used to be a feminist artist coming from a wealthy family whom she abandoned, her life finally seems to take the right turn: she finds a suitable and stable boyfriend and a new job in a coffee shop, but paradoxically she leaves with him, careless of Tom and Anabel still not reconnecting. Thus, her dissatisfaction is not really with herself, but with her lack of knowledge; her yearning is for knowledge of others, not of her self, and once she has got that knowledge she can move on, regardless of what that knowledge should entail. Pip tries to find a solution in the lifelong external absence she had to bear, in her unknown roots, but doesn't attempt to solve the actual lack in her own person. Therefore, I believe that her quest is only apparently concerned with her self – knowing who your family is does not necessarily give you access to who you are.

Considering the other main characters in *Purity*, Andreas is probably the most striking one, as no other character in Franzen's previous fiction has ever been so dark and controversial. His past dooms every choice he makes and, in particular, the Oedipus complex that hunts him seems to be the cause of his pathological perversity and solipsism, so much so that he won't be able to bear it and will put an end to his own life (Hidalga, Jonathan Franzen 226). His solipsistic mind doesn't look for

someone who he could share his feelings with, he is not able to move towards a “we”, but he is stuck in a blind illness, “trapped” in himself, looking for purity, for a redemption that doesn’t seem to be available for him.

Even though some reviews have emphasized that characters in Franzen’s novels bear a strong resemblance to each other, especially in *The Corrections*, *Freedom* and *Purity*, I would not rush in delineating such a connection between Walter Berglund and Andreas Wolf, or Patty Berglund and Anabel Laird, as it might be true that they share feelings such as rage, depression and anxiety, but, at the same time, their ways of acknowledging and reacting to them are indeed very different and, I would suggest, set them apart (Dess). Certainly, some close correspondences can be detected – perhaps the most self-evident is Tom’s autobiographical manuscript, which inevitably reminds the readers of Patty’s memoir, written as a therapy exercise. Nonetheless, in *Purity* closure is left suspended; Tom and Anabel’s relationship cannot be compared to Patty and Walter’s neither in marital issues nor in their reconciliation. As both Weinstein and Hidalgo have noticed, the marriage described in *Purity* has much more in common with Franzen’s own marriage, dealt with in his essay “My Bird Problem”. Without exploring the writer’s personal experience any further, it suffices to say that he himself acknowledged that, when writing *Purity*, he felt “farther out on the limb than” ever (Weinstein 216).

For the kind of analysis I wish to provide in this work and my interest in linking Jonathan Franzen’s fiction with those of his contemporaries, I have opted for *Freedom* instead of *Purity* because I consider it better suited to my research goal. As a matter of fact, I believe that the end of postmodernism has left a heritage that is still developing and contemporary writers may or may not be influenced by it, depending on their own unique ideas and relationship with literature, but also on their point of view on social and cultural issues. I consider Franzen’s perspective one of the most articulated in this respect, especially since he explicitly refers to his forerunners. At the same time, other American authors have also reacted to the postmodernist era and Franzen shares with them certain features, among which, I believe, the construction of narrative identities is one of the most complex and fascinating. These identities are characterized by a return to the human dimension which presents certain “symptoms”, such as the inability to make decisions, the presence of pervasive pain and overwhelming feelings,

and the need to share them to reconnect with the surrounding world. *Freedom*'s main characters embody these features, which are in turn linked to the social and political American context; on the other hand, *Purity* characters, for the reasons we have just seen, seem to me less concerned with the necessity of reconnecting to one another to overcome a displaced sense of self. In the next chapters I will focus on *Freedom* and on the post-postmodernist trends that have been emerging after the postmodern sensibility started to fade away, linking them to understand the main aspects of the novel examined so far and its relevance for the contemporary scene.

2. *FREEDOM: TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING*

“An indelible portrait of our times,” *Freedom* has been of interest to critics and academics especially for Franzen’s “ability to throw open a big, Updikean picture window on American middle-class life,” thus showing “his own transformation from a sharp-elbowed, apocalyptic satirist focused on sending up the socio-economic-political plight of this country into a kind of 19th-century realist concerned with the public and private lives of his characters” (Kakutani).

Despite having been accused of focusing on family vicissitudes to the detriment of the bigger social picture, *Freedom* is indeed remarkable for its engagement with the American political and social situation in several ways: namely, the choice of dealing with environmentalism focusing on very specific issues, such as overpopulation and bird protection; the political polarization of Left versus Right, that is liberals versus republicans; the problem of freedom, to which all Americans feel entitled, and their tendency to look for solutions through geographical displacement – mirror of their internal lack of direction and stability and of the writer’s decision of focusing on characters’ personal dimension. As a matter of fact, according to Jesús Blanco Hidalgo, Franzen’s choices of “displacement of social issues by personal concerns” stand symbolically for the impossibility of bringing about social change, thus considering feasible only the prospect of “self-amelioration” (The Romance 330). On the other hand, Hidalgo approaches *Freedom*’s political themes with an elaborate, in-depth analysis, which may lead to the conclusion that the American social picture has never been truly abandoned in Franzen’s work. Other critics, such as Ruth Franklin, feel that Franzen’s novel is closer to a soap opera than to an epic, that it is “all mirror and no lamp,” which suggests that *Freedom*’s mimesis manages to give readers nothing more than a “hyper-realistic portraiture for genuine psychological insight” (Phelan 391). This affective energy is not enough according to Franklin, but to Sam Tanenhaus and Lev Grossman, for example, it is the fuel that ignites the novel’s richness and depth, its involvement in the Berglunds’ story and the external forces at play. From this disagreement, James Phelan understands that, while Franzen’s ability to capture the audience emotionally is ascertained, his use of mimesis might turn out hazardous for the thematic purposes of the book (396).

Below, I will provide a sort of “map of the territory” of *Freedom*, offering an account of the different analyses and interpretations that have been carried out so far. By doing so, I wish to delineate the complexity of the debate, which perfectly reflects the complexity of post-postmodern artists. I would like to take these perspectives as a starting point for my analysis; hence, after each of them I will specify why I deem them helpful and how I intend to draw upon them for my study through specific questions.

2.1 Political turmoil

One of the main themes in *Freedom* is undoubtedly politics. The very first political feature which is prominent throughout the novel is the perspective readers are provided, which is that of white, liberal, upper-middle class (Hidalga, *The Romance* 334). The concept of social class is not taken for granted in Hidalgo’s study, for, referring to Max Weber’s theory, one should distinguish between class and status. According to Weber, classes are not communities, rather they are “*determined* by the market,” which means that they represent an economic stratification (Gane 216). On the other hand, *Stände*, that is status, embodies a different situation, which is not economically defined, rather it results “from the typical integral part of life, in which the fate of men depends on a specific positive or negative social assessment of honor. [...] such honor normally stands in stark contrast to the pretensions of ‘naked’ property” (Weber 142-3). One important feature that is lacking in the English translation of Weber’s work is that status groups refer to a community, or better, they are the “outcome of communal social relationships” (Gane 217). These relationships are based on affective and traditional values, that is, feelings, habits, rituals and so forth (differently from associative social relationships, which instead are funded on rational motives) (Gane 214). Weber’s conclusion is that “social relationships of status are quite incompatible with the market situation” because they do not follow the economic criteria typical of class (Gane 219). According to Hidalgo’s analysis, the concept of honor can be shifted in Franzen’s novel to dignity and distinction – values that allow to distinguish some characters belonging to the same social class (*The Romance* 336). The Berglunds, for example, are members of the upper-middle class, but their moral positioning is improved by means of respecting and obeying to work

ethics, while other characters still belonging to the middle, working class are depicted as morally deplorable, such as the Berglund's neighbor Blake, whose republicanism is displayed by the bumper sticker "I'm white and I vote" (The Romance 336-7). One of the main antagonisms presented by the novel is, in fact, the opposition between left-liberalism and right-wing populism, which we find embodied by Walter on one side and by his own father and elder brother, his neighbor and Coyle Mathis – the Virginian landowner – on the other. Close-mindedness, bad manners, uncivilized behavior, violence and racism are some of the main features that belong to these characters, who are depicted in such derogatory terms for Franzen himself feels the left has been defeated by populism (Hidalga, The Romance 338-9). Not only did the conservatives win, says Walter to Richard, but they "won culturally" (Freedom 277); it is exactly in his discourse that the recognition of failure can be found, for liberals have been left in a state of "perplexed frustration" that the novel represents faithfully (Hidalga, The Romance 346). Culture, notices Kathy Knapp, has been "infected" by values that once were typical only of suburbia – "consumerism, possessive individualism [...], the fetishization of private property" (52). According to Franzen, what is needed to move towards a political reconciliation is the "scientifically enlightened elite," for social change can only happen top-down (Freedom 455); however, at the same time, the ruling class is the other opponent of liberalism. In *Freedom*, lobbies and corporations are able to trick the working class into becoming part of their schemes; their economic authority empowers them to pursue their own political and financial interests, while the lower classes are actually the vulnerable prey, clinging to their "harmful modes of freedom," fetishizing and, thus, damaging the very essence of freedom itself (Hidalga, The Romance 349). The ruling class is represented by Vin Haven and those capitalists who work relentlessly towards their personal interests, in the same way the Bush administration does to finally reach what has been defined the "gigantic scam" of the US military intervention in Iraq (Hidalga, The Romance 353).

With this outline in mind, the questions I would like to focus on in my study are: how does the contemporary American political, economic and social scene affect the individual lives of the characters? How does it impact – even if indirectly – on their lives and personal choices?

2.2 The Cerulean Warbler and other stories

In addition to the political background described, the issue of environmentalism is central to the novel – but not a generic sort of environmentalism, as the problems dealt with by Franzen’s characters are very specific. The environmental consciousness is represented by Walter and Lalitha, whose project is twofold: on the one hand, it aims to create a secluded natural area, where birds could live safe and undisturbed, while, on the other, they wish to bring back into the public eye the issue of overpopulation. As it has been noticed, the first part of the project is at the very least elitist and utopian, for, excluding completely the presence of human beings, it forces dozens of families to leave their houses and relocate, without actually seeking their support and involvement in a proactive way. As far as the second part of the project is concerned, the couple’s goal is to raise awareness, especially among young people, about population growth issues, as, according to them, overpopulation stands at the heart of all environmental problems. In both Hidalgo’s and Knapp’s studies, interesting readings of this problem and how it is addressed can be found. Analyzing how events develop through the book, Hidalgo emphasizes the close correspondence between Walter and Franzen’s trajectory in terms of “crisis” and detects a parallelism between the character’s turmoil and Franzen’s own dissatisfaction (referring to the *Harper’s* essay) since both conclude that society and the forces beneath it cannot be affected. The solution Franzen comes up with, advanced for Walter as well, is that of self-improvement, for salvation cannot be found in society but in the individual dimension (Hidalgo, *The Romance* 368-9).

“Anachronistic and provocative” is how Kathy Knapp describes the issue of overpopulation, as it used to be a real concern in the 1960s, until the trend actually reversed and declining birthrates started to alarm policy makers in the opposite direction (60). Nowadays, demographic trends are opposed in developed and underdeveloped nations, thus implying a more complex debate to raise consciousness about long-term consequences related to both declining and rising population. Nonetheless, the subjects that have taken over public debate are more focused on wealth, gender and education inequalities, while the overpopulation discourse has started to fade away perhaps exactly because it is a “downer,” a hindrance to today’s capitalist, consumerist, growth-focused economy (Knapp 60-61). The “business of

making babies” is certainly an important one, for, as Richard points out, “the real problem is free-market capitalism” (*Freedom* 453). Growth, both economic and demographic, is pursued because of the capitalist drive that leads markets, societies – in one word, lives (Knapp 61).

Another interesting interpretation is the one given by Margaret Hunt Gram, who focuses instead on the reasons why overpopulation is dealt with only through speech, but not through experiences. In *Freedom*, characters talk about unsustainable population growth, which is presented via dialogues or monologues, without experiencing it directly, whereas other political dilemmas affect their lives explicitly. The problem according to Gram is that overpopulation might not be compatible with the “affective engines that drive narrative fiction in general and with the formal mechanisms available to literary realism in particular” (296). As we will see, Hidalgo does not agree with critics who associate *Freedom* with realism straightforwardly; however, both him and Gram draw from the Lukácsian theory of realism, according to which totalizing systems and problems are presented through experiences lived by individuals in the historical present. Gram sees two problems with the application of this theory in Franzen’s novel: first, a temporal difficulty, for overpopulation is a problem that will affect people’s lives in a hypothetical future and cannot show itself as it is in the present tense; second, it is a problem of the aggregate, for the issue of growth, by its very nature, can only concern a group of people, of communities, not the individual, who therefore is fundamentally unable to represent the problem (Hunt Gram 303). At the same time, the problem of population growth is strictly linked to that of capitalism and economic growth; hence, global economy may be the root of it all, and the possible solution might concern not merely some measures of birth control, but more likely a complex notion of equilibrium in different fields of human lives. These notions are not easy to emplot in a narrative, and we have an example with the events that take over Joey’s college years – his involvement with unethical American businesses and their shady trades; on the other hand, Gram feels that, once Joey is over with these deals, the issue of economic growth is abandoned as well, and it never reaches another dimension beyond that of discourse (308). A possible explanation could be that readers have come to see growth as an inevitable condition of our present time and, thus, proposing its subversion might prove not a wise move on the part of a

novelist who explicitly sides with the “Contract” model, trying to leave the “Status” behind (Hunt Gram 309).

Furthermore, in this context of environmentalism and activism, characters show unequivocally their inconsistencies and duplicity, their human, imperfect side. For instance, whereas Walter and Lalitha share the same passion, their approaches differ in their motives, actions and resolutions. Lalitha stands in the novel as the young woman of color who, at twenty-five, is already set in her ways not to have children, committed to a mission in the name of social justice after having witnessed poverty and suffering in West Bengal. On the other hand, Walter might as well have been interested in population issues since his college years, but in no way did this stop him from pursuing his own personal interests, leaving Lalitha alone in her trip to West Virginia, which will lead her to a mortal car accident, so that he can visit his brother instead – this being only one of the many contradictions that mark Walter’s persona (Knapp 62-3). For instance, despite supporting the cause of overpopulation, Walter’s embarrassment in front of his assistant’s talk on having her tubes tied will turn into an actual desire of becoming the father of her child. “How to live?” is the constant refrain that expresses through the whole novel the conflict between personal and political embodied by Walter, who is in the process of figuring out what choices to make while he is a “victim of his own self-serving delusions” (Knapp 55, 64). In fact, in the deal he closes with Vin Haven, he is ready to sacrifice acres and acres of land to the practice of mountaintop removal (MTR) to extract coal, in exchange for a small sanctuary dedicated to Cerulean Warblers. Hence, protecting birds becomes such a compulsory goal for him that it is worth the destruction of a large portion of West Virginian countryside and the eviction of many blameless families – individual rights prevail over social justice in a culturally imperialist way that is not even as environmentalist as we are lead to believe, since human beings are not even in the picture, they do not have to take care of the environment they live in, they are only supposed to move somewhere else without any other responsibility (Knapp 56). This sort of ambivalence will be solved at the end of the novel, but it is crucial to show how also Walter, the most ethically inclined character, despite his overly emphasized “niceness”, is fallible, subject to many contradictions.

Again, exploiting these considerations, in my analysis I will focus on the following questions: how are the themes of environmentalism and capitalism linked to the characters' stories and to their inner contradictions? How do they influence their decision-making process and their individual freedom?

2.3 Geographical coordinates

Considering the settings of *Freedom*, locations have been given rather a central role in the novel and the movements described throughout the story can be useful to understand the characters' displacement and what it stands for. Geographical mobility is described from a large-scale perspective – starting from immigration, as Walter's parents came all the way from Sweden and crossed the ocean with the American dream in mind – to a small-scale one, such as moving from one's own parents' house to the neighbors' place on the other side of the street (Narcisi 68). What *Freedom* tries to convey is that no matter how much we try to move to a new space, we can remain stuck in our own selves, unable to find the solution we were looking for regardless of our external position. Not only are characters' inner tensions at the core of Franzen's novel, but they are also a synecdoche of the “rootlessness and alienation” that permeate deeply all the fibers of the American social fabric (Narcisi 68). Changing location does not necessarily bring about deeper life changes; even though human beings “manipulate [their] surroundings” as if they were an “essential and guaranteed right,” it does not automatically imply that they can manipulate as easily their personal lives and relationships (Narcisi 69). One of the most unequivocal examples is that of the Berglunds' moving from small suburban town St. Paul to the big city of Washington, where they try to regain control over their lives, unsuccessfully. Nameless lake is also significant for its peculiar role in the story; it is the place where Walter and Patty look for emotional shelter, hiding from their troubles in search for peace and relief, but at the same time Patty and Richard's affair takes place under its roof (Narcisi 76, 78). Particularly, all the movements concerning the family require a better understanding of Patty. Even though her character has not been taken much into consideration, I believe she is one of *Freedom's* best developed, deep and meaningful ones; her trajectory described in terms of space in Narcisi's study can be helpful to better understand the implications of her decisions.

Before moving on to the next section, drawing on the geographical issue brought about by Narcisi, I would like to consider the geographical instabilities of the characters as a metaphor for another kind of disorientation. Hence, in my analysis of *Freedom* I will be guided by these questions: how does the characters' geographical dislocation manifest in their inner selves? What kind of psychological disorientation are they subject to?

2.4 Autobiography and the power of storytelling

Patty's autobiographical account is of primary importance, for, as James Phelan states, it plays the function of "thematiz[ing] the power of storytelling" thanks to the equivalence between the autobiography and the novel itself – an equivalence that "invites reflection on the novel's own efforts at persuasion and on the various interpretations we readers will inevitably construct" (400). Patty's parents are members of the upper-middle class – her father, Ray Emerson, is a lawyer and her mother, Joyce Markowitz, is a representative of the Democrats; she was raised in Westchester County, New York, and then went to college in Minnesota, but once she gets married with Walter she does not come back to the city, rather they opt for moving to the suburbs. The choice will trap her into a housewife life, entirely dedicated to raising children and taking care of the house, a place where her identity is mainly defined by being a wife and a mother. Why offering in a 2010 novel such an anachronistic female portrait; why, after decades of fights for equal rights, offering a picture of a well-educated talented woman who retreats in such an outdated lifestyle? "Her choice is largely dictated by her society and environment," summarizes Lara Narcisi (73); hence, I will try in my analysis to see the effects that society and environment trigger in connection with her identity, how the narrative of her story is shaped by several elements that do not belong only to the novel's framework, but that intertwine with characters' lives. Besides, her "consciously" built "confining environment" is insightful to understand that having limitless choices does not automatically imply a freer and fuller existence (74). Narcisi rightly emphasizes that Patty is able to come to terms with her current situation when she goes back to the very origin of it all – her childhood home, "the place she left and why she left it" (74).

Most of Patty's realizations, however, come not from a specific moment of awakening, but rather from a series of – perhaps traumatic would be a comprehensive description – events which help her escape from the state of “sleepwalking” that seems to haunt her from her teenage years. After having survived a rape, her best friend's Eliza deceit, her knee injury (with a tragic consequence on her basketball career) and the despair in seeing her son moving out, Patty decides to write a memoir. The title specifies that it is a therapeutic exercise to possibly regain some sort of control on her own life, but the autobiography proves crucial to the readers' connecting and understanding of the whole story. As a matter of fact, it is through Patty's words that we are told how everything began and, even more remarkably, these events are narrated in the third person perspective, through a heterodiegetic narration – the autobiographer, who is Patty, but a different version of her, a conscious, present-tense Patty who, thanks to her greater experience, has now a different perspective about the past. This formula provides a sort of comfort that Patty cannot resist – “she still can't bring herself to let go of a voice she found when she had nothing else to hold on to” (Freedom 637) – and it can provide an autobiographical account of value (Dolińska 187). Through this stylistic choice, a sort of division of personality is presented: Patty discovers within herself another person, a “you” that according to Catharine Walker Bergström symbolizes the awakening of the moral self, the good of selflessness and agreeability, in conflict with her competitive nature (Walker Bergström 113). By means of writing a remorseful history of her mistakes, she proceeds to a new phase of her life which, to have a start, needs not only a recognition, but also a confession, as she admits her deficiencies with a touch of disturbing self-pity. Together with this dimension, similarities with the coming-of-age novel and conversion narrative are also detected, which can be easily linked to Hidalgo's reading of Franzen's metanarrative: he replicates in his characters trajectories that are based on his own writerly path to invoke and justify his own choices (The Romance 332).

I deem Patty a fundamental character in Freedom's narrative, especially to understand the link between the novel and the post-postmodernist urgency towards a more human kind of fiction. Hence, the questions I would like to examine in this instance are: how can Patty's characterization be related to post-postmodernist traits?

What function do her life trajectory and her manuscript play in *Freedom* and how is she relevant for the closure of the novel?

2.5 Closure is the key

As we have already seen, ambivalence is a crucial aspect permeating the novel in its characters, its themes and its form, too. As far as characters are concerned, Patty and Joey are both tormented in their lives, unable to make decisions, and are at the beginning in stark contrast with Walter, who will be presented later on as caught up in a net of hard choices as well, not sure of what direction to take. Mother and son come to recognize that having obligations can be infinitely liberating as opposed to a sense of freedom that becomes too unbearable, for it brings about openness, boredom, indecision and vulnerability. Freeing oneself of obligations is only an illusory happiness and, with time, it turns out to be a choice of loneliness; personal freedom is not easy to understand and manage and, without ethics, it can lead to real disasters (Walker Bergström 116-7). Walter depicts this risk better than any other character, as his initial involvement with Vin Haven for a cause that he actually considers worth pursuing could have drastic consequences on the environment. At the same time, the form of the novel emerges as significant in relation to this thematic ambivalence; realism is the label *Freedom* has been assigned, even though, as Hidalgo argues, it is a label not perfectly suitable to it, for Franzen's novel presents a mixture of elements appealing to genres that are not properly realist, such as *Bildungsroman* and melodrama. The latter is especially significant as it includes the capacity to provide closure and counterbalance the limitations of realism; where, for instance, realism would suggest that no compromise is attainable, the romance-inspired form chosen offers a happy conclusion (Hidalgo, *The Romance* 359). In chapter 5, I will come back to these aspects and show how realism and its subgenres are relevant to my analysis.

Precisely in this conclusion, Patty's character is considered fundamental in her role, reuniting with her husband. After six years spent apart from Walter, she tries to react to her failure and poses the foundations for a new start, for both herself and the couple. Walter and Patty's reconciliation has been interpreted as a signal of a "neohumanist aesthetics" that replaces alienation with sympathy (Knapp 78). Redemption is not achieved on a social, communal scale, but rather on the individual

dimension, in the relationships with one's own beloved. Suffering is what legitimizes the conclusion and the element that establishes an empathic bond with readers, connecting with them on a deeper psychological level. This turn may remind readers of what Franzen explained in "Mr. Difficult", where he reveals that "a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness" (How to Be 240) would have become from that moment on his goal as a writer of fiction, even though in "Why Write Novels at All?" Garth Risk Hallberg adopted a quite suspicious stance towards such a statement, doubting that this approach actually constitutes a way to show that "there are other people besides ourselves in the world [...] equally real." According to Knapp, the proof of this interpretation can be found in the compassion Patty gains through her journey of mistakes and atonement (78). I don't find Hallberg's interpretation completely applicable to the novel and I believe that, looking at *Freedom* in its global psychological complexity, Franzen's interest goes beyond the characters' ability to escape their solipsistic and self-centered nature and draws near to his fellow writers in the aim of finding a not-alone, sympathetic dimension where not only "there are other people besides ourselves," but the relationships that we establish with them reveal to be crucial in our human lives.

Walter's trajectory resembles in some ways a coming of age, for he is not without sins and learns how to deal with his existential disorientation the tough way. He is depicted as the environmentally conscious character, but, at the same time, he makes the unforgivable mistake of not taking into the equation the factor of social inequality, and how it impacts on environmental issues as well. His rage and misanthropic attitude reach a peak, followed however by Lalitha's tragic death and, thus, his need to regain access to human relationships with others (Hidalga, *The Romance* 382). The lack of a controlling narrative is for Walter the source of his problems, as it entraps him in his hypocrisies and prevents him from achieving maturity and stability; the main difference between Walter and the classic hero of the *Bildungsroman* is that the latter finds his closure in the community, while Walter finds solace in the family and, specifically, in the couple (Hidalga, *The Romance* 381-2). His last gesture of emptying the cottage on Nameless Lake is a way of rejecting the inheritance of the previous generations, turning towards a future that may seem uncertain, but that is finally starting with the right person on his side. The monument

left there as a haven for birds dedicated to his departed lover, Lalitha, can be seen as a final symbol towards a full redemption, but it could also “cast him [...] as the heroic antihero of his own story” (Knapp 79).

Finally, for the purpose of my study, I would argue that realism plays an important part for the development of *Freedom* and its closure, not to mention the trajectory every character follows in his or her path towards a new awareness. Hence, the questions I would link with these observations are the following: what other features of realism are there in the novel and how do they contribute to its positioning in the post-postmodernist trend? How can we link the characters’ troubles and their redemption with other contemporary post-postmodernist works? Is *Freedom*’s closure in any way comparable to the post-postmodern “symptom” defined as “structural need for a we”?

The preserve named after Lalitha at the end of the novel brings us back to the epigraph, a short passage from Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* (Act V, Scene III):

Go together,
You precious winners all; your exultation
Partake to every one. I, an old turtle,
Will wing me to some wither’d bough and there
My mate, that’s never to be found again,
Lament till I am lost.

In this scene, the statue of Hermione awakes after sixteen years; after having been falsely accused of betraying her husband, King Leontes, she had (only apparently) died of grief and her daughter Perdita had been abandoned in the Bohemian desert, raised by a shepherd, unaware of being the King’s offspring. After all these years Perdita returns, and her mother finally comes back to life thanks to Paulina, her old advisor and friend. Now that everything has come back into place and life has been restored, Paulina is ready to withdraw to her wintry bough; her character may remind the readers of Lalitha, who, even though involuntarily, has retreated to the afterlife and can watch over the others’ lives. Similarly, Hermione’s statue can be associated with the image of Patty freezing outside, on Walter’s steps, and coming back to life when he takes her inside and warms her with the heat of his own body (Weinstein 173). As Philip

Weinstein notices, the message Franzen may have imagined choosing this specific passage is that the woods and thickets of life should be entered so as to be crossed to safety and exited renewed (174).

In his interview for the *Paris Review*, Franzen told Burn that writing *Freedom* had been a long process, especially due to the “masks” he wanted to represent: they had to be realistic, but at the same time imaginary, fashioned to convey his “personal drama,” “the unsayable things inside” him (The Art). “The mask is a way to convey the truth,” concludes Burn, and I would argue that this statement can link Franzen to his fellow contemporary writers. In the next chapter I will outline the literary scene that, from the end of the twentieth century, has started to show a departure from the postmodern trends and a new sensibility towards the importance of sincerity and reconnecting with other human beings. In the following analysis, I will then try to highlight what features of *Freedom* can be recognized as relevant to these new trends, to finally position Franzen’s work in the post-postmodernist scenario and to understand his valuable contribution to it.

3. POST-POSTMODERNISM

After postmodernism, the American literary scene has been witnessing several different tendencies that are difficult to categorize under one umbrella term, also because they are developing faster and faster in several respects. I believe that a good starting point to begin looking at the wake of postmodernism is at the end of the twentieth century, with some of the so-called “manifestos” – performative and projective statements of some influential writers who have marked the following years quite remarkably (Smith, *Manifestos* 186). These statements, and the overview that I will try to provide in this chapter, are significant not only to understand the core of post-postmodernism, but also to position Franzen in this territory and to better contextualize the analysis of *Freedom*, looking for both similarities and discrepancies within the contemporary scene, thus enhancing Franzen’s own way to contribute to this new trend.

3.1 Manifestos

Sincerity, compromise, mimesis – these are only some of the concepts that have been associated to literature’s new turn, in the attempt to identify and outline the direction in which fiction has been sailing. However, despite the variety of terms, it seems that one point which is common for this generation of writers is the decline – or at least this is how it is perceived by authors and critics – of postmodernism, mainly due to its “detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of nonreferential language” (McLaughlin 55). The manifestos I will focus on are written by David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen, who were, as Wallace himself admitted, both friends and “sort of rivals” (B), and who articulated different points of view which, nonetheless, reached the same conclusion. In the introduction to the special volume of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* he edited, Wallace states that none of the contributors is “right” about the future of literary art “in any argumentative or predictive sense” (B); instead, he sees these essays as a personal expression of the writer himself, “of a self’s heart’s special tangle and verbal self’s particular tortured relation to what is unknow- and -sayable” (B). As a matter of fact, the focus on the

personal is one of the main features of the post-postmodern era, for personal expression is perceived as “a means of fighting against the imposition of popular culture upon the literary sphere” (Smith, Manifestos 186), a point of view which Wallace and Franzen share.

In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction”, Wallace laments that postmodernism’s main features – irony and self-referentiality – have been appropriated by the media, especially television, and therefore they can no longer carry out their initial function of responding to a ridiculous and hypocritical world, to an idealized and mythical version of America that existed only in early TV programs (McLaughlin 63-64). What used to constitute a rebellion for postmodernists has become today nothing more than a conservative culture which does not allow for a way out, “negating the possibility of change at the same time it despairs of the status quo” (McLaughlin 65). As most critics would now notice, the solution that Wallace offers is that of a new group of “anti-rebels” who would step away from the ironic stance to embark on a trip towards anachronistic values, clichés, banality, “untrendy emotions”; nonetheless, Smith rightly notices that the way in which Wallace positions himself is actually not so clear-cut, as he seems aware of being trapped in self-reference, unable to think outside of it. In fact, what Wallace emphasizes at the end of the essay is the fact that the future cannot be predicted so easily and everyone can draw his own conclusions, because our guess is as good as his (Smith, Manifestos 189-190).

Franzen expressed his own concerns mainly in two essays, “Perchance to Dream” (reprinted as “Why Bother?”) and “I’ll Be Doing More of Same”, in the *RCF* issue edited by Wallace, who thinks that “Jon Franzen’s very, very close to being right” (B). In the latter, Franzen focuses on consumer technology and academia, which are both guilty of having caused the novel’s inability to create a connection between the two worlds of the personal and the social. Technology – and television in particular – is to blame for it makes human beings the center of their own “choices and gratifications” (How to Be 70), robbing them of the time they would have engaged with culture, reading a novel, while academia seems lost in an innovative and subversive kind of literature that could discourage and turn away readers instead of attracting them, since what used to be avant-garde has now become the mainstream. However, Franzen anticipates a solution which he will propose more decisively later

on, that is, the possibility of looking back and finding some sort of solace in what might be considered obsolete and conservative, but that can still be valid and meaningful. Indeed, in “Why Bother?”, he recognizes that the role of the novel is not necessarily that of reuniting the personal and the social dimensions, but rather reconnecting people to the fundamental human problems, thus emphasizing that the mission of a novelist is “preserving” a community of readers and writers where all of them can be rescued from their loneliness (McLaughlin 61-2). He finally surrenders to the fact that writing postmodern fiction is a task he is simply unable to fulfill and that he is much better off trusting his own judgement, without forcing on himself any “chimerical mainstream” (Franzen, *How to Be* 95). Hence, it seems that Wallace’s and Franzen’s conclusions share the impossibility of foreseeing the future of literature in general, but rely on an autobiographical answer, a personal expression – I, the writer, can find a way out that is resolute for me, but does not necessarily have to be the same for other writers and it does not represent the future course of literature – even though Franzen does not show the awareness his colleague has in regard to his own embeddedness in a self-aware dominant (Smith, *Manifestos* 191).

Besides these remarkable contributions, other writers have expressed their take on post-postmodernism, or better, on the direction that literature has been taking after the departure of postmodernism. In his essay “American Writing Today: A Diagnosis of the Disease” (1990), William T. Vollmann concurs with Wallace’s and Franzen’s ideas on the need for art – and especially literature – to regain our human empathic abilities, which have been lost in a failure that he dubs as “Selves incapable of comprehending others.” Hence, he feels that writers should follow certain rules to “fulfill their role and *accomplish* something”: feelings are a tool that writers must always employ to “portray important human problems” and “seek for solutions to those problems” (Vollmann). In particular, writers’ task can be condensed in respect towards Other, aiming at the elimination of the distance between Self and Other, for they are “equal partners.”¹

¹ In *The End of the End of the Earth*, Franzen dedicates the essay “A Friendship” to William Vollmann – “Bill” – who used to be one of his closest friends until 1996. Even though he is “not sure why [they] drifted part”, Franzen praises especially his “ceaseless quest for meaning and order in a frightening and complicated world” (104).

Following Vollmann's thoughts, in his article "Human, All Too Inhuman" (written ten years later), commenting Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, James Wood expresses his concerns about the absence of feelings and the depthlessness of characters in contemporary fiction: they "are not really alive, not fully human, their connectedness can only be insisted on." The realism that we witness today is "hysterical" precisely because of this crisis of characters, who look more like caricatures than human beings and whom we cannot "enter" (Wood). Smith said that writers should not deal with people's feelings, but rather with the world and its mechanisms, with "ideas and themes and problem-solving from other places." According to Wood, this is indeed the problem: novelists think more about "themes and ideas," leaving behind "language and the representation of consciousness."

The debate, though, does not end here. In 2012, Garth Risk Hallberg is inspired by a conference in Italy called "Le Conversazioni" where contemporary writers (among whom Wallace, Franzen and Smith) discussed "the novel's way forward," emphasizing how their focus is not placed anymore on style and form, rather on the purpose of writing. "Here is a sign that you're not alone" is the answer they have given through their works of fiction; yet, Hallberg seems skeptical about it, for it could refer either to the "solitary reader" or to the author, or even to "some third thing altogether." Thus, he concludes that contemporary fiction may be able to delight us, but not to instruct (Hallberg). In my opinion, "instruct" is a quite unsuitable term here, for, even though it is true that entertainment and delight are not enough on their own, a writer should not be compared to an instructor, but rather to a source of inspiration and reflection. In the same year, Colson Whitehead published on the *Sunday Book Review* a guide to writing made up of eleven rules, among which the importance of "showing" together with "telling" plays a crucial role. Writers are like "kids bringing their broken unicorns and chewed-up teddy bears into class," hoping that "someone else will love them as much as they do." Indeed, writing should be about one's own knowledge and heart, a way to express and be oneself, because readers who will not be appreciative "are not worth being friends with" (Whitehead). All these contributions focus on the importance for the writer to express his feelings, experiences, points of view not only as a cultural enrichment, but as a way to acknowledge their belonging to the human world and the need to share with others this humanity.

Finally, I would like to quote Ben Marcus's article "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It", for, although he specifies that his is not a manifesto, I do believe that his stance on literature is strongly felt and conveyed. Marcus targets Franzen's ideas referring in particular to his Status vs Contract model (see chapter 1), as he disagrees with the implicit correlation between formal experimentalism and difficulty, unreadability and unworthiness. According to Franzen, difficulty is "needless," it has no purpose; however, Marcus, thinks that what is difficult is language itself, and he actually values the infinite opportunities that language offers to "show a reader what it's like to be alive, to be a thinking, feeling person in a very complex world" (51). Art – and consequently literature, too – should not be limited in its forms, should not be evaluated based on how large an audience it is able to attract and satisfy; rather it should be encouraged in its ambitious goals, failing and trying again, for artists' "failure might help readers discover new ways of thinking and feeling" (Marcus 52). I would argue that, even if Marcus's emphasis is placed on artists' right to experiment and explore different techniques, he also acknowledges that the ultimate purpose is that of establishing a bond with the reader, for he might discover a new way of looking at the world, of feeling what the artist feels. Thus, human beings and their feelings are again the object of an enterprise we call literature.

3.2 Conservatism, compromise, realism: are we looking forward or backward?

One of the key concepts that describes the post-postmodernists' reaction is conservatism. What is the meaning given to "conservative" in this context by writers and critics? First, it seems obvious that the term is to be considered in relation to the wave of experimentalism, transgression and post-structuralism that has characterized the last decades of the twentieth century. What comes after is mainly marked by a "revival of narrative realism," "the adoption [...] of standard genre forms," "conventionality, accessibility, and communicative stability" (Kelly, Fiction 47). After the trauma of postmodernity, postboomers are survivors who look back to seek a stable vision, for what used to be new and radical is no longer a revolutionary novelty; besides, their attention is drawn more to the interpersonal than to the social-institutional level. In fact, many writers, such as Eugenides, Powers and Saunders, talk

about literature as hunger for connection, a refuge, an unmediated exchange, a mutual experience with readers that is pleasurable (Kelly, Fiction 52-3).

Another point of view that takes into consideration conventionalism is that of “compromise aesthetics”, presented by Smith, who argues that the tension between experimentalism and convention reflects the tension in political culture and is linked to the rise of neoliberalism in the US in the past few decades (Propositions 183). In economics, neoliberalism is associated with free-market capitalism, but its effects have spread on other aspects of life and in particular to the arts, so that neoliberal attitudes, such as the pursuit of profit and a spirit of entrepreneurialism, can be detected in writers’ formal choices, while economic and aesthetic activities share the same trajectory, exploiting all the available tools in the most effective way (Propositions 184). As we have already seen, after postmodernism literature is characterized by a return to the personal, which can be easily linked to the model of the entrepreneur, for in a work of literature “the personal might be self-consciously invented” and, at the same time, “the self as entrepreneur rests on the notion that the self is and should be buildable from scratch” (Propositions 187). As a result, artificiality seen as (artistic) construction and deep emotional value do not rule each other out, but they go hand in hand because “the constructed individual remains the vessel of enormous emotional energy” (Propositions 188). Smith ends her reflection on compromise aesthetics by emphasizing that the hybridity of forms and the broad range of techniques borrowed from different trends does not resolve the presence of conflict, which is instead bound to increase when smothered. Even though compromise is meant to function as a settlement, the value given to its form, “both in literature and in politics, might be historically specific” and, thus, hinder the very core of the compromise – its definitiveness – which means that compromise itself cannot be considered a point of arrival, but rather a stage, still unfolding towards change (Propositions 191).

Hoffmann agrees with Smith’s point of view especially in regard to the historical specificity of the hybridity of form, as he highlights that realism has never completely disappeared from the literary scene, but it has taken on different nuances according to the context. In post-postmodern times, the term – often changed into “neorealism” – actually refers to an array of different realisms, which present several approaches and strategies of representation that are the result of a focus on experience,

both on the outer world and on the inner self (Hoffmann 624). This result is due to a change in history – a period of political crisis, the triumph of capitalism – which laid the foundations for a new attitude, a search for different answers; the postmodern aesthetics did not completely vanish, but it retreated, leaving the foreground to new developments, although still influencing them (625). Hoffmann notices that this period is characterized by optimism, on one hand, for it is a new beginning, and pessimism, on the other, due to the perception of having exhausted possibilities of innovation, change and moral growth (626). Therefore, the consequent need to go back to the human field of experience, to human life, takes shape by finding a common ground that connects modernism, postmodernism and realism, which is the desire for narrative, the need to familiarize the world and create models to understand it. A parallel emerges between the new realism in politics and the one in literature: improving the modes of communication in society mirrors the need to fix the lack of communication in fiction, recurring to the power of creating and interpreting narratives (627). At the same time, as Italo Calvino points out, “it would be indeed simplistic and faulty after all the modernizations of art and literature to believe that one could still tell a story in a naive manner” (Hoffmann 628) – reminding of Umberto Eco’s postmodern impossibility to speak innocently. Hoffmann concludes that the post-postmodern novel presents three paradigms, based on the urgency to order the world:

- the presence of dualisms that can essentially be reconciled to the main opposition good vs. evil or order vs. chaos;
- the contrast between the American dream and American reality, which concretizes in ideals such as freedom, equality, happiness, and the failure to realize them;
- the conundrum appearance vs. reality, linked to the relationship between individual and society and the opposition between moral standards and moral hypocrisy (628).

At this point, having listed these oppositions, I believe it is important to spend some time on the historical background of realism, especially following György Lukács’s thoughts, both because his ideas acknowledge the bond between literary trends and socio-historical and political phenomena and because Franzen’s fiction, in certain instances, draws from the Lukácsian view of realism.

As already pointed out, postmodernism rejected traditional mimetic procedures as inadequate to deal with the complex and unintelligible reality; however, as times have changed, we might wonder – as writers did – whether now realism might be a viable option to represent and understand reality. As realism is made up of diachronically different practices, the focus here should be on the form of the realist novel, which for some critics was born in a primitive shape in the classical Antiquity era, while for others it was triggered by the rise of the bourgeoisie. History is one of the main concerns of the realist novel for Lukács, too, as it is made clear in his works “Realism in the Balance” (1938) and *The Historical Novel* (1937).

After Ernst Bloch’s accusations and his insistence in protecting modernism, Lukács wrote in response the essay “Realism in the Balance” to defend his ideas on realism and his concept of totality, already articulated in his previous work *The Theory of the Novel* (1920), which he would later disavow. Totality is associated to reality as an objective entity and, in literature, only realism is able to grasp it, for modernism is guilty of reproducing reality as it manifests itself, that is, only in its immediate display. Instead, it is necessary to go beyond this level to understand social reality and the laws that lie beneath it; immediate experience is not enough and should be substituted by a “deeper probing of the real world” (Lukács 37). The realist writer uses abstraction to penetrate the objective reality and uncover the relationships that constitute society. Therefore, abstraction is necessary, but it needs to move in a specific direction; while modernist schools employed abstraction to move away from reality, settling for immediacy, realists engaged in an intellectual work – that of discovering the driving forces of society – and in an artistic one – exploiting abstraction to conceal these relationships in their works. The result is a new “artistically mediated immediacy” in which the surface of life is no longer fragmentary and obscure, but it appears as life and is at the same time transparent enough to let the essence transpire (Lukács 39). The dialectic between appearance and essence takes us back to Hoffmann’s paradigms of new realism, especially when Lukács emphasizes that “the more firmly it grasps hold of the living contradictions of life and society, the greater and the more profound the realism will be” (38). In addition, Lukács believes that present social phenomena depend not only on past events, but also on future ones. The theorist notices that great realism portrays a permanent and objectively significant reality, tendencies that

already exist but that haven't yet unfolded; this anticipatory quality is what denotes the historical mission of realism. Its prophetic nature is to be found particularly in characters, or even better types, who embody everlasting human features and tendencies (Lukács 48). In conclusion, he says, differently from the schools of modernism, realism "provides answers to the questions put by the readers themselves" (57). In Franzen's *Freedom*, I believe we will come back to these notions, not necessarily because the writer espouses completely the critic's thoughts, but because some of his ideas have influenced the shaping of the narrative world and the so-called relationships hiding behind the American society's façade.

Realism is linked to the political dimension of the novel, too, as new national allegories exploit it to shape globalized worlds that are immediately recognizable by readers. The concept of national allegory was introduced by Fredric Jameson, another literary critic and Marxist theorist who saw in national allegories a form of "mapping of the totality" (Irr 217) – interestingly, he picks up the term totality from Lukács. It is, most of all, an antidote to the resistance postmodernism had stubbornly shown against politics in general. As a matter of fact, in the first decade of the new millennium, some novels have casted a restricted number of characters and settings representative of an entire nation's situation, themes and problems, wishing to give readers a better picture of social conditions and mechanisms that regulate their dynamics (Irr 218-9). *Freedom* is one of these novels, as it combines several typical features of the political novel, among which the downward trajectory of a social class, naïve environmental politics, the satire of claims to a pristine wilderness, urban gentrification, while at the same time focuses on a cluster of associations that surround the national allegory embedded in the title, providing in the story several examples of freedoms, both political and personal, suggesting an ethical ambivalence that for the author is a perfect means to convey the feeling of a national liberal despair (Irr 224-5).

3.3 Irony, sincerity or both?

Having seen so far how the new realism of the present century has developed its form starting from both postmodernism and realism, and how it is linked to history, politics, and economics, the next element that I deem worthy of further examination is the apparent dispute between irony and sincerity. Wallace's call for a new generation

of sincere anti-rebels starts from the assumption that the media have appropriated irony, which, for this reason, is no longer a tool available to writers who wish – and most of all feel the need – to overcome postmodernism. However, in their fiction, Wallace and his contemporaries engage the issues of irony and sincerity in more complicated ways (Kelly, *Sincerity* 197). What does it mean to live without irony? It means filling the void between what one means and one actually says – saying what you mean, meaning what you say – thus escaping from cynicism and trying to create something more meaningful and fulfilling (Doyle 260). On the other hand, what does it mean to be sincere? First, it is important to specify that some scholars make a distinction between authenticity and sincerity, which might be used as synonyms, but are conceived differently in literature. While authenticity refers to the notion of truth as inward and related to the personal sphere, aiming to self-examination, sincerity is linked to the public self, that is truth and communication with others (Kelly, *Sincerity* 199). This antagonism reflects in a way the one that has risen between postmodernism and its rebellious descendant. While postmodernism rejected values such as truth and meaning, in these past decades, as Wallace emphasizes, something has changed: namely, the need to go back to the audience, reconnecting with it through sincere communication, something that, as we have already seen above, may be achieved thanks to a new perspective on fiction as “a two-way exchange of attention, experience, and the universal hunger for connection” (Chabon 5). Form is immediately affected by this change, as this antimodernist attitude pushes for the return of the 19th century novel. The so-called “intentional bad form” ignores the “artificiality of the canons of good form,” for its aim is the expression of “one’s deepest self” (Kelly, *Sincerity* 201). However, McLaughlin is concerned about the chronological and ideological overlap between post-postmodernism and the rise of conservative politics in America, so much so that he believes a definitive suspension of irony and skepticism could lead to open political manipulation of the masses who refuse to confront the complexity of reality (Doyle 263). According to Kelly, the legacy of postmodernism complicates the situation, introducing irony and manipulation, which are inescapable elements for “sincerity, expressed through language, can never be pure” (*Sincerity* 201). In other words, the promise of being truthful to the other can always imply the threat of manipulating him; the only way to overcome this threat is to believe the other,

to trust his judgement and his word. Therefore, the sincerity of a twenty-first century writer cannot be found in his own representation, but in the reaction of the readers, their response outside the page; as a consequence, the existence of the text itself depends on both the writer and the reader – or, even better, the contingency of the reader, who finds himself in a particular time and space and who will experience a unique reaction, different from others' reactions (Kelly, Sincerity 206). In this instance, irony is employed with a different aim than in postmodern works: it is not a means used by the author to gain absolute control over his material and the inexplicable in it, rather it is a way to avoid a too simplistic familiarization, to prevent the creation of an image of a clichéd, illusory reality (Hoffmann 655). In conclusion, it seems that Wallace's take on the rejection of irony can be reformulated, as the issue is not the decline of irony, but rather how irony can survive together with sincerity, without neither succumbing to nor prevailing over it (Doyle 263). The solution – or compromise – can be a balance of the two, aiming at a fiction able to “empathize with sincerity and attacking through irony” at the same time (Doyle 267).

In this overview on post-postmodernism I have tried to outline the main features and issues that I believe are necessary to understand in what period Franzen is working, how he might have been – and still may be – influenced by ideas that come both from the arts field and from the political and social situation of the United States, to better understand the sources and reasons of his literary reactions and output.

Before turning to the analysis of the novel, the last thing I believe worth mentioning to conclude this survey is another trait, common to many post-postmodern authors and crucial to Franzen, that is a marked inclination to storytelling. One of the heaviest legacies coming from the deconstruction typical of postmodernism is the instability and uncertainty of the world where we live and of the identities of individuals, too. This ambiguity is faced by post-postmodern writers with an optimistic attitude that concretizes in a kind of storytelling characterized by clear-cut descriptions and situations to “cope with [...] the unknowable, and the frightening in human existence and to interpret what is there together with that which is not there” (Hoffmann 652); to achieve this goal, they go back to the very protagonists of storytelling – the characters. Nonetheless, the notion of character is not so simple to

be dealt with after having been put into question by Systems theory and post-structuralism among others; hence, in their works, post-postmodernists offer a characterization based not so much on personality traits, rather on their reaction to different situations, on “extraordinary commitments [...] even obsessions [...] as if the fullness of the character can only be represented by the absoluteness of its passion” (Hoffmann 651). This kind of representation creates an interaction between the character and the object of his passion which becomes a theme; in this way, an interdependent relationship comes into being between subject and theme (Hoffmann 651), which I deem is one of *Freedom*’s most developed traits. As Hoffmann rightly points out, the functions of literature in contemporary times have multiplied: it can confirm readers’ expectations or catch them off guard with uncertainty, it can show a recognizable world, with its deficits and problems, but at the same time provide comfort, it can be a pleasant experience, while challenging the reader with questions that remain unanswered (656). Simply put, it can show its human face. In the next chapter, I will explore how Franzen tries to join and accomplish this mission.

4. *FREEDOM*: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL

As I have already anticipated, drawing from the points highlighted in chapter 2, I wish to analyze *Freedom* and focus on what I believe are the main issues that help understand how and why the novel can be positioned within the post-postmodernist trend. Hence, I will take into consideration the main characters – Patty, Walter and Joey – and I will analyze the relationships they have with their families, with the communities they interact with and with their friends and loved ones. I will dwell on the aspects of their characterizations that I deem important to show their development in the novel, how it is crucial to its closure and to finally link it, in chapter 5, to the “symptoms” of post-postmodernism.

4.1 Family and parents-children relationships

In his *relational approach* methodology, John Shotter explains that one of the main characteristics of the self is not only its being autonomous and free, but its being determined also by the context in which it finds itself, that is, the social context. Consequently, what any human being does, the way in which he acts, reacts and feels within himself is influenced by the surrounding circumstances and other people’s actions (Shotter 387, 402). One of the first and most important relationships that influence human beings in their making sense of their own selves and the world and in building their own life narrative are the relationships built in the family, especially with the parents. As *Freedom* has been dubbed a family saga, it is interesting to focus more closely on family relationships, how they develop and how they are described and felt by the characters themselves throughout the novel, for I believe it will help to understand how Franzen elaborates on the main “symptoms” identified by Nicoline Timmer as defining the post-postmodern syndrome.

As we focus on this specific issue in terms of content, the form in which family ties are dealt with is also relevant, for it includes some narrative strategies that are carefully employed and changed according to the characters involved. In my opinion, Franzen’s choice is not merely adopted for plot purposes, but it also wishes to convey a sense of how human beings in the novel go about trying to understand their lives and

their decisions, continuously negotiating them to reach the very much longed-for happiness.

The first section of the book, “Good Neighbors”, introduces the story world from the perspective of the Berglunds’ ex-neighbors in Ramsey Hill, an area in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Seth and Merrie Paulsen are a couple who lived next to Patty and Walter and their children, Jessica and Joey, before they moved to Washington. The peculiar things that are immediately highlighted from the Paulsens’ point of view are Patty’s isolation from her own family and the way in which she talked about them – explaining what her parents did, without getting into details, “as if the topic had been exhausted” (6)² just like that – together with her unusual situation as “one of the few stay-at-home moms” (5), seeing that she was an educated young woman, or better a “college grad” (3) like her husband. Another awkward characteristic of their family is certainly the fact that “Joey was the child Patty could not shut up about” (9), even though Jessica was the good kid. As a matter of fact, despite all the love and attention Patty gave him, Joey ended up leaving his house to move in with the neighbors – Connie Monaghan, who was his girlfriend, Carol, her mother, and Blake, her mother’s new partner. Walter is depicted, instead, as the poor man who made sacrifices in order to give his family all they needed to live the life they wanted and a considerate dad who tried, with disputable results, to discipline his own offspring. However, the Paulsens are surprised as they have just found out on *The New York Times* that Walter “had made quite a mess of his professional life out there in the nation’s capital [...]. Then again, there had always been something not quite right about the Berglunds” (3). But Merrie’s thought is pretty clear and, in a certain way, it will become the novel’s refrain: “I don’t think they’ve figured out yet how to live” (33).

After this incipit, we are plunged in a manuscript titled “MISTAKES WERE MADE. Autobiography of Patty Berglund by Patty Berglund (Composed at Her Therapist’s Suggestion)” (35). The very first distinct feature is the use of the third person narrator, even though it is an autobiography and, thus, the use of the first person would be expected. While I would like to investigate this specific feature of Patty’s

² All citations from the novel are taken from the paperback Picador edition (2011) and will appear from now on in the text parenthetically, only with the page number referred to.

account later on, it is interesting to dwell on the very first paragraphs to see how she introduces her relationship with her family:

Patty grew up in Westchester County, New York. She was the oldest of four children, the other three of whom were more like what her parents had been hoping for. She was notably Larger than everybody else, also Less Unusual, also measurably Dumber. Not actually dumb but relatively dumber. She grew up to be 5'9½" which was almost the same as her brother and numerous inches taller than the others, and sometimes she wished she could have gone ahead and been six feet, since she was never going to fit into the family anyway. [...] By the time she got to the collegiate level, she was usually one of the shorter players on the floor, which in a funny way reminded her of her position in her family and helped keep adrenaline at peak levels. (37-8)

The comparisons between Patty and her siblings – highlighted with comparative adjectives starting with capital letters – are one of the features that defines her identity: even though she is the tallest of her sisters and slightly shorter than her brother, she feels that her position in the family is at the bottom and she seems perfectly aware of the fact that, no matter what might happen, she is never going to be part of the family – “to fit into” it. As a matter of fact, in the very first paragraph, she thanks her basketball coaches, as they are the “wonderful” people who “helped her make up for morbid competitiveness and low self-esteem” (37). Hence, it is immediately clear that family to Patty is a place where she needs to compete – even more than when she is playing a match – to stand out and be considered someone worthy of consideration, so much so that her mother went to see her play only once, without complimenting her for her talent, but instead pointing out how unnecessary was for Patty to be so “aggressive” on the field and how, instead, she should focus on working “cooperatively” together with other people (39). Both her parents are described by their social and professional status: her mother is “a professional Democrat, [...] a state assembly-woman, the Honorable Joyce Emerson” (39), who was so busy with her political engagement that Patty could spend all afternoon playing without anybody noticing; her father, Ray Emerson, was “a lawyer and amateur humorist” who liked “tormenting” and “ridiculing” her daughter in front of the rest of the family and who came from a rich family – “an important fact,” according to Patty (40, 42). It becomes

clear why such a description is relevant when her parents need to manage a difficult situation: during a party, after having drunk a little too much, Patty was raped by the son of an outstanding family with whom her parents were political friends. Patty, embarrassed, thinking “it was absurd to imagine the hulking B-student family jock making a dent in the Posts’ armor” (it would have been a different story for “one of Patty’s straight-A, grade-skipping, Arts-doing sister”) (49), confessed the incident to her Coach, who then called her mother. The mother-daughter conversation that follows is awkward, to say the least:

“I’m sorry about this,” Patty said.

“What I don’t understand,” her mother burst out, “is how such an outstanding athlete as you are—I mean, how could Ethan, or whoever it was—”

“Ethan. It was Ethan.”

“How could anybody—or Ethan,” she said. “You say it’s pretty definitely Ethan. How could—if it’s Ethan—how could he have . . . ?” Her mother hid her mouth with her fingers. “Oh, I wish it had been almost anybody else. Dr. and Mrs. Post are such good friends of—good friends of so many good things. And I don’t know Ethan well, but—”

“I hardly know him at all!”

“Well then how could this happen!”

“Let’s just go home.”

“No. You have to tell me. I’m your mother.”

Hearing herself say this, Joyce looked embarrassed. She seemed to realize how peculiar it was to have to remind Patty who her mother was. And Patty, for one, was glad to finally have this doubt out in the open. (51)

Patty’s mother seems more concerned with the fact that it was Ethan Post – *if* it was him! – the one who raped her daughter, than with the fact that her own daughter had been raped. Even though she highlights her own role in Patty’s life spelling it out loud, she seems to understand the implications of being a mother not as someone who takes care and emotionally supports her child, but more as someone who is owed an explanation. Patty, on her side, is not so sure of what this entailed at all, since her mother should not have been the one to question her, but to support and root for her – and not only in this specific occasion, but also during the basketball games that meant

so much to Patty, to which Joyce didn't even deign to show up. The conversation continues only to get worse, as Joyce suggests that Ethan's real apology could be a "nearly ideal solution" (53). Similarly, her father convinces her that, even though he feels terrible for her, the best course of action is to "let it drop," as to avoid being publicly humiliated, given the position of the Post family and what such an accusation could trigger (59). Despite their best intentions and the attempt not to let her daughter fall in a trap that could cost her a huge price, they come across as parents driven by fear of risking their social status, losing their reputation and political acquaintances – a logic that perfectly reflects an opportunistic attitude, almost devoid of any feeling or emotional involvement, aimed at minimizing further potential damage not only for their daughter, but for themselves as well. From the turn of the millennium, in contemporary societies "the family would appear to be less and less a haven of affective certainty and more, as old securities diminish and new insecurities arise, a site for the creation and negotiation of risk" (Simpson 123).

"Agreeable" is the title of the first chapter of Patty's autobiography and a word that echoes through the novel, too, most of the times referred to Patty herself. She defines her behavior as characterized by agreeability when she talks of how she started dating any boy who would ask her out; when, during the night of the rape, she didn't scream to call for help; when she says how she shared the room with one of her sisters to let the other have her own space in which to exercise her creativity; when she was at the hospital after having injured her knee and she felt she had to make up for her mother's arrogance with the staff. The sense that agreeable conveys is always related to an effort, a behavior that is not presented as natural or spontaneous, but aimed at looking pleasant in other people's eyes, to win their favor or admiration. Patty's insecurity, low self-esteem and need for validation are a not-so-surprising result of her upbringing, an almost foreseeable development of her feelings of exclusion and being misplaced in her family, unable to fit. Therefore, she will escape her household to find shelter and niceness in a man willing to "make [their] own family!" (154). Walter is for Patty a poor man who, when they got married, could not have had any clue of the disappointments she would have given him, despite his sacrifices for her and their children; indeed, "the whole thing happened almost without discussion. [...] In the early years, he was so fired up about Patty, she could do no wrong" (154-5).

From this rather disturbing beginning through the end of the novel, Patty will be haunted by the need to be an agreeable person, to be liked by others as she wasn't in her own house – the first environment in which one should not need to gain appreciation and affection but should just be loved for who one is. Likewise, later in her life, she will be troubled by the urge to be a great parent, especially to be the mother she never had. At a certain point in the journal, Patty explains that, at the same time of her mother-in-law's death, she found out that the neighbors' daughter, Connie Monaghan, "had been preying on Joey sexually" (183), as if her own son were a non-consenting victim. This was a hard realization for her to face, so much so that, from this moment on, she would be making a "litany of mistakes" which, at the time of writing,³ she was still ashamed and embarrassed of. One night her rage exploded in such hysteria that she slashed the tires of her neighbors' pickup truck; is it moral to "plead insanity as a legal defense?" (183), she asked herself. Here, Patty is thrown in the midst of a trial and, being both the prosecutor and the defendant, she looks at herself and examines her behavior from two different perspectives simultaneously:

For the defense: But she was trying to be good and make a good life! And then she forsook all others and worked hard to be a great mom and homemaker.

For the prosecution: Her motives were bad. She was competing with her mom and sisters. She wanted her kids to be a reproach to them.

For the defense: She loved her kids!

For the prosecution: She loved Jessica an appropriate amount, but Joey she loved way too much. She knew what she was doing and she didn't stop [...].

For the defense: But love just happens. It wasn't *her* fault that every last thing about Joey gave her so much pleasure.

For the prosecution: It was her fault. You can't love cookies and ice cream inordinately and then say it's not your fault you end up weighing three hundred pounds.

³ The time of writing (time of telling) is the last year Patty spent in St. Paul before moving to Washington, that is 2001. The moment when she found out Joey had started a relationship with Connie (time of the told) was the winter between 1997 and 1998, right after Walter's mother funeral. Joey at that time was 14 years old and Connie 15. Patty slashed Blake's tires in February 1999 (Joey was still at home). In September 1999, when he started eleventh grade (he was 16 years old), Joey moved in with the Monaghans.

For the defense: But she didn't know that! She thought she was doing the right thing by giving her kids the attention and the love her own parents hadn't given her.

For the prosecution: She did know it, because Walter told her, and told her, and told her. (184)

A sense of confusion and irresolution emerges from Patty's judgment, for she feels she tried her best as a mother, but she was not able to realize when to stop, when it was "too much" (186). Attributing fault turns out to be a complicated process, an issue common to several characters in the novel; hence, the emphasis on mistakes and on blaming somebody for them, finding the ones to be held accountable, is palpable through the whole narrative and affects the development of relationships, too. Indeed, at the end, when the story closes with a resolute turn, most of the reconciliations will include a sort of suspension of blame, an acknowledgment of shared culpability, for everybody is human and, thus, imperfect.

A sense of competitiveness, which was initiated right into her own family, torments Patty and she is well aware of that, as she candidly admits at the very beginning of her autobiography. The same competitiveness is found throughout the account of her life: when she was annoyed by other girls looking for Walter's attention in college, when she felt that Walter's interest in her was mainly due to her being not nice and "morbidly competitive" (119), when Walter was the one to encourage her, to provide the "rabid fandom which she needed" to carry forward "her questionable programs of competing with" her family (148). More precisely, what Patty describes as her one and only "way to win – her obvious best shot at defeating her sisters and her mother – was to marry the nicest guy in Minnesota, live in a bigger and better and more interesting house than anybody else in her family, pop out the babies, and do everything as a parent that Joyce hadn't" (148). While at the beginning he was her way out, her supporter, with Joey things change, for, as parents, Patty and Walter don't agree on how to raise the child and they end up blaming each other – Walter, for her inability to discipline the boy, and Patty, for his interference in the mother-son bond, the "amazing friendship" that she built through the years with such unconditional devotion towards her "incredible boy" (187). Walter, just by "being her husband [...]" had made Joey believe that Patty was in the enemy camp. She hated Walter for this"

(188). However, Patty blames herself, too, for not being able to see “how [Joey] could possibly be *loyal and devoted* to the neighbor girl [...] sneaky little competitor that she was” and “she was disastrously slow to grasp the seriousness of the Monaghan menace”: in the end, “she managed to undo fifteen years of effort to be a good mom. She fucked it up royally, Patty did, and then proceeded to become quite unhinged” (188). The vocabulary that Patty uses is again a clear sign of her competitive feelings and her fear of losing the only thing that she was able to create in her life – her own family and her being a mother.

All the citations reported up until now have been taken from Patty’s autobiography, which is written in the third person. Such a stylistic narrative choice should go neither underestimated nor ignored, for, I would argue, it has a good reason to be employed specifically for the character of Patty and at a certain point of the novel, that is right after the short introduction given from the neighbors’ point of view. According to Philippe Lejeune, using the third person is an explicit way to present a dialogue between two polarities that each of us has, the sender and the receiver, as “the individual is a dialogue.” In the same person, both an “I” and a “he” are present, because “the first person, then, always conceals a third person, and in this sense every autobiography is by definition indirect” (Lejeune 32). Besides, when using the first person, an adult could speak of his childhood even though he is not that child anymore: the adult is the one who provides the account and the analysis of the facts, but the child he used to be is the subject; therefore, the third person can provide a “distancing [...] used to express an articulated connection (a tension) between identity and difference” (Lejeune 32). In Patty’s case, I believe the word tension perfectly fits her situation, for she started her journal as a psychotherapy exercise to fight her depression; hence, she needs to delve into her life, her decisions and mistakes to make some sense out of them. What emerges is a sort of “division of her personality,” which Jagoda Dolińska interprets not as “an account by and about the person who she truly believes herself to be, but rather a story of what she imagines her life to be like in terms of representational methods and style” (192). She continues by specifying that the choice of a third person narrative is to be attributed to the shaping of the self “by projection,” “a desire to be that which one is not and reimagining oneself as such” (193). I believe what Dolińska means is that Patty saw herself as a writer in charge of narrating someone else’s life;

she was concerned about form and techniques as a writer would have been, and saw her life in terms of a “literary production,” “imitating a narrative model” (193). I do not agree with this point of view, as I believe Patty’s writing needs to be contextualized in the moment in which she started her memoir. Therefore, there are two different times, as the manuscript is divided in two parts: Patty started to write the first three chapters in 2001, before leaving their house in Ramsey Hill, when Joey and Jessica had already moved out and she was seeing her therapist, up until when she and Walter moved to Washington (in December 2001). Instead, the last part, the fourth chapter, is written six years after Patty and Walter’s separation and Lalitha’s – Walter’s assistant – death (which occurred in 2004, as the title of *Freedom*’s central section indicates). Consequently, the two parts need to be considered from two different perspectives, not because her assertion of having changed (at the beginning of “Chapter 4: Six Years”) has to be trusted unquestionably, but because of the time-frame that sets her analysis in different circumstances. With regard to the first part, I believe she does not attempt to reimagine her life or representing it in the way she wishes it could have been, but rather to look for explanations, for the sources of her choices, what chain of events and factors have led her to such a depressive state. Even if her way of telling these events is shaped as a fictional narrative, this does not imply that she is inventing the story behind them. As a matter of fact, she can be considered quite a reliable narrator, for if we compare her version of the story – merely facts, not subjective impressions or feelings – with the one provided in the following chapters of the novel by the heterodiegetic narrator, no significant discrepancies are to be found. Her feelings can be questioned or looked at with skepticism, although it is exactly the distancing of the third person that should push our judgment towards believing in Patty’s good intentions, in her attempt to see things from a new perspective, one that still comes from herself but that is informed by and focused also on her interactions with others and their relevance. This attempt originates from the very fact that she felt “plung[ing] down the mental-health mine shaft” (231), an instability that is common to the post-postmodern malady I will later come back to. For the time being, I believe it is important emphasizing that the reader is given most of Patty’s family history through her memoir, while Walter and Joey stories are examined further in the novel where an external omniscient narrator is in charge of the telling. Besides, in the different

sections, the heterodiegetic narrator is characterized by a different internal focalization, according to the character that is being “followed” and free indirect discourse can be found, too, which is a strategy that “maintains the third-person reference and the tense of narration, but [...] reproduces verbatim the character’s own mental language” (Cohn 14)⁴ and which I deem noteworthy for the development of the characterization. As a matter of fact, in situations of figural narration (as, for example, in the chapters of the sections “Good Neighbors” and “2004” in *Freedom*), free indirect discourse represents “the moment when the thought-thread of a character is mostly tightly woven into the texture of third-person narration” (Cohn 111). “Blur[ring] the line between narration and quotation,” free indirect discourse is a powerful technique, for it brings forth feelings and emotions of characters as if they were the narrator’s – a “very special two-in-one-effect” that leads to the narrator’s “*identification* – but not his *identity* – with the character’s mentality” (Cohn 112). However, other techniques can be helpful to understand characters’ inner minds. As Alan Palmer explains,

it is important to stress that the story contains mental as well as physical events. It consists of characters’ reasons for action as well as the actions themselves. In fact, a distinction cannot really be made between the two, because the concept of an action necessarily contains within it mental phenomena such as intentions and reasons. These reasons [...] form an indispensable part of characters’ embedded narratives that can be recovered by readers from the discourse, in part with the help of direct presentations of minds. A vital part of this whole process is the use of the mode of thought report. (Fictional 76)

Thought report is considered as valuable as (or, by Palmer, even more than) other devices used to construct fictional minds, for it helps understand that characters’ minds are not only made up of a “private, passive flow of thought,” but rather that thought could be seen as “purposeful, engaged social interaction” (Palmer, *The Construction* 32). In other words, through thought report the social context can be linked to the fictional minds and its impact on them emerges: “the linking function is such a vital contribution to what can plausibly be described as the purpose of the novel: the exploration of the relationship between individuals and the societies within which they

⁴ In her study, Dorrit Cohn uses the term “narrated monologue” to indicate free indirect discourse (e.g. Was he late?) and “psycho-narration” for thought report (e.g. He wondered if he was late). See also Palmer, *Fictional Minds* 54-55.

live” (Palmer, *Fictional* 78). According to Cohn, whose study Palmer draws on, thought report can “order and explain a character’s conscious thoughts better than the character himself” and “articulate a psychic life that remains un verbalized” (Cohn 46). Furthermore, when external reality and subjective perception are tightly linked to one another, thought report and “scenic description” become intertwined – it is a “dovetailing between the inner and outer realms of fictional reality” (Cohn 49). I feel that these two devices are important in *Freedom*, for they help readers outline characters’ consciousness, their actions and the reasons behind them, especially when their minds and their deeds seem to take opposite directions.

From Patty’s memoir a picture of Joey has already emerged, especially of their relationship which used to be almost like a friendship, but which was broken when Joey started to date Connie Monaghan, the neighbors’ girl. In the chapter “Womanland”, we start to learn about Joey and his version of the story through a phone call that he decided to make to talk to his mother. Joey moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, to attend university and decided to break up with his girlfriend after having spent an intense weekend together in his dorm room (even if, to be more precise, Joey had in mind to break up with her even before). Some weeks later he received a phone call from Carol, Connie’s mother, outraged by his behavior with her daughter. Hence, Joey called Patty, as, differently from all the other boys at university who had daily conversations with their families, he hadn’t heard from his parents for a while. On the one hand, he was happy about the freedom his parents allowed him; on the other, though, he wished he could still have a different relationship with them. On the phone, Patty

sounded like a nattering older lady, not the vital force he still imagined when he allowed himself to think of her. [...] Everything he’d done with regard to her in the last three years had been calculated to foreclose the intensely personal sort of talks they’d had when he was younger: to get her to *shut up*, to train her to contain herself, to make her stop pestering him with her overfull heart and her uncensored self. And now that the training was complete and she was obediently trivial with him, he felt bereft of her and wanted to undo it. (304)

The vocabulary in this passage emphasizes how Joey felt about his relationship with his mother, a bond that was based on her openness and excessive love, which he was overwhelmed by, so much so that he had to *train* her to restrain herself. However, he felt then “bereft of her,” as if she used to be a sort of possession he deprived himself of, and he started to have doubts about his own decisions. After a few minutes of talking to her, trying to collect information on her life at that time and what she was doing all day long being without a job, Joey’s attitude changed again: his “feeling of bereavement was giving way to irritation, because, no matter how much she denied that she was doing it, she couldn’t seem to help reproaching him. [...] He called her for a little support, and the next thing he knew, he was falling short of providing support to her” (306). When the phone call ended, he was happy that his mother offered him to send a check; nonetheless, he ran to hide in a toilet and started “sob[bing] with hatred of his mother” (308). His feelings are extremely mixed up, his thoughts seem to be changing from one minute to the other, but there seems to be a reason for his incoherent behavior:

The actual root cause of her stupidity was her wish for Joey to keep on being her little boy-pal: to continue being more entertained and fascinated by his mother than by great TV or a bona-fide genius rap star. This was the sick heart of her dumbness: she was *competing*. Eventually he’d become desperate enough to drive it into her head that he didn’t want to be her little boy-pal anymore. This hadn’t even been his conscious plan [...]. (310)

It is immediately clear that, being a teenager and not a child anymore, Joey started to feel the heaviness of the role he performed for Patty, mostly because she was feeling threatened by all the things that could become Joey’s interests and, therefore, take her place in his life. Patty tried insistently to force her presence in his life, “she tried to make him her Designated Understander, and this turned out to be even worse than being her little boy-pal” (312). When she confessed to Joey her secrets, at first, he “considered himself *lucky* to have a mom so cool and forthcoming”, but when she told him she had been raped, after feeling “outraged” and “guilty” (313), he reacted by “hating her [...] violently [...]. It was like a chemical transformation. As if there were arsenic leaching from his organs” (314). Something changed again, overnight, quickly and unexpectedly, without Joey’s conscious realization, as he felt a powerful and

uncontrollable reaction growing within himself, altering him inside, but, at the same time, originating from his mother's doing, from an external source.

These pages are a perfect example of how we can understand characters and their narrative selves through thought report about themselves and others as well: both mother and son's personalities, fears and issues are revealed through the account of Joey's feelings. "She didn't seem to be very good at living her life, but it wasn't because she was stupid. Almost the opposite somehow" (314) – Joey's depiction of his mother is that of a woman who is in some way troubled by her own excessive thinking and who feels that "there was her, and then there was the rest of the world" (314). Joey needs to choose which side he wants to take; however, even though he is longing for building his own life, he knows that his mother counts on him as the only person who is able to understand her, to decipher her language.

Another significant phone exchange is the one that Joey had with his parents when he called them from Abigail's – Patty's sister – apartment in New York, where he was housesitting while his aunt was in France for the Christmas holidays. When Patty found out where he was and told him that staying there by himself wasn't an option, Walter took hold of the conversation, reproaching his son for his inconsiderate and selfish behavior towards his mother:

"[...] What I'm talking about is my personal disappointment that a child of ours can't find it in his heart to be kinder to his mother."

"*Why don't you ask her why not?*" Joey countered savagely. "*She knows why not! She fucking knows, Dad. Since you're so wonderfully concerned about her happiness, and all, why don't you ask her, instead of bothering me?*"

"Don't talk to me that way."

"Well then don't talk to *me* that way."

"All right, then, I won't."

His father seemed glad to let the subject drop, and Joey was also glad. He relished feeling cool and in control of his life, and it was disturbing to discover that there was this other thing in him, this reservoir of rage, this complex of family feelings that could suddenly explode and take control of him. The angry words he'd spoken to his father had felt pre-formed, as if there were an aggrieved second self inside him 24/7, ordinarily invisible but clearly fully

sentient and ready to vent itself, at a moment's notice, in the form of sentences independent of his volition. It made him wonder who his real self was; and this was very disturbing. (353-4)

Wondering who one's own self is, finding in oneself feelings that one hadn't noticed before, that have a life of their own and can't be explained by logic – this seems to be a common problem for many of the characters in *Freedom*, and it seems to have its root in the environment by which they are surrounded, especially the family.

Walter, too, is heavily affected by his family history and the mechanisms inside it, as we are told both by Patty, in her autobiography, and more in detail by the narrator, in the chapter “The Fiend of Washington”, which goes back to Walter's grandfather, Einar Berglund – a Swedish immigrant who came to America in his early youth after a familial disagreement with his mother. The relationship between Walter and his parents, Gene and Dorothy, had always been a difficult one, and during his university years it was even more complicated, as his dad was ill, dying of liver disease due to his alcoholism, and his mother, who also had physical disabilities, had to take care of their motel by herself, while Walter's brothers cared only about themselves – the older one, Mitch, had been convicted, while the younger, Brent, was in the military. Interestingly, all this information is given first from the Berglunds' ex-neighbors' point of view and then by Walter's best friend, Richard Katz, while talking to Patty, in the attempt to make her realize how much Walter liked her, how much he was willing to spend every single minute of his nonexistent free time (as he was both attending law school and working construction) with her, and to reproach her for not being honest with him, giving him false hope. At the end, though, Patty would make up her mind and choose Walter to spend the rest of her life with. In her account again, Walter's own competitiveness emerges, but not a “family-oriented one,” as, according to Patty, “by the time she met him, he'd already won that game. [...] He was [...] his family winner” (155). Walter felt competitive towards Richard, who in turn felt the same; besides, their friendship would turn out to have a significant role in Patty's love story with Walter and in her betrayal with Richard, as I will show more in depth later in the analysis.

Right after a car trip with Richard to go back home to Westchester, Patty decided at last to miss her parents' wedding anniversary and went to Hibbing, instead, to visit Walter's family. In this occasion, he showed her his old room, which he used to share with his younger brother:

Running down the middle of the carpeting was a line of gummy residue from the duct tape that Walter had put down as a child to demarcate his private space. Paraphernalia from his striving childhood were still ranged along the far wall [...]. On the room's warped door was a yellowed homemade No Smoking sign, lettered in red crayon, its N and its S unsteady but tall in their defiance.

"My first act of rebellion," Walter said.

"How old were you?" Patty said.

"I don't know. Maybe ten. My little brother had bad asthma." (156-7)

Later in the novel, we find out that, when Walter was nine or ten, he hung the sign up and, for this reason, he had an argument with his dad, who, being a heavy smoker, complained sarcastically that Brent might have not agreed with his brother's decision, and that, more than being concerned for his brother's health, Walter was showing his "allergy" towards him (565). Gene's resentment towards his middle child unfolds not only during the spats they have; when Gene's siblings and their families stopped visiting him, "he singled out Walter for derision simply because Walter liked his city cousins" (563) and, "in the hope of making [him] less like them, Gene assigned his bookish son the dirtiest and most demeaning maintenance tasks" (563).

It was as if all of the hostility that Gene might have directed at his college-educated wife, but refused to allow himself for fear of being like Einar, had found a more permissible target in his middle son [...]. In the short run, it may have been unjust for Gene to be so hard on Walter, but in the long run her son was going to be a success, whereas her husband would never amount to much. And Walter himself [...] showed his father that he could beat him even at his own game. Gene's nightly late-night stumblings into furniture, his childish panics when he ran out of cigarettes, his reflexive denigration of successful people: if Walter hadn't been perpetually occupied with hating him, he might have pitied him. And there was little that Gene feared more than being pitied. (564)

Even though Walter's ability to bear his father's injustice had been honed progressively during his childhood, as a teenager he felt an urgent need to separate his own private space not merely in his bedroom, but to completely distance himself from the family. When his mother inherited the small lakeside house where she used to spend her summers as a child, Gene proposed selling it, as he didn't see what use it could have been holding on to it, thus causing Dorothy great sorrow. Walter, "who was willing to suffer himself but couldn't stand to see her suffering" (568), decided to go to the house and fix it, so that they could rent it. While there, he actually realized that "seventeen years in cramped quarters with his family had given him a thirst for solitude" and that he could finally "savor this unsilent silence, [...] soaking [it] up" while lying in bed at night, hearing only the "wind, birdsong, insects, fish jumping, branches squeaking, birch leaves scraping" (573). Unfortunately, this idyllic moment was soon interrupted by Mitch's arrival with his friends, as Dorothy preferred having Walter at home helping her with the motel. His relationship with his mother was twofold, as "he'd come openhearted to nature, and nature, in its weakness, which was like his mother's weakness, had let him down" (575). As an adult, he will leave 3M, the company where he worked as a lawyer, to start a new job for the Conservancy aiming at "safeguard[ing] nature from loutish country people like his brother," as he could "project" himself in the creatures he wanted so badly to protect, whose wish was just that "to be left alone by noisy human beings" (575). Noise, opposed to silence, is a metaphor for Walter's own state of mind and the source of his later decisions in life.

With regard to Walter's relationship with Joey, both his tough background and Patty's own relationship with the boy had an impact on it. Merrie Paulsen was amused especially by the fact that "in Patty's stories the discipline always came from Walter, as if Patty was some feckless bystander whose job was to be cute," so that the one "confused about the distinction between children and adults" seemed not so much the son, but rather the mother (10). Walter's difficulty was caused mostly by the questioning of his authority, which was not taken seriously both by Joey – who felt he could disobey his parents' rule about turning the lights out at nighttime, or who called Walter "son" because "it's a rap thing" and it was not meant as an offensive epithet, or answered him disrespectfully when threatened of being punished – and by Patty – who would step in, undermining even more Walter's efforts (11-2). In addition, when

Patty decided to send Joey monthly checks while he was at university, she hid it from Walter, thus creating an even deeper rift between father and son, marking once again the difference between the kind of parents she and Walter were. And even before that, “she didn’t feel she was being unfaithful to Walter when she made Joey laugh at his eccentricities [...] because these were all things she herself had learned to love in him [...] and she wanted Joey to see Walter her way” (187-8). Patty also thought that Walter, in his conflicts with Joey, had failed “to understand him and earn his respect, [...] replicating his relationship with his own dad” (174) and, seeing how much Joey was growing up to be completely different from him, Walter failed for “he couldn’t accept that [his own son] wasn’t like him” (187).

To understand Walter’s – and other characters’ – self narratives of development, I believe it is necessary to refer to Giddens and his notion of *protective cocoon* (40) – an emotional protection against external risks and dangers – which seems to have been damaged from the very beginning by parents and siblings in problematic family settings. Walter, for instance, resembles what Giddens calls an ontologically insecure individual, that is a person who, being overwhelmed by anxiety and scrutinizing himself constantly, finds it difficult to find continuity in his own narrative and is incapable of sustaining his *protective cocoon* (53-4). In Walter’s case, as a matter of fact, the main outcome of his instability is the question “How to live?” (401), which expresses powerfully all his feelings of being lost, incapable of trusting his own self and the environment in which he lives. I wish to explore this condition more in depth, linking it with characters’ life decisions and their making sense of their own lives, as they are not completely passive people, but they are inevitably doomed by the freedom that haunts contemporary societies – a freedom that Franzen wishes to problematize, portraying it as a source not only of great opportunities, but also of ambiguity, anxiety and Hamletic doubts.

4.2 Making the world a better place: the environment, politics and other troubles

As I have pointed out in the previous chapter, it is interesting to see how the different dimensions of a human being’s life are strictly interrelated and how one’s perception of oneself is not something that originates only within the individual but is permeated by the surrounding environment and by interactions with others. Therefore,

deciding what kind of life to have, where to live, what kind of job to do, are all decisions that see the self acting in different communities which shape and are in turn shaped by all its members. This is a self that “discover[s] and constitute[s] itself in relation to other selves” (Schrag 77). After having seen how characters in *Freedom* have been greatly affected by their family backgrounds, another aspect I deem important to explore is the way in which they interact within the different communities they find themselves in – college friends, work colleagues, neighbors. The choices they make regarding their lives outside of the familial environment are linked to the – I would say bewildered – perceptions they have of themselves and of the world that surrounds them. However, we should remember that, as Calvin Schrag emphasizes, there is a difference between community and society, for “community” is a notion linked to values and to “an ethico-moral dimension of human life” (87). In addition, it is important to notice that when talking about the self in relation to others, a distinction must be made between being “context-conditioned” and “context-determined”: human beings are influenced by the historical time in which they live and the society with which they interact; however, they are also able to think independently from them and create an entirely new vision of the world (Schrag 107). Consequently,

The self in community is a self situated in this space of communicative praxis, historically embedded, existing with others, inclusive of predecessors, contemporaries and successors. Never an island entire of itself, the self remains rooted in history but it is not suffocated by the influx of historical form and forces. The communalized self is *in* history but not *of* history. (Schrag 109)

Therefore, a human being’s life is always a complex fabric, made up of intertwining systems, both within and outside the self. In the following paragraphs, I will show the importance of this complexity in characters’ lives and experiences.

In the third section of the novel, “2004”, Walter’s professional situation starts to be outlined, since, until this point in the book, it had only been presented marginally, with an emphasis on how shocked the neighbors in Saint Paul were when they found out an article on the *New York Times* about Walter’s dealings with the coal industry – something unimaginable from someone “who was greener than Greenpeace [...]” (3). After moving to Washington, Walter and his assistant Lalitha decided to call Richard Katz to make him a sort of business proposal. During their meeting, they explained to

Richard that Walter had been working for the Cerulean Mountain Trust, an organization set up by Vin Haven, “a big oil-and-gas guy” (262), republican, friend with Bush and Cheney and bird lover, willing to protect especially the cerulean warbler species. He “had seen an opportunity to partner with coal companies to create a very large, permanent private reserve for the warbler and other [...] species [...] as long as they were allowed to continue extracting coal” (263). In fact, if the bird had been declared among the species not threatened by extinction, coal mining practices would not have been stopped. Hence, the companies would be allowed to extract coal in one third of the area in exchange for letting the Trust build the warbler reserve. However, the coal extraction would have been performed via MTR, that is mountaintop removal – an “ecologically deplorable” practice that consists in exposing coal seams by removing the topsoil and vegetation, blowing the mountain surface away (264). This kind of project would have required “sacrificing mountain ridges and displacing poor families from their ancestral homes” (267), thus dissuading any kind of financing, either from the state or from privates. Walter’s idea of restoring the land through forest reclamation, generating a biodiverse new forest and creating green sustainable jobs, had a strong opponent in the environmental mainstream and public opinion. Besides, the problem was also that Vin Haven hadn’t been completely honest to Walter. As a matter of fact, in 2001, vice president Cheney had told Vin that Bush was going to make natural gas extraction economically feasible in the Appalachians, the cerulean warbler main habitat. Hence, Vin had bought mineral rights of different areas of West Virginia letting Walter believe that he “was safeguarding possible future preserve sites for the Trust” (270), while he was actually trying to get an economic return. Walter, admitting having been played, came to Richard for he had thought of a new plan involving overpopulation, which is the “final cause [...] the root of pretty much every problem we have” (274). According to Walter, any measure adopted to try and save the environment and improve quality of life would be useless, because unsustainable population growth is linked to everything: poverty, resources’ consumption, pollution, famine and so forth. The reason why he called up on Richard was that their new project aimed at sensitizing the public opinion on the issue of overpopulation, reaching especially young people and offering them summer internships to take part to a music-and-politics festival. For the event to succeed and grab the attention of college kids,

Walter and Lalitha needed Katz's image and his involvement in the project to make it "cool" and "viral" (280). After thinking about it, Richard decided to accept the offer and sent an email to Walter to let him know. At that moment, Walter was in West Virginia with Lalitha celebrating the finalized deal between the Trust and the coal companies, but he received also another email, from a reporter of the *New York Times* who wanted to talk to him about the (supposedly still secret) signing of that morning. Feeling "deprived and anxious and sorry for himself" (404), he called Patty and instead of getting the reassurance that he had hoped for, he only got her skepticism and bitter sarcasm about Lalitha's "Pretty Face" having taken over the job of comforting him (408).

Walter's situation has started to unfold as a precarious one, not only on the personal side – his relationships with Patty and his son seem to be deteriorating, while he is falling in love with his young and devoted assistant – but also on the professional one, as he is in a very delicate position: on the one hand, he needs to manage the Trust dealings and the relocation of the families in Wyoming County, while on the other, he is trying to spread awareness about the cause he really is engaged with. The "fragmentation" (273) he talks about when explaining to Richard how he feels about human intervention in the environment is the same fragmentation his life has been subjected to – struggling with his family, during the college years and now with all this. Walter's concerns for the environment, birds and overpopulation are strictly linked to his personal life, the fears, insecurity and anger he has developed through his whole life. He doesn't seem to realize it, but Katz is surprised by what an "angry crank" (273) he has become, and Patty, during one of their fights, brings up his competitiveness, telling him how he had always competed against Richard and how now he wants her to get a job only because she is making him a "loser" (413). Even though this is Patty's opinion, the reader might be inclined to believe her when later on, after reading her manuscript and finding out about her betrayal, Walter tells her: "Do you think there's anything in your writing that surprised me? Do you think I didn't know every fucking bit of it every fucking minute of the way?" (583) Indeed, it seems that Walter's relationship with Richard had been unbalanced from the very beginning, when in college Richard had sex with a girl Walter liked and justified it as a way to show his friend her "worthlessness" (169). Or again when years later Walnut Surprise,

Richard's band, achieved great success thanks to their new album *Nameless Lake* and Walter "said he understood why Richard hardly ever called him anymore, [...] that he had a lot on his plate now, but he didn't really understand it" (232). I will come back to Walter and Richard's friendship in chapter 4.4 to analyze more in depth how it shaped Walter's personality and his choices. Yet, I would argue that Walter's issue, thus, is not only competitiveness, but also the risk of losing what he holds dear and, therefore, the tentativeness of his decision-making. In fact, every time that he had tried to make a positive impact, to be an active citizen engaging in important causes, what he got in return was not what he had expected. Even though he knew about Haven's involvement with the coal companies and his political friendships, he "had a low opinion of the Bush-Cheney venture in Iraq and an even lower opinion of the moral hygiene of defense contractors" (378) and he considered the body-armor deal with LBI to relocate Wyoming County inhabitants "exorbitant and distasteful" (393). Yet, at the same time, he listened to Lalitha's enthusiasm about being "a model of compassionate relocation and retraining of people displaced by endangered-species conservation" and let her convince him of the silver lining behind it (378). The real problem was overpopulation and "the unclouded serenity of his countrymen's indifference made him wild with anger" (395). An anger that he was aware had an "intimate connection" with depression; he knew how his obsession "was feeding on frustration with his wife and disappointment with his son. [...] Probably, if he'd been truly alone in his anger, he couldn't have stood it. But Lalitha was with him every step of the way" (396). Thus, making the right choice is all but a clear-cut process and compromises seem to be a daily occurrence for him.

The issue of MTR and the Cerulean Mountain Trust could be perceived as ironically staged to point at the paradoxical condition of having to destroy the environment first to then be able to preserve a bird species from extinction – something we would never expect from Walter. However, I believe that the author's intention when plotting this – arguably improbable – circumstance was a different one. It is true that Franzen is a passionate bird-watcher and, as a matter of fact, many of his essays are dedicated to his beloved hobby. He also wrote some articles in which he expressed "his hopelessness about our ability to avert catastrophic climate change" and his

“skeptical[ism] about a movement that seeks to dismantle the capitalist world order in the next few years, and that imagines that human beings are fundamentally rational and nice and only the carbon industry is evil” (Renner). I would like to quote part of an interview that Franzen gave to Amanda Little for *The Guardian*, specifically on this matter:

Q. You've said *Freedom* is your first non-satirical work of fiction. I did interpret Walter as a satire – as the desperate, failing, wacky environmentalist who's saying let's chop down mountains and destroy rivers to save this one rare bird. Do you think it's realistic to blast mountains and destroy river systems to save a bird?

A. That's a tough call. How do we continue generating electricity in this country? You want more nuclear? You want to cover this country with wind turbines? Wind power's impact on wildlife alone is very, very substantial. The impact on the sense of there being an outdoors that isn't just a factory for power is radically altered if you cover the landscape with turbines. Natural-gas drilling also has a huge negative impact. It totally fragments the habitat. It renders it unusable to the most sensitive species, which are the ones we're most concerned about. And everyone's talking about MTR in Appalachia while the gas drillers there are having a field day. So the question is really, really complicated.

Walter comes to feel that coal is maybe not so bad. He sees that we aren't going to stop using coal in this country, and he asks, "Why don't we talk about how to do it better, how to do it right, rather than taking extreme positions that feel good but have no realistic alternative solutions to offer?" His position is not my position, exactly – I'm an agnostic on this stuff. But I don't actually think it's a crazy position to take. (Little)

Franzen prefers not to take sides environmentally speaking, although he tries to present justifications for the reason why someone could think about an alternative considered infeasible and extremely harmful for the ecosystem.

Truth is that MTR is already a problem. It started in the 1970s, even though it spread more systematically in the '90s, especially in West Virginia. In 1999, it was defined as “one of the most egregious and little-known instances of environmental

degradation taking place in the United States” (Fox 163). MTR can be considered ecologically destructive not only for stripping away mountaintops, but also for the acid elements that pollute water in the nearby streams (Fox 165); besides, research has found a correlation between MTR and increases in several illnesses (lung cancer included) among the people who live in the Appalachian area, which is also one of the poorest in the US, considering the low employment rates (Schiffman).

With this premise, the situation depicted in *Freedom* starts to take on a sinister tone, for Vin Haven’s scheme looks already implemented in the real world – and without any bird reserve project to reclaim the forests destroyed.⁵ Amanda Little interpreted Walter as a satire, for destroying mountains and river systems to save a bird does not sound, according to her, a realistic project. However, I would argue that here the problem has deeper roots. During his speech at the inauguration of the body armor plant (as we will see below, too), Walter ironically describes the “perfect world” in which we live as a place where one’s comforts are the priority and surrounding oneself with cars and technology at the expense of the environment and other populations’ lives has become commonplace. It is a “perfect world” where you “don’t have to think about any of the ugly consequences” (608).

As Liesbeth Korthals Altes affirms,

An ironic utterance indeed conveys information about the speaker’s attitude only if I have already classified it as ironic on the basis of what I perceive to be textual signals, or alternately, on the basis of my prior information or contextually situated hypotheses about a speaker’s ethos, attitude and values. [...] In other words, inferences about ironic meanings may be prompted if we have identified the mental profile of the utterance’s source as an ironist [...]. [...] one discourse can embed or quote another voice or thought, with or without explicitly marking the quotation as such. (223-4)

In this case, I would attribute an ironic stance to what Walter says (in the first part of the speech) not because I consider him an ironist, but because of the circumstances of the speech, the background context and the presence of expressions such as “perfect

⁵ In 2009, NRDC and Appalachian Voices did, in fact, declare as failed the projects of reclamation, for only 5% of mined land had actually been reclaimed for economic development. (http://www.ilovemountains.org/reclamation-fail/mining-reclamation-2010/MTR_Economic_Reclamation_Report_for_NRDC_V7.pdf, last accessed on 11/06/2019)

world” and “excellent things like acid rain”, which clearly mean the opposite and are further enhanced by the rest of the speech in which he, instead, talks straightforwardly to the people of Forster Hollow. In this instance, his point of view is that of politicians and corporations that are interested in gaining power, authority and economic hegemony, exploiting the environment and finite resources such as coal, oil and gas, while common people – “the middle class” – enjoy the comforts of a 21st century lifestyle... as long as they are not asked to leave their houses. Keeping in mind Franzen’s environmental point of view, I would argue that the irony lies in the bigger picture of a society that has taken its precious freedom and turned it into an indisputable right, without realizing that the consequences are twofold and that compromises always need to be made. Yet, how are we to decide which compromises are worth making? Is there a limit to our rights? Franzen urges us to reflect upon the duties that come with freedom, and not only our rights; to remind us that our responsibilities toward others and the environment in which we live are ineluctable and, if we continue ignoring them, they will come knocking on our door sooner or later.

The political situation in America stands out in the novel not only when Walter’s environmentalism is dealt with, but also in some other instances. Interestingly, the first hint about politics is given in the first section of the book, from the point of view of St. Paul neighbors, who saw the Berglunds as “the superguilty sort of liberals who needed to forgive everybody so their own good fortune could be forgiven” and Patty as “allergic to politics,” “certainly no feminist,” with something “rather Reaganite” in her (8-9). Afterwards, even though they are in the novel only for few pages and don’t make a huge impact on the progression of the story, Coyle Mathis, Blake and Jonathan’s father come into the picture – three characters who should not be overlooked, for the communities they represent share some political values that have become more and more prevalent, spreading in the US especially after 9/11. Blake is Carol Monaghan’s new boyfriend and, in a short period of time, manages to be despised in the Ramsey Hill neighborhood: he would “let anthem rock throb” out of his pick-up, “chainsaw every tree in [Carol’s] back yard and run wild with a rented backhoe” (21). Not to mention the “I’m white and I vote” sign that he exhibited on his car. Coyle Mathis, on the other hand, “embodied the pure negative spirit of

backcountry West Virginia,” as he expressed his hatred towards everybody he had to deal with: “Big Coal, the United Mine Workers, environmentalists, all forms of government, black people, meddling white Yankees [...]” (370). As we have already seen in chapter 2, these characters can be interpreted as representatives of a widespread right-wing populism, a system of values that had started to disseminate through society and different social classes. Indeed, an example of republicanism, which, however, is not tinged by such aggressive populism, is Jonathan’s (Joey’s roommate) father, “the founder and luminary president of a think tank devoted to advocating the unilateral exercise of American military supremacy to make the world freer and safer” (327). The conversation that he had with Joey when he went to visit Jonathan’s family for Thanksgiving pretty much describes his ideas and political views, for he expressed with absolute confidence that “we have to learn to be comfortable with stretching some facts [...] in the service of a greater truth” (335) and that “freedom is a pain in the ass. And that’s precisely why it’s so imperative [...] to get a nation of free people to let go of their bad logic and sign on with better logic, by whatever means are necessary” (337). Besides, in an interview with a young fan of his, Richard Katz gives a good picture of what republicanism has become, the values it stands for, in a quite sarcastic tone. He conveys his distaste for consumerism and new capitalistic trends, claiming that “Apple Computer must be way more committed to a better world, because iPods are so much cooler-looking than other MP3 players” (251), so “getting to have your own iPod is itself the very thing that makes the world a better place. [The Republican Party] leave it up to the individual to decide what a better world might be. It’s the party of liberty” (252) and “we already *are* perfect Republican role models” as our motto is “me me me, buy buy buy, party party party” (253).

Walter’s political stance, opposite to Blake and Mathis’s, is stated explicitly during his conversations with Richard, when he complained of Clinton and his total carelessness for the environment, or that the conservatives had defeated the Democrats, “especially culturally,” converting them to a center-right ideology (277). Arguing with Patty about the money she was sending to Joey to help him out with his social expenses, Walter made an interesting comparison between his son and “free-market companies sucking on the tit of the federal government” (411), “pretending to be so grownup and free-market when they’re actually just big babies devouring the

federal budget” (412). And further on, when he had to give a speech in West Virginia to the families of Forster Hollow who had been relocated and hired by LBI, overwhelmed by the antidepressant drug he had taken the night before and by the fact that “the world was moving ahead, the world was full of winners [...] while he was left behind with the dead and dying and the forgotten” (604), Walter started shouting at the mike, welcoming the audience to the American middle class, “the mainstay of economies all around the globe” (607), the place where you “can help denude every last scrap of native habitat [...], buy six-foot-wide plasma TV screens [...] and you don’t have to think about any of the ugly consequences” (608). Even though politics is not the main theme dealt with in *Freedom*, it is strictly related to the issues of environmentalism Walter holds dear. Besides, the opposition between the different values belonging to republicanism and liberalism is brought up in different situations and politics is presented as a remarkable presence throughout the novel and in people’s lives, for it is a way to define one’s priorities and make certain choices, even though, as we are reminded in the book, the world is not all black and white – the more complex the problems become, the more nuances emerge and the more difficult it becomes to take sides.

Joey is another character who experiences, like his father, tentativeness and uncertainty, who is not so sure about how to distinguish good and bad and how to make choices which could have a big impact on other people’s lives. When he started to work for Jonathan’s dad think tank (funded by LBI), his job required him to “research ways in which LBI might commercially exploit an American invasion and takeover of Iraq, and then writing up these commercial possibilities as arguments for invading” (487). Later, Joey was offered a job in an LBI subsidiary, “Restore Iraqi Secular Enterprise Now”, which was involved in the privatization of the bread-baking market in Iraq and, after that, his boss Kenny decided to sell RISEN and start a new business, providing trucks to the American military in Iraq; thus, he asked Joey to become his partner, tracking down spare parts for these trucks (a very specific kind, the Pladsky A10) and promising a huge reward. Joey was actually able to find the parts in Paraguay, only to find out that they were all rusty and unusable. After making a fantastic deal with the owner of the parts, he felt “good about the way he’d handled the negotiation,” but this feeling of coolness faded right away, when he started thinking

about the problem he had just put himself in, fearing the worst and aware of having spent already all Connie's trust fund money (548). He called Connie asking for some support, asking her whether he should have been "morally worried" about "selling total crap to the government" (550). As Connie was not very helpful, expressing once again her unquestionable loyalty to him no matter what he could have done, "Joey wished there were some different world he could belong to, some simpler world in which a good life could be had at nobody else's expense" (550). In the end, Joey seems not to care so much about the money he is going to receive (\$ 850,000) as he did at the beginning, but rather worried about the implications that his deal could provoke. Despite his trying to make amends – calling LBI to explain the situation, asking Jonathan to blow the whistle at the Post (where he was working) – he could not do anything else but accept the situation and let himself become prey of depression. In this moment, he decided to turn to his father, as "Connie's love was too unqualified, his mother's too self-involved, Jonathan's too secondary [...] and now the time had come to admit that he was beaten" (555-6).

In *Freedom*, depression has already made its appearance, as it has hit Patty and Connie – and I would argue Walter as well, at a certain point, even though in a different way. As I will try to show in the next chapter as well, I believe most of the times it is possible to link this pathological outcome with an issue that Timmer has defined as a symptom of post-postmodern times: the lack of decision-making tools. In Franzen's novel, characters feel as if they were "bounc[ing] around like random billiard balls, reacting to the latest random stimuli" (273). As Schwartz et al. state in their research on the correlation between happiness and making choices, depression is a quite common reaction when people do not reach the success they had hoped for; however, when there is a poor number of choices, it is easier to blame the world, whereas when the choices are plentiful, people tend to find the source of blame in themselves (1194). The choices that Walter and Joey are asked to make will lead them to situations out of their control, but in which they will nonetheless have to react, feeling vulnerable and disoriented. This pattern, as we will see, emerges even more in personal affective relationships.

The issues that the novel brings forth are, therefore, involving different communities and different social classes in various ways, but they are also significant

to the analysis I am carrying out, for they provide a picture of the social background in which characters develop their sense of self, their understanding of the world and of their lives in connection with it and with other people, who experience the same world, but from different perspectives. Even though each individual lives in a specific situation and has a different story, everyone lives in the present tense of a country which is permeated by political tensions, fear of terrorism, anger, vulnerability and prejudice. The characters that I have analyzed feel on the one hand compelled to act in some ways, to show their ability to “win the game”, while on the other they are obsessed by doing the best thing, making a choice without really knowing whether the direction they are taking is the right one, but trying nonetheless.

Franzen has been accused of resorting to realism in *Freedom*, leaving behind all the postmodern features he had tried to keep alive in his first novels. As I have shown in chapter 3, post-postmodern works have made different uses of realism, reshaping it according to their needs. Different scholars have already linked *Freedom* to the notion of realism introduced by Lukács, which is based on a deep analysis of the real world that does not stop at the surface, but that reaches for the essence. Both Gram and Hidalgo have found connections to Lukács’s ideas in the way Franzen deals with the themes of environmentalism, population growth and the American social background portrayed (see chapter 2). However, I would argue that Lukács’s influence can be found in other aspects of the novel, too. For instance, his notion of delving deeper to unearth “the contradictions of life and society” can be found also in the way personal relationships are narrativized and in the psychological issues that we have already started to examine. On the other hand, a complete parallelism cannot be drawn when considering the prophetic nature Lukács attributed to realist works. In my opinion, the aim of *Freedom* is not that of foreseeing in some way the future progression of American history and society (even though the environmental turn focuses on the potential future outcome), but rather, for all the issues the novel brings forth, its function could certainly be that of connecting with its readers without providing easy answers, but “by making ethical demands upon us” (Walker Bergström 115), such as Walter’s “how to live?” In chapter 5 I will come back to the notion of

realism to explore the theme of freedom and its consequences – the *fil rouge* of the novel.

4.3 Narcissism and American exceptionalism – a winning combination?

Narcissism in the United States is an old issue. Even though in the 21st century the American culture has been dubbed as more narcissistic than ever, narcissism was a widespread problem also in the previous decades, as articles and books written since the 1960's prove. *Time* magazine dedicated a cover in 2013 to the “ME ME ME generation” which actually recalls the “Me generation” issued in *New York* magazine some forty years earlier – apparently, in every decade some evidence can be found in mainstream publications accusing young people to be doomed by narcissism (Reeve).

Today, not only do experts and psychologists not agree on the exacerbation of the problem, but they also cannot come up with a single, unequivocal definition that states exactly what narcissism is and what it entails.

Starting from the myth of Narcissus, which appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, one of the main elements of the story is “an identifiable splitting, disjunction or separation”, which is common to all different and later variants of the story itself (Andréoli 13). The episode that precedes Narcissus most known scene is important, for it features Tiresias, the seer, questioned by Narcissus's mother about his future. Tiresias enigmatically answers her that her son “will enjoy long life [...] if he is not to know himself” (Andréoli 15). What is exactly the meaning of “knowing oneself” (*se novere* in Latin)? When Narcissus sees his reflection on water, he does not know it is himself; rather he sees “someone other than himself, independent of him” (Andréoli 16). He is mesmerized by his image and unable to react, feeling as if he were the only one on earth to love “so cruelly” (Hannan 569). When he understands that what he is seeing is only an image, he has an epiphanic moment and realizes that *Iste ego sum* – “I am him.” Illusion obliterated, he now knows that he is “split”; yet, he wishes he could leave his own body, even though his body is his object of love (Andréoli 16-7). He stares at his image painfully; when “his tears ripple the surface of the water and disturb his reflection,” he is afraid “to release his beloved even momentarily” (Hannan 571). Thus, he causes his death, while Echo, the nymph he had earlier rejected, perishes with him, echoing his words and the pain she had already felt (Hannan 571).

The knowledge Narcissus achieved reveals to be lethal, as Tiresias predicted, although some philosophers would argue that Narcissus never really comes to know himself, for “an authentic knowledge of himself [...] is possible only, if at all, by leaving oneself in communication with the other” (Andréoli 17).

In *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1914), Sigmund Freud distinguished two phases of narcissism. Primary narcissism is the “universal original condition” in which ego-cathexis, that is attachment to oneself, and object-cathexis, that is investment in persons or things outside oneself, can coexist (Hannan 561). In particular, for the child the object-cathexis is the attachment to the mother, while, for parents, the love they feel towards their child is nothing else but the narcissism they once experienced and which is now transformed into object-love (Mancia 10; Freud 21). Secondary narcissism is instead the “withdrawal of libidinal energy from objects back into the self where it remains” (Hannan 561). However, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud offered a different reading, in which primary narcissism occurs when the Ego is not yet mature; instead, secondary narcissism is linked to the consolidation of the Ego, which splits from the Id and becomes its love-object (Mancia 17). Later, Freud will link the concept of narcissism with the Dual Instinct Theory (or Death Drive), for the death instinct plays in opposition to the Eros. However, Freud’s concept of narcissism is not devoid of ambiguities; therefore, it is not surprising that scholars (e.g. Grunberger, Klein, Kohut, Kernberg etc.) have built on the notion of narcissism differently and that today this term has been adapted to different circumstances (Mancia 18-20).

In the 20th century, narcissism was associated with “anti-social and self-destructive” behaviors, together with “an over-inflated, unrealistic sense of self” (Battan 199). At the same time, it has also been described as a “timeless” malaise that consists in “pervasive forms of self-deception, self-hatred and the possible annihilation of the entire human community” (Battan 199). In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch tried to explain how a general crisis of the Western culture, together with economic and political turmoil, affected the very core of human personality and narcissism as well (Lasch xiii-xviii). According to him, narcissistic traits are present in everybody, but “the prevailing social conditions” bring them out as a way to fight and survive “the tensions and anxieties of modern life” (Lasch 50). Thus, “the new

narcissist is haunted [...] by anxiety. He seeks [...] to find a meaning in life. Liberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even the reality of his own existence” (Lasch xvi). Richard Sennett, too, emphasized the fragmentation and fragility of the modern self, which becomes as “contextualized and dispersed” as the social world does (Giddens 170). In his account, the narcissistic individual is so preoccupied with himself that he cannot identify external worlds as such, for he is focused on the only thing that matters: the “search for self-identity,” which in the end proves to be unattainable because of his self-absorption (Giddens 170). Generally, the narcissistic personality emerges when relationships lack trust, especially in childhood, and it develops because of a need to shield the ego from the threats of modern life: the narcissist craves attentions from others to feed his own self-esteem, but at the same time he experiences feelings of emptiness, despair, lack of ability and of power, particularly to communicate with others (Giddens 173, 178). “Lacking full engagement with others, the narcissist depends on continual infusion of admiration and approval to bolster an uncertain sense of self-worth” (Giddens 172). However, Lasch says, the world is perceived as dangerous, without a future to which one can aspire and without a past on which one can rely (Lasch 51). Besides, consumerism – which has become so prevalent in the past few decades of economic growth and restless capitalism – pushes narcissism even further, as it encourages to focus on appearances as the only place where to find “an unblemished, socially valued self” (Giddens 172). Although the concept of narcissism has evolved together with society and culture, Sennett relates it back to the myth, for, “when one cannot distinguish between self and other and treats reality as a projection of self, one is in danger. [...] his sense of outside is so taken up by reflections of himself, that the self disappears; it is destroyed” (Sennett 72).

How is this disorder portrayed in *Freedom* and how can it be useful for our understanding of the characters’ sense of self and the development of their trajectories? I will try to explain it in the following paragraphs, linking narcissism with the issues I have already analyzed and with the specific historical moment in which the novel is set.

While visiting his roommate Jonathan's family, Joey got along particularly with his father, who, when he found out about Joey's Jewish origins, left in his room some books for him to peruse and learn more about his religious legacy, which his mother had always been indifferent to.

Flipping through them, feeling both a deep lack of personal interest and a deepening respect for people who were interested, Joey became angry with his mother all over again. Her disrespect of religion seemed to him just more of her me me me: her competitive Copernican wish to be the sun around which all things revolved. (342)

"Me me me" mirrors exactly how Joel Stein defined the millennials' generation; however, here Joey is referring to Patty, who comes across throughout the novel as a woman who reflects many of the typical narcissistic characteristics summarized above. We have come to know Patty first for her competitiveness and low self-esteem, then for her excessive love and devotion towards her son and now for her self-centeredness. As I have already pointed out in the first section of the analysis, Patty's main traits emerge both from her autobiography and from others' thoughts about her. For instance, in her manuscript she recalls how one night in St. Paul, when Richard stopped by to have dinner with the Berglunds, she had been caught in her new hobby: drinking.

Richard gave her a hard look. "You should cool it with the drinking," he said. He might as well have punched her in the sternum. Where Walter's disapproval actively fed her misbehavior, Richard's had the effect of catching her out in her childishness, of exposing her unattractiveness to daylight. [...]

"So, let's see, then," Patty said. "We've got individuation for Joey, we've got relief for Walter, but then, for Patty, what? What does she get? Wine, I guess. Right? Patty gets wine."

"Whoa," Richard said. "Little bit of self-pity there?"

"For God's sake," Walter said.

It was terrible to see, through Richard's eyes, what she'd been turning into. [...] he illuminated in a flash what a self-absorbed little child she'd been able to remain by walling herself inside her lovely house. She'd run from her family's babyishness only to be just as big a baby herself. (193-4)

Patty blames her freedom for pitying herself so much, despite all the good things she has in her life – a freedom that “was killing her but she was nonetheless unable to let go of” (224, 227). Her depression started one night when, after discovering her friend Eliza had lied to her about being sick, she went to play a basketball game, but things didn’t go the usual way – “she experienced a peculiar weakness at her core” (106). It was the night in which, as Patty admitted to herself, she “lost her religion” and “felt defeated by injustice,” a defeat of the heart (106-7). It was like hemorrhaging confidence; she felt “the game swirling around her, totally out of her control,” foreseeing the “emptiness of her future and the futility of struggle” (109).

Emptiness is the other problem haunting Patty, which she perceives as a “pointlessness of her existence,” consequent to her depression, and which becomes Walter’s “lot in life to do his best to fill with love” (382). Since the beginning of their love story, he had been supportive of Patty, admired all her good qualities and tried his best to fulfill her wishes. However, Patty has not always been responsive to his love, mainly because of her attraction to Richard and because of Joey’s situation, which she blamed on Walter, too (in the next section I will focus specifically on their relationship as a couple and on Richard’s role in it). With regard to her drinking she explains in her memoir that she wasn’t an alcoholic, but that “she was just turning out to be like her dad, who sometimes escaped his family by drinking too much” (186). Walter, despite his hate of alcohol (his father had been addicted to it, too), came to accept it and even like it as something that was part of her:

[...] because he loved her breath, because her breath came from deep inside her and he loved the inside of her. This was the sort of thing he used to say to her—the sort of avowal she couldn’t reciprocate and was nevertheless intoxicated by. But once the one or two glasses turned into six or eight glasses, everything changed. Walter needed her sober at night so she could listen to all the things he thought were morally defective in their son, while she needed not to be sober so as not to have to listen. It wasn’t alcoholism, it was self-defense. (186)

Patty is intoxicated by Walter’s sweet words, and she knows now that, also in college, when she was a basketball star, “compliments were like a beverage she was unconsciously smart enough to deny herself [...] because her thirst for them was infinite” (64). However, the outside world is for Patty a place to run away from; her

own family – the one that she longed for so much – has let her down as well and is not safe anymore. Now, her only fear seems to be that of losing herself, so much so that she needs a shield, a self-protection, to isolate her from any danger. Patty is a victim of herself, as she keeps losing control over her emotions, letting herself drink too much, feeling sorry for her situation and in constant need of attention and approval – she cannot find who she truly is and accept it. In the next chapter, I will explore more thoroughly her relationships with Richard and Walter to show how she is able to recover from her self-pity and narcissism, how she finds a new way to live and to relate to others.

In *Freedom*, the character who actually belongs to the “me me me” generation is Joey and he, too, appears to be matching the narcissist model on quite a few traits. Indeed, from the very first pages of the chapter “Womanland”, Joey is presented with a strong sense of entitlement, since the “assurances” he had been given about his life being “a lucky one” were numberless (291). Luck plays a central role in Joey’s life, much more than his own responsibility and control over his actions. In fact, after the 9/11 terroristic attack that unsettled American lives permanently, Joey was more confused by how his own college life was not going the way he had expected, than by the “glitch” itself (292).

Later, as his troubles began to mount, it would seem to him as if his very good luck, which his childhood had taught him to consider his birthright, had been trumped by a stroke of higher-order bad luck so wrong as not even to be real. He kept waiting for its wrongness, its fraudulence, to be exposed, and for the world to be set right again, so that he could have the college experience he’d expected. When this failed to happen, he was gripped by an anger whose specific object refused to come into focus. The culprit, in hindsight, seemed *almost* like bin Laden, but not quite. The culprit was something deeper, something not political, something structurally malicious, like the bump in a sidewalk that trips you and lands you on your face when you’re out innocently walking. (292)

The culprit cannot be identified, but it is certainly something that appears to make *your* life as difficult as possible, just when *you* were so sure of its progression. From this moment on, Joey’s life started to change, everything started to “seem extremely

stupid”: “people [...] kept watching the same disaster footage over and over, [...] the football game against Penn State was cancelled,” and “a big fuss was made about the students who’d lost relatives or family friends in the attacks” (292-3). His longing for a life back to normality is on the one hand understandable, but on the other it shows his inability of dealing with loss – any kind of loss, either a personal or a communal one – and his unwillingness to deal with something other than himself. His friendships also prove his self-preoccupation. For instance, during his stay with Jonathan’s family, while playing pool, Joey felt quite satisfied in seeing his own friend’s “meltdown,” which “made him uncontrollably want to smile” (340). When then Jonathan showed to be bothered by the impression his friend had made on his parents, Joey, “never having experienced envy himself, [...] was impatient with its manifestation in other people” (340-1). In addition, his feeling of “fucking grow up already” (341), expressed towards the people in high school who could not cope with his having so many friends, is a clear sign of Joey’s distorted perception of his own maturity. Another remarkable sign is the fact that, whenever he feels lonely, Joey calls Connie, either “giving [her] permission to take a Greyhound bus to visit him” – only a twenty-hour long trip (293), or generously offering to pay the bus ticket himself only to have her keep him company while he was house-sitting in New York for his aunt Abigail, thus getting him rid of the “specter of solitude” (356).

As anticipated earlier, capitalism also bears a share of guilt, as it acts as the catalyst of consumerism and, hence, of narcissism as well. One of Joey’s ambitions is that of “pursuing a business career and meeting girls [...] more exotic and advanced and connected” (293). Joey cares about money, as being “dominant and generous” at college to be part of the “herd” (305) requires funds, and that is the reason why he does not hesitate when his mother offered him monthly checks. When he later began working for Kenny Bartles at RISEN, he was aware that his “interest in the war was primarily financial” and, even though he knew it was also LBI’s main interest, he was no “less eager to cash in” (502). Joey’s entrepreneurial vein emerged quite early, when he started selling watches at Connie’s Catholic school, back when the two begun their relationship, and used to listen to U2’s *Achtung Baby*, “their love song to each other and to capitalism” (517). When Connie offered Joey to lend him the money to invest in the Pladsky business that Kenny had convinced him to accept, “the mere naming of

the figure [fifty thousand dollars] sexually excited him” (517). Besides, Joey’s peculiar way to refer to and think about his relationships with Connie shows a perspective typical of consumerism – “a flutter in his stomach [...] warned him not to mistake the pain of losing [Connie] for an active desire to have her” (517), “it was central to his faith in his future as a businessman, this ability to identify value, espy opportunity, where others didn’t and it was central to his love of Connie, too. [...] The two of them had started fucking amid the piles of twenty-dollar bills she brought home from her school” (518).

Money is what Joey needed to make an impression on Jenna, Jonathan’s stunning sister, whose boyfriend worked at Goldman Sachs and whose ambition was “a hundred acres in Connecticut, some horses and a full-time groom, and maybe a private jet” (347). Joey’s courting of Jenna was ambiguous, long and difficult, as Jenna “had dollar signs in her eyes and was all for making killings” (502). After marrying Connie, though, Joey had the chance to join Jenna (who had broken up with her boyfriend) on a trip to Argentina, which he decided to go to without informing his wife, despite Jonathan’s disapproval. Joey’s reasoning is reported once again as related to his own financial situation, as if people and money were always indissolubly tied and one affected the other:

What was burdening him now was the contrast between the muchness that he possessed—a signed contract that stood to net him \$600,000 if Paraguay came through for him; the prospect of a week abroad with the most beautiful girl he’d ever met—and the nullity of what, at this moment, he could think to offer Connie. (484)

It seems, thus, that relationships are controlled and steered by one’s own material possessions, just as sex is – “Jenna excited him the way large sums of money did, the way the delicious abdication of social responsibility and embrace of excessive resource consumption did” (486). The account of his trip with Jenna also presents a vocabulary related to business transactions and emphasizes once again Jenna’s exaggerated self-involvement – even greater than Joey’s: she looked at him “the way a person might confirm that a product she’d ordered had arrived in acceptable condition,” warned him that she had her period and then complained that the lounge did not offer free drinks – “I was like, I could have sat in the gate area and done *that*” (527-8). Joey’s interest in

Jenna is not only due to her beauty, popularity and the social status of her family, but also to the opportunity that he would have of increasing his own popularity, being the envy of all his friends – something that he cannot aspire to with Connie. As a matter of fact, while walking down 47th Street, right after buying their wedding rings, Joey and Connie met Casey, Joey’s friend, who showed his surprise of seeing him with a girl.

Casey shot Joey a frown of inquiry and comic alarm. From the various acceptable guy-to-guy responses available to him, Joey chose to produce a sheepish smirk suggesting mucho excelente sex, the irrational demands of girlfriends, their need to be bought trinkets, and so forth. Casey cast a quick connoisseurial glance at Connie’s bare shoulders and nodded judiciously. The entire exchange took four seconds, and Joey was relieved by how easy it was, even at a moment like this, to seem to Casey a person like Casey: to compartmentalize. It boded well for his continuing to have an ordinary life at college. (525)

An “ordinary life” is a symbol of certainty and safety of his position, avoiding any risk of compromising his reputation and losing others’ respect. Joey needs to “compartmentalize,” behaving according to the circumstances and the people he hangs out with. Surely, it is difficult to understand one’s own self when it depends more on the outside than on the inside.

Another interesting parallelism I believe can be drawn – and I will try to show it below – is that between Joey’s narcissism and the myth of American exceptionalism, especially considering his involvement with companies which deal with the so-called War on Terror as a response of the Bush administration to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Joey’s political sympathies change during his college years, as initially he despised Republicans like Blake, his girlfriend’s stepfather, and he disagreed with Jenna’s father and his assertions about manipulating people and “stretching facts [...] in the service of a greater truth” (335-6). During his summer job at Jonathan’s father think-tank – “devoted to advocating the unilateral exercise of American military supremacy to make the world freer and safer” (327) – Joey did some research on commercial opportunities available for the US in Iraq, later used by the think-tank as arguments to support Iraq’s invasion. The following summer, Joey worked at RISEN in dealings

which involved yet again the commercial exploitation of the war in Iraq. During those years of college, Joey's mind changed, and he started to side with the Republican party, for the one thing that he liked about it was that "they didn't *disdain* people the way liberal Democrats did" – the way his mother looked down on the Monaghans (494). He finally became convinced that "an invasion [of Iraq] was needed to safeguard America's petropolitical interests and take out Saddam's weapons of mass destruction" (494). Joey's political choices, however, are heavily influenced by his relationship with Connie, despite his ambivalent attitude: "the longer Joey persisted in siding with Connie and defending her against his mother's snobbery, the more at home he felt with the party of angry anti-snobism" (494). In the next part of the analysis I will examine more closely their relationship and explain how it affects Joey's characterization and his development throughout the book. It is interesting also to notice that the snobbish attitude he so much despises in Patty is the same Jenna shows, even though with her he is much more accommodating, so much so that he "made himself her Designated Understander" (479) – another signal of his inconsistent personality.

Earlier in the novel, the motives put forward in favor of the American intervention in Iraq are those represented by Jonathan's father ideals – bringing together the country to fulfill the "mission" (335) to reach "universal human freedom" (336) – and are the same embraced by the concept of American exceptionalism.

In the field of foreign policy – but not only – it is important to define American identity as American exceptionalism, for, when other elements and beliefs of the national identity have changed throughout the centuries, American exceptionalism has remained a national myth continuously and powerfully present in the history of the country and in its heritage (Restad 55). American exceptionalism is made up of three main ideas: first, America is a nation that has been "chosen," by either God or Nature; second, America has a "calling" or "mission" to accomplish, which is inherent in its "manifest destiny," and it consists in leading other countries by example towards freedom and democracy; finally, America is responsible for representing "the forces of good against evil" (Esch 366-8). The second and third points are particularly significant for our understanding of *Freedom's* political and social background, as the novel is set during the years in which George W. Bush exploited the myth of the

country's special role in the world to justify the intervention in the Middle East, a maneuver that leverages the idea of a "good war" against the terrorists as a responsibility of the United States (Esch 372). In the National Security Strategy document, it is stated as follows:

The United States possesses unprecedented— and unequaled—strength and influence in the world. Sustained by faith in the principles of liberty, and the value of a free society, this position comes with unparalleled responsibilities, obligations, and opportunity. The great strength of this nation must be used to promote a balance of power that favors freedom. (Overview of America's International Strategy)

As Andrew Rojecki points out, this last sentence refers to the idea that with the spread of democracy peace around the world would increase as a consequence – hence, the moral need for the United States to intervene (Rojecki 72). At the same time, America is seen as a victim which has to overcome the extraordinary pain that was inflicted by its enemies; the only way to reestablish its safety and uniqueness is that of carrying out its task. America's freedom is the main reason why Walter's grandfather had decided to leave Sweden to move to the "place where a son could still imagine he was special" (559). However, he soon realized that the US was no more blessed and no less problematic than any other country; this awareness led him to an even greater anger, because, as the heterodiegetic narrator carefully warns us, "the personality susceptible to the dream of limitless freedom is a personality also prone [...] to misanthropy and rage" (560). The rage he is talking about can be related to the violence that America's war on terror inevitably brought about – and that same rage is quite pervasive in the whole novel, as it haunts not only Joey, but Walter as well.

The way Joey is presented in the chapter "Womanland" is particularly interesting in this instance, I believe, for the vocabulary used by the external narrator, who is talking from the point of view of the young Berglund. Joey's "*personal* resentment of the terrorist attacks" is mainly due to the fact that he felt it was his "birthright" to have a good and blessed life – just as America's birthright to have a unique place in history thanks to its "chosenness" (292). In the same way, parallels can be drawn between Joey's anger towards his mother and his desire to think about his own life, working to become a wealthy and successful businessman, with America's

need for reappropriation of its privileged position and leading figure in the world. Besides, the way Joey feels about the world – a world that “conspired against him,” in which it is practically impossible to “have a good life [...] at nobody else’s expenses” (484, 550) – reflects the way in which the United States have felt about being the target of terrorist attacks.

Nonetheless, exceptionalism should not be perceived as wholly negative; as Jake Sullivan writes in *The Atlantic*, “exceptionalism is how you reconcile patriotism with internationalism” (Sullivan). I believe Joey’s development represents metaphorically this statement, for he will be able to find a new dimension and a balance between his own personal dimension and his relationships with others. In the following section, I will focus exactly on how characters grow up, how they are able to come out of their protective shell to seek a new understanding of themselves through a fuller connection with others.

4.4 “In touch with the void”: reconnecting with and through others

As we have already seen in chapter 4.1, relationships in *Freedom* are presented as problematic, precarious, threatened by the characters’ unstable personalities and the ever-changing outside world. Building strong and permanent bonds with other people is depicted as a challenge, but as a necessity, too. In the next paragraphs I will show how and why the main relationships presented in the book develop, deteriorate, have highs and lows, to then go back and strive for reconciliation – the outcome is a shared space in which identities find each other and reconnect, realizing that redemption cannot be reached in isolation.

Patty and Walter’s is certainly the main troubled relationship in the book, but from the very beginning it is influenced by another figure: Richard Katz, Walter’s best friend and roommate at college. As a matter of fact, Patty and Walter met for the first time at one of his concerts, for at that time, Patty’s best friend Eliza was dating Richard. Richard and Walter could not have been more different: “a self-absorbed, addiction-prone, unreliable, street-smart guitar player from Yonkers, New York” and “a heartbreakingly responsible Minnesota country boy” (82-3). It did not take Patty long to realize that she wasn’t attracted to Walter, who instead tried his best to get to know her since the first time they met at the Traumatatics’ concert (Richard’s band) and

offered to take the bus with her back home. Walter's first impression of her being "a genuinely nice person" was wrong according to Patty, but she understood that "the mistake she went on to make, the really big life mistake, was to go along with Walter's version of her in spite of knowing that it wasn't right" (93). The main reason Patty agreed to go out with Walter was "his connection to Richard," as "she contrived to find nonchalant ways to lead the conversation around to Richard," or she would call him back "hoping she might talk to Richard instead" (94-5). However, after ending her toxic friendship with Eliza (who had lied to her about having leukemia), she started to really appreciate Walter, especially after her knee surgery; he would go visit her at the hospital daily, becoming friendly with her basket teammates, and then he continued courting her, devoting all his free time to her. "This was the first time that a person had ever looked through her jock exterior and seen light on inside," Patty writes in her autobiography (116). Yet, Walter's niceness was not enough to stop her from flirting with Richard. After asking him a ride to New York, exploiting the fact that he was driving there the same weekend of her parents' anniversary, Richard confronted her and suggested she make up her mind about Walter, without "stringing [him] along" (132). Patty, though, felt she wanted to take the road trip with Richard, for

finally, after months of trying to be somebody who she wasn't, or wasn't quite, she'd felt and sounded like her unpretended and true self. This was why she knew she'd find a way to take the road trip. All she had to do now was surmount her guilt about Walter and her sorrow about not being the kind of person he and she both wished she were. How right he'd been to go slow with her! How smart he was about her inner dubiousness! When she considered how right and smart he was about her, she felt all the sadder and guiltier about disappointing him, and was plunged back into the roundabout of indecision. (133)

Patty's indecision between the two boys was directly linked to the confusion she felt about herself in the first place. She did make up her mind in the end and chose Walter, but she always had a sort of weird feeling about it. Even when she went for the first time to Hibbing to visit him, "the scene at the Whispering Pines [...] unsettled that self-contained state of mind in which she'd run to a guy who physically didn't do for her what his best friend did" (156). Despite being aware of her attraction for Richard, Walter decided to believe her when she reassured him that nothing had happened with

the musician and that she wanted him by her side. At the same time, she was relieved that Walter had understood something was going on, that he wasn't "stupid" about it (160).

Walter's situation is worsened by the feelings he felt for Richard – as Patty defined it, it was love "at first sight" (164). Their friendship started at Macalester college, with Richard being impressed by the fact that Walter came from the town Bob Dylan grew up in, and Walter being struck by the "tall unsmiling" person who stood in a corner during the orientation meeting held for freshmen (165). Having no family of his own (his dad had died, and his mother had left him), Richard was welcomed in Walter's family, and he made a nice impression both on Dorothy and Gene, showing his interest in casseroles recipes as well as guns. Nonetheless, Walter always felt competitive and didn't trust him, because "he could never shake the feeling that Richard was hiding stuff from him; that there was a dark side of him always going off in the night [...], that he was happy to be friends with Walter as long as it was understood that he was the top dog" (169). Even when Patty chose him, he confided to her that he had a "*problem*" (159) with Richard – a problem that remained unresolved for a very long time, a sort of premonition for what would happen later in their lives when Patty and Richard would betray him.

After an unlucky period with his music business, Richard, "homeless, at the age of forty-four, [...] with maxed-out credit cards," was saved by his big brother Walter who offered him to stay in his departed mother's house on a lake near Grand Rapids, so that he could spend his time writing new music and helping him with the renovation of the house "while he got his life sorted out" – some ongoing business, that of sorting out one's life, which all the characters in the novel share (192). At that time, Walter's marriage, after some beautiful years, had started to fall apart because of Joey's situation – and mostly because Patty blamed Walter for what had happened and the fact that Joey had moved in with the Monaghans. One day, Patty and Richard found themselves alone in Nameless Lake house and Patty described those moments as follows:

[...] as if a ruthless and well-organized party of resistance fighters had assembled under cover of the darkness of her mind, and so it was *imperative* not to let the spotlight of her conscience shine anywhere near them, not even

for one second. Her love of Walter and her loyalty to him, her wish to be a good person, her understanding of Walter's lifelong competition with Richard, her sober appraisal of Richard's character, and just the all-around shittiness of sleeping with your spouse's best friend: these superior considerations stood ready to annihilate the resistance fighters. And so she had to keep the forces of conscience fully diverted. [...] the tiniest hint of ordinary flirting would attract the searchlight, and the spectacle it illuminated would be just too revolting and shameful and pathetic. [...]

Her pulse, however, knew—and was telling her with its racing—that she would probably not have another chance like this. (198-9)

The military vocabulary she used to convey her feelings gives the impression that Patty was split in two squads which were fighting one with the other. In the end, “the resistance fighters had been exposed” (208), and during the night, while sleeping, she let herself crawl in Richard's bed. The account of this sleepwalking episode is peculiar, as Patty herself, at the moment of writing, is on the one hand skeptical about it, but, on the other, “*adamant* in her insistence that she was not awake at the moment of betraying Walter” (210). Since then, Patty felt that remorse, indecision and confusion got hold of her. When she headed to Philadelphia for Parents' Weekend at Jessica's college and tried to see Richard again there, he didn't show up, but called her to tell her about his conversation with Walter, how happy he was about their relationship, “happiest in many years” (225). For Patty this marked a new beginning – a stage of her life deeply affected by depression and a freedom she could not give up.

Things got complicated when a new assistant came into Walter's life. After leaving the Nature Conservancy and starting to work for the Cerulean Mountain Trust, Walter hired Lalitha, a beautiful young woman of Bengali origin, who Richard immediately realized “*adored*” his friend (263). His prediction turned out to be right, as Walter, witnessing the decline of his marriage and the fruitlessness of his efforts to save it, fell in love with the girl little by little. At first, he felt that between him and Lalitha “a kind of father-daughter thing” was going on (282), even though he was aware that “Lalitha *was* better than Patty” and that Patty had noticed his admiration for his assistant (382). Not for a moment until then, though, did Walter let himself think of leaving his wife for Lalitha, for

however unworkable his life with Patty had become, he loved Patty in some wholly other way, some larger and more abstract but nevertheless essential way that was about a lifetime of responsibility; about being a good person. [...] Patty still needed him to think the world of her. He knew this, because why else hadn't she left him? He knew it very, very well. (382)

During his trip with Lalitha to West Virginia and their dinner together to celebrate the signing of the contracts between the Trust and its industry partners, Walter began to see it differently and admit to himself that, being asked some advice on the possibility of having her tubes tied, he had suggested Lalitha should not make such an irreversible step because “he *did* want to have a baby with her” (397). He could now see more clearly that he and Patty have always been “an odd couple, [...] ill matched,” while if he ever had a son with Lalitha, “the son would be like him” (397) – differently from Joey, who certainly hadn't taken after his father. Yet, when Jessica called him and described how pathetically a married middle-aged manager tried to hit on a young colleague of her, Walter felt terrible. Through the voice of the external narrator, the turmoil that caught him comes across effectively:

He didn't know what to do, he didn't know how to live. Each new thing he encountered in life impelled him in a direction that fully convinced him of its rightness, but then the next new thing loomed up and impelled him in the opposite direction, which also felt right. There was no controlling narrative: he seemed to himself a purely reactive pinball in a game whose only object was to stay alive for staying alive's sake. To throw away his marriage and follow Lalitha had felt irresistible until the moment he saw himself, in the person of Jessica's older colleague, as another overconsuming white American male who felt entitled to more and more and more: saw the romantic imperialism of his falling for someone fresh and Asian, having exhausted domestic supplies. (400)

Walter knew how to live only in “self-denial” (401), which is one of the main causes of his anger – against Patty and his son, against Richard, against his own family and a country which cared more about TV and *American Idol* than about the environment and the future of humanity. Walter feels on the one hand tied to the choices he had made, but on the other he lives in a world that does not belong to him, a world in which he has to obliterate his true self. Through the years, his relationship with Patty has

become a sort of inescapable trap, in which they “couldn’t live together and couldn’t imagine living apart. Each time he thought they’d reached the unbearable breaking point, it turned out that there was still further they could go without breaking” (408). But the more they fought – about Patty’s need to get a job, about how wasted her talent was working at the reception of a gym, about how she didn’t need plastic surgery to get a bigger chest – the more Walter felt the “long-term toxicity they were creating with their fights” was “pooling in their marriage like the coal-sludge ponds in Appalachian valleys” (418). This disquieting image perfectly conveys how both environmental flows and human relationships are deeply affected by the “poison” that lies underneath the surface; yet, Walter believed in it, “because of Patty” – because he saw in it the only way to legitimize himself as somebody responsible and loyal, somebody different from his own father (419).

Finally, the unforeseeable happened. When Richard went to Washington to plan with Walter, Lalitha and Jessica his contribution to “Free Space”, he had a talk with Patty, trying to get her to admit – or better convince her – that she could not stay in her marriage anymore and she would be better off with him. Surprisingly, Patty reminded Richard of when she wanted to be with him in Philadelphia, but instead he chose not to hurt Walter’s feelings. She made it clear that watching Walter falling for Lalitha had been “quite extraordinarily painful,” but she had understood it was too late to save her marriage: “if I were a sane, whole person, that’s probably what I’d be trying to do. Because, you know, I used to want to win. I used to be a fighter. But I’ve developed some kind of allergy to doing the sensible thing. I spend my life jumping out of my skin with frustration at myself” (473). The fear and frustration Patty was talking about are the feelings that accompanied her all her life and that made her so suspicious towards not only others, but herself as well. Patty left Richard her manuscript to read, and, once he got to the last page, the sensation that pervaded him was that of “defeat,” as “the star in Patty’s drama” was Walter, not him. The autobiography was written as a way to apologize to him, and Richard was just “a supporting actor” (474). Therefore, before leaving the Berglunds, Richard decided to leave his friend “a little parting gift [...] to clear the air and put an end to the bullshit,” even though the real reason seems to be his sickness of feeling defeated, a revenge for not having won (474-5).

Trust is the element that visibly these relationships lack. As a matter of fact, we should not forget that trust in others is built first and foremost during childhood and it is “at the origin of a stable external world and a coherent sense of self-identity” (Giddens 51). The basic trust developed by the child is towards his caretakers and functions as an “emotional inoculation” to protect the individual against potential harmful situation. Thus, in adult life, besides helping build a sense of ontological security, trust is affected and affects in turn interpersonal relations and the experiences of reality each of us has gained (Giddens 39, 51, 66). The characters in *Freedom*, having faced some debilitating situations during their childhood, are prone to doubt others and not to trust their relationships, for their *protective cocoon* has been damaged. It is also interesting to notice the link between the failure to achieve basic trust and narcissism: once again, if as a child one is not provided with parenting figures who help him build “confidence in the reliability of persons,” then the individual will have to endure a condition of instability, oscillating between a sense of undisputed power and self-esteem and “a sense of emptiness and despair” (Giddens 178). Consequently, he will be dependent on others’ judgement to maintain self-confidence, as his fragility, in a situation of risk, could undermine his very self-identity (Giddens 178). This description inevitably reminds us of Patty and Joey (whose relationship will be dealt with in a moment), but of Richard, too, who wasn’t able to bear Patty’s rejection, his description in her memoir as merely a collateral character, and felt so beaten that he even thought about suicide – “*This is a good day to die!*” (475).

Betrayal is how Walter describes both his and Patty’s behavior – on his side, he didn’t tell her what Joey had revealed him about marrying Connie and his work problems, which, after finding her manuscript on his desk and reading it, seemed a “laughably, cryably small” betrayal, compared to her infidelity with Katz (579). After throwing her out of the house, Walter finally gave in to Lalitha’s love, as he needed to suppress the impulse of forgiving his wife; however, when Lalitha rejected his request to fire Richard from the “Free Space” project, he felt that “she’d betrayed him with Richard, too, a little bit” (592). However, he kept enjoying his time with Lalitha until Joey told him he and Connie went to see Patty in New Jersey – where she was staying, temporarily, with Richard.

Hearing that she'd gone back to Richard ought to have liberated him, ought to have freed him to enjoy Lalitha with the cleanest of consciences. But it didn't feel like a liberation, it felt like a death. He could see now (as Lalitha herself had seen all along) that the last three weeks had merely been a kind of payback, a treat he was due in recompense for Patty's betrayal. Despite his avowals that the marriage was over, he hadn't believed it one tiny bit. He threw himself onto the bed and sobbed in a state to which all previous states of existence seemed infinitely preferable. The world was moving ahead, the world was full of winners, [...] while Walter was left behind with the dead and dying and forgotten, the endangered species of the world, the nonadaptive . . . (604)

As things got worse for Walter with the New York Times disparaging article on MTR, he lost his job at the Trust because of the disastrous speech he had made at the inauguration of the LBI body-armor plant in West Virginia. However, that very speech made him a hero, too, and increased the popularity of "Free Space", which had lost its financial funding and the support of Richard, but not that of radicals and environmentalists. Thus, right when his new adventure with Lalitha could have a fresh start, when he started "enjoying, every minute of every day, the love of a woman who wanted all of him" (615), the poor girl died in a car accident while she was in West Virginia trying to arrange "Free Space" volunteers, and Walter was instead in Minnesota, on his way to visit his brother Mitch. The problem had been that Walter had started thinking about the past again, and the "old Swedish-genet depression was seeping up inside him: a feeling of not deserving a partner like Lalitha; of not being made for a life of freedom and outlaw heroics" (626). Once again, that freedom to which Americans so forcefully cling is also the reason why Franzen's characters are so afraid, discontent, lost and unable to see the right direction. Lalitha's death coincided for Walter with the death of "his delight in the world," for nothing made sense anymore, "there was no point in anything" (696).

A similar wave of depression is that which haunts Joey as well – no one, indeed, seems to be immune except for Jessica, who maybe the only one in *Freedom* who actually got towards the right path. As I have already spent a few words on Joey's narcissism and his involvement with businesses of dubious moral character, I would like to examine his relationship with Connie as well, for I deem it another central point

that affects his characterization significantly and that is helpful to position Franzen's work in the post-postmodernist trend. His depression, instead, will require another figure coming back into his life: his father.

Connie and Joey's love story is quite a peculiar one, considering that Joey left his parents' house to go live at Connie's before finishing high school. The novel does not dwell on that specific period, but we are given many more details about their love story during Joey's years at college in Charlottesville. From the very first description of Connie's visit, it seems that Joey is the one controlling the relationship, even though he is younger. As a matter of fact, once he got to Virginia, he started thinking about their "inevitable breakup" and how he could prepare the Monaghan girl to it (293). He could already see himself in the future, becoming an important businessman, accompanied by women "more exotic and advanced and connected" (293); however, for the moment being, he exploited his roommate's absence to spend an ordinary weekend with Connie. Her presence in his territory had to be minimized; she would take her things from her bag to zip them back in as soon as she was finished. And she would insist, when pushed by Joey, that she was willing to go back to school not for herself, but for him. Their conversation shows a lack of maturity on both sides:

"I'll go to school," she said. "But it's not going to make me forget about you. Nothing's going to make me forget about you."

"Right," he said, "but we still need to find out who we are. We both need to do some growing." "I already know who I am."

"Maybe you're wrong, though. Maybe you still need to—"

"No," she said. "I'm not wrong. I only want to be with you. That's all I want in my life. You're the best person in the world. You can do anything you want, and I can be there for you. You'll own lots of companies, and I can work for you. Or you can run for president, and I'll work for your campaign. I'll do the things that nobody else will do. If you need somebody to break the law, I'll do that for you. If you want children, I'll raise them for you." [...]

He was beginning to see, as he hadn't in St. Paul, that things' prices weren't always evident at first glance: that the really big ballooning of the interest charges on his high-school pleasures might still lie ahead of him. (294-5)

On the one hand, Connie is annihilated by Joey's persona, she is willing to dedicate her life to him; on the other, Joey sees her more as a burden than as the girl with whom he is in love. Yet, it is interesting to notice how Joey seems more aware of being on his way to find out his own self. At that time, this was an ongoing process and his aim was that of "develop[ing] independent selves" to see if they could still be together (293). Hence, as a sort of experiment, he suggested not to talk to one another for at least a week, to start cutting some ties, and Connie agreed "obediently" (296). The result, though, was an unexpected one: Connie developed a depression that made Carol, her mother, call Joey to reproach him about his inconsiderate and selfish behavior, reminding him that, after several time spent under the same roof, the least he could do was being a responsible boyfriend and coming home for Thanksgiving. Carol was obviously worried for her daughter also because she realized that Joey was like a "god" (300) for her, her life plan entailed being with him and nothing else. The following day, when Joey found the courage to call her, Connie seemed everything but depressed; surprisingly – or perhaps not – Joey "felt that it was somehow not great at all – that morbid weakness and clinginess on her part might have provided him with a viable escape route" (321). Besides, when she told him that it was OK with her if he had sex with other girls – "I don't expect you to be a monk" – and that he didn't need to visit her for Thanksgiving, he felt relieved on the one hand, but on the other he realized that she "was resetting a hook that for a while [...] he'd managed to work halfway free" (321-3). "Feeling connected to her," "getting sucked into such heavy waters of affection" provoked in him a scary sensation, an awareness that it was wrong (323). Even though he didn't cancel his plans to spend Thanksgiving with Jonathan's family – and especially looking forward to meeting his sister Jenna – Joey kept calling Connie, justifying their conversations as trivial phone sex, which could not be counted as a real contact. However, with time passing by, "he realized that it was making their contact *all the deeper and realer*" (324); thus, his trip to Northern Virginia came at the perfect time to give him yet another break from Connie. A short break, though, as during Christmas, when he had to housesit for his aunt Abigail in New York, "alone again and confronting the specter of two weeks of solitude and brady abuse and/or masturbation" (356), he did not hesitate to invite Connie up. The disclosures she made then are defined as "alarming" (357): first, she had quit her job at the restaurant to

spend time with Joey; second, she had told Patty she was going to visit him in the city; third, she had thought about applying to colleges nearer to Charlottesville, to shorten the distance between them. These revelations are disquieting for Joey, as the more he tried not to “get sucked too far into something he couldn’t control,” the more Connie seemed to push herself in (357).

In the chapter “Bad News”, we find out that Joey got married with Connie – wasn’t he actually trying to get off the hook? This free indirect discourse prompts us to consider Joey’s love more as a narcissistic feeling than sincere affection: “Why *had* he stuck with Connie? The only answer that made sense was that he loved her. He’d had his chance to free himself of her – had, indeed, deliberately created some of them – but again and again, at the crucial moment, had chosen not to use them” (494). Before getting to this point, their relationship had another drawback when Joey tried once again to make a step back, but, as a result, Connie dropped out of Morton college and went back home in St. Paul “more depressed than ever,” unable to get out of bed, while Joey had hoped to spend the Christmas holidays in Jenna’s company (495). When he realized how bad the situation was, he went up to see Connie and “he was almost glad of how sick she was; it gave him seriousness and purpose. She kept repeating that she’d let him down, but he felt almost the opposite. As if a new and more grownup world of love had revealed itself: as if there were still no end of inner doors for them to open” (497). Joey’s sense of importance in this relationship originates from his heroic mission of saving Connie from the ugly monster of depression, awarding himself the healing power of maturity. A power that was even better than the antidepressants whose side effects he very much feared, for “he decided, the truth was that her depression was a facet of the same intensity he’d always so much loved in her,” the “ocean of feelings” without which Connie would not have been the same, would not have been his Connie (499, 501).

After being back to his life and Connie being back to work at the restaurant, things took a direction Joey could not have imagined: his devoted girlfriend confessed to him she had been sleeping with her restaurant manager and she was willing to stop it if Joey had asked her. The young Berglund did not expect it, “a draft was coming through a mental door that he’d assumed was shut and locked but in fact was standing open wide” (509). The reason why Connie did it was that she felt unbearably lonely

without him and that she only loved Joey and nobody else. The pain that Joey felt, though, is described as “quite extraordinary,” but also “weirdly welcome and restorative,” for it made him feel alive and “caught in a story larger than himself” (510). When things get out of control Joey is overwhelmed by his contrasting feelings:

He was totally alone and didn't understand how it had happened to him. How there had come to be an ache named Connie at the center of his life. He was being driven crazy by so minutely feeling what she felt, by understanding her too well, by not being able to imagine her life without him. Every time he had a chance to get away from her, the logic of self-interest failed him: was supplanted, like a gear that his mind kept popping out of, by the logic of the two of them. A week went by without her calling him, and then another week. [...] For the first few days of their silence, he managed to believe that he was punishing her by not calling her, but before long he came to feel like the punished one, the person waiting to see whether she, in her ocean of feeling, might find a drop of mercy and break the silence for him. (512-3)

Once again, Joey's relationship takes on the nuances of a connection that is so deep that it scares him and disorients him, based on feelings that both of them experience. He is no more an innocent kid, he is not able to think only of himself without her, although he is the perpetrator and the victim at the same time – this image recalls the one Patty outlined in her autobiography, the prosecutor and the defense. I believe this attitude of his perfectly mirrors his narcissistic personality, as Joey finds in Connie someone who has questioned his sense of entitlement, but who has also acknowledged his superiority, the fact that she loves him, and only him. Thus, she might be an “ache” (513), yet she is also the source of his very own satisfaction. Another betrayal, one that Joey feels as the most unfaithful to him, is that of his mother, as we have already examined in chapter 4.1.

After a short time, Connie came back in Joey's life for a reason that – at least apparently – has more to do with convenience rather than with love. In fact, Joey had been offered a new job by his boss at RISEN, Kenny, although he had to provide an initial investment of 50,000 dollars to accept it. Joey immediately thought of Connie, who had enough money in her trust fund and was more than thrilled to lend it to him. When the two met at La Guardia airport, Joey “felt flush with more than money. He

felt flush with importance, with life to burn, with crazy chances to take, with the story of the two of them” (519). Besides, when he found out that she had been cutting herself, he was “*glad*,” because she had done it for him, “he couldn’t help it” (520). “I just needed to hurt a little” is Connie’s explanation; in the same way Joey needed her unfaithfulness to realize that their world had become a “two-person” world, that he needed to marry her (521). And so they did. Yet, Joey realized one thing: “the more he merged with her, the more he strangely also felt he didn’t know the first thing about her, [...] it almost seemed to him as if he were marrying Connie to see if she would finally start fighting with him: to get to know her” (526-7). Joey’s awareness of Connie changes by the minute, he is uncertain not only of himself, but also of his wife. What actually will help him understand more is a funny and at the same time disgusting episode in which Joey, during his vacation in Argentina with Jenna, was locked in the bathroom, trying to find inside his stool the wedding ring he had accidentally swallowed some days before.

It was a strange thing to feel, but he definitely felt it: when he emerged from the bathroom with the ring on his ring finger, [...] he was a different person. He could see this person so clearly, it was like standing outside himself. [...] there was something comforting and liberating about being an actual definite someone, rather than a collection of contradictory potential someones. (543)

When Joey arrived in Argentina his first thought was about how “*sickened*” (536) of him the three closest people he had – Connie, Jonathan and his father – were. Now, at the end of the journey, he felt a new, whole person and “the world immediately seemed to slow down and steady itself, as if it, too, were settling into a new necessity” (543). Nonetheless, this epiphany did not spare Joey of dreadful moments of depression later on, when he decided to comply with the contract he had with Kenny and send him the rusty unusable spare parts he had collected in Paraguay, despite his feelings of guilt. He could not bail out, for otherwise he would have lost Connie’s money and would have risked a law suit, too, but he did try to make things better turning to Jonathan for advice and asking him whether leaking the story to somebody inside the *Washington Post* could have been a good compromise. Yet, what did help Joey clear his conscience was calling his father and “admit that he was beaten” (556). On Walter’s birthday, Joey had dinner with him and the two reconnected, talking about their difficult

situations at work, about Walter's separation and Joey's wedding, just like any father and son would. And when later Joey got the money from his contract with Kenny and decided to donate it to the "Free Space" project, Walter put his anger and resentment behind him and felt finally proud of his son (614).

Reconciliation is how the main characters in the novel find a new way to be in the world, to accept others and to understand themselves. *Freedom* is a journey towards recognition and appropriation that sees all characters evolve through the inevitable process of making mistakes and having to question one's own identity. Reconciliation happens both inside the family and with others – friends and partners; however, it is not contemplated within society and communities outside the household – or at least this has been one of the main observations made by critics and scholars (see for example Hidalgo, *The Romance*). I believe that this interpretation can be deemed appropriate if we consider the failures of Walter and Joey in their business dealings; however, some encouraging details about their future careers are given. Joey, thanks to his father's connection, has started to work in the shade-grown coffee business, a profitable sector that makes him happy both for the financial outcome and its beneficial impact on the environment. For Walter, the situation is more complicated, even though he is back working for the Nature Conservancy, managing some properties near the lake where he also moved, even though the "coziness with corporations and millionaires" that the Conservancy at that point showed made him "queasy" (690). His work is however for the environment he so much cared about through all his life, and even if "he wasn't doing dazzling good, [...] he wasn't doing any harm, either" (691). Not to mention Patty and her new job, which had nothing to do with gym receptions, but was much more attuned to her skills and new mindset. Therefore, I would not say that reconciliation outside of the family is impossible, but that it is just a different process and one that in *Freedom* is less articulated – yet not totally absent.

Examining all the main relationships, readers have certainly noticed how the familial ties are in one way or the other restored, although not just merely "reactivated", rather renewed, given a different awareness. As we are told in the last part of Patty's autobiography, which she wrote after six years from her separation with

Walter,⁶ she had to deal with her father's illness and death. Before that, however, she had the chance to spend some time with him, as "she hated her childish refusal to forgive" (643). Even though Ray had not changed, he expressed to her how difficult it had been for him to show his love for her; "it was clear to her, finally, that he could be no other way" (645). She realized how much the two of them were actually similar and how wrong it was to deny it:

As much as possible, though, Patty sat with her father, held his hand, and allowed herself to love him. She could almost physically feel her emotional organs rearranging themselves, bringing her self-pity plainly into view at last, in its full obscenity, like a hideous purple-red growth in her that needed to be cut out. [...] she was disturbed to see how much like him she was, [...] and why it would have been better to have forced herself to see more of her parents in the critical years of her own parenthood, so as to better understand her kids' response to her. Her dream of creating a fresh life, entirely from scratch, entirely independent, had been just that: a dream. She was her father's daughter. Neither he nor she had ever really wanted to grow up, and now they worked at it together. [...] As a girl, she'd wanted to believe that he loved her more than anything, and now, as she squeezed his hand in hers, [...] it became true, they made it true, and it changed her. (645-6)

A life is never "created from scratch," is never "independent" from others, from their lives and the way they live; the only possible solution is working together – it is a plural pronoun "they", instead of a "she".

The other person with whom Patty reconnected was her mother, Joyce, who was at that time in a difficult situation, having to decide what to do with the old Emerson country estate inherited after her husband's death. Leaving aside the thirst for money Patty's siblings had and their peculiar lifestyles, it is interesting to notice how Patty tried to tune in with the mother she once despised so much, to see beyond what she had always considered to be carelessness.

Like so many people who become politicians, Joyce was not a whole person; she was even less whole than Patty. She needed to feel *extraordinary*, and

⁶ Patty left Walter and Washington in 2004; thus, "Chapter 4: Six Years" of her memoir was written in 2010.

becoming an Emerson reinforced her feeling that she was, and when she started having children she needed to feel that they, too, were extraordinary, so as to make up for what was lacking at her center. Thus the refrain of Patty's childhood: we're not like other families. (649)

Patty saw in her mother the same guilt she felt towards Joey, for all parents are not immune to make mistakes and, in the end, they are able to acknowledge that. Joyce was able to admit that she wasn't there for Patty during her basketball games, and many other times, and she blamed herself for it, but at the same time she revealed to her daughter: "I guess my life hasn't always been happy, or easy, or exactly what I wanted. At a certain point, I just have to try not think too much about certain things, or else they'll break my heart" (666). It seems that the only way to keep on living is that of forgiving oneself for that which cannot be changed and try to make the best out of the future, what can still evolve. "I'd love to see more of ... Joey. [...] Now that we've been *forgiven*" (650). Patty, too, realized that wanting to become a better person does not guarantee turning into a perfect person; indeed, her reunion with Joey turned out not as unproblematic as she wished, for Connie was still an insuperable hurdle to leave behind: "her failure will always stand between her and Joey, and be her lasting punishment for the mistakes she made with him" (672).

When Patty started the last chapter of her autobiography she intended it as a letter to Walter, to explain to him how much she had changed, how much she had made of her life, for it seemed to her impossible to recover their relationship, and so "she thought, she might as well try to save her own [life]" (638). She started working as a teacher's aide in a private school, helping kids with their linguistic skills and "giving back, as a coach, the total dedication and tough love and lessons in teamwork that her own coaches once gave her" (668). However, she still did lack a sign to stop hoping in the possibility of a second chance: "she can imagine several discouraging reasons why Walter hasn't divorced her [...] but her heart persists in taking courage from the fact that he hasn't" (673). The "yearning for her mate" was a thought that would not leave her even for a minute, because she hoped he too still believed that "they were not just the worst thing that ever happened to each other, [but] also the best thing" (673). When Walter received her manuscript, though, he put it in a drawer and forgot about it. He was still mourning Lalitha's death and felt that resuming communication with Patty

would have meant disrespect what he had with his assistant; he felt the need to assert his refusal as strongly as he could and to “hold on to what little of [Lalitha] he still had” (697). His solitary life was devoted to his birds, the creatures he still wanted to protect so badly, and to fight the ferociousness of the neighbors’ cats. He went so far as to kidnap Bobby – the Hoffbauers’ cat and a real bird murderer – to take it to a Minneapolis shelter, a three-hour drive away from the lake. Yet, on his way back,

he wasn’t prepared for the depression that beset him [...] the sense of loss and waste and sorrow: the feeling that he and Bobby had in some way been married to each other, and that even a horrible marriage was less lonely than no marriage at all. [...] He pictured the sour cage in which Bobby would not be dwelling. [...] there was something pitiable about his trappedness nonetheless. (690)

The cat’s trappedness remind us of Walter’s own condition, not only now, leaving like a hermit far away from the people he loved, rather through his whole life, trying to find a way out that he simply could not discern. Not until he got home, did he come across a missing-Bobby poster with the cat’s face printed on it, looking “worthy of protection and tenderness” even to him – his problem was that he “pitied even the beings he most hated” (692). Hence, Walter’s efforts collapsed when Patty showed up at his house, sitting on the front step in the dark, willing to stay there all night and freeze while waiting for him. He was aware that speaking to her would have implied giving up his refusal, letting everything fall into oblivion; “however little he’d ever known how to live, he’d never known less than he knew now” (700). Finally, he rescued her just in time and brought her inside, warming her up with his own body until she regained consciousness.

Her eyes weren’t blinking. There was still something almost dead in them, something very far away. She seemed to be seeing all the way through to the back of him and beyond, out into the cold space of the future in which they would both soon be dead, out into the nothingness that Lalitha and his mother and his father had already passed into, and yet she was looking straight into his eyes, and he could feel her getting warmer by the minute. And so he stopped looking at her eyes and started looking into them, returning their look before it was too late, before this connection between life and what came after life was

lost, and let her see all the vileness inside him, all the hatreds of two thousand solitary nights, while the two of them were still in touch with the void in which the sum of everything they'd ever said or done, every pain they'd inflicted, every joy they'd shared, would weigh less than the smallest feather on the wind. "It's me," she said. "Just me."

"I know," he said, and kissed her." (701-2)

Despite being separated, Patty and Walter have always been "in touch with the void," a place where human beings are together not because of what they did, but because of who they are, because of their ability to forgive the other's mistakes, since mistakes are what they have in common, what "we all make," as Ray Emerson said (644). "It's me, just me" is what Patty also told Walter many years before, during one of their dates, when she asked him to take off his glasses and he complained he wouldn't have been able to see her. That night they went to see *The Fiend of Athens*, a movie about "a mild-mannered Athenian accountant with horn-rimmed glasses" (121) mistaken for the leader of a criminal group, a man who according to Patty "never had a real life, because he was so responsible and timid, and he had no idea what he was actually capable of. He never really got to be alive until he was mistaken for the Fiend" (122). According to Walter, instead, the protagonist did not die to accomplish something in his life, but for the loyalty and responsibility he felt towards the gang that saved his life. Patty – and, I believe, readers as well – could not help but find some resemblance between the Fiend and Walter, between their honesty, their willingness to do some good, their uncertainty when choosing whether to run away or to accept foul play and compromises. In the end, though, it seems clear that, regardless of what trajectory we follow, we cannot go about it without others, we cannot shed light on our identities counting only on our own forces, for our being together goes beyond the common dimensions of space and time – it is a void that, invisibly but persistently, connects us.

Richard Katz is the character who is left "suspended", for we do not know much about him. Through Patty's account, we understand that he is the one who encouraged her to write to Walter, even though he himself had not tried to get back in touch with him. In the last chapter of the book, Walter received a package from him, a CD titled "Songs for Walter". "Two Kids Good, No Kids Better" is the title of the first song, which Walter had suggested to Richard back when they were in college and

when he complained that the musician kept rejecting his ideas (127). We do not know if a reunion actually took place between the two friends, but when Patty explained to the neighbors in Canterbridge Estates Lake that they were going back to New York, the reasons she gave were that she had a job there, but most of all a family and Walter had “his best friend” (705). Everybody, then, can be forgiven and start afresh.

I would like to conclude this analysis with a last thought on the second part of Patty’s autobiography. In the last page, we are told that this part of the memoir was actually Richard’s idea, for he believed that Patty could have reconnected with Walter thanks to the power of storytelling. “You know how to tell a story [...] Why don’t you tell him a story?” (675) – hence, the title “A Sort of Letter to Her Reader.” However, she begins this fourth and last chapter of her manuscript in a peculiar way:

The autobiographer, mindful of her reader and the loss he suffered, and mindful that a certain kind of voice would do well to fall silent in the face of life’s increasing somberness, has been trying very hard to write these pages in first and second person. But she seems doomed, alas, as a writer, to be one of those jocks who refer to themselves in third person. Although she believes herself to be genuinely changed, and doing infinitely better than in the old days, and therefore worthy of a fresh hearing, she still can’t bring herself to let go of a voice she found when she had nothing else to hold on to, even if it means that her reader throws this document straight into his old Macalester College wastebasket. (637)

Patty’s reference to “a voice” to justify her use of the third person is important, for her autobiography is not only a therapeutic exercise, but it symbolizes the power of narration and shows an important characteristic of the self, which is its continuous fragmentation. In his book *The Literature of Reconstruction*, Wolfgang Funk deals with authenticity⁷ and links this concept with the notion of the self, emphasizing how authenticity “arises from the endlessly reflecting and refracting interplay between the self and the demands made on it – by itself as well as by its environment. Human experience can only be authentic to the extent to which it is self-reflective” (Funk 32).

⁷ Funk prefers the term authenticity to sincerity for a pragmatic reason related to his specific study about metareference. However, he acknowledges that the difference is “one of aesthetic emphasis rather than terminological principle” (77).

I believe that Patty's effort to write about her life embodies this self-reflectivity and focuses especially on the ongoing relation between her self and others' influence on it. Funk refers to Emmanuel Levinas's theory to explain that "the self is the result of an original encounter with an other [...]. The self, in other words, can only become self-aware in the face of its significant other" (Funk 34). Patty feels that she has changed, but her "old" voice still survives, and she cannot help but to hang on to it, for it is another part of her self that she came to accept and rely on in her journey towards awareness. Now, she addresses Walter for it is only through a reconciliation with him that she can build the "dichotomy of self and other" – the "we" that "precedes the I," resolving the tension between self and authenticity (Funk 36).

5. POST-POSTMODERNIST THOUGHTS: “IF WE ARE SO FREE, WHY AREN’T WE HAPPY?”

In this chapter I wish to return to the main features of post-postmodernism which I had introduced earlier to understand how *Freedom* relates to them and if it can be considered a post-postmodernist work. In the following paragraphs, I will thus discuss both form and contents of the novel, to better understand how the hybridity of style that characterizes post-postmodernism is functional to convey thematic issues which outline a more humane kind of literature. By doing so, I aim at highlighting how Franzen’s novel shares with contemporary works certain concerns, which until now have been overlooked by critics and scholars in his production, and, at the same time, how it offers new insights and questions for readers to reflect upon.

One of the main features of post-postmodernist works is a return to realism – a new form of realism, still affected by the postmodern legacy, but set in a new historical timeframe, pushed by rehumanizing needs (see chapter 3). *Freedom* has been dubbed by many critics a pure realist work of fiction, whereas Hidalgo has argued that the use of the term realism mainly referred to “the description of character and locale” present in *Freedom* is incomplete, as it leaves out “its innate and inseparable social dimension” (The Romance 33). Besides, he focuses his attention on elements that are “not properly realist,” but not uncommonly found in previous realist novels: these come from romance, *Bildungsroman* (novel of formation) and melodrama (The Romance 34). I will spend a few words on his observations as I deem them relevant not only from a stylistic point of view, but also to show how they relate to the development of the novel’s themes. I will then return to *Freedom*’s realist features and values that have been dealt with in contemporary times as well, linking them with the post-postmodern “symptoms” that Noline Timmer identifies in David Foster Wallace’s, Dave Eggers’s and Mark Danielewski’s works, which are present in Franzen’s novel as well. Finally, I will return to Lukács’s point of view on realism to emphasize how his ideas can be related to *Freedom*.

Romance, melodrama and *Bildungsroman* are significant in *Freedom* for they provide structurally essential elements to the novel. First, one of the most prominent features is undoubtedly the presence of reconciliation offered as a closure, providing

a redeeming perspective typical of romance, which, according to Jameson, is a fully-fledged narrative genre that has its origin in the poems of Chrétien de Troyes and has developed since then (Hidalga, *The Romance* 18, 38; Jameson, *Narratives* 154). After a series of melodramatic vicissitudes, most of the characters in *Freedom* are able to overcome the difficult moments and crisis they went through by reaching a new self-awareness and recovering their relationships. Patty and Walter's trajectory, in particular, immediately recalls the typical sequence of melodrama that can be summarized as "courting / falling in love / adultery / estrangement / reconciliation of lovers" (Hidalga, *The Romance* 35). At the same time, some epiphany-like moments belonging to the genre of romance can be identified – for instance, Joey's realization of being a certain kind of person and Patty and Walter's reunion. Yet, I believe differently from romance, *Freedom* does not stage the figure of one hero who in the end is recognized by his closest others and by members of a community, which is usually the family (Hidalga, *The Romance* 38). Walter may be thought of as embodying the figure of the hero; however, he is not the only one who goes through a process of recognition. *Freedom* acknowledges that all characters in the end can be both villains and heroes, all of them need to overcome difficult times and work on themselves to realize who they really are and how they can improve. Besides, some reconciliations seem not so straightforward – suffice it to think about Patty and Joey's relationship, the mother-son bond which remains irreparably scarred, or Patty and Abigail's unbridgeable divergences. Hence, stating that redemption is "always possible" in the battlefield of family, the realm where "actual truth can be generated" (Hidalga, *The Romance* 362), seems to me a little too simplistic: redemption is possible when both parts are willing to find themselves in the same territory, which is not that of indisputable "truth", but a place where they understand each other, for they experience the same fears, pain and, finally, the awareness of not being alone. *Bildungsroman* is the other significant form, which is considered by the Italian academic Franco Moretti the "dominant" one in the eighteenth century, mainly for it provides a "fuller interiority" (Hidalga, *The Romance* 103). Since its main focus is on youth, *Bildungsroman* is particularly relevant in *Freedom* to the character of Joey, who is followed in his journey towards adulthood. In the traditional novel of formation, youth symbolizes "the essence of modernity," and modernity, in turn, is characterized

by a series of changes in the economic and social fields that make youth more problematic (Hidalga, *The Romance* 103). Joey's situation is certainly influenced by a specific historical moment, namely 9/11, which subverts American society, and its politics and economics as well. The *Bildungsroman*, however, offers a solution with its "tendency to compromise," for it teaches how to accept contradictions, without aiming at removing them completely (Hidalga, *The Romance* 103). Indeed, a compromise is what Joey seems to be able to find in the end – donating the money he had dishonestly gained, finding a way to communicate again with his family and be part of it, accepting Connie's love and loving her in turn: he learns how to relate to others (and to himself, too) with a less narcissistic and more mature, adult attitude. Thus, all the elements coming from these three subgenres of the realist novel – melodrama, romance and *Bildungsroman* – can be considered functional to the plot and conclusion of *Freedom*, but also to the third so-called "symptom" of post-postmodernism, which I will analyze below in detail. In addition, more realist elements can be found to contribute to the novel's positioning within the post-postmodernist framework.

In *Realist Vision*, Brooks emphasizes how the core of realism is based on its "visuality," that is the importance of the sense of sight as our primary way to connect with the world that surrounds us, "the most reliable guide" for it leads us to build "first impressions," to understand how things look to then go deeper (Brooks 3). This visual core, so to speak, affects the other two ingredients of realism: characters and *thing-ism*, which, according to Brooks, corresponds to the "concern with registering what the world looks like" (16). As a matter of fact, characters become reflections of real people: they dress and look like normal men and women, but they also think like them, they are moved by the same reasons and live in the same social settings (Brooks 5). In the previous chapter, the analysis that I have performed is mainly based on exactly this premise: Patty, Walter, Joey and most of the characters perfectly mirror the troubles and uncertainties of real American people living in the present time. I will examine first *thing-ism* to better understand the background in which characters move and the new socio-cultural context of the turn of the millennium.

With the modern age, a new importance is given to ordinariness, that is the lives of common people living in common settings, conducting an "unexceptional

human life,” which becomes the object of interest of artists who are influenced by the changes and challenges of their time (Brooks 7). The nineteenth century is indeed a period which witnessed revolutions in politics and society, but also the emergence and development of the modern industry. In particular, the “cash nexus” comes in the picture, transforming the lives of the emergent middle class. Money replaces the ownership of land, creating new identities in society, which are no more inherited from generation to generation – as the land was – but achieved, gained through work, investments, speculations (Brooks 13-4). Since money becomes so commonplace, things start to appear in ordinary men’s lives: it’s the birth of capitalism and of what we have come to know as consumerism. Things can symbolize either success or failure, making it immediately clear who a man is and what he is able to attain; they become part of how human beings define themselves and, therefore, they are unavoidable in realist novels as well, for they coexist with characters and their lives and, thus, they cannot escape the “visual inspection” performed so thoroughly by realism (Brooks 15-6). In *Freedom*, both things and money appear as remarkable elements of different lifestyles. For instance, the “urban gentry of Ramsey Hill” (3) and Patty, the perfect mother and housewife, were very concerned about – among various different things – Volvos 240, cloth diapers, drywall compound, the *Silver Palate Cookbook*, bulgur, latex paint, having milk delivered in glass bottles, recycling batteries, old Fiesta ware which might contain lead and grounding coffee beans (4-5). Similarly, Jonathan’s parents’ house is described with abundance of details to convey the luxury in which the family lived: fine-grained oak floors, infinite rooms, tons of hardcover books, a basement rec room with an eight-foot projection screen and a mahogany pool table (328-9, 332). Possessions are representations of one’s social status, of one’s identity in a world where money makes people richer and their lives fuller. Things help people impose their superiority, such as Patty did when she decided to wear “a rather chic pair of stack-heeled boots, and it was perhaps the least nice part of her that chose to wear [them] when she went to see her shortest sibling” (652). Joey, too, realized that to have a good life money was imperative – especially to seduce extremely beautiful girls who “knew how to enjoy what money could bring” (538) or, better, are able to enjoy only that. According to Brooks, “money represents the fluidity and vaporousness of things in an economy that can swiftly move from boom to bust

and then recycle” (Brooks 14). The society portrayed is one obsessed by consumerism, haunted by the need of getting more and more, as if one’s well-being were measured only by things and money. In this sense, the world in which the first realist novels were set and the world of the twenty-first century are very much alike. However, characters’ thoughts and reactions have changed, and new issues trouble their existence.

Hence, considering now the characters of the novel, I would like to link my analysis with Timmer’s study of the three main “symptoms” of post-postmodern times to show how Franzen’s *Freedom* has several points in common with the writers of his time. As I have already pointed out, in Timmer’s work, three features are emphasized as signs of a malaise haunting human beings in the troublesome beginning of the new millennium:

- the lack of decision-making tools;
- “it hurts, I can’t feel anything”;
- the structural need for a we (Timmer 309-12).

The first problem, a lack of decision-making tools, is strictly related to the cultural and social context taken into consideration. In a late modern or postmodern situation, choosing has become indeed not only a right, but also a burden, for, even though we are no more limited by external constraints – “the signpost established by tradition now are blank” (Giddens 82) – and we are allowed more freedom and possibilities, it seems that these very possibilities make the process of selection all the more difficult, especially when a “strong and stable sense of self” is absent (Timmer 314). A lifestyle, according to Giddens, is “a set of practices” that human beings follow because “they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity” (Giddens 81): if our choices are thus related not merely to what we do, but also impact who we are, every kind of hesitation will likely transform into a crack of our identity wall, which risks to fall to pieces. Modernity “offers little help as to which option should be selected,” jeopardizing “the very core of self-identity,” influencing “its making and remaking” (Giddens 80-1). Timmer emphasizes how in *Infinite Jest* “the more freedom people have to act as they please, the more passive they seem to get,” as people do not know how to choose, but in that society “feelings of loneliness and helplessness” cannot be shared – “craving for some form of guidance” is a need people feel but must not disclose (Timmer 314-5). These feelings feature in the Berglund family, too,

throughout their lives: Walter is conned into a business deal he did not know would have included the destruction of a vast portion of land and the displacement of innocent people, and, at the same time, he is tormented by a combination of anger, responsibility and disillusionment towards his wife and son; Joey ends up in troubles bigger than he could ever have imagined and plays with Connie's love, disappearing and reappearing according to his own fluctuating sensations; Patty decides not to pursue a career and then remorsefully blames herself for failing to be the mother she had always dreamed of, while cheating on her husband and then losing him to another woman. The ability to go about one's life, making decisions one will not regret, seems an unattainable goal. Depression is one of the main consequences, as I have already showed (see chapter 4.2), for it emerges in situations of "choice overload," whose natural outcome manifests in a sense of guilt for one's mistakes, of disappointment towards one's effectiveness and in a wish not to choose – a wish for a different, more transparent world, where solutions could be readily accessible and "choosing which 'kind' of self one wants to be" (Timmer 320) would be immediately clear. Therefore, a culture in which being free is so important does not coincide with a culture where people are able to succeed, where people feel proud of themselves and happy: "being free does not necessarily make people *feel* free" (Timmer 325).

"It hurts, I can't feel anything" is the second symptom, which aims in a nutshell at conveying a disquieting, complex feeling that overwhelms a person at the point of depriving her of any perceptive ability, provoking a pervasive sense of "internal emptiness" (Timmer 329). In *Freedom*, even though characters do not lament the impossibility to feel, they still manifest their reactions to painful situations in specific ways, which I believe can be related to this second symptom. For instance, when hearing about Connie's unfaithfulness, Joey describes his pain as "weirdly welcome and restorative," for it allowed him to realize he had been caught "in a story larger than himself" (510); on the other hand, Walter laments how there is "no controlling narrative" (400), and Patty is "so ashamed of what she did to Joey that she can't begin to make a sensible narrative out of it" (183). In Joey's case, the relief and "aliveness" (510) he comes to feel emerges only after a completely unexpected and shocking event for him: to understand Connie's importance in his life, he needs to get to the point of seeing her leave with another man and losing her, he needs the pain to be unbearable

to realize what is happening and regain consciousness of his own life. For Walter, the absence of a narrative, the “stay[ing] alive for staying alive’s sake” (400), culminates with Lalitha’s death. After losing her, he finds life meaningless, with “no point in anything” (696) and, to finally react and take back control of his life, he needs to see Patty putting her own life in jeopardy for him, freezing outside, waiting for his forgiveness – he needs to face death once again. The “void” where Patty and Walter are still “in touch” is a place where their sufferings are obliterated, thanks to a “connection between life and what came after life” (702). Hence, when they realize that death is the last destination where feeling is no longer possible, they regain a true sense of being alive. This image reminds us of the epigraph of the novel, when, in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* (Act V, Scene III), the statue of Hermione is finally brought back to life – similarly, *Freedom*’s characters also need the spell to be broken to come back to life. Thus, it seems that only when pain reaches its peak, when nothingness draws nearer and nearer, they can wake up from their disorientation and start anew.

Linked to emptiness and the absence of a meaningful narrative, the sense of a fragmented self is also relevant. The idea of a “unified” self derives from romanticist and modernist notions of the self; however, the socio-cultural context has now changed – Walter says that “fragmentation” has become a problem, “all the real things, the authentic things, the honest things are dying off” (273) – and the self seems not to be an autonomous one, “in full control of its ‘story’, but a self-constructed through feedback,” lost “without recognition, without a ‘listener’” (Timmer 332-3). The problem of the “solipsistic delusion,” according to Wallace, is exactly the need to share the pain, the indescribable feeling, with somebody else, even if it requires exposing oneself and one’s own vulnerability (Timmer 342). In *Freedom*, I would argue, Patty and her autobiography are the emblematic representation of this need: she turns to a therapist for help and she writes a memoir to try and better understand what is going on with her life; she is re-building her story to regain control over it, to create a narrative that she can cope with.

The third symptom is, I believe, the most important one in *Freedom*, as it provides a solution to the difficulties characters meet in the contemporary culture in which they live, and it is also the key of the novel’s closure. The “structural need for

a we” finds its basis in the concept of the self. As Gergen states, the self is not an autonomous entity, rather it is “relational,” for it can make sense of itself only through interaction with others: social interchange provides the self with the narrative skills needed to build a narrative (Timmer 347). “Relationship precedes individual existence, not vice versa” (Gergen 223), and thanks to it we can no longer feel alone, alienated, or isolated, “rather, we sense ourselves as both constituted by, and constituting, the other. In a certain sense, we are each other [...] Individual subjectivity, then, is not a mark of differentiation, but of relatedness” (Gergen 224). Thus, our agency is a “form of relational engagement,” as it is influenced by our interactions with others, not merely by our internal motives and desires (Gergen 225). Another important contribution of others to our own narrative, as I already mentioned in chapter 4.1, is that of the *doubly embedded narrative*, as Palmer calls it. As a matter of fact, a character’s identity is not only determined by his or her own narrative, but it is also defined by what is contained in another character’s mind. Hence, our actions and goals are influenced by others’ expectations (Palmer, *Fictional* 231-2). In the different parts of my analysis, I believe I showed how much this is true in *Freedom*: how Joey was influenced by his mother’s and Connie’s devotion, but also by his father’s disagreements and by society at large, by the importance of gaining money to lead an extraordinary wealthy and happy life; how Patty was haunted by a fierce competitiveness originated in her household and by the idea Walter had of her goodness, together with her inability to sustain such expectations, but at the same time her need for him not to leave her; how Walter became “the fiend of Washington” after having tried so badly to do the right thing and finding in front of him one obstacle after the other. The problem for them was that they had lost their sense of connectedness and focused on their own predicament, thinking that they had to face what they were going through all alone, unable to trust others for it would have been dangerous and would have put them in an even more vulnerable position. “I’m in some trouble” Joey told his father when he finally decided that he needed his help, to which Walter replied “So am I! So is everybody!” (432) However, as we have seen in chapter 4.4, despite all the crises, anxieties and conflicts, they are able to see these troubles not as something standing in their ways, but as a means to reconnect and reestablish contact, understanding that what separated them was in fact what they had in common.

Considering Lukács's take on realism as a "deeper probing of the world," it is possible to see how *Freedom* is about "taking the cover off our superficial lives and delving into the hot stuff underneath," as Franzen himself explains (Burn, *The Art*). What Franzen has tried to do (and I believe accomplished as well) corresponds to Lukács's idea of representing the real world through its dialectic between essence and appearance. On the one hand, there is a consumerist society, focused on economic achievements, wealth and success; an America where truths and facts must be stretched to convince people that fighting against terrorism with a war is the only feasible alternative; a business community where profit has the upper hand over honesty, decency and environmental sustainability, where deals can be made only through corruption, pursuing one's own self-interests. On the other, there are people who are submerged by these rapid cultural changes, who find themselves as floating islands at the mercy of powerful politicians and reckless businesses, unable to show their disorientation and vulnerability, for otherwise they would risk their credibility, reputation and the chance to reach the top. Contradictions are thus present in Franzen's novel; however, I do not believe that answers are provided as well, or at least not all the answers readers need. Differently from what Lukács argued, I would say that Franzen's realism is not able to solve all contemporary conundrums, perhaps because the issues of the new millennium do not allow straightforward answers, but rather must be looked at from different perspectives to better grasp their nuances and complexities.

In *Freedom*, the closure provided offers a solution to overcome the fragmentation, alienation and isolation that characters suffer; in this sense, it is aligned with other contemporary works of fiction, for it "reconfigure[s] the relationship between the self and others and explore[s] the mediating role that feelings may fulfill in this" (Timmer 365). Yet, the problem of freedom remains open. Franzen has dealt with different issues in the novel that involve the way in which society has developed and changed in the past few decades: the effects of capitalism and consumerism, the craving for wealth and success at the expense of moral integrity, the indifference towards environmental problems, the constant need for recognition and appreciation. All these are negative by-products of freedom, which have grown and become more and more pervasive to a level that was probably never expected. Freedom is the reason why people came to America, we are told by Walter – "you may be poor, but the one

thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life whatever way you want to” (453). For his grandfather, too, America was the land of “unSwedish freedom” (559). This freedom, though, is clearly presented as problematic throughout the novel, for it does not allow people to reach the happiness they long for; instead, they end up even more miserable. Reconnecting with others to find a source of solace and to regain a sense of self can help us face our disorientation and helplessness as human beings living in a world that is becoming increasingly fast, technological and inhuman. However, what can we do to prevent freedom from becoming a harmful weapon and reinstating it as the epitome of our humanity? I do not believe that Franzen aimed at answering this question, for there probably is no right answer; rather he hoped to urge his readers to reflect upon it, to convey his message and empathize with them exploiting both irony and sincerity. He tried to offer a new problematized perspective on an ethical issue that has perhaps been relegated to a corner, even though it is instead at the very core of our existences, thus following other contemporary fellow writers in what I deem the *mission* of post-postmodernism: taking us back to a dimension where humanity is still the most precious value we have. “USE WELL THY FREEDOM” (230) is an invitation for all of us to stop and think what use we have made of freedom so far and how we can change it for the better, engaging in a new challenge of our time. Whose responsibility is this? I believe that, as the Berglunds did, we should all “start small”, without any presumptions of big changes, but with the hope of inspiring others and in turn be inspired to add even a single brush stroke to the bigger painting of our future. Indeed, “fiction that isn’t an author’s personal adventure into the frightening or the unknown isn’t worth writing” (Franzen, *The End* 125).

CONCLUSION

Wishing to position Jonathan Franzen within the American post-postmodernist scenario, I set out to analyze his fourth novel, *Freedom*, to identify what elements can be related to this new trend, how they have been articulated and in what ways they differ from other writers' contributions. First, I provided an outline of Franzen's career, focusing on the moments in which he has more strongly expressed his own fears, doubts and ambitions – particularly his essays “Why Bother?” and “Mr. Difficult” – and which have helped him work towards a new approach to fiction. Second, with the aim of building subsequently my own interpretation, I summed up the main elements of *Freedom* which had already been taken into consideration for their thematic and stylistic significance, such as the political and environmental issues, the geographical movements of the characters, the importance of Patty's autobiography and of a happy ending for all the Berglunds. Then, I focused on the still debated definition of post-postmodernism, drawing on writers' manifestos and scholars' studies of the past few decades, concerned especially with the new hybridity of styles in which realism and sincerity prevail over the typical postmodernist rebellious experimentation and irony.

With my analysis, I aimed to show that the novel shares some of the main features of post-postmodernism, namely its reappropriation of a realist attention to characters and human values, together with an interest in the human psychological dimension and how this has been affected by the social and cultural change of the new millennium. Drawing on Nicoline Timmer's study, I linked *Freedom's* characters and their stories to the three “symptoms” of post-postmodernism, which describe how the modern world has powerfully impacted on our sense of self and our interactions with others. The lack of decision-making tool – the first symptom – is represented by the characters' uncertainty and helplessness when offered several alternatives and their fear of making the wrong choice. Their tentativeness is the symbol of a society where choice overload does not make people feel in control of their lives; rather, it is bound to lead them to a state of permanent dissatisfaction and unhappiness. The impossibility of feeling anything because of overwhelming pain – the second symptom – can be addressed looking at the reaction of *Freedom's* characters in their darkest moments:

Joey feels paradoxically relieved and alive only when his girlfriend betrays him, causing him an unbearable pain, whereas Patty and Walter, after their separation, reach a complete state of emptiness and despair, so much so that only when they face the possibility of death they are able to act and take back control over their narratives.

The closure of the novel is thus important for it relates to the third symptom: the structural need for a we. Characters rediscover themselves through others; their renewed sense of self occurs thanks to their ability of recognizing the other and reestablishing a bond of trust, thus defeating the alienation that trapped them. Although the ending of the novel does not contemplate a community reconciliation but is limited within the sphere of family and loved ones, I would argue that for Franzen this represents the very first step towards the human reconnection post-postmodernism longs for.

The whole novel, with its heavy title, aims to be a starting point for a reflection upon the ways in which we have let modernity play with the concept of freedom, distorting it, pushing its authentic core far from our 21st-century lives, and disguising the consequences as significant milestones for the progress of our civilization. Franzen's mission consists in a change of perspective, which urges his readers to open their eyes and think critically about what freedom really entails and how to best use it. Indeed, to bring about change one cannot act in isolation but needs to address the other and share with him his feelings and thoughts: it is the writer's job and what he invites us to do. Hence, I consider Franzen's contribution to post-postmodernism significantly valuable, for, with *Freedom*, he has been able to reach his audience with a powerful question that will likely follow humanity throughout its journey on earth.

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