

“WE ARE WHAT WE BELIEVE”: CHARACTER AND
PSYCHOLOGY IN JONATHAN FRANZEN’S
THE CORRECTIONS

THESIS

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By

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*For my parents, Dennis and Louise
Galli, with love and appreciation.*

Acknowledgments

I consider myself very fortunate to have had such a strong support system throughout this entire process.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This thesis represents the culmination of a year and a half of reading and re-reading (and re-reading and re-reading) Jonathan Franzen's 2001 novel *The Corrections*; of searching out and wading through countless sources of secondary reading; of destroying numerous unusable drafts, starting from scratch at least a dozen times; and of a good deal of personal examination and psychic contemplation. Franzen has commented that it took him seven years to complete *The Corrections*, and fifteen months into this project, I began to wonder if it might take me at least that long to complete this paper. Much to my relief, however, I was somehow able to finish in time for Spring graduation.

The original idea for the thesis, a Marxist interpretation of *The Corrections* vis-à-vis Frederic Jameson (along with some of his equally indecipherable contemporaries, the relentlessly infuriating Slavoj Žižek among them), proved to be, six months in, rather obscure and suffocatingly boring. Plan B called for a character analysis of each member of the Lambert family as well as a study of the ways in which they interact with and influence each other: Enid, the mother; Alfred, the father; and their three adult children, Gary, Chip, and Denise. Twenty or so pages into Enid's section, however, I realized I would have neither the time nor space for such an undertaking. Those inescapable factors, time and space, thus decided the structure of the paper for me, and I had to settle on a discussion of just two characters, Enid and Alfred. I chose to approach their analyses with a focus on contemporary theories of psychology, peeling back their psyches layer by layer to discover what, exactly, motivates and drives their thoughts and actions. In so doing, I came to some surprising understandings

about my own life, some of my own behaviors, an effect which is, I think, one of the hallmarks of truly exceptional and meaningful literature.

Franzen divides his novel into five sections, so that each of the main characters, at one time or another, has a chance to act as the protagonist. What is so remarkable about this particular choice of form is that the reader comes to understand and identify with each character little by little, as we see their worlds distinctly through their own eyes. In this manner, we do not have to rely on the perceptions of one “main” character for an awareness of the others; we are allowed to experience their lives through their own words and deeds. The novel’s five sections provide unique insights into each of the family members, and the reader is constantly surprised to discover that we do, in fact, identify and sympathize with all of them, gradually realizing that the observations of the rest of the characters do not necessarily tell the whole story about each individual Lambert. I have tried to mirror this reading experience within this paper, so that you, the reader, will first see life strictly through Enid’s eyes—her frustrations with her husband, her distress at the path her life has taken—and then have an opportunity to hear Alfred’s side of the story. I have devoted equal time to Enid and Alfred, so that they both have a chance to defend themselves, as it were. Admittedly, this approach gives the three children something of a bad rap, but the reader of *The Corrections* will understand that they, too, have their reasons for behaving as they do, reasons that I could not, unfortunately, examine due to the above-mentioned constraints of time and space.

One of the many themes running throughout the novel is the idea of place—how the characters react to and respond to their particular geographic environments. While the issue of environment is not a topic broadly discussed in the paper, the idea of the Midwest plays a particular role in forming Enid's conceptions and behaviors. Similarly, it is those very ideas of the Midwest which their children find so disagreeable, causing them to flee to the East coast at the earliest available opportunity. Because the Midwestern culture is such a significant factor in the attitudes and beliefs of the characters, it will be useful to briefly gain an understanding of the ways in which Enid and her children, Gary in particular, respond to the community of St. Jude, the heart of the Midwest. The most effective means of achieving this is to extract directly from the text.

Enid's exceptional fondness for St. Jude, and the values imparted by the community, is made clear in this passage:

In the pageantry of weddings Enid reliably experienced the paroxysmal love of *place*—of the Midwest in general and suburban St. Jude in particular—that for her was the only true patriotism and the only viable spirituality. Living under presidents as crooked as Nixon and stupid as Reagan and disgusting as Clinton, she'd lost interest in American flag-waving, and not one of the miracles she'd ever prayed to God for had come to pass, but at a Saturday wedding in the lilac season, from a pew of the Paradise Valley Presbyterian Church, she could look around and see two hundred nice people and not a single bad one. All her friends were nice and had nice friends, and since nice people tended to raise nice children, Enid's world was like a lawn in which the bluegrass grew so thick that evil was simply choked out, a miracle of niceness. If, for example, it was one of Esther and Kirby Root's girls coming down the Presbyterian aisle on Kirby's arm, Enid would remember how the little Root had trick-or-treated in a ballerina costume, vended Girl Scout cookies, and baby-sat Denise, and how, even after the Root girls had gone off to good Midwestern Colleges, they all still made a point, when home on holiday, of tapping on Enid's back door and filling her in on the doings chez Root, often sitting and visiting for *an hour or more* (and not, Enid knew, because Esther had told them to come over but just because they were good St. Jude kids who naturally took an interest in other people), and Enid's heart would swell at the sight of yet another sweetly charitable Root girl now receiving, as her reward, the vows of a young man with a neat haircut of the kind you saw in ads for menswear, a really super young fellow who had an upbeat attitude and was polite to older people and didn't believe in premarital sex, and who had a job that contributed to society, such as electrical engineer or environmental biologist, and who came from a loving, stable, traditional family

and wanted to start a loving, stable, traditional family of his own. Unless Enid was very much deceived by appearances, young men of this caliber continued, even as the twentieth century drew to a close, to be *the norm* in suburban St. Jude. All the young fellows she'd known as Cub Scouts and users of her downstairs bathroom and shovelers of her snow, the many Driblett boys, the various Persons, the young Schumpert twins, all these clean-cut and *handsome* young men (whom Denise, as a teenager, to Enid's quiet rage, had dismissed with her look of "amusement"), had marched or would soon be marching down heartland Protestant aisles and exchanging vows with nice, normal girls and settling down, if not in St. Jude itself, then at least in the same time zone.¹

Enid's children, on the other hand, have a markedly different perception of the suburbs in which they grew up, as evidenced in these reflections by Gary:

The midmorning light of a late-winter thaw, the stillness of a weekday nonhour in St. Jude, Gary wondered how his parents stood it. The oak trees were the same oily black as the crows perching in them. The sky was the same color as the salt-white pavement on which elderly St. Judean drivers obeying barbiturate speed limits were crawling to their destinations: to malls with pools of meltwater on their papered roofs, to the arterial that overlooked puddled steel yards and the state mental hospital and transmission towers feeding soaps and game shows to the ether, to the beltways and, beyond them, to a million acres of thawing hinterland where pickups were axle-deep in clay and .22s were fired in the woods and only gospel and pedal steel guitars were on the radio; to residential blocks with the same pallid glare in every window, besquirreled yellow lawns with a random plastic toy or two embedded in the dirt, a mailman whistling something Celtic and slamming mailboxes harder than he had to, because the deadness of these streets, at such a nonhour, in such a nonseason, could honestly kill you...

What Gary hated most about the Midwest was how unpampered and unprivileged he felt in it. St. Jude in its optimistic egalitarianism consistently failed to accord him the respect to which his gifts and attainments entitled him. Oh, the sadness of this place! The earnest St. Judean rubes all around him seemed curious and undepressed. Happily filling their misshapen heads with facts. As if facts were going to save them! Not one woman half as pretty or as well dressed as Caroline. Not one other man with a decent haircut or an abdomen as flat as Gary's. But, like Alfred, like Enid, they were all extremely deferential. God, he hated the Midwest! He could hardly breathe or hold his head up. He thought he might be getting sick.²

The truth about the environment of St. Jude is likely somewhere in between.

These two examples, however, are useful to illustrate, first, Enid's remarkable ability to create and live in a Utopian world; and secondly, to show that her family, seen here through Gary's perception, wholly rejects and struggles against the illusory existence that Enid insists on maintaining.

Indeed, Enid's consuming attraction to and need for fantasy speak to a larger issue—that of her deep and morbid shame, addressed in the first section of the thesis. Thus, Part I looks at the ways in which Enid's stubborn obsession with illusion is manifestly connected to her feelings of shame, a distinctly unhealthy merger that cuts her off from reality—not only the reality of her own world, but the realities of her husband and children as well. Using contemporary psychoanalytical theory concerning the emotion of shame, Part I follows Enid through the course of the novel, looking at the role of shame as a source for Enid's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

Enid's husband, Alfred Lambert, is similarly plagued with internal anguish, though his principal challenge is an uncontrollable lifelong depression, a condition that affects his relationship with his family just as profoundly as does his wife's. Modern psychological theory is again valuable in assessing and discussing Alfred's motivations and frame of mind. For Alfred, overcoming depression seems an impossibility, as he must contend not only with that one disease, which affects the elderly in unique and distinctive fashions—he must also daily struggle against the progressive deterioration of his body and mind due to Parkinson's disease and dementia. These additional factors of weakening physical and mental capabilities contribute to Alfred's already severe depression, thus trapping him in a vicious cycle from which there is seemingly no escape.

Among the many ideas evoked throughout *The Corrections* is the notion that one can never truly know another person. This is patently evidenced through the relations and perceptions of each of the characters and their impressions of

one another. With that in mind, I have tried in this paper to uncover some of the secrets of Enid's and Alfred's inner workings, to show the paths their lives follow as they fight their respective mental battles almost completely alone.

Notes

¹ Franzen, Jonathan, *The Corrections*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001, p. 118-119.

² *Ibid.*, p. 175, 178.

Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.

—Philos of Alexandria

CHAPTER I

FOR SHAME: ENID LAMBERT

I am ashamed of what I *am*. Shame therefore
realizes an intimate relation of myself to myself.
Through shame I have discovered an aspect of *my*
being.

— Jean-Paul-Sartre

The concept of shame has, until recently, received fairly little attention in the psychiatric field; it is only in the last twenty years that therapists and psychoanalysts have given serious consideration to this emotion.¹ Authors of literature, however, have long understood and written extensively on the power of shame. Witness Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, both early works of literature in which the title characters struggle with debilitating feelings of shame.² A more recent example can be found in much of the work of Franz Kafka. It is curious that it is predominantly writers, indeed almost singularly among the general public, who have embraced and discussed this painful emotion. Francis J. Broucek notes that "shame makes us want to hide...[it] is so painful that we hope it ends quickly; we have no particular desire to reflect on it or talk about it, because to do so is to run the risk of re-experiencing it."³ Writers of substantive fiction, however, *do* seem to have a desire to reflect on shame and talk about it. Are they more in touch with the human condition? If so, is it because of what Jonathan Franzen calls the novelist's "social isolation" and "personal unpredictability"⁴ that allow a writer to tackle distressing emotions largely avoided by the general public? In any case, combining authorial conceptions of shame with current clinical psychiatric theories can evoke an interesting and insightful discussion on what Carl Goldberg calls "the master emotion."⁵

Sigmund Freud asserts that shame is “a feminine characteristic *par excellence*,” a concept that holds true in an analysis of *The Corrections*. While all of Franzen’s major characters, male and female, are attuned to and experience shame at some point during the course of the narrative, it is the novel’s primary female character, Enid Lambert, who most intensely experiences the emotion. Shame is, for her, the single most powerful force shaping her thoughts, beliefs, motivations, and actions.

The idea of shame is often confused with the idea of guilt, and it will therefore be useful to briefly distinguish between the two. While guilt and shame are closely linked, shame is considered by many psychoanalysts to be the parent emotion, spawning, variously, corresponding feelings of guilt, humiliation, mortification, embarrassment, and so on. Though there is still a good deal of debate on how to concretely differentiate between these two abstract emotions, the central question seems to concern the source of the feeling. On the most basic level, guilt refers to the self as both the object and cause of negative judging and valuation, while shame refers to the suffering that comes from a lost sense of self—the feeling, as formulated by Goldberg, that the self is “crumbling away, without a new, valued self emerging to replace it...the suffering is derived from *our reflection* on our human condition and the realization that we are falling short of some expected desired state of existence.”⁷ Similarly, Helen B. Lewis notes that guilt experiences involve specific conflicting values and actions; shame, as the more psychically fundamental of the two, involves the whole self.⁸ Guilt, then, is the result of perceived wrongdoing, while shame is the result of perceived

“wrong-being,” which may or may not accompany particular guilt-causing actions.

Keeping in mind the power of shame over the self, we can now turn to the different ways in which shame can manifest itself within an individual. Shame may involve matters of regret over one’s past behavior; it may result from humiliating treatment at the hands of another; and it is frequently the effect of having been associated or identified with a particular person (or that person’s particular deeds) as well as with a *group* of people. That is to say, one can feel shame simply because of his or her ethnic identification as, for example, a Jew. Similarly, one can feel shame as a result of, say, an embarrassing act or behavior by a family member.⁹ Broucek refers to this last instance as “borrowed” or “inherited” shame,¹⁰ Adam Blatner as “identification” shame.¹¹ When one is susceptible to and affected by shame in all its forms and causes, the outcome can be psychologically devastating.

Meet Enid Lambert, Midwesterner, mother of three dysfunctional grown children, wife to an emotionally distant husband, and victim of an incapacitating, paralyzing sense of shame. While shame is often (paradoxically) a healthy emotion, signaling a temporary departure from socially established, accepted morals and values, it can also be—as it is for Enid—chronic, debilitating, and pathological. To understand why this woman is so consumed by shame, we need to inquire into her social circumstances, and also consider explanations provided by the discipline of psychiatry.

The ostensible sources of Enid's shame are primarily her husband, Al, who suffers from what she sees as the "embarrassing" illnesses of Parkinson's disease and dementia, and her adult children, whose behaviors Enid considers inappropriate and disgraceful, compounded with her own feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy as a wife and mother. Nestled in the Midwestern cocoon of suburban St. Jude, Enid is surrounded by families next to whom hers seems utterly *different*. The husbands of her friends are interested in travel, hobbies, investments, parties—Al sleeps away the day like an old tomcat, showing little if any interest in the outside world, spending his retirement "without inkling of how much he was embarrassing and disappointing" his wife, reminding her of "all the fun she couldn't have with such a husband."¹² The children of her neighbors are kind to their elders, go off to good Midwestern colleges, and hold jobs that contribute to society—Enid's daughter Denise married young, badly, and outside her religion; her son Gary hates the Midwest and everything it represents; her other son Chip is essentially jobless and floundering. Most inconceivably to Enid, all three have abandoned St. Jude in favor of the city. Franzen tells us that in Enid's opinion, "her children didn't match. They didn't want the things that she and all her friends and all her friends' children wanted. Her children wanted radically, shamefully other things."¹³

By citing immediate family members as the central causes of Enid's shame, it would seem that she suffers principally from what is described above as identification shame. Franzen, however, characterizes her with much more complexity than that quick simplification suggests. Enid desperately wishes to be

identified with a group much different from the dysfunctional Lamberts. She wants instead to be associated with those pillars of American goodness and righteousness—the Midwestern community in general and her St. Judean neighbors in particular. At every turn, though, someone in her family thwarts this desire, and she finds herself a Lambert, identified with their never-ending embarrassments and foibles, mistakes and transgressions. Despite her best efforts to the contrary, her husband and children just will not conform, and Enid is convinced that she sees her shame and despair, her inescapable *otherness*, reflected in the eyes of her friends and neighbors.

This seems to be just the situation Carl Schneider has in mind with his idea that “we experience shame when we feel we are placed out of the context within which we wish to be interpreted.”¹⁴ Though Enid wishes to be interpreted as a typical Midwesterner with Midwestern values, a Midwestern husband, and Midwestern children, those closest to her are constantly behaving in ways that shatter that illusion for her, and she is sure, negatively impact her neighbors’ view of her. Indeed, as Schneider goes on to assert, at the center of a shame occurrence is a particular kind of visibility and exposure (from the Latin *exponere*, “to put out” or “to place out”).¹⁵ For Enid, it seems as though the shamefulness of her family is always exposed, that others are constantly “[witnessing] how peculiar she and Alfred [are],”¹⁶ how urban and embarrassing her children are. The effect of this exposure is Enid’s perceived isolation from the community with whom she urgently craves to be identified.

While Schneider believes that this “placing out” is at the heart of the shame incident, Goldberg contends that “[the] realization of our failure to achieve expected and desired goals lies at the core experience of shame.”¹⁷ Though the two authors differ in what they consider to be the essence of shame, both explanations are relevant to Enid’s identification with her peculiar family, as well as her lack of identification with her community. In support of Goldberg’s contention that unattained objectives provide a source of shame, Franzen makes clear to the reader that Enid’s life as Alfred’s spouse, as mother to her three children, has for her been a long series of frustrated expectations and unfulfilled goals. Though the reader is given relatively little information about Enid in the pre-Alfred years, the small glimpse we do see of her hopes and dreams for the future serves to further underscore the fact that she clearly did not achieve what she was looking for in her decision to marry Al. While living and working in her mother’s boardinghouse during World War II,

already two men in uniform had proposed to her, each of them a *rather* good dancer, but neither was an earner and both still risked getting shot at. Her mother had married a man who didn’t earn and died young. Avoiding such a husband was a priority with Enid. She intended to be comfortable in life as well as happy.

To the boardinghouse a few years after the war came a young steel engineer newly transferred to St. Jude to manage a foundry. They drank cocoa and he told her that human beings were born to suffer. He...told her that the intelligent were doomed to be tormented by the stupid. He was a good earner and a good dancer, however, and...soon they were engaged..

What to believe about Al Lambert? There were the old-man things he said about himself and the young-man way he looked. Enid had chosen to believe the promise of his looks. Life then became a matter of waiting for his personality to change.¹⁸

In fairness to Enid, her expectations for a husband and the kind of life he can provide are not unreasonable. When his personality does not change, however—when Al continues to be distant and morose, when he does not reach

for Enid if she cries, when he proves to be a good earner but a stubbornly frugal investor, when he refuses on moral grounds to act on an insider stock tip that could make them rich, when he mentions the stock tip to a neighbor who *does* act on it and becomes rich, when he inexplicably retires two months before his sixty-fifth birthday, thereby reducing their retirement income by half, when he refuses to push for a larger fee for an old patent that is finally paying off, when they struggle to finance the medical bills; when, in short, Enid's life does not match the lives of her well-off, happily married friends—her frustration and contention of life's unfairness, her inability to attain the universal goal of prosperity and happiness, manifests itself in the form of shame. Several years into their marriage, when Al continues to quote Schopenhauer and deny his wife affection and financial stability, Enid realizes that “[this] was a *bad* husband she had landed, a bad, bad, bad husband who would never give her what she needed. Anything that might have satisfied her he found a reason to withhold.”¹⁹ Enid's disenchantment over the life that she and Al have created speaks to Goldberg's assertion that “shame...is an inevitable consequence of having been thrust into the world and suffering disappointments at having needs met.”²⁰

There is no question that Enid is ashamed of her husband. In the earlier years of her marriage, her shame is rooted in his failure to provide her with either emotional or fiscal security; in the later years, she is ashamed of his shaking Parkinsonian hands, his dementia-addled brain, his recurrent public embarrassments. What is less explicit in the novel's manifest layers, but clear nonetheless, is that while Al is for Enid an overt, relentless source of

identification shame, he is also indirectly a major source of her self-directed feelings of shame and inadequacy. Despite his failing to satisfy any of her needs and goals, despite providing her with the precise opposite of the life she desires, she loves him deeply and seemingly without choice in the matter: “Her life would have been easier if she hadn’t loved him so much, but she couldn’t help loving him. Just to look at him was to love him.”²¹ Because Al rarely if ever returns her affection, Enid is ashamed of continually giving her own unconditional love in the face of such consistently demoralizing treatment. The reader comes to the tacit understanding, then, that Enid is ashamed of herself for permitting Al to regard her as something of an employee, yet often responding to him, at her core, with helpless feelings of tenderness and devotion. She is, in short, ashamed of herself for loving him.

Al’s refusal to accept or even acknowledge Enid’s affection is for her one of the many humiliations that comes along with being married to him; Goldberg argues that “debilitating shame is the result of shame-sensitive people colluding with those who humiliate and shame them on an ongoing and, often, daily basis.”²² This translates into a double blow for Enid, who must contend with Al’s regular humiliation of her, as well as her own shame in accepting that humiliation. Certainly there is a good deal of anger and resentment on Enid’s part towards Al, but those feelings are, to a large extent, supplanted by the more present, ever-conflicting emotions of shame and love.

The shame that Alfred’s mere existence imposes upon Enid is paralleled to the shame and disappointment brought to her, in her eyes, by her children. It is

true that her children's lives are unequivocally in shambles; it is also true, however, that Enid's knowledge of the realities of her children's lives is really quite limited. She doesn't know, for example, that Chip was fired, on the brink of receiving tenure, for having an affair with one of his undergraduate students, or that he is dating a married woman, or that his financial situation is such that he is forced to steal from the supermarket, nestling a salmon filet in the crotch of his pants to feed his visiting parents. Enid is unaware that her daughter Denise is involved in an intense affair with the wife of her boss, the latest in a string of encounters with other women and/or married men. Enid is also ignorant of the fact that her oldest child Gary is suffering from severe, clinical depression, and that he lives his life mainly under the thumb of his own wife and two oldest sons. If she did know all this, she would surely die of a three-fold shame—identification, insecurities over her failings as a mother, and the unbearable possibility of having her neighbors discover these realities.

Enid's shame regarding her children, then, rests on seemingly innocuous complaints. Chip is a doctor of humanities rather than of medicine, as his mother would have preferred; Gary fled the Midwest at the first available opportunity, rejecting the St. Judean values Enid holds so dear; Denise dropped out of college to become a chef in a "*noisy* restaurant where [she] was ruining her hands and wasting her youth"²³ Despite these disappointments, Gary is in fact a successful bank vice-president, Denise is a highly successful and sought-after chef, and Chip was, until the firing to which his mother is oblivious, a successful and popular college professor. Children regularly choose paths for themselves that differ from

what their parents expect; why is this so devastating and shameful for Enid? One could argue that she is desperately, if unconsciously, trying to make up for her own failures by projecting onto her children her desires and dreams of a perfect Midwestern life—dreams that she once had for herself and, to a degree, still clings to. Her continuous attempts to live vicariously through her children, coupled with their repeated resistance to these attempts, results in the further disintegration of her personal identity.²⁴ None of Enid's wishes for the future came to pass, partly because Al did not seem to care to fulfill them; now all three of her children are unilaterally rejecting the values and ideals she endeavored to instill in them growing up. Those closest to her, for as long as she has known them, have in effect told Enid that what she wants does not matter, causing her to feel weak, inadequate, isolated, and shamed.

Goldberg notes that in neurotic conflicts involving the disappearance of self, "self-absorbing defenses are mobilized, such as...projection and reproach toward others for one's own unrecognized failings."²⁵ It is not just that Enid's children are not cooperating with her ideas of "correct" living; those self-absorbing defenses are kicking in, causing Enid to be hypercritical of her children each time they make a decision with which she disagrees. Enid is angry with, disappointed in, and ashamed of herself for not meeting her own goals, but it is far easier to rebuke and criticize those around her for rejecting the imposition of her ideals upon them than it is to fully confront her own flaws and mistakes. While she is on one level aware of her shortcomings, it is safer to find fault with others rather than fully admit to her own transgressions. In this way, Enid is able

to continue avoiding a true recognition of her failures, as she uses her children's perceived shameful behaviors to defensively cover her own.

Enid is quite clever at articulating her dissatisfaction, cloaking it in seemingly innocent comments. While she and Alfred are visiting Chip in New York, for example, Enid energetically recounts to Chip the details of a party recently attended by her and Al:

“I told you, didn't I, they built that *enormous* house out in Paradise Valley—Al, didn't you count eight bedrooms? .Dad and I were at the housewarming in June,” Enid said. “It was spectacular. They'd had it catered, and they had *pyramids* of shrimp. It was solid shrimp, in pyramids. I've never seen anything like it...Anyway, it's a beautiful house,” Enid said. “There are at least six bedrooms, and you know, it looks like they're going to fill them. Dean's tremendously successful . He's quite the entrepreneur, *I'd say* .
 “But you know what he told me he's doing for his mother's birthday? It's still a surprise for her, but I can tell you. He's taking her to Paris for eight days. Two first-class tickets, eight nights at the Ritz! That's the kind of person Dean is, very family-oriented. But can you believe that kind of birthday present? Al, didn't you say the house alone probably cost a million dollars? Al?”²⁶

The trick for Enid is to deliver her point without seeming critical or confrontational. In the above dialogue, she simultaneously reminds Al that he never provided her that kind of house, those pyramids of shrimp, and reminds Chip that he is not a family-oriented person because he never takes his mother to Paris. Many of Enid's discussions with her family have these particular undertones; her conversation may sound innocent or girlish, but “subtexts and agendas”²⁷ are easily detected, and often the subtext is accusation and contempt.

Andrew Morrison suggests that “contempt may be viewed as the projected identification of shame...contempt is an attempt to rid the self of shame by an effort to relocate it in another person. The recipient of the projected shame is pressured in various ways to take ownership of the shame and is then treated with disdain and scorn.”²⁸ Enid tries to return her shame to the people she believes are

the sources of her embarrassment and disappointment, and while her disdain and scorn are often implied rather than overt, there is little doubt that the family receives the intended messages.

This process of projected contempt is one way in which Enid attempts to alleviate her shame, but by far her most reliable tactic in her quest to Midwesternize her family is the purposeful distortion of her reality. The half-truths, misleading information, and outright lies she tells to her friends and neighbors are the same lies she tells to herself. “So often credulity was asked of you, so seldom could you summon it absolutely”²⁹—but Enid certainly tries. She desperately wants and needs to accept and trust her version of events. It is equally important that her neighbors do so as well.

Enid has spent so many years putting her personal spin on the goings-on of her family that, like her all-consuming shame, her need to lie to herself has become a fundamental element of her personality. It is a reflexive ability to deliberately mishear, to purposely misinterpret the truth and make it instantly palatable to her St. Judean sensibilities. When, for example, Chip tells his parents he has quit his job to pursue writing, he mentions contributing to the *Warren Street Journal*,

the name of which his mother had misheard and instantly began to trumpet to her friends Esther Root and Bea Meisner and Mary Beth Schumpert, and though Chip in his monthly phone calls home had had many opportunities to disabuse her he'd instead actively fostered the misunderstanding; and here things became rather complex . because the *Wall Street Journal* was available in St. Jude and his mother had never mentioned looking for his work and failing to find it (meaning that some part of her knew perfectly well that he didn't write for the paper)³⁰

Facilitated by Chip's complicity in the lie, Enid chooses to ignore the part of her that questions Chip's employment. She even goes so far as to suggest they

drop by and visit Chip's *Journal* office while in New York. Fully aware that there is no time to visit this hypothetical office, she remains secure and comfortable in her illusion. Similarly, upon discovering that Chip has taken part-time work as a legal proofreader, Enid creates another chimera with which she can comfort herself and impress her friends, illustrated in this conversation with Denise:

“Is he still doing law?”
 “You mean proofreading? Yes ”
 “So he's still at the firm.”
 “He's not a lawyer, Mother.”
 “I know he's not a lawyer.”
 “Well, when you say, ‘doing law,’ or ‘at the firm’—is that what you tell your friends?”
 “I say he works at a law firm. That's all I say. A New York City law firm. And it's the truth. He does work there.”
 “It's misleading and you know it.”
 “I guess I should just never say anything.”
 “Just say things that are true,” Denise said.³¹

Enid quickly recovers from this assault on her fantasy, entertaining the naïve possibility that even if, okay, Chip isn't *really* a lawyer, he might yet become one:

“Well, I think he *should* be in law,” Enid said. “I think the law would be perfect for Chip ..[Don't] you think Chip could be an excellent lawyer? He's so quick with words.”
 “Enid, it's too late,” [Al replied].
 “I thought maybe working for the firm he'd get interested and go back to school. .The thing is, Denise, there are so *many* things you can do with law. You can be a company president You can be a judge! You can teach You can be a journalist. There are so *many* directions Chip could go in.”³²

Months later, still stubbornly clinging to what she wants to believe, Enid writes in her standard Christmas letter, “...Chip continued work at his NYC law firm and pursued investments in Eastern Europe.”³³ The implication, of course, designed to impress Enid's friends as well as maintain her carefully constructed self-

delusion, is that not only is Chip an attorney, he is an attorney at “*his* NYC law firm.”

Enid’s approach to her husband’s illness is much the same. Despite Al’s rapidly failing motor skills, frequent forgetfulness, and hallucinations, Enid is convinced that his affliction is not all that serious, and that Al “just needs to work a little on his attitude.”³⁴ She tells herself, and seems to believe, that the Parkinson’s “is not at all severe” and he should “just get out and *do* a little.”³⁵ Enid does have a point; Al spends the majority of his days secluded in the basement, sleeping in his big blue chair, displaying no desire whatsoever to “work on his attitude.” She chooses, however, to overlook the realities of his illness. The constant, violent shaking of his hands prohibits him from an act as simple as installing a light switch, indeed, inhibits his ability to merely feed himself. He crawls across the floor and hoists himself up on the ping-pong table to extricate himself from his chair, and he needs Enid’s assistance simply to bathe. His deteriorating mental faculties occasionally make it difficult for him to complete a sentence or even remember where he is. He suffers from vivid hallucinations, one of which involves an aggressive, animated piece of feces.

Even if Al were so inclined, no amount of stamp collecting, fly-fishing, or socializing would alleviate these manifestations of his illness. Really, who can blame him for preferring to sleep? Still, Enid insists on comparing him to those friends with whom she strives so hard to identify. As she laments to Denise:

“Dave Schumpert has had ten times more health problems than Dad, he’s had a colostomy for fifteen years, he’s got one lung and a pacemaker, and look at all the things that he and Mary Beth are doing. They just got back from snorkeling in Fiji! And Dave *never* complains, *never* complains.”³⁶

The idea of Al donning trunks and flippers to go snorkeling in Fiji is ridiculous; nevertheless, Enid stubbornly believes that he *should* do just that (or something similar), that activities and hobbies are the answer to his medical problems.

One night, Enid discovers her husband naked and hysterical on the floor, repeatedly calling her name and begging for help. To the best of her understanding, Al's terrifying hallucination has something to do with excrement. Two mornings later, she finds him curled up asleep in the shower stall, where he had fled in the night to escape the torments of the imaginary feces. Enid's response to these incidents is to tell Denise, "Dad has some mild symptoms of hallucination which his doctor says are *probably drug-related*."³⁷ It is hard to imagine that Enid, after spending an exhausting night tending to and caring for Alfred in the throes of his anguish, would honestly believe this characterization of events. Nonetheless, she remains unyielding in her resolution to uphold the pretense that his illness is not that serious

Enid's relentless efforts to deny the truths of Al's condition are reflective of her efforts to idealize their marriage as a whole, in her own eyes and in the eyes of her friends. It is yet another instance of her attempts to "match" her neighbors, to feel like she belongs with this community, to identify with her ideal:

She'd always wanted three children. The longer nature denied her a third, the less fulfilled she felt in comparison to her neighbors. Bea Meisner, though fatter and dumber than Enid, publicly smooched with her husband, Chuck, twice a month; the Meisners hired a sitter and went dancing every October without fail; Dale Dribblett took his wife, Honey, someplace extravagant and out of state for their anniversary, and the many young Dribblett's all had birthdays in July. Even Esther and Kirby Root could be seen at barbecues patting each other's well-marbled bottoms. It frightened and shamed Enid, the loving-kindness of other couples. In every neighbor woman's eyes she saw the tacit question: Did Al at least make her feel super-special in that special way?

As soon as she was visibly pregnant again, she had a tacit answer. The changes in her body were incontrovertible, and she imagined so vividly the

flattering inferences about her love life that Bea and Esther and Honey might draw from these changes that soon enough she drew the inferences herself.³⁸

It should be clear that these deliberate and conscientious fabrications constructed by Enid serve as the primary defense against her overwhelming feelings of shame. Just as it is safer to incessantly criticize those around her than to come to terms with her own faults, the sterile bubble of Midwesternness that she builds around herself is a crucial ally in her on-going struggle against shame. “It wasn’t a wonderful life,” Franzen writes, “but a woman could subsist on self-deceptions like these...”³⁹

The effect of this simulated happiness, however, is that her shame is in fact intensified rather than eased. Goldberg asserts that shame “comes from the realization of how one’s life has been duplicitous...shame is closely associated with the bitterness and animosity directed towards oneself which comes from the realization of having lived a lie.”⁴⁰ Each time Enid tries to comfort herself by distorting the truth, her sense of shame only grows larger and more unbearable. To some degree of consciousness, Enid is aware that her entire life as a wife and mother has been a forgery. She has spent so many years tiptoeing around the truth that she has forgotten how to live honestly—*authentically*. Goldberg characterizes this as “the vital lie.”⁴¹

The obvious question to be answered is, *why* does Enid feel compelled to live her life this way? Why is she tormented by shame, and why does she compulsively manufacture this inauthentic life for herself? One explanation can be found in studying Broucek’s “subject-OBJECT” theory.

We are all, to an extent, being objectified by others, in that we have a body and that others react to that body and the behavior exhibited by it. What we hope, however, is that even though we are all objects for others, we can eventually become much more than that. Brouček explains this way:

After we become aware of ourselves as objects for others we hope that the other will at least regard us as “SUBJECT- objects,” that is, that the “subject” aspect of our dual nature for the other will be primary in the other’s response to us, thus affirming that we exist together with the other in a field of shared affective experience and overlapping consciousness rather than as disjunctive consciousnesses, surveying each other as mere objects...

I would reserve the term “objectification” for those instances in which the self or the other is not a SUBJECT-object but a subject-OBJECT or mere object.⁴²

It should be noted that Broucek bases his theory on parent-child relationships; that is, the treatment of a child as either SUBJECT-object or subject-OBJECT during his or her formative years. Nevertheless, his ideas are useful in discussing Al and Enid’s relationship, as there are many ways in which they are significantly more like parent and child than they are husband and wife.

To begin with, Enid herself makes it clear that she expects Al to take care of her, much in the way a parent would care for a child. Her main criterion for choosing a husband, as noted above, is that he be an “earner.” In this sense, Al is like a father, in that he provides her with physical needs such as food, shelter, medical care, and so on—but it does not stop there. Al treats Enid very much like a child, refusing to discuss financial matters with her, for instance, and giving orders and assigning “chores” as one would a child (“Do you remember,” he said, “that I asked you to take care of the mess at the top of the stairs? That that was the one thing—*the one thing*—I asked you to do while I was gone?”⁴³). Finally, all the information given to the reader about Enid’s own father is that he “didn’t

earn and died young,”⁴⁴ and it is therefore not unlikely that some part of her was looking for a father figure as well as a husband.

Whether conscious of it or not, Al ignores or negates Enid’s subjectivity at every turn. His extreme and seemingly heartless reaction to her feelings is revealed in this memorable exchange between them, fairly early into the marriage:

“What is the reason you’re so cold to me?” she said.
 “There are reasons,” Alfred said, “but I will not tell you.”
 “Why are you so unhappy? Why won’t you tell me?”
 “I will go to the grave before I tell you. To the grave.”⁴⁵

Here, Enid tries desperately to be seen as a person, to initiate an honest dialogue with her husband, but he completely shuts her down. This is Al’s preferred method for dealing with Enid, and it continues throughout their fifty years of marriage. Not surprisingly, this relentless objectification and denial of personhood results in significant shame anxiety. As Broucek argues,

It is when one is trying to relate to the other as a subject but feels objectified that one is apt to experience shame. If such objectifications are standard fare rather than occasional happenings, the stage is set for the development of significant psychopathology...To be continually objectified by the significant other is to have one’s very sense of self negated or expropriated by the other.⁴⁶

Being reduced to subject-OBJECT, then (perhaps even mere object in Enid’s case), serves to compound her sense of shame year after year, causing Enid to invent for herself the life she wishes she had, and this “vital lie” in turn causes even more shame. The process is beautifully illustrated in this passage:

[Enid] didn’t care much for the reality of this moment That her husband had left town eleven days ago without kissing her goodbye was a thing she’d halfway succeeded in forgetting. With the living Al absent, she’d alchemically transmuted her base resentments into the gold of longing and remorse. Her swelling womb, the pleasures of the fourth month, the time alone with her handsome boys, the envy of her neighbors were all colorful philtres over which she’d waved the wand of her imagination Even as Al had come down the stairs she’d still imagined apologies, homecoming kisses, a bouquet of flowers maybe ...The philtres may have been colorful but unfortunately (she saw now) they were chemically inert. Nothing had really changed.⁴⁷

By failing to kiss his wife goodbye before his business trip, Al discounts Enid's feelings and denies her subjectivity. Enid responds to this shameful objectification by retreating back into her illusory world, and though it is not explicit in the passage, we know from Goldberg that further shame is brought on by the realization of the vital lie. This is the vicious circle of shame in which Enid is caught.

The question of subjectivity also has interesting parallels with Hegel's master/slave dialectic. When two self-consciousnesses confront one another, the symmetry of mutual recognition is unstable, and both self-consciousnesses want to dominate the other, or "supercede this otherness of itself."⁴⁸ The symmetry must be broken so that of the two opposed self-consciousnesses, one is going to be recognized (master), the other only recognizing (slave). Hegel notes that in the end, one of the two self-consciousnesses "is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman."⁴⁹ In this dialectical struggle between Enid and Alfred, Alfred of course emerges as the winner. Enid, the "slave," is like a mirror that reflects Al, and Al, the "master," is like a mirror that reflects only his own image—"the outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal."⁵⁰ Whether or not this is a situation that causes shame is up for debate; interestingly, however, Hegel notes that shame is an anger about *what ought not to be*,⁵¹ and we do know for certain that Enid is displeased with her status in their marriage.

Hegel writes that the synthesis of the master/slave relationship involves increasing independence on the part of the slave, increasing dependence on the part of the master. This is certainly true for Enid and Al; as his physical and mental abilities continue to deteriorate, he becomes more and more reliant upon his wife (“Enid...I am having difficulties. I would appreciate your assistance...Can you help me? ...Get that...Help me with this.”⁵²). It might seem that Enid’s power has balanced that of Alfred’s, that the situation is now equalized; Al still controls Enid, but he is dependent upon her, while Enid is controlled by Al, yet simultaneously independent.⁵³ The extent to which this synthesis is truly realized will be addressed later in the chapter.

The sources and causes of Enid’s debilitating shame that have been discussed to this point, then, are as follows: her identification with her embarrassing family and the exposure that comes along with it; her lack of identification with her friends and neighbors; the frustration of her goals; the humiliation that comes from her love for Al; the recognition of the vital lie; her treatment as subject-OBJECT; and her inferior position in Hegel’s cosmic consciousness. There is, however, yet another force at work in Enid’s shame, one that is beyond her control as well as the control of her husband or children.

Gershen Kaufman refers to this force as “ideological scripts.” He writes,

...We inherit ideological scripts by belonging to a particular nation, religion, gender, or class, and also because we live during a particular historical time.

Three main characteristics distinguish ideological scripts. They define one’s general orientation in the universe, in a particular society, and in relationship to other members of that society. They embody values and injunctions by evaluating what is good and what is bad. And they also embody sanctions, positive ones for the fulfillment of central values and negative ones for their violation.

...These unique scripts are the particular faiths by which human beings live and die and thus are the principal agents of bonding and division among all

peoples. Ideological scripts are both self-validating and self-fulfilling because, for all individuals, they divide what is true and good from what is false and bad, and they are lived out *as if* true, while all other competing scripts are refuted *as if* false.⁵⁴

As we have seen, the ideological script in full effect in St. Jude dictates everything from the proper marriage partner to the proper job to the proper leisure activities. Enid's strict interpretation of St. Judean culture does not allow for much deviance from the expected norm; when it routinely occurs, however, Enid's shame is reflected in, as Broucek notes, the "severe tension or strain between [her] self and [her] ideal self."⁵⁵ While she desperately wishes to be the same type of wife and mother as her friends Bea and Esther and Mary Beth, with husbands and children just like theirs, her family constantly refutes the ideological script of St. Jude, leaving Enid ashamed.

The urgent attempts at persuading her family to conform speak to the power of these ideological scripts. Enid's insistence on "appropriate" behavior, on adherence to the script, is related to her need to measure up to and identify with her friends and neighbors. This time, however, this need comes not just from identification shame, but from the terrifying risk of exclusion from her social group. As Broucek argues, "Social conformity achieved through shame will be essentially a conformity based on identification and shared ideals, with rejection, expulsion, or abandonment as the threat."⁵⁶ If Enid wishes to remain in her social circle, then, it seems as though she has virtually no choice but to persistently foist this ideological script upon her resistant family. Indirectly, the Midwestern mindset is responsible for much of Enid's shame, as she stubbornly

exhorts, wholeheartedly believes, and insistently imposes its “shared ideals” upon her family, in constant fear of exclusion by her friends.

Fortunately, however, there is some hope for Enid. Though she has spent much of her life wrestling with and hiding from shame, there are hints throughout the novel suggesting that Enid is ready to take action towards a major change. The catalyst comes during a much-anticipated luxury cruise, which for months “had been her mind’s safe parking place, the future that made her present bearable.”⁵⁷ Between Alfred’s long bathroom breaks and frequent naps, Enid strikes up a friendship with Sylvia Roth, a fellow cruiser from Pennsylvania. The evening starts out innocently enough, with the two women playing the slot machines and downing cloudberry akvavits. Soon, however, Sylvia confesses that she has a secret, and proceeds to tell her disturbing story to a progressively more intoxicated Enid. Enid learns that Sylvia’s daughter has been brutally murdered, that Sylvia’s previous fondness for creating woodcuts has been replaced by a consuming desire to draw firearms, exclusively, and that Sylvia’s husband, Ted, refuses to acknowledge or speak of his daughter’s death. If Sylvia mentions the trial, for instance, Ted tells her calmly, “I don’t know what you’re talking about...No one killed our daughter, I don’t want to hear you say that again.”⁵⁸

Though Enid is by now quite drunk, and somewhat confused by Sylvia’s long story, something begins to register in her mind. Perhaps it is learning of another’s flat denial of a fundamental truth; perhaps it is the shamelessly honest manner in which her new friend divulges her deepest secrets; perhaps it is Enid’s

mental exhaustion and drunkenness; or perhaps it is a combination of all of these that leads Enid, finally, to her own moment of reckoning with her reality. As Sylvia unburdens herself, Enid is ambushed by the truth of her life:

To Enid at this moment came a vision of rain. She saw herself in a house with no walls, to keep the weather out, all she had was tissue. And here came the rain from the east, and she tacked up a tissue version of Chip and his exciting new job as a reporter. Here it came from the west, and the tissue was how handsome and intelligent Gary's boys were and how much she loved them. Then the winds shifted, and she *ran* to the north side of the house with such shreds of tissue as Denise afforded: how she'd married too young but was older and wiser now and enjoying great success as a restaurateur and hoping to meet the right young man! And then the rain came blasting up from the south, the tissue disintegrating even as she insisted that Al's impairments were very mild and he'd be fine if he'd just work on his attitude and get his drugs adjusted, and it rained harder and harder, and she was so tired, and all she had was tissue—⁵⁹

All at once, Enid is confronted with the counterfeit existence she has created for herself, her husband, and her children.

It is important to recognize the significance of this moment, while keeping in mind that there is much work ahead for Enid. Her flash of awareness serves as the very beginning of a theoretical paradigm shift, but we must remember that Enid is exhausted and very drunk; that she still must overcome a lifetime of self-deception; and that she is just minutes away from discovering her husband in their stateroom, frantically battling the abusive feces. Like many epiphanies that sneak up in the night, radically if temporarily altering our established perceptions, re-entry into the real world (here, tending to a crying, half-naked, mentally disturbed spouse), along with the arrival of sobriety and daylight (for Enid, breakfast, socializing, and a tour of historic Newport), can make us forget precisely what seemed so meaningful and momentous just hours earlier.

Still, Enid has a chance to act and reflect upon her crucial insight before she can relegate it back into her subconscious. Following Sylvia to the Upper

Deck, Enid at first pretends her room is also among the most expensive, then reconsiders:

“I’m sorry. What deck is this?”
 “This is the Upper.”
 “Oh dear, I’m on the wrong deck. I’m sorry.”
 “Don’t be sorry. Do you want me to walk you down?”
 “No, I got confused, I see now, this is the Upper Deck and I’m
 supposed to be on a lower deck. A much lower deck. So, I’m sorry.”⁶⁰

This may seem trivial, but Enid has had a life-long obsession with portraying the appearance of wealth. If Al can not fully provide it, she reasons, she will instead provide the illusion. To admit to Sylvia, then, that she and Al cannot afford a room on the Upper Deck is actually quite significant; just seconds earlier, Enid had felt that she “couldn’t bear to be seen by Sylvia as a ‘B’ Deck sort of person.”⁶¹ This ostensibly inconsequential confession, in fact, marks the first time in the novel that Enid tells the truth instead of trying to sustain a fantasy.

This admission is followed by another that would have previously been inconceivable. Earlier in the evening, Enid had mentioned that Chip, her son who works for the *Wall Street Journal*, had made her and Al “a lovely lunch” before taking them to the pier to board the cruise ship.⁶² Now, Enid tells her new friend,

“My husband ..No, our son actually. We didn’t have lunch with him today. That’s what I wanted to tell you. He met us at the airport and we were supposed to have lunch with him and his friend, but they just—*left*, I don’t understand it, and he never came back, and we still don’t know where he went. So, anyway .”⁶³

Again, though this confession may seem extraneous, it is really another small step that Enid takes towards living authentically. It also leads her to a second recognition about the manner in which she has been living her life, which is to say, living a lie.

Enid leaves Sylvia and makes her way to the “B” Deck, reflecting on her life, her marriage, her family. Slumping onto a bench in the hallway, she thinks,

Here was a torture that the Greek inventors of the Feast and the Stone had omitted from their Hades. the Blanket of Self-Deception. A lovely warm blanket as far as it covered the soul in torment, *but it never quite covered everything* And the nights were getting cold now.⁶⁴

This particular moment of recognition and awareness differs somewhat from both her earlier vision of rain and her concessions to Sylvia in that it seems to be Enid’s first *conscious and deliberate* acknowledgment of her self-imposed duplicity. The reader feels a definite sense of “giving in” on Enid’s part, whereby she finally and completely allows herself to see the truth. Though it is inarguably an uncomfortable moment for her, accompanied by tears and desperation, we nonetheless feel a sense of relief, both for ourselves and for Enid. Like many instances of sudden self-awareness, however, it is also accompanied by deep shame, and speaks to the issue of the vital lie. Goldberg notes that “feelings of shame come not only from revealing our frailties to others but, perhaps more importantly, from being forced to face aspects of vulnerability in one’s self, which, up until that moment, have not been recognized.”⁶⁵ It is true that Enid has, before this point, been confronted with attacks on her fantasy, as when Denise pointedly informs her mother that Chip is not a lawyer; each time, though, Enid is able to safely withdraw back into her illusory world by refusing to accept the truth. On this occasion, however, drunk and sobbing on the bench in the late hours, Enid becomes truly sentient of her crucial role in the lifelong deceptions she has invented for herself. As Goldberg further points out, the sense of shame reveals that we have “believed *a lie*, [and] comes from finding important

beliefs...unfounded...Shame in this sense derives from a sense of betrayal—the shocking or startling realization that we are frail, vulnerable, and finite beings...”⁶⁶ Though Enid has formerly believed that it is her family, not her, that is responsible for any sense of betrayal—Al betrayed her by not “earning,” her children betrayed her by not conforming—she now sees that she has actually betrayed herself. It is this understanding of the true source of her feelings of betrayal and shame, the comprehension of her vulnerability and her responsibility for it, that brings her to tears.

As mentioned earlier, however, Enid unfortunately does not have a chance to address and examine this shift in perception. Discovering Alfred in the grips of his hallucinatory nightmare effectively erases any inclination toward self-examination, as the situation demands her immediate time and attention, and likely sends her *fleeing* back to her make-believe world. She is also about to make another discovery that will put her self-awareness on hold—her introduction to the psychotropic drug Aslan. The seeds of self-knowledge have been planted, however, and Enid does have time for a bit more painful psychic contemplation before seeking relief in the arms of Aslan.

The following morning, exhausted, sleep-deprived, hung over, shaken from caring for Al, Enid does her best to pretend that everything is copasetic by signing up for a tour of Newport’s historic homes, encouraging Sylvia to come along. Soon, however, the night’s events creep into Enid’s now-fragile bubble of illusion, and the tenuous grip she has on her fantasy life continues to disintegrate:

Enid had slept for six of the previous fifty-five hours, and even as Sylvia thanked her for inviting her along she found she had no energy for touring. The Astors and the Vanderbilts, their pleasure domes and money: she was sick of it.

Sick of envying, sick of herself. She didn't understand antiques or architecture, she couldn't draw like Sylvia, she didn't read like Ted, she had few interests and no expertise. A capacity for love was the only thing she'd ever had. And so she tuned out the tour guide and heeded the October angle of the yellow light, the heart-mangling intensities of the season. In the wind pushing waves across the bay she could smell night's approach. It was coming at her fast: mystery and pain and a strange yearning sense of *possibility*, as though heartbreak were a thing to be sought and moved toward.⁶⁷

Enid seems to intuitively understand that “it is the *private* shame kept enclosed in secrecy in the isolated psyche that is the source of human misery,” and that relief from her misery may be found in an honest and dedicated attempt to work through this shame.⁶⁸ The passage continues with a tentative effort to pursue this new sense of possibility:

On the bus between Rosecliff and the lighthouse, Sylvia offered Enid a cell phone so she could give Chip a call. Enid declined...but she made this statement: “It’s been years, Sylvia, since we had a relationship with him I don’t think he tells us the truth about what he’s doing with his life. He said once he was working for the *Wall Street Journal*. Maybe I misheard him, but I think that’s what he said, but I don’t think that’s really where he’s working. I don’t know what he does for a living really You must think it’s awful of me to complain about this, when you’ve had things so much worse.” In Sylvia’s insistence that it wasn’t awful, not at all, Enid glimpsed how she might confess an even more shameful thing or two, and how this exposure to the public elements might, while painful, offer solace. But like so many phenomena that were beautiful at a distance—thunderheads, volcanic eruptions, the stars and planets—this alluring pain proved, at closer range, to be inhuman in its scale⁶⁹

Again, Enid can discern how confessing may bring a measure of relief, but Goldberg has an explanation as to why she cannot quite bring herself to do so. Unburdening herself is an appealing idea at the moment, but comes with great risks as well. “The deepest shame,” Goldberg notes,

is not the humiliation reflected in the eyes of others, but weakness in one’s own eyes. .We become anxious about others seeing us too accurately, not so much because they might condemn us, but because we will be forced to see parts of ourselves that others see—parts that, until the public exposure, we have concealed from our own scrutiny.⁷⁰

Thus, while Enid appreciates the liberation that may come from confessing, and while she is to an extent prepared to handle Sylvia’s reaction, she is not yet

psychically able to cope with her *own* reaction to the admissions, to address the effects of her self-scrutiny, to be completely honest with herself as well as with her new friend. She instead goes through the motions of having fun on the long-anticipated luxury cruise, touring, gambling, socializing. It is clear, however, that for now at least, the eagerness to play the game has left her. Moreover, in just a few short hours, she will not have to play the game at all, for she is about to encounter a new best friend, in pill form, to completely eradicate all traces of shame.

After another grueling night with Alfred and his war against the hallucinated excrement, Enid, numb with exhaustion and “the worst despair and anxiety she’d ever felt,”⁷¹ is finally driven to the ship’s infirmary to seek some help, some advice, anything. Enid seems to want to take this opportunity to fully unburden herself, to continue the process she started with Sylvia, but this is not to be. She tells the young doctor, “I’m having some trouble...it’s my husband—My trouble is my husband and my children...”⁷² Dr. Hibbard misunderstands the reason for Enid’s visit, believing she is another of the many cruisers who come to his office seeking Aslan, a seemingly miraculous drug that “has yet to receive full American regulatory approval”⁷³ and is thus not available stateside. Though apprehensive, Enid cannot help but be intrigued as Dr. Hibbard extols the virtues and benefits of Aslan:

“This is an excellent new medication that will help you enormously. The drug exerts a remarkable blocking effect on ‘deep’ or ‘morbid’ shame...This interests you?” he said. “I have your full attention?”
 “You’ll feel emotionally more resilient,” Hibbard said. “More flexible, more confident, happier with yourself. Your anxiety and oversensitivity will disappear, as will any morbid concern about the opinion of others. Anything you’re ashamed of now—”
 “Yes,” Enid said. “Yes.”

“‘If it comes up, I’ll talk about it; if not, why mention it?’ That will be your attitude. The vicious bipolarity of shame, that rapid cycling between confession and concealment—this is a complaint of yours?”
 “I think you understand me.”⁷⁴

What an incredible discovery for Enid! Aslan appears to be the solution she has been looking for for five decades. By simply taking one small pill, her shame will be eradicated in under an hour. There is no need anymore for shameful, terrifying confessions, no basis for covering up her family’s embarrassing behavior, no reason whatsoever to worry about her friends’ and neighbors’ impressions of her, no motive to hide behind a façade of cheer and happiness. One gold caplet to give Enid the relief she has been desperately searching for all her married life. Franzen vividly elucidates Enid’s joyful anticipation of Aslan’s extraordinary effects:

With a pounding heart Enid made her way to the bow of the “B” Deck. After the nightmare of the previous days and nights she again had a concrete thing to look forward to; and how sweet the optimism of the person carrying a newly scored drug that she believed would change her head; how universal the cravings to escape the givens of the self. No exertion more strenuous than raising hand to mouth, no act more violent than swallowing, no religious feeling, no faith in anything more mystical than cause and effect was required to experience the pill’s transformative blessings. *She couldn’t wait to take it.* She treaded on air all the way to B11, where happily she saw no sign of Alfred. As if to acknowledge the illicit nature of her mission, she threw the dead bolt on the hall door. Further locked herself inside the bathroom. Raised her eyes to their reflected twins and, on ceremonial impulse, returned their gaze as she hadn’t in months or maybe years. Pushed one golden Aslan through the foil backing of its SampLpak. Placed it on her tongue and swallowed it with water.
 I’ve taken the medication, she told herself. I’ve taken the medication.
 I’ve taken the medication.⁷⁵

And, it turns out, Aslan delivers exactly what it promises. Enid’s shame and personal torment have miraculously, entirely disappeared. She sleeps well and deeply, even through Al’s third consecutive nightly delirium, and is completely unfazed, upon awakening, to find him “curled up fast asleep in the shower stall.”

“What on earth are you doing in there?” Enid gurgled through a fluoride foam, brushing merrily away.

“Got all turned around in the night,” he said. “I had such dreams ”

She found that in the arms of Aslan she had new reserves of patience for the wrist-straining wiggle-waggle brushstroke her dentist recommended for the sides of her molars. She watched with low to medium interest as Alfred achieved full uprightness through a multistage process of propping, levering, hoisting, bracing, and controlled tipping. A lunatic dhoti of bunched and shredded diapers hung from his loins “Look at this,” he said, shaking his head “Would you look at this.”

“I had the most wonderful night’s sleep,” she answered ⁷⁶

Enid’s “new emotional flexibility”⁷⁷ sustains her through breakfast with her husband, through conversation with her table partners, and through Al’s repeated and previously infuriating bathroom breaks. In good spirits, she exhorts him to “take a book outside and read for a while... You just sit. In the sun. And relax relax relax,” while she and Sylvia head off to an investment lecture.⁷⁸ Her new emotional flexibility carries her through her irritation with the pushy women in the lecture hall, through her annoyance with the lecturer himself—and when, during said lecture, she glances out the window and glimpses, out of the corner of her eye, her husband falling from the top of the ship into the icy ocean below, her new emotional flexibility allows her to take that in stride as well.

Enid essentially disappears from the narrative for the next hundred and twenty pages, but the reader presumes she is enjoying shame-free days back in St. Jude, where she is able to assist Al in his recovery and find continued solace in her Aslan SampLpak. The reader (this reader, in any case) must admit to a certain amount of fist-pumping at Enid’s victorious discovery, her sudden and complete overcoming of the debilitating shame. After a lifetime of worry, anxiety, isolation, and paralyzing shame, she is at last living a freer life. Still, there is something distasteful about the easy fix, the pseudo-solution, much like spraying

an air freshener to cover up the smell of garbage instead of taking the garbage to the curb. Indeed, there seem to be as many problems with having a sense of utter shamelessness as there are with an all-consuming, unhealthy fixation with the emotion. Broucek, for example, notes that,

A major part of the Freudian legacy is a general cultural disrespect for shame. Freud's failure, and the failure of later psychoanalysts, to recognize shame's healthy functions led to the culturally disastrous notion that freedom from shame (including the sense of shame) is the mark of a healthy personality.⁷⁹

He further argues that principally associated with shamelessness is willing objectification, the embracing of objecthood:

If shame is triggered by the experience of being objectified by the other while wanting to be related to in an intersubjective mode, then the painful discrepancy can be removed by embracing objecthood and renouncing one's claims as a subject, a solution that replaces the self with a constructed persona and replaces spontaneous personal responsiveness with cultivated and rehearsed performance.⁸⁰

Thus, while Enid feels a strong sense of relief and comfort in her total personality change, she is really doing herself a disservice by inviting others to treat her as an object, the precise condition she has been strenuously fighting against. The argument may be made that she no longer cares, that Aslan has given her a new lease on life, that she is manifestly content with her new situation, and if others want to objectify her, it is an issue that does not concern her any longer—which in essence makes her objectification moot. The truth, however, is that this is just another kind of inauthentic living, like putting on a blindfold so you can't see the proverbial elephant in the sitting room.

Goldberg posits another, equally disconcerting effect of shamelessness. He contends that, "In the throes of their shamelessness, people do not only become insensitive to the griefs and sensitivities of other people, but lose touch

with their own feelings as well.”⁸¹ This is certainly not a desirable outcome for a woman who believes that “a capacity for love was the only thing she’d ever had.”⁸² In fact, Enid herself is aware that under the influence of Aslan, she does not even bother to say a comforting word to Sylvia on the eve of the execution of her daughter’s murderer.⁸³ Most astonishingly, she watches with what can best be described as mere curiosity when her aging, ill husband topples off the cruise ship, a fall which results in “a broken arm, a dislocated shoulder, a detached retina, short-term memory loss, and possibly a mild stroke.”⁸⁴ Despite her innumerable frustrations with Alfred, and despite the nightly hell he has recently subjected her to, one would imagine a certain amount of concern is warranted, if for no other reason than her admission that she loves him in spite of it all. Aslan, however, has taken away the most basic feelings of empathy, perhaps humanity, in Enid.

It may appear, then, that Enid is in a lose-lose situation—without Aslan she is permanently caught in the grips of her incapacitating shame; with the drug she is somewhat cold and unfeeling. There is, however, an attainable synthesis between these two extremes. As mentioned very briefly above, shame can, in fact, be a healthy emotion, calling attention to and hopefully remedying our social transgressions as well as our personal missteps. Healthy shame can, and should, act as a sort of barometer for our behavior, so that if we insult someone, for example, we feel badly and attempt to make amends. It is in this sense that shame can actually make us better people. Goldberg, in discussing the various forms of shame, observes that,

In different manifestations and contexts, [shame] may be either constructive, restraining, or pathological. Therefore, whereas it is true that pathological shame is the harbinger of hopelessness, healthy shame is the crucible of freedom. It spurs our greatest human achievements by making us aware of the conditions necessary in our lives for self-improvement and self-realization⁸⁵

Like a number of other aspects of human personalities, then, shame can be either detrimental or beneficial. Concern for one's appearance, for example, is healthy to an extent, but can become extreme, as in anorexia or bulimia or addiction to plastic surgery. Similarly, healthy, constructive shame gives us parameters within which to effectively live our lives, while excessive shamefulness is psychologically and interpersonally destructive.

Anthony O'Hear takes the idea of constructive shame one step further. Instead of regarding healthy shame as a mutually beneficial adherence to moral order, he considers it a source of honor:

The sense of self-respect provides the basis for a *less socially dependent* concept of honor, in which shame is not tied to fear of exposure, but to a *fuller view of personal worth*, involving ideals such as those of reliability, fairness, decency, and fidelity.⁸⁶

Thus, while Goldberg believes that productive shame is linked to following established cultural mores, O'Hear contends that shame-as-honor leads to an actualization that transcends the common worldview. While the idea is attractive, it seems a little esoteric for Enid's purposes. She would benefit more, I think, from Goldberg's more grounded, more realistically attainable conception of healthy shame as it corresponds to social regulation. The question of whether she can achieve this is another matter.

When we next encounter Enid, we get a clear idea of how she is faring with her Aslan experience—which is to say, quite well, initially. Franzen writes:

Enid hadn't felt ashamed at all, not the tiniest bit, when the warning horns were sounding and the *Gunnar Myrdal* was shuddering with the reversal of its thrusters and Sylvia Roth was pulling her through the crowded Pippi Longstocking Ballroom, crying, "Here's his wife, let us through!" It hadn't embarrassed Enid to see Dr. Hibbard again as he knelt on the shuffleboard deck and cut the wet clothes off her husband with dainty surgical clippers. Not even when the assistant cruise director who was helping her pack Alfred's bags found a yellowed diaper in an ice bucket, not even when Alfred cursed the nurses and orderlies on the mainland, did she feel shame.⁸⁷

By all accounts so far, Enid seems to have found the answer to all her problems.

Aslan allows her to experience precisely the life she has been simulating for decades. She is now free, as she sees it, to pour her inexhaustible supply of love into her husband and children without the slightest feeling of embarrassment or shame, without even the smallest urge to cover up or distort the truth. Like any euphoria-producing drug, however, the high must inevitably end, and when Enid crashes, she does so magnificently:

[She] was feeling quite alright until she ran out of Aslan and nearly died of shame. Her shame was crippling and atrocious. It mattered to her now, as it hadn't a week earlier, that a thousand happy travelers on the *Gunnar Myrdal* had witnessed how peculiar she and Alfred were. Everyone on the ship understood that the landing at historic Gaspé was being delayed and the side trip to scenic Bonaventure Island was being cancelled because the palsied man in the awful raincoat had gone where nobody was supposed to go, because his wife had selfishly enjoyed herself at an investment lecture, because she'd taken a drug so bad that no doctor in America could legally prescribe it, because she didn't believe in God and she didn't respect the law, because she was horribly, unspeakably *different* from other people

Night after night she lay awake, suffered shame, and pictured the golden caplets. She was ashamed of lusting for these caplets, but she was also convinced that only they could bring relief.⁸⁸

Enid's old life, the shameful life she has briefly escaped, returns in full force, accompanied by all the familiar elements of shame, hopelessness, and despair. Indeed, she may even be in a worse position now, having experienced, albeit momentarily, an existence free from self-doubt, isolation, and feelings of inferiority. Having no choice now but to return to her former shame-ridden reality brings Enid to such despair and anguish that she requests a shameful favor

of her friend Bea Meisner—to pick up some more of the drug during the Meisner’s annual vacation in Austria, where, luckily for Enid, Aslan can be prescribed legally.

Once the Meisners depart for their trip, however, Enid’s crippling shame curiously disappears:

As if an evil spell had worn off, she began to sleep better and think less about the drug. She brought her powers of selective forgetfulness to bear on the favor she’d asked of Bea. She began to feel like herself again, which was to say: optimistic.⁸⁹

There are a number of possible explanations for Enid’s sudden and mysterious recovery. On the most basic level, she has completed the withdrawal phase and is thus back to “normal.” Or perhaps she is able to put her mind at ease somewhat with the promise of Bea’s return, Aslan in hand. The most likely reason for her sudden turnaround, however, is that Christmas is fast approaching, and Enid can throw all her energy and desires into the promise of that magical holiday. Enid can always be counted on to be in relatively good spirits when she has something tangible to look forward to, and the Christmas season is something she has been planning and obsessing over since March. Now, with Christmas just days away, Enid is nearly transported with joy and anticipation.

From the beginning of the novel, Enid has worked tirelessly to achieve her dream—a family Christmas in St. Jude. The possibility of having the whole family together for “one last Christmas” has sustained Enid through the bleak realities of the past year; now, just days away from the big morning, it looks as though she may get her wish. Denise has agreed to come home, Gary is bringing his youngest son (and Enid’s favorite grandchild) Jonah, and Chip is doing his

best to wrap up his internet scam in war-torn Lithuania to make it home for the holidays. Enid hasn't had her children home for Christmas in eight long years, and the prospect of her dream becoming a reality sends her into an ecstatic swoon. The almost alarming extent to which Enid immerses herself in her Christmas fantasies is seen in this passage:

She told not only her friends but everyone else she knew in St. Jude, including her butcher, her broker, and her mailman, that her grandson Jonah was coming for the holidays. Naturally she was disappointed that Gary and Jonah were staying for just three days and were leaving at noon on Christmas, but plenty of fun could be packed into three days. She had tickets for the Christmasland light show and *The Nutcracker*; tree-trimming, sledding, caroling, and a Christmas Eve church service were also on the bill. She dug out cookie recipes that she hadn't used in twenty years. She laid in eggnog.

On the Sunday before Christmas she awoke at 3:05 a.m. and thought: *Thirty-six hours*. Four hours later she got up thinking: *Thirty-two hours*. Late in the day she took Alfred to the street-association Christmas party at Dale and Honey Driblett's. .and proceeded to remind all her neighbors that her favorite grandson, who'd been *looking forward all year* to a Christmas in St. Jude, was arriving tomorrow afternoon⁹⁰

Enid spends hours handwriting her Christmas letters, filling everyone in on the goings-on of her family and revealing her delight at the prospect of a family Christmas. It is clear at this point that Enid has ably retreated back into her illusory world, as she writes, "Al took an unexpected 'swim' in the Gulf of St. Lawrence but is feeling 'ship-shape' again!"⁹¹ She carefully tends to the Advent calendar that she has taken out for thirty years, reminded by the baby Jesus of "her own three babies and all the sweet baby-smelling babies of the world."⁹² Even Al's daily constipation and morbid attention to all things evacuatory are easily erased from her mind in her paroxysms of joy, happiness, and anticipation.

Poor Enid. Though she has channeled all of her remarkable abilities to imagine and expect the very best from her latest obsession, we as readers are not so easily fooled. Behind her consuming desire to have her family home is a

memory of Christmases past; when her children were young and had yet to flee to the city, when Denise had not yet married her short Jewish husband, Chip had not yet become a broke, miserable failure, and Gary had not yet submitted himself to his wife's control. Enid desperately wishes to recreate the relative happiness of those early years as wife and mother, before the painful realities of her life had set in. Though Enid is anticipating Christmas morning with all the innocence and delight of a child, the reader is by this point wise to the game. We do not know precisely what will happen to Enid's picture of Christmas bliss, but we feel quite certain that something will go terribly wrong. What is uncertain, however, is how Enid will react to the breakdown of this, her ultimate fantasy.

The first intimation that Enid's Christmas will be somewhat different from her ideal is a phone call from Gary, delivering the news that Jonah will not be accompanying him to St. Jude due to the flu. Though "this camel of disappointment balked at the needle's eye of Enid's willingness to apprehend it,"⁹³ she responds in characteristic, self-delusional fashion:

"See how he feels in the morning," she said. "Kids get twenty-four-hour bugs, I bet he'll be fine. He can rest on the plane if he needs to. He can go to bed early and sleep late on Tuesday!"

"Mother."

"If he's really sick, Gary, I understand, he can't come. But if he gets over his fever—"

"Believe me, we're all disappointed. Especially Jonah."

"No need to make a decision right this minute. Tomorrow is a completely new day."

"I'm warning you it will probably just be me."

"Well, but, Gary, things could look very, very different in the morning. Why don't you wait and make your decision then, and surprise me. I bet everything's going to work out fine!"

It was the season of joy and miracles, and Enid went to bed full of hope.⁹⁴

Gary arrives in St. Jude the following morning, alone. Enid of course does not know that Jonah's decision not to come is based on bribery by his mother, in the form of tickets to a magic show and *The Lion King*. Enid is not fully aware of her daughter-in-law's malicious aversion to St. Jude, and to her and Al; she just knows that Gary's family has not been to visit in eight years. Nonetheless, the reader cannot help but feel sorry for Enid, at this first puncture of her Christmas dream, especially because "for months she'd imagined Jonah pinning the Christ child to the Advent calendar on the morning of the twenty-fourth."⁹⁵

Still, Enid tries to rally herself with the comforting thought that Chip and Denise will soon arrive, completing the nuclear family. At the same time, however, she has the beginnings of her own realization that this Christmas might not turn out the way she has fervently hoped:

The world in the windows looked less real than Enid would have liked. The spotlight of sunshine coming in under the ceiling of cloud was the dream light of no familiar hour of the day. She had an intimation that the family she'd tried to bring together was no longer the family she remembered—that this Christmas would be nothing at all like the Christmases of old. But she was doing her best to adjust to the new reality.⁹⁶

This insight is similar to other recognitions of the "vital lie," other moments of awareness that Enid may be fooling herself after all. The glimmer of understanding does not, however, hit her with the same force as it did on the cruise ship, when she collapsed in tears on the way to her stateroom. This is because she is still convinced she has much to look forward to—Christmasland, *The Nutcracker*, cookie-eating and eggnog-drinking, gift-exchanging with her three children, who are all coming home for one last Christmas! There is still, in short, enough of her fantasy remaining to allow her to overlook the negatives thus far.

Her oldest son, however, makes this immediately difficult. The first conversation Gary has with his mother, upon his first Christmas home in eight years, does not consist of tree-trimming, ballet dancing, or light-stringing, but of the setting of his “ground rules.” Gary sniffs his mother’s dishtowel before drying his hands with it, then proceeds to inform her of the extent of his familial duties as he perceives them:

Gary, with ominous calm, smoothed and straightened the folded dish towel on its rack. “Here are the ground rules, Mother,” he said in the courtroom voice. “Are you listening? These are the ground rules. For the next three days, I will do anything you want me to do, except deal with Dad in situations he shouldn’t be in. If he wants to climb a ladder and fall off, I’m going to let him lie on the ground. If he bleeds to death, he bleeds to death. If he can’t get out of the bathtub without my help, he’ll be spending Christmas in the bathtub. Have I made myself clear? Apart from that, I will do anything you want me to do. And then, on Christmas morning, you and he and I are going to sit down and have a talk.”⁹⁷

Within five minutes of Gary’s arrival, then, Enid is first severely disappointed by Jonah’s “flu,” and secondly receives a dressing-down from her oldest son. (Merry Christmas, Enid.) She is, however, able to muster a dose of her old optimism when she and Al and Gary visit Christmasland that night. The beautiful display of lights, of reindeer, of Santas and candy canes, of *Christmasness*, restores to Enid her hopeful mindset, and she “was delighted. And tomorrow Denise and Chip came, tomorrow was *The Nutcracker*, and on Wednesday they would take the Christ baby from its pocket and pin the walnut cradle to the tree: she had so much to look forward to.”⁹⁸

This wavering back and forth between confrontation with the truth and struggling to sustain the illusion is reminiscent of Enid’s conversation with Dr. Hibbard aboard the cruise ship—the “rapid cycling between confession and concealment.” Here, however, Enid is not grappling with confession to or

concealment from Sylvia, or anyone else for that matter; she is battling herself, addressing to a degree what she will confess to or conceal from herself. After sharing with anyone who will listen her joy at the upcoming arrival of her grandson, and after being disappointed in that regard, after being treated like a child in her own home by her own son, she seems to be carefully shielding her hope and optimism from anyone who might challenge what is left of her Christmas yearning. The exception proving the rule is her loud and public insistence that Chip will, in fact, arrive from Lithuania, which Gary chooses to attribute to his mother's habit to "fixate on whoever isn't here and oppress whoever is."⁹⁹

Apart from this last grasp at her illusion, Enid seems to be actually coming to terms with a reality or two. After Denise's arrival, mother and daughter are cooking and conversing in the kitchen, when Enid suddenly changes her stance on Alfred's health:

Enid gazed bleakly at the unpeeled potatoes by the sink "He's not going to get better, is he "

"I don't think so," [Denise] said.

"It's probably not the medication, is it."

"It probably isn't."

"And there's probably no point in going to Philadelphia [for treatment]," Enid said, "if he can't follow instructions."

"You're right. There probably isn't "

"Denise, what are we going to do?"¹⁰⁰

Here, Enid does something remarkable. A day earlier, Gary had taken delivery of a certain package from Bea Meisner, discussed its contents with Denise, and hid it away from his mother. Denise, in turn, deciding to let her mother choose for herself instead of Gary's deciding for her, reclaims the package of Aslan and deposits it in the "twenty-four" pocket of Enid's beloved Advent calendar, where

the baby Jesus recently lay in his walnut cradle. Denise directs her mother to that pocket, and Enid returns shortly with the drug in hand. Just a few weeks ago, Enid had been badly craving another supply, struggling again with her deep shame and remembering the total relief she enjoyed for a few short days. Now that she finally has the medication in her grasp, however, she does something very surprising:

Enid set the pills on the counter, took two steps away from them, and frowned at them severely. "I'm sure whoever put those there meant well," she said. "But I don't want them in my house."

"That's probably a good idea."

"I want the real thing or I don't want anything."

With her right hand Enid herded the pills into her left hand. She dumped them into the garbage grinder, turned on the water, and ground them up.

"What's the real thing?" Denise said when the noise subsided.

"I want us all together for one last Christmas."¹⁰¹

If Enid were merely keeping up appearances as usual, we could assume that she would have simply pocketed the Aslan for later consumption after expressing her disapproval for Denise's sake. Instead, she deliberately and decisively puts them into the garbage disposal, knowing full well that she is unlikely to ever have access to the pills again. Though she is still stubbornly clinging to her hope of having all her children home for the holidays, it seems to be just that: a hope (fervent though it may be), a *want*, rather than a firm conviction and insistence on fantasy. By disposing of the Aslan, Enid has taken the first actual step towards authentic living, a process begun months ago on board the *Gunnar Myrdal*. Enid is beginning to have the first glimmers of realization that an authentic life, a genuine existence, is better than a barely-sustained fairy tale, that the honest experience of life's ups and downs may, after all, be preferable to unrealistic illusions, that apprehending the present is more

beneficial than living in the future. Franzen notes that “who a person was was what a person wanted,”¹⁰² and Enid is further understanding that, if this is true, she herself is imaginary, ethereal. The more she comes to comprehend the vital lie, the more she realizes that all her efforts at idealizing and fantasizing the world around her have rendered her essentially invisible and impalpable. Though the reader again feels a measure of pity for Enid, her increasing awareness is, in fact, quite fortuitous, as her progressive rejection of illusion will help her through the forthcoming, disastrous Christmas breakfast.

Much to everyone’s surprise (save Enid’s), Chip has managed to escape from Lithuania just in time to arrive home on Christmas morning. Enid’s elation at seeing her younger son is surpassed only by her elation at having accomplished her goal of having everyone home for one last Christmas. Almost as soon as they all sit down to breakfast, however, things turn sour, with Gary choosing this moment to give his mother another lecture before his unceremonious departure. He starts in with forceful questioning about just how Enid plans to manage the house and her ailing husband after the children leave, demanding, ““You really think you’re going to Philadelphia? You think [treatment is] going to fix all this?”” To which Enid uncharacteristically replies, ““No, Gary, I don’t.””¹⁰³ The earlier admission made to Denise in the kitchen is now exposed for all to hear, but the significance of the acknowledgment is unfortunately lost on her family as the breakfast descends into chaos:

As [Alfred] stood up, his leg buckled and he pitched to the floor, dragging his plate and place mat and coffee cup and saucer along with him. The crash might have been the last bar of a symphony. He lay on his side amid the runs like a wounded gladiator, a fallen horse...

“It’s a quarter to eleven,” Gary said as if nothing unusual had happened. “Before I leave, here’s a summary. Dad is demented and incontinent. Mom can’t have him in this house without a lot of help, which she says she doesn’t want even if she could afford it. [Treatment] is obviously not an option, and so what I want to know is what you’re going to do. *Now*, Mother. I want to know *now*.”¹⁰⁴

Enid quietly proposes a “drug holiday” for Alfred, and Gary implores his siblings to help out, says his goodbyes, and walks out the door. This breakfast, the only time in the novel the entire family is together, comprises the whole of Enid’s “one last Christmas.”

At Gary’s departure, Denise tries to salvage what is left of Christmas morning, but Enid cuts her off, saying, “No, he’s right...Something has to change.”¹⁰⁵ And later she admits to Chip, “This wasn’t the Christmas I’d hoped for.”¹⁰⁶

I have paid significant attention to the details of this “one last Christmas” because it is clearly the novel’s climax, and for Enid, the turning point in her long journey to awareness and authenticity. Though Gary’s words may have been harsh, he has actually done her a favor by delivering the no-holds-barred truth, a truth she is finally ready to accept. Furthermore, along with the long-awaited understanding that Al simply cannot take care of himself, and needs more care than Enid herself can give him, Enid has also come to accept the realities of her children’s lives. She may not be entirely happy about it, but she knows that Gary’s wife and oldest sons will never come to St. Jude again; she knows that Chip earned his living in Lithuania by defrauding Western investors; and she knows that Denise will never marry that nice young man from the Midwest.

Alfred’s continued deterioration makes it necessary for him to be moved to a nursing home, and once he is out of the house, Enid’s life changes

dramatically, on a number of fronts. Though she still struggles a bit to pay the nursing home bills, “the simple truth was that, although she wasn’t rich, she also wasn’t poor.”¹⁰⁷ Enid seems to have miraculously lost her obsession with financial security. When Gary and Jonah come for a visit, a wonderful time is had all around. She spends four days in New York with Denise, again having fantastic fun. She attends Chip’s wedding to his pregnant girlfriend, and instead of finding fault with their situation, she has a terrific time and makes a host of new friends. While playing bridge with Mary Beth and Bea, Enid realizes she no longer needs to conform her opinions to those of her friends. As Franzen writes,

She couldn’t have said why this particular bridge-table conversation made her decide that she no longer needed to be friends with Bea Meisner. Nor could she have said why Gary’s materialism and Chip’s failures and Denise’s childlessness, which had cost her countless late-night hours of fretting and punitive judgment over the years, distressed her so much less once Alfred was out of the house¹⁰⁸

There are similar references to Enid’s newfound happiness coming as a result of Al’s leaving the home (“...as soon as he was out of the house and she’d caught up on her sleep, she saw it clearly;” “The sorry fact seemed to be that life without Alfred in the house was better for everyone but Alfred.”¹⁰⁹). Though, while Al’s leaving must certainly contribute to her new outlook, it is not that simple; his departure is emphatically not a panacea for a lifetime of shame.

It is Enid’s confrontation with the vital lie, in part, that leads to her healing from shame. The vision of rain that comes to her on the cruise ship is the beginning of this process, brought to fruition on Christmas morning. Once Enid has stopped lying to herself, once she has accepted the facts of her life and her children’s lives, she begins, finally, to live authentically. The immediate by-product of this is a more rewarding, more honest relationship with her children.

Enid finds that she is much better company when she is not full of criticism and judgment. She also discovers, through her new sense of self, that she no longer has to cater to the opinions and ideals of her friends and neighbors, or live with the constant anxiety of their disapproval. Letting go of her shame, destroying her own illusions, allows Enid to finally be comfortable in her own skin.

Revisiting Broucek's subject-OBJECT theory provides another indication of the process by which Enid's pathological shame has been eradicated. To begin with, because Al is out of the house, he no longer has opportunity to deny his wife's subjectivity. He is no longer able to refuse her requests, or to relegate her to an object. The absence of his objectifying presence, together with her recently-attained authenticity, sanctions Enid to explore new relationships and improve upon established ones, and to experience for the first time in her life the recognition of her subjectivity by others. Perhaps more importantly, and whether appropriate or not, Enid now has a chance to deny Al *his* subjectivity, to treat *him* as the object. Taking advantage of his incapacity and inability to argue, Enid regularly takes the opportunity to tell her husband just how wrong he has been all their married life:

Somehow Chip and Denise had the patience to sit and converse with him about whatever demented scenario he inhabited, whatever train wreck or incarceration or luxury cruise, but Enid couldn't tolerate the least error. If he mistook her for her mother, she corrected him angrily: "Al, it's *me*, Enid, your wife of *forty-eight years*." If he mistook her for Denise, she used the very same words. She'd felt Wrong all her life and now she had a chance to tell him how Wrong *he* was. Even as she was loosening up and becoming less critical in other areas of life, she remained strictly vigilant at the Deepmure Home. She had to come and tell Alfred that he was wrong to dribble ice cream on his clean, freshly pressed pants. He was wrong not to recognize Joe Person when Joe was nice enough to drop in...She had to tell him, while she still had time, how wrong he'd been and how right she'd been. How wrong not to love her more, how wrong not to cherish her and have sex at every opportunity, how wrong not to trust her financial instincts, how wrong to have spent so much time at work and so little with the children, how wrong to have been so negative, how wrong to

have been so gloomy, how wrong to have run away from life, how wrong to have said no, again and again, instead of yes: she had to tell him all of this, every single day. Even if he wouldn't listen, she had to tell him.¹¹⁰

Though psychologists would likely argue that this is not the healthiest approach to overcoming shame and claiming subjectivity, it clearly makes Enid feel better. And there is, of course, a certain amount of irony in her gaining satisfaction from routine objectification of the one person who most contributed to her lifelong feelings of inferiority and inadequacy.

Has Enid in fact achieved synthesis according to Hegel's master/slave dialectic? It doesn't appear so. It is certainly true that Al's condition forces him into a state of complete dependence, but that dependence is more upon the caregivers at the nursing home than it is upon Enid. It is equally true that Enid has achieved a state of independence, but is it really the kind of independence that Hegel posits? How independent of Alfred is she really, when she feels compelled to visit him every day simply to inform him of his transgressions? It seems as though her sense of self-worth is still reliant upon her husband; the difference now is, because she is able to freely express her opinions to and about him, instead of being silenced at every turn, that sense of self-worth is more positive, whereas before, when Al was healthy, his derogatory responses to Enid contributed greatly to her feelings of shame and inferiority. Furthermore, Hegel argues that synthesis is achieved when both the master and the slave realize that they benefit more from mutual cooperation rather than domination;¹¹¹ this symmetry has obviously not been accomplished here, as there is no evidence of cooperation in any meaning of the word. In one respect, Al is in fact still the dominant consciousness, as Enid's newfound happiness comes partly as a result

of her finally being able to expose her true feelings to him. In another respect, Enid is the dominant consciousness, because Al has no choice but to listen. In either case, however, there is no cooperation, no recognition of mutual beneficence. Most significantly, synthesis has not been realized due to Al's state of mind. The purpose of the dialectical struggle between self-consciousnesses is the eventual recognition of one consciousness over the other; if Al has difficulty recognizing Enid's physical body as that of his wife of fifty years, how can he possibly, in his dementia, recognize her consciousness? Conversely, Al's consciousness, affected severely by his illness, is likely not recognizable to Enid in any constructive manner. Thus, while the roles have been reversed in that Enid is now the dominant *personality*, she cannot truly be the dominant consciousness according to Hegel's characterization.

I doubt that this argument would make much of a difference to Enid, however. Just as her objectification of Al serves to ameliorate her damaged self-perception, so does it give her, in her view, a superior position in the realm of consciousness. Whether or not it corresponds to Hegel's conception of the dialectal struggle is probably not particularly important to Enid. (Incidentally, the dialectical outcome would not be of much interest to Al, either; he is partial to Schopenhauer, who despises Hegel, considering him to be a "charlatan, humbug, and windbag."¹¹²)

The novel's last lines hint, simultaneously, that Enid is healed of her shame, yet still stubbornly idealistic and future-oriented:

[When] he was dead, when she'd pressed her lips to his forehead and walked out with Denise and Gary into the warm spring night, she felt that nothing could kill

her hope now, nothing. She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life.¹¹³

On the one hand, she seems to have attained a healthy sense of shame as defined by Goldberg, who argues that positive shame is a catalyst for self-improvement:

Shame is a normal part of life. As a complex emotion, it comes in a variety of shapes and has a multitude of different functions. Not all experiences with shame are deleterious. Quite to the contrary. In small doses, shame is a prod to self-improvement. In digestible amounts, shame spurs personal freedom by providing a means for penetrating self-discovery. Positive shame comes from the recognition that we do not know ourselves and the significant people in our life sufficiently well in order to live fully with pride. Healthy responses to feeling shame derive from our willingness to examine openly, and to do something constructive about, those aspects of ourselves that cause us to feel badly and that we can reasonably change.¹¹⁴

Positive shame, much different from pathological shame, has allowed Enid the opportunity for self-discovery, as well as a much-improved relationship with her children, and she clearly intends to continue down this path of making changes in her life. Undoubtedly this is advantageous both to her and to those around her. At the same time, however, there is something rather disconcerting about her assertion that “nothing could kill her hope now, nothing.” It is remarkably similar to her behavior throughout the novel, whereby she focuses intently on one thing and one thing only which she expects to significantly improve her existence—and routinely, the “one thing” never does. Still, this kind of ending makes sense in the novel’s context.

Just as Al’s departure is not a panacea for Enid’s shame, her acquisition of healthy shame is not a panacea for a lifetime of neuroses. Unquestionably, Enid is a far happier person at the end of the novel than she was at the beginning, but she is by no means a miraculously changed, well-adjusted, “normal” person (who, in fact, is?). She will likely have to confront and examine a number of other aspects of her personality, her passionate, unrealistic optimism among them.

Though she has made great strides in healing from her shame, there are probably a number of other issues she will eventually need to address.

This type of interpretation of the ending is preferable to one that is “classically happy,” as that would seem a bit too Dickensian for the framework of the rest of the novel, indeed, for Franzen himself. Instead, the reader is satisfied that Enid has overcome the shame that has so plagued her throughout her life, while concurrently understanding that, while she is not at the end of her journey to self-actualization, she is well on her way.

Notes

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- ¹ Kaufman, Gershen, *The Psychology of Shame Theory and Treatment of Shame-Based Syndromes* 2nd ed. New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc., 1996, p.3-5.
- ² For an extended analysis of shame in these plays, see Goldberg, Carl, *Understanding Shame*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1991
- ³ Broucek, Francis J. *Shame and the Self*. New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1991, p. 4
- ⁴ Franzen, Jonathan, "Why Bother?" In *How to Be Alone*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002, p. 77, 81.
- ⁵ *Understanding Shame*, p.43.
- ⁶ Freud, Sigmund. "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. J. Strachey. Vol. 22, p. 132. London: Hogarth Press, 1964
- ⁷ Goldberg, Carl, *Understanding Shame*, p 50-52
- ⁸ Lewis, Helen B. *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*. New York: International UP, 1971, p. 36.
- ⁹ *Understanding Shame*. p. 56.
- ¹⁰ *Shame and the Self*, p. 73.
- ¹¹ Blatner, Adam, M.D., personal communication.
- ¹² Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001, p. 297.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p 122
- ¹⁴ Schneider, Carl. *Shame, Exposure, and Privacy*. Boston. Beacon Press, 1977, p.35.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*
- ¹⁶ *The Corrections*, p. 467.
- ¹⁷ *Understanding Shame*, p 52.
- ¹⁸ *The Corrections*, p. 268-269
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p 279.
- ²⁰ *Understanding Shame*, p 25
- ²¹ *The Corrections*, p 269
- ²² *Understanding Shame*, p 26
- ²³ *The Corrections*, p. 120
- ²⁴ *Understanding Shame*, p 67
- ²⁵ *Ibid* , p. 68
- ²⁶ *The Corrections*, p.21-22.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ²⁸ Morrison, Andrew. *Shame The Underside of Narcissism*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: The Analytic Press, 1989, p 72.
- ²⁹ *The Corrections*, p. 483
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17
- ³¹ *Ibid* , p. 101.
- ³² *Ibid* , p 101-102
- ³³ *Ibid* , p. 470.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p 179
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 469.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Understanding Shame*, p 94.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142
- ⁴² *Shame and the Self*, p 46
- ⁴³ *The Corrections*, p 250
- ⁴⁴ See note 18.
- ⁴⁵ *The Corrections*, p 279.
- ⁴⁶ *Shame and the Self*, p 47.

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- ⁴⁷ *The Corrections*, p. 250
- ⁴⁸ Hegel, G W F , *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans A V Miller Oxford Oxford UP, 1977 p 111
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid* , p. 115
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid* , p 116
- ⁵¹ Hegel, G.W F., *The Logic of Hegel*, trans William Wallace. Oxford. Oxford UP, 1892
- ⁵² *The Corrections*, p 288, 477, 478
- ⁵³ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p 118.
- ⁵⁴ *The Psychology of Shame*, p 290
- ⁵⁵ *Shame and the Self*, p 55
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid* , p 18
- ⁵⁷ *The Corrections*, p 292
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid* , p. 308
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid* , p. 310.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid* , p 311.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid*.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 301.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 311-312.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid* , p. 312.
- ⁶⁵ *Understanding Shame*, p. 94.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid* , p 56-57.
- ⁶⁷ *The Corrections*, p. 315.
- ⁶⁸ *Understanding Shame*, p 226-227.
- ⁶⁹ *The Corrections*, p. 315
- ⁷⁰ *Understanding Shame*, p 58
- ⁷¹ *The Corrections*, p 316
- ⁷² *Ibid* , p 317
- ⁷³ *Ibid* , p 320
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid* , p 318-323
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid* , p 324-325.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid* , p 325
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid*
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid* , p. 331.
- ⁷⁹ *Shame and the Self*, p. 135.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid* , p 131
- ⁸¹ *Understanding Shame*, p 14
- ⁸² See note 67
- ⁸³ *The Corrections*, p 466
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid* , p. 431.
- ⁸⁵ *Understanding Shame*, p. xv.
- ⁸⁶ O'Hear, Anthony "Guilt and Shame as Moral Concepts " In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. 77. 73-86, 1977. p. 81 (emphasis mine)
- ⁸⁷ *The Corrections*, p. 466-467
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid* , p. 467.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p 469
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid*
- ⁹¹ *Ibid* , p 470.
- ⁹² *Ibid* , p 471
- ⁹³ *Ibid* , p 470
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid* , p 470-471
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid* , p 473
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid* , p 476
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 477
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid* , p 483
- ⁹⁹ *Ibid* , p 493

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid* , p 528-529

¹⁰¹ *Ibid* , p 529-530

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 539

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 545

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 547.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid* , p 548

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid* , p 563.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid* , p 565

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid* , p 563, 566.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid* , p 567-577

¹¹¹ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p 118-119.

¹¹² Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Idea*, ed David Berman, trans. Jill Berman
London: Orion Publishing Group, 1995, 1997, p. xviii

¹¹³ *The Corrections*, p 568.

¹¹⁴ *Understanding Shame*, p. 274

CHAPTER II

“IT WAS HELL TO GET OLD”: ALFRED LAMBERT

Before you contradict an old man, my friend,
 you should endeavor to understand him.
 —George Santayana

We have seen the ways in which Enid Lambert's unhealthy and obsessive fixation with shame has negatively influenced her life and the lives of those around her; we have further realized the gradual process of her self-renewal, her hope for a second chance in the later years of her life. This chapter will address the psychology of her husband, Alfred Lambert, through a similar approach, while paying attention to a number of the significant differences informing his particular experience.

The reader must admit that there are, undeniably, aspects of Al's personality that make him difficult to tolerate. He often appears as insensitive, selfish, and uncaring, even (perhaps especially) towards his own wife and children. He is frequently pessimistic, cynical, and demoralizing; he is exacting, demanding, and rigidly stubborn—he is, in short, quite unpleasant to be around. At the same time, however, Alfred Lambert is an extraordinarily complex individual, with psychic torments that easily rival those of his wife. A look at Alfred's struggles and internal battles provides insights and understandings with which we can all identify and sympathize.

If Enid's main psychological complaint is a sense of inescapable shame, Alfred's is an equally disabling, and in fact insurmountable, severe depression. To understand Al as fully as possible, we need to address the many factors contributing to his depression, ranging from issues of environment to his profound feelings of loss on levels professional, physical, mental, and personal.

One of the main difficulties in attempting a character analysis of Alfred is that his interior is somewhat inaccessible to the reader. Distinct from Enid, who freely allows the audience into her mind, thereby enabling a cohesive understanding of her psychology, Jonathan Franzen characterizes Al as an intensely, almost obsessively private person. Unlike Enid, who relentlessly probes her husband for information he is uncomfortable revealing; unlike Gary and Chip, who use their father's need for privacy as an excuse to distance themselves from him; and unlike Denise, who eventually wonders if "respecting Alfred's privacy wasn't a little bit too easy,"¹ Franzen himself, more so than any of his characters, appreciates and respects Al's concerns to be left alone, to be free from prying ears and eyes. As a result, the reader feels as though Al is always kept just beyond our reach, and we therefore do not understand his interior to the same degree as we come to understand the rest of his family. At the same time, however, Franzen gives us just enough access to Al's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions to allow for an awareness and insight into his psyche; eventually, we begin to comprehend him in a manner not afforded to his wife and children.

In his essay, "Privacy in Bloom," Michael Groden discusses the main character of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in a similar fashion:

From the outside, and to his fellow Dubliners, [Leopold] Bloom is practically invisible and silent—they acknowledge him only to scorn him. But Joyce gives us access to Bloom's inner life, and it is his thoughts, responses, reactions, daydreams, and fantasies that make him, for me, a figure of great sympathy, even of heroism.

Joyce gives us access to a full range of Bloom's thoughts as he lives through his day—serious thoughts, trivial ones, happy, sad, generous, selfish, licit, illicit... In one of the most extraordinary sections of *Ulysses*, we witness, as if paraded on a stage, Bloom's unconscious mind, the desires and drives, fears and wishes to which he has no conscious access. He would surely be mortified to learn that anyone else knew about this part of his being, or even to know it himself.²

This is quite like the ways in which we come to know Al Lambert—largely through the revelations of his unconscious with which Franzen trusts his readers. Though Groden contends that Bloom “has had much of what we would consider his privacy ripped from him by his creator,”³ Franzen treats Alfred more delicately, so that the effect is not so much a naked exposure, but a privileged understanding of what motivates and drives the Lambert family patriarch.

Alfred Lambert is a retired railroad engineer, husband of an overbearing, neurotic, unrelentingly critical wife, and father of three children, one of whom expresses undisguised dislike for his father, one of whom treats his father with almost total indifference, and the last of whom, despite her love and respect, betrayed her father in what is, for Alfred, the most offensive manner possible. Alfred has been recently diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, and he is forced to sit by helplessly and witness the progressive deterioration of his once healthy, functional body. He is further suffering from a steady decline in his mental abilities, made even more painful by virtue of his frequent moments of lucidity, during which he fully understands and laments the worsening debility of his mind. Alfred spends much of his time alone in the basement; when he does have company, it is usually his wife, who, as we have seen, approaches his illness with embarrassment, denial, and a general, overt frustration and lack of support. To further exacerbate these issues, Al has absolutely no one with whom he can share his feelings of misery, even if he were so inclined. Instead, he endures his trials in complete silence.

We can begin an initial understanding of Al's depression by considering something as seemingly innocuous as his physical environment. In their discussion on the influences of one's surroundings, Edith Kettel and G. Maureen Chaisson-Stewart note that "environmental research continually reaffirms the strong and intimate link between environmental factors and the individual's health, both mental and physical," and further argue, "Environmental stimuli play significant and continual roles in shaping individual behavior and emotional states."⁴ As one might intuit, a pleasant, enjoyable environment facilitates a positive, more cheerful mood, while stark, austere surroundings can lead to negativity and a depressed state. With this in mind, consider the environment in which Al passes most of his time.

Because of a lifelong interest in metallurgy, Alfred has long ago constructed a workshop in the couple's basement, where, despite his failing mental and physical health, he still spends a good deal of time alone. On the one hand, the laboratory is a place for Alfred to escape the constant criticisms of his wife, to take some pleasure in his interest in chemical experimentation; on the other hand, it is the only room in the house that belongs solely to Al, as Enid has taken over the rest of their home with her figurines, decades-old magazines and coupons, and the general clutter of a well-lived-in house. In this respect, the workshop is a place to which Al is forced regularly to return for his much-needed privacy, as it is the only space available in which he can do as he pleases. Keeping in mind Kettel and Chaisson-Stewart's ideas of space as it relates to

psychology, we can arrive at an understanding of what effect this room, as described by Franzen, might have on Alfred:

The workshop was now home to a colony of mute, dust-colored crickets, which, when startled, would scatter across the room like a handful of dropped marbles, some of them misfiring at crazy angles, others toppling over with the weight of their own copious protoplasm. They popped all too easily, and cleanup took more than one Kleenex.

The gray dust of evil spells and the cobwebs of enchantment thickly cloaked the old electric arc furnace, and the jars of exotic rhodium and sinister cadmium and stalwart bismuth, and the hand-printed labels browned by the vapors from a glass-stoppered bottle of aqua regia, and the quad-ruled notebook in which the latest entry in Alfred's hand dated from a time, fifteen years ago, before the betrayals had begun. Something as daily and friendly as a pencil still occupied the random spot on the workbench where Alfred had laid it in a different decade; the passage of so many years imbued the pencil with a kind of enmity. Asbestos mitts hung from a nail beneath two certificates of U.S. patents, the frames warped and sprung by dampness. On the hood of a binocular microscope lay big chips of peeled paint from the ceiling. The only dust-free objects in the room were the wicker love seat, a can of Rust-Oleum and some brushes, and a couple of Yuban coffee cans which despite increasingly strong olfactory evidence Enid chose not to believe were filling up with her husband's urine, because what earthly reason could he have, with a nice little half-bathroom not twenty feet away, for peeing in a Yuban can?⁵

This room is, for Al, the only safe haven in the entire house, the only space that is exclusively his own. A combination of his weakening bladder and failing mental acuity explains the use of the Yuban cans, and thus, Al spends a good deal of time in a dusty, dank corner of the basement, a windowless, insect-ridden room filled with the smell of urine and ancient chemicals.

The reader may reason that if Alfred chooses to place himself in such an unpleasant environment, it is his own fault if his surroundings make him depressed. In fact, Al did make an attempt to create some space for himself in the house's main living area, an attempt eventually squelched by Enid. Shortly after his retirement from the railroad, Al went out and got himself a great blue chair, the importance of which, for Al, cannot be underestimated:

The chair was the only major purchase Alfred had ever made without Enid's approval. He wanted something really comfortable, of course, but after a lifetime of providing for others he needed more than just comfort: he needed a

monument to this need. So he went, alone, to a non-discount furniture store and picked out a chair of permanence. An engineer's chair. A chair so big that even a big man got lost in it; a chair designed to bear up under heavy stress. And because the blue of its leather vaguely matched the blue in the Chinese rug, Enid had no choice but to suffer its deployment in the family room.⁶

For whatever reason, Enid does not care for her husband's big blue chair, and soon sets about redecorating the living room, with the (intended) result that the chair no longer matches the room's color scheme, and must, according to Enid, be moved.

"And what about the chair, then?" [Alfred] said. "*What about the chair?*"

Enid looked at the chair. Her expression was merely pained, no more. "I never liked that chair."

This was probably the most terrible thing she could have said to Alfred. The chair was the only sign he'd ever given of having a personal vision of the future. Enid's words filled him with such sorrow—he felt such pity for the chair, such solidarity with it, such astonished grief at its betrayal—that he...sank into its arms and fell asleep.

When it became clear that both the rug and Alfred's chair had to go, the rug was easily shed.

But the chair? The chair was a monument and a symbol and could not be parted from Alfred. It could only be relocated, and so it went into the basement and Alfred followed. And so in the house of the Lamberts...life came to be lived underground.⁷

Despite whatever faults Al may have as a husband, he has rarely, if ever, challenged Enid on the domestic front; he is in charge of the finances, she is in charge of the house. He and his "personal vision of the future" are thus relegated to the basement.

We have already noted the relatively disagreeable surroundings of Alfred's workshop; what about the rest of the basement, where Al's chair is now located? Far from a comfortable retreat, the basement is overrun with junk and unused, worthless clutter, as Denise discovers while attempting to clean during one of her visits:

She dragged a trash can from the garage and began to fill it with her mother's crap. She threw away the Korean barfleberries, the fifty most obviously worthless plastic flowerpots, the assortment of sand-dollar fragments, and the

sheaf of silver-dollar plants whose dollars had all fallen off. She threw away the wreath of spray-painted pinecones that somebody had ripped apart. She threw away the brandy-pumpkin "spread" that had turned a snottish gray-green. She threw away the Neolithic cans of hearts of palm and baby shrimps and miniature Chinese corncocks, the turbid black liter of Romanian wine whose cork had rotted, the Nixon-era bottle of Mai Tai mix with an oozing crust around its neck, the collection of Paul Masson Chablis carafes with spider parts and moth wings at the bottom, the profoundly corroded bracket for some long-lost wind chimes. She threw away the quart glass bottle of Vess Diet Cola that had turned the color of plasma, the ornamental jar of brandied kumquats that was now a fantasia of rock candy and amorphous brown gunk, the smelly thermos whose broken inner glass tinkled when she shook it, the mildewed half-peck produce basket full of smelly yogurt cartons, the hurricane lanterns sticky with oxidation and brimming with severed moth wings, the lost empires of florist's clay and florist's tape that hung together even as they crumbled and rusted...⁸

This, then, is the environment to which Enid's penchant for redecorating has chased her husband. He cannot even watch the local news on the little portable television, because the table on which it sits is "fully engulfed by *Good Housekeepings* and the seasonal candy tins and baroque but cheaply made candle holders that Enid had never quite found time to transport to the Nearly New consignment shop."⁹ The printing calculator with which Al likes to tinker with figures is "ambushed by floral print pot-holders and souvenir coasters from the Epcot Center and a device for pitting cherries which Enid had owned for thirty years and never used..."¹⁰ The reader cannot help but feel empathy for Alfred, as we imagine him alone in the basement, hands shaking uncontrollably, urinating into a coffee can to avoid the embarrassment of wetting himself, bending over to pick up pulpy dead crickets, maneuvering around his wife's ubiquitous disorder, unable to watch his news or operate his calculator, finally dropping into his prized possession, the big blue chair, to fall asleep and escape it all.

Of course, it seems unlikely that one's environment could be the sole source of a severe depression. In Al's case, his unpleasant surroundings are simply the tip of the iceberg. Before discussing the specific causes of his

depression, however, it will be useful to inquire into the possibility that Alfred is already predisposed to the condition. The psychosocial theories of depression, including psychoanalytic, behavioral, environmental, cognitive, and interpersonal theories, are helpful in this regard. These theories, according to Patricia Ainsworth, “are generally based on observations of human behavior and on philosophical explanations as to how the human mind and human mood and behavior relate.”¹¹ While all of these psychosocial theories have some bearing on Alfred’s situation, I have chosen to concentrate on the two that are most relevant: the cognitive and behavioral theories.¹²

The cognitive theory of depression, advanced by Aaron Beck and described by Ainsworth, emphasizes “the importance of the ways in which people think about life and themselves. According to cognitive theorists, mood is related to the individual’s belief system.”¹³ Simply stated, we are what we believe.

Ainsworth elaborates:

When our beliefs are pessimistic in nature and we focus on what is wrong or negative in ourselves and our environment rather than on what is good, the natural outcome is a depressive posture...In Beck’s model, depression is caused by individuals’ negative views of themselves, their world, and their future. According to this theory, depression is not the primary illness but a secondary manifestation of a pessimistic belief system.

Cognitive theorists believe that once people assume the typical pessimistic stance presaging depression, then they tend to view all life circumstances in the same manner. As a result, individuals rehearse their beliefs and behaviors and see each circumstance that blends easily with their belief system as yet another proof of the truth of those beliefs. At the same time, they conveniently discard any circumstance that does not fit. In this manner, depressed people learn and maintain their depressive stance through rehearsal and reinforcement.¹⁴

Similarly, Chaisson-Stewart notes that “depression in the elderly is often colored by the patient’s life experiences and personality traits.”¹⁵ Though we are not aware of the specific circumstances surrounding Al’s early years or his

upbringing, it is clear that somewhere along the way he developed an intensely negative attitude towards life and towards other people in general. This outlook is doubtlessly reinforced, perhaps caused, by his attraction to the philosophies of Arthur Schopenhauer, as Al finds truth and a strange sense of comfort in ideas such as these:

The pleasure in this world, it has been said, outweighs the pain; or, at any rate, there is an even balance between the two. If the reader wishes to see shortly whether this statement is true, let him compare the respective feelings of two animals, one of which is engaged in eating the other

If you want a safe compass to guide you through life.. you cannot do better than accustom yourself to regard this world as a penitentiary, a sort of penal colony

*No little part of the torment of existence is that Time is continually pressing upon us, never letting us catch our breath but always coming after us, like a taskmaster with a whip*¹⁶

I do not intend to embark upon a lengthy digression on Schopenhauer, but at the same time, he cannot be ignored. Enid, after all, found one of his books, heavily underlined, in Al's room at the boardinghouse, and so we know that Al's fascination with Schopenhauer has lasted at least fifty years. Alfred's perception of the world, and the place of human beings in it, is confirmed by Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy, and thus a general discussion of Schopenhauer's ideas is necessary alongside a discussion of Al.

Schopenhauer uses as his starting point the epistemological and subjective views of John Locke and George Berkeley primarily, though he is also largely influenced by David Hume and Immanuel Kant, among others. This starting point states, essentially, that the world is nothing more or less than a collection of ideas, that all we can know for certain are our perceptions of the world, and therefore, we have no reason to believe that anything has a cause. Kant refined

this philosophical idealism to show “in systematic detail how the empirical world is objective, and distinguishable from the imaginary, yet is still a world of ideas or appearances: that it is empirically real but transcendently ideal.”¹⁷ Kant maintains that causality is found not in the outer, phenomenal world, but in the inner, mental structure of the noumenal world, so that, as David Berman notes, “causality always and everywhere obtains in the physical world in much the same way that people with pink-tinted contact lenses must always see the world in a pinkish light.”¹⁸ Kant further argues that because our view of the phenomenal world is based on sense-perceptions, we cannot know what lies behind the transcendental ideal. This unknowable, inner mental structure is termed by Kant “the thing-in-itself.” This is the point at which Schopenhauer picks up on Kant’s purified idealist philosophy, by contending that there is, in fact, a source through which we can gain some insight into the thing-in-itself, and thus insight into causality. This source is our physical, living bodies.

In Schopenhauer’s view, an individual can experience his body in two ways: objectively, as an idea (as we experience all other objects in the world); and “also more directly as the most distinct manifestation or expression of the thing-in-itself.”¹⁹ So, for example, suppose that I scratch a mosquito bite—this one action can be known in two distinct ways. First, both I and anyone nearby will understand through ordinary sense-perception that I have an itch. Only I, however, can experience the action in a more direct, unmediated way. I do not have to see the mosquito bite to know that I am itchy; I do not have to witness my fingers reaching for the bite to know that I have scratched.²⁰ What, then,

distinguishes my experience from the experience of my observers? What is the difference between my inner awareness and the outward perceptions available to everyone else?

The best word to describe this familiar yet unknown concept, Schopenhauer claims, is “will.” Berman elaborates:

Yet it is vital to appreciate that he is using the word in a novel and extended way as the best term for something that had not been previously understood. For Schopenhauer, will is neither a cause nor an effect, neither spatial nor temporal—it is that metaphysical reality which underlies or grounds all phenomena, although our best apprehension of it is in the phenomenon of motivated action...

Schopenhauer's conclusion is that bodily actions are will objectified, will made physical by the structuring of time, space, and causality. Hence that which had eluded Kant, and which he thought was intractably unknowable, can be known, Schopenhauer thinks, if we attend to our living bodies—which Kant and nearly all earlier philosophers ignored...

For Schopenhauer, human beings are not essentially rational, but are desiring, emotional animals, whose rationality was developed to serve and maximize the will to life... This thesis, that human, and indeed, all beings, are expressions of a blind, ceaseless will to life, is probably Schopenhauer's principal and most original philosophical contribution.²¹

Thus, we can feel the will dominating our mental lives in aspects of desire, hunger, sexuality, and so forth. But Schopenhauer does not stop there; he maintains that not only are our actions will, but our bodies themselves are will, so that “teeth, throat, and intestines are objectified hunger, the genitals are objectified sexual desire.”²²

We are beginning to understand the pessimistic nature of Schopenhauer's philosophy. We are all simply part of a vast and single will that pervades the universe, and can be seen not just in ourselves but throughout nature—in the struggles of animals, the growth of plants, the pull of magnets. Because everything in the universe, living and non-living, is controlled by the will, the feeling of separateness and uniqueness that each of us has is merely an illusion.

The icing on the cake, so to speak, of Schopenhauer's beliefs is that the will is wicked, negative, pointless, and all-consuming. Though the will is real, it is not free, and there is no escaping it. The will, the thing-in-itself, is desire—longing, hungering, thirsting—and thus “suffering is essential to existence itself,”²³ and there will always be more unhappiness than happiness in the world: “Life, in short, is morally wrong; has no meaning or purpose; and will always have more pain than pleasure.”²⁴

This is Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy in a nutshell. It should be clear to the reader of *The Corrections* that Alfred's views of existence and his negativity in general are remarkably similar to those of Schopenhauer. If the cognitive theorists are correct, then, and “we are what we believe,” Al's gloomy, cynical worldview goes a long way toward explaining his depression. Before moving on to the behaviorist aspects of his depression, I will look at a few more ways in which Al has been influenced by the ideas of his favorite philosopher.

As we have seen through Enid's eyes in Part I, Alfred often treats his wife with scorn and outright disdain. He does not feel as though she is intelligent or responsible enough to share in the finances; he does not value her opinion in any area; he seems to feel as though her contributions to the marriage consist almost solely of cooking, cleaning, and looking after the children. Schopenhauer, for his part, found that women “are directly fitted for acting as the nurses and teachers of our early childhood by the fact that they themselves are childish, frivolous, and short-sighted; in a word, they are big children all their life long...they have no proper knowledge, and they have no genius.”²⁵ If Al's actions towards Enid are

not enough to confirm his acceptance of Schopenhauer's views, consider the passages he looks to when frustrated with his wife:

Woman pays the debt of life not by what she does, but by what she suffers, by the pains of childbearing and care for the child, and by submission to her husband, to whom she should be a patient and cheering companion

*The people who make money are men, not women, and from this it follows that women are neither justified in having unconditional possession of it, nor fit persons to be entrusted with its administration*²⁶

Al's derogatory views of women, then, combined with Enid's general hypercriticism and inflated neuroses, explain in large part their unhappy marriage. The circumstances only worsen over the years, as the two feed off of each other, continually exacerbating the situation.

Alfred also seems to agree with Schopenhauer's contention that the only relief from the oppressive, controlling will can be found in the denial of the will to live and the eradication of the will's desires. Thus, Al struggles to squelch any sexual cravings, and in general embraces discipline as a means of denying the will. This results in his distancing himself emotionally and physically from his wife, as well as being thought of as "a shouter and a punisher"²⁷ by at least one of his children; Chip remembers his father "laboring in the spanking of a child, usually Chip himself."²⁸

With Al's attraction to Schopenhauer's philosophies as a background, then, and keeping in mind the ways in which that mindset affects his relationships with his wife and children, we can now turn to the behavioral theory of depression. As Ainsworth observes:

Behaviorists believe that humans, like other animals, react to their environment and learn from the success or failure of behaviors in dealing with it. Behaviorists theorize that humans come into the world as a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, on which their experiences write the scripts for their lives. Behavioral theorists focus on the individual's tendency to overrespond to loss of social

supports. When the social environment no longer supports individuals and no longer reinforces their behavior, feelings of isolation, discomfort, and fear result. Behaviorists believe that the lack of social support is one of the strongest factors in the production of depression. They point to a vicious cycle that can intensify and prolong the depression. Depressed people tend to elicit negative responses from important people in their lives, such as their spouses, children, and friends. Eventually tiring of dealing with the depressed person's behaviors, people who have tried to be supportive become less sympathetic and more impatient.²⁹

As one would imagine, Al's negativity and general lack of enthusiasm for life (that is, the cognitive aspects of his depression), make him rather unpleasant to be around. As he consistently maintains his pessimistic attitude year after year, his family gradually withdraws their social supports, leading, eventually, to the feelings of isolation, discomfort, and fear described by Ainsworth. (It is worth mentioning, strange as it may seem, that Alfred's ever-present incontinence might, in fact, be correlated to his lack of social support. J.L. Newman believes that "incontinence may be the result of rejection by society," and he associates "incontinence in the elderly with isolation, humiliation, and privation;" he further believes that "an understanding of their needs might reduce the dimensions of the problem."³⁰)

One might expect that Al would *prefer* to be alone and isolated, given his temperament, and this does seem to be the case, as he retires to his basement workshop one evening, almost immediately after returning home from a business trip. Franzen, however, tells a different story about the goings-on in Alfred's mind:

In the lab below the dining room Alfred sat with his head bowed in the darkness and his eyes closed. Interesting how eager he'd been to be alone, how hatefully clear he'd made this to everyone around him; and now, having finally closeted himself, he sat hoping that someone would come and disturb him. He wanted this someone to see how much he hurt. Though he was cold to her it seemed unfair that she was cold in turn to him: unfair that she could happily play Ping-Pong, shuffle around outside his door, and never knock to ask how he was doing...

Every time his wife's footsteps approached the lab he braced himself to accept her comforts. Then he heard the game ending, and he thought *surely* she would take pity on him now. It was the one thing he asked of her, the one thing—

But no rescue was forthcoming. Through the closed door he heard her retreat to the laundry room. .

[He had a] dream of being comforted by a woman, truly comforted, when the misery overcame him. .

[He had a] suspicion that everything was relative. That the “real” and “authentic” might not be simply doomed but fictive to begin with...

And if the world refused to square with his version of reality then it was necessarily an uncaring world, a sour and sickening world, a penal colony, and he was doomed to be violently lonely in it.

He bowed his head at the thought of how much strength a man would need to survive an entire life so lonely .

There came an upwelling of pain so intense that he had to clench his jaw and refer to his philosophy to prevent its turning into tears.³¹

It seems as though the behaviorists are on to something. Enid's refusal to bring comfort to Al shows that she is no longer willing to reinforce his antagonistic behavior towards her. By withdrawing her social support of her husband, however, she is sending him deeper into his depression—this is the vicious cycle Ainsworth describes. The idea is reinforced by Nathan Billig, who notes, “A vicious cycle can be set up, in which the patient alienates the very people who can be of most assistance.”³²

Indeed, Al's children are as complicit in their father's alienation as is Enid. Again, though Denise expresses a good deal of concern and love for her father, Al is reminded of the betrayal every time he speaks to her or even thinks of her. As for Gary and Chip, their treatment of Al is almost inexcusable. On the evening of Al's seventy-fifth birthday, for example, Chip must be prompted by his furious sister to call and wish his father a happy birthday. When he finally does call, quite late at night, it is obvious to both the reader and to Alfred that he does so only out of a sense of obligation:

“Yes,” Alfred said.

“Hey, Dad, happy birthday,” Chip said.

“Yes,” Alfred said again in exactly the same flat voice.

“I’m sorry to call so late ”

“I was not asleep,” Alfred said

“I was afraid I woke you up ”

“Yes ”

“Well, so happy seventy-fifth ”

“Yes.”

Chip hoped that Enid was motoring back down to the kitchen as fast as she could, ailing hip and all, to bail him out “I guess you’re tired and it’s late,” he said “We don’t have to talk.”

“Thank you for the call,” Alfred said.³³

While Chip considers his father a burden that must occasionally be dealt with, Gary treats Al with outright disdain and disrespect. He has never made it a secret that his loyalties lie with Enid, just as Denise’s lie with Al, but he makes no attempts to mask his contempt for his father. In a phone call home, for example, Gary argues with Al about Al’s decision to accept an offer for his patent, an offer that Gary feels is unfair. He insists on giving his father his opinion on this matter, which is, essentially, none of Gary’s business:

“Dad,” he said, “I’ve done some research on Axon We’re looking at a company with a *lot* of money ”

“Gary, I said I didn’t want you monkeying with this,” Alfred replied.

“It is moot now, anyway ”

“What do you mean, ‘moot’?”

“I mean moot It’s taken care of. The documents are notarized. I’m recouping my lawyer’s fees and that’s the end of it ”

Gary pressed two fingers into his forehead “My God. Dad. You had it notarized? On a Sunday?”

“I will tell your mother that you called.”

“Do *not* put those documents in the mail. Do you hear me?”

“Gary, I’ve had just about enough of this.”

“Well, too bad, because I’m just getting started!”

“I’ve asked you not to speak of it. If you will not behave like a decent, civilized person, then I have no choice—”

“Your decency is bullshit. Your civilization is bullshit It’s weakness! It’s fear! It’s bullshit!”

“I have no wish to discuss this ”

“Then forget it.”

“I intend to We’ll not speak of it again Your mother and I will visit for two days next month, and we will hope to see you here in December It’s my wish that we can all be civil ”³⁴

Another instance in which Gary displays his scorn occurs when he arrives in St.

Jude for Christmas; Gary is unsuccessfully trying to operate a drill when he

encounters his father. Though Gary does not disparage his father with words, his attitude towards Al is made all too clear:

It hadn't been Gary's intention to attract the old man and the agitated twin fingered animals that were his advance guard. He shied from the incapacity and greedy openness of these hands, but Alfred's eyes were fixed on the drill now, his face bright with the possibility of solving a problem. Gary relinquished the drill. He wondered how his father could even see what he was holding, the drill shook so violently. The old man's fingers crawled around its tarnished surface, groping like eyeless worms.

"You got it on Reverse," he said.

With the ridged yellow nail of his thumb, Alfred pushed the polarity switch to Forward and handed the drill back to Gary, and for the first time since his arrival, their eyes met. The chill that ran through Gary was only partly from his cooling sweat...

*That was your Christmas present, Gary told him silently. Flipping that switch was your present from me.*³⁵

And at Christmas breakfast, Gary does something almost unbelievable cruel.

Though he is trying to demonstrate to the family that Alfred's condition requires care beyond the home, he does so at the cost of what remains of his father's dignity:

Alfred, still smiling, asked Chip what Gary was talking about...

"Dad, here, do me a favor," [Gary] said "Put your right hand on your left shoulder "

"Gary, stop it," Denise said

Alfred leaned close to Chip and spoke confidentially "What's he asking?"

"He wants you to put your right hand on your left shoulder "

"That's a lot of nonsense."

"Dad?" Gary said. "Come on, right hand, left shoulder "

"Stop it," Denise said.

"Let's go, Dad. Right hand, left shoulder. Can you do that? You want to show us how you follow simple instructions? Come on! *Right hand. Left shoulder* "

. The old man pushed his chair away from the table and turned once more to Chip. He said, "You can see it's not without its difficulties."³⁶

Alfred's "support system," then, consists of one embarrassed, irritated wife who "flinched or sighed or shook her head at every spilled bite, every non sequitur"³⁷; one son whose feelings for his father are ambivalent at best; another son whose

blatant lack of respect is painfully evident; and one daughter, whose mere presence, despite her love and care, recalls anguished betrayal.

This rejection and isolation at the hands of his children is particularly painful for Alfred. Just as Schopenhauer displayed an uncharacteristic affection for animals, Al, though he admittedly does not always show it, has a deep devotion to and love for his children. This is made clear from the very beginning of the novel, when Enid notes, “He became agitated whenever they were going to see their children. Seeing their children was the only thing he seemed to care about anymore.”³⁸ We can see this for ourselves when Chip meets his parents at the airport: “[Alfred’s] face was brightening at the discovery of a son among so many strangers. In the lunging manner of a man floundering in water, Alfred fell upon Chip and grabbed Chip’s hand and wrist as if they were a rope he’d been thrown. ‘Well!’ he said. ‘Well!’”³⁹ Similarly, when Denise offers her father a plate of snacks before lunch, he is overwhelmed by his feelings:

As the gratitude spread outward from his heart—as he was moved—his clasped hands and lower arms began to bounce more freely on his lap. He tried to find something in the room that didn’t move him, something he could rest his eyes on safely; but because the room was Chip’s and because Denise was standing in it, every fixture and every surface—even a radiator knob, even a thigh-level expanse of faintly scuffed wall—was a reminder of the separate, eastern worlds in which his children led their lives and hence of the various vast distances that separated him from them, which made his hands shake all the more⁴⁰

Finally, Alfred’s elation upon Chip’s arrival for Christmas is simultaneously poignant and heartbreaking:

“Well!” Alfred said, his face blazing with joy, as he took Chip’s hand in both of his “Look who’s here!”

Enid tried to elbow her way into the picture, speaking Chip’s name, but Alfred wouldn’t let go of his hand. He said it twice more: “Look who’s here! Look who’s here!”

...Whenever he entered his father's field of vision, a smile of recognition and pleasure spread over Alfred's face. This recognition might have had the character of mistaken identity if it hadn't been accompanied by Alfred's exclamation of Chip's name. Chip seemed *beloved* to the old man.⁴¹

Certainly, Al's children could be a significant source of support through his illness, if only they chose to fulfill that role. Instead, however, Gary and Chip, tired of dealing with their father's behaviors, become more and more impatient and hostile, just as the behavioral theory suggests. Because Al's love for his children is kept largely private, like most of his other emotions, his sons react mainly to their father's pessimism and negativity, thereby exacerbating Alfred's isolation and loneliness.

One might question why, if Alfred is so in need of comfort and companionship, he doesn't just ask for it? He may simply be unable to—and here, again, the behavioral theory can provide a clue:

Some behaviorists also believe that people who are prone to depression have impaired social skills, which makes it difficult for them to obtain the level of support and reinforcement they require from their social environment.⁴²

Al does, undoubtedly, have a significant amount of trouble relating to other people, including his own family. His young sons, for example, are eager to greet their father upon his return home from a long business trip, but they know the rules:

As fast as they could without running (forbidden indoors), the boys proceeded to the basement .and found their father in his laboratory. It was in their nature to throw their arms around him, but this nature had been corrected out of them. They stood and waited, like company subordinates, for the boss to speak...

Alfred regarded his two subordinates gravely. Fraternizing had always been a struggle for him.⁴³

This discomfort and unease at the prospect of simple conversation with two little boys transcends to all areas of Al's life—his associations with neighbors, co-

workers, and, of course, his wife. If he can barely bring himself to ask his sons about their day, how can he possibly approach his wife and children, tell them he is in severe psychic pain, and ask for their love and support? He essentially has no choice but to suffer in silence. Enid interprets his silence as a desire to be left alone, when in fact the opposite is true.

To this point, then, we can understand Alfred as an extremely private man with a profoundly pessimistic nature, lacking adequate social skills, pushing his family away because of an inability to express himself appropriately, secluding himself in an unhealthy and unpleasant environment, preferring the solitude of the disused basement to the “chairs and tables by Ethan Allen, Spode and Waterford in the breakfront”⁴⁴ of the upper floors. These are the factors that have remained more or less constant throughout most of his life. There is, however, much more that Alfred has to endure in his later years—his illness, the accompanying dementia, the continuing criticism of his wife, the overt dislike and neglect by his sons, and Denise’s betrayal, fifteen years earlier.

Alfred seems to have accepted the diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease much as he accepts other trials throughout his life—quietly and resignedly. Though he usually limits his complaints to statements such as, “I am increasingly bothered by my affliction,” and “My affliction makes this difficult,”⁴⁵ Franzen gives us an insight into the ways in which the illness is truly affecting Alfred:

His affliction offended his sense of ownership. These shaking hands belonged to nobody but him, and yet they refused to obey him. They were like bad children. Unreasoning two-year-olds in a tantrum of selfish misery. The more sternly he gave orders, the less they listened and the more miserable and out of control they got. He’d always been vulnerable to a child’s recalcitrance and refusal to behave like an adult. Irresponsibility and undiscipline were the bane of his existence, and it was another instance of that Devil’s logic that his own untimely affliction should consist of his body’s refusal to obey him.

If thy right hand offend thee, Jesus said, cut it off.

As he waited for the tremor to abate—as he watched his hands’ jerking rowing motions impotently, as if he were in a nursery with screaming misbehaving infants and had lost his voice and couldn’t make them quiet down—Alfred took pleasure in the imagination of chopping his hand off with a hatchet: of letting the transgressing limb know how deeply he was angry with it, how little he loved it if it insisted on disobeying him. It brought a kind of ecstasy to imagine the first deep bite of the hatchet’s blade in the bone and muscle of his offending wrist; but along with the ecstasy, right beside it, was an inclination to weep for this hand that was his, that he loved and wished the best for, that he’d known all its life.⁴⁶

Psychiatrists agree that a debilitating illness can often be the catalyst for the onset of severe depression,⁴⁷ particularly for those who have previously enjoyed good health. Chaisson-Stewart, for example, notes that, “For many, physical infirmity, chronic illness, or the diagnosis of an incurable or debilitating disease leads to a deep depression, and for some, suicide.”⁴⁸ To make matters worse, Alfred must deal with every aspect of his illness completely on his own—his feelings of rage toward his uncooperative body, his humiliation over his failing bladder, his frustration at the difficulty of completing even simple tasks, and his fear and apprehension about what the disease has planned for him in the future. Enid, as we have seen, is entirely unsympathetic. Instead of concern, she shows annoyance. She insists on proposing more and more ridiculous, impossible activities with which she believes her husband should get involved, and she denies the seriousness of his illness each and every time he dares to bring it up:

Alfred was guiding a forkful of salmon and sorrel sauce to his mouth. The food dropped off his fork and broke into violently shaped pieces .

“Are you enjoying the lunch?” Enid said.

He took his left hand in his right and squeezed it. The mated hands continued their oscillation together while he stared at the sunflowers in the middle of the table. He seemed to *swallow* the sour set of his mouth, to choke back the paranoia.

“I am increasingly bothered by my affliction,” he said.

“What you have is very mild,” Enid said. “We just need to get the medication adjusted.”

He shook his head. “[Dr.] Hedgpeth said it’s unpredictable.”

“The important thing is to keep doing things,” Enid said, “to keep active, to always just go.”

“No. You were not listening. Hedgpeth was very careful not to promise anything.”

“According to what I read—”

“I don’t give a damn what your magazine article said. I am not well, and Hedgpeth admitted as much.”⁴⁹

Here, Alfred is having obvious difficulty simply feeding himself, and his wife perseveres in her assertion that the disease is “very mild.” It is unclear exactly why Enid is unable or unwilling to see the seriousness of her husband’s condition. Perhaps she has grown so used to criticizing and berating him over the last fifty years, that it is the only way in which she knows how to interact with him. Perhaps it is another instance of her retaliating against his coldness to her throughout their marriage. Most likely, it is a result of her insistence on living a fantasy. Whatever the reason, Enid is staunch in her refusal to validate Al in this regard.

A.W. Kaszniak, Menachem Sadeh, and Lawrence Z. Stern observe that, “Symptoms of depression have long been known to be associated with Parkinson’s disease;”⁵⁰ in addition to the depression brought about by the illness, then, Enid’s continued withdrawal of social supports only serves to deepen her husband’s mental suffering. Alfred is truly alone in contemplating the progression of his disease:

There were chapters in Hedgpeth’s booklets that even Alfred, fatalist and man of discipline though he was, couldn’t bring himself to read. Chapters devoted to the problems of swallowing, to the late torments of the tongue; to the breakdown of the signal system.⁵¹

Al must further contend with the progressive deterioration of his mind, a condition that is even more painful for him to face than is the Parkinson’s; and again, he must face it alone. As Billig points out,

It is depressing to realize that you are losing mental functioning and gradually becoming increasingly disabled intellectually, psychologically, and

neurologically. It is depressing to have increasing difficulty in remembering the names of things that used to be familiar and of people whom you knew well...Many patients in the early to middle stages of a progressive dementia are quite depressed as they witness their own deterioration.⁵²

Franzen allows us into Alfred's mind during one of his episodes of forgetfulness, permitting the reader a poignantly clear view of the sadness and confusion that Al must constantly come to terms with:

Alfred was standing in the master bedroom wondering why the drawers of his dresser were open, who had opened them, whether he had opened them himself. He couldn't help blaming Enid for his confusion. For witnessing it into existence. For existing, herself, as a person who could have opened these drawers

"Al? What are you doing?"

He turned to the doorway where she'd appeared. He began a sentence: "I am—" but when he was taken by surprise, every sentence became an adventure in the woods; as soon as he could no longer see the light of the clearing from which he'd entered, he would realize that the crumbs he'd dropped for bearings had been eaten by birds, silent deft darting things which he couldn't quite see in the darkness but which were so numerous and swarming in their hunger that it seemed as if *they* were the darkness, as if the darkness weren't uniform, weren't an absence of light but a teeming and corpuscular thing...and hence the panic of a man betrayed deep in the woods whose darkness was the darkness of starlings blotting out the sunset or black ants storming a dead opossum, a darkness that didn't just exist but actively *consumed* the bearings that he'd sensibly established for himself, lest he be lost; but in the instant of realizing he was lost, time became marvelously slow and he discovered hitherto unguessed eternities in the space between one word and the next, or rather he became trapped in that space between words and could only stand and watch as time went on without him, the thoughtless boyish part of him crashing on out of sight blindly through the woods while he, trapped, the grownup Al, watched in oddly impersonal suspense to see if the panic-stricken little boy might, despite no longer knowing where he was or at what point he'd entered the woods of this sentence, still manage to blunder into the clearing where Enid was waiting for him, unaware of any woods—"packing my suitcase," he heard himself say. This sounded right. Verb, possessive, noun. Here was a suitcase in front of him, an important confirmation. He'd betrayed nothing.⁵³

After the panic involved in not understanding where he is or what he is doing, Al is momentarily relieved to have managed answering his wife in a suitable, coherent manner. This relief is short-lived, however, as Enid easily finds a reason to express her unconcealed irritation:

But Enid had spoken again. The audiologist had said that he was mildly impaired. He frowned at her, not following.

"It's *Thursday*," she said, louder. "We're not leaving until *Saturday*."

“Saturday!” he echoed.

She berated him then, and for a while the crepuscular birds retreated, but outside the wind had blown the sun out, and it was getting very cold.⁵⁴

Clearly, Alfred has as little social support in managing the anguish of his dementia as he has in managing the Parkinson’s disease. While one can imagine a certain amount of frustration in being forced to contend with someone who behaves more like a child than a husband, Enid’s reactions to Al’s moments of forgetfulness, confusion, and hallucination are almost unvaryingly reactions of annoyance and exasperation. Consider Enid’s response when Alfred hallucinates during lunch with Denise—here, Enid shows that she is much more concerned with the opinions of others than with her husband’s mental state:

“Dad?”

Alfred didn’t answer. His mouth had gone slack and sour again in the way that made Enid feel that something terrible was going to happen. He turned to the darkening, rain-spotted windows and gazed at them dully, his head hanging low

“Dad?”

“Al, there’s dessert.”

Something seemed to melt in him. Still looking at the window, he raised his head with tentative joy, as if he thought he recognized someone outside, someone he loved.

“Al, what is it?”

“Dad?”

“There are children,” he said, sitting up straighter. “Do you see them?” He raised a trembling index finger. “There.” His finger moved laterally, following the motion of the children he saw. “And there. And there.”

He turned to Enid and Denise as if he expected them to be overjoyed to hear this news, but Enid was not the least bit overjoyed. She was about to embark on a very elegant fall color cruise on which it would be extremely important that Alfred not make mistakes like this.

“Al, those are *sunflowers*,” she said, half angry, half beseeching.

“You’re seeing reflections in the window”

“Well!” He shook his head bluffly. “I thought I saw children.”

“No, sunflowers,” Enid said. “You saw sunflowers.”⁵⁵

Again, like the Parkinson’s disease, Al must suffer through his dementia and the accompanying depression without benefit of social supports; to the contrary, Enid makes her exasperation and embarrassment all too clear to her husband.

There is another facet of Al's dementia as it relates to depression that bears discussion. According to psychiatrists, loss of mental functioning is not only secondary to illnesses such as Parkinson's; dementia, in fact, can be a symptom of severe depression itself, particularly among the elderly.⁵⁶ Kasziak et al, for example, observe that, "There is general agreement that one of the most difficult yet important diagnostic decisions involves differentiating the signs and symptoms of dementia from those of depression."⁵⁷ They go on to explain why:

Difficulties in differentiating dementia from depression in older age appear to be increased by several specific factors...Cognitive difficulty frequently accompanies depression, especially for the elderly, and can reach proportions sufficient to be easily confused with that of dementia. Signs and symptoms of neurological disorder accompanied by dementia (e.g., Parkinson's disease) have some overlap with those of depression.⁵⁸

This, of course, raises an extremely interesting question: Is Al's dementia a product of his Parkinson's or his depression? Because the symptoms of depression-related dementia are so similar to those of dementia brought on by Parkinson's, we can never really be sure. Nancy J. Osgood reiterates the difficulty in assessment:

Are apparent disorientation, confusion, and poor intellectual function caused by organic brain disease or by severe depression? The latter clinical picture, often called pseudodementia, has been found to be common in the severely depressed elderly...Most certainly, its differentiation from true dementia is quite important, for unlike true dementia, pseudodementia usually clears with successful treatment of underlying depression.⁵⁹

Alfred certainly seems to be a candidate for pseudodementia. (Billig prefers the term "the depression of dementia," because, as he contends, "there is nothing 'pseudo' about this condition."⁶⁰) For someone like Alfred, who appears to have suffered from depression nearly all his life, certainly the past fifty years, one would assume that under these circumstances, the dementia of depression could easily manifest itself as Alfred grows older. In fact, a history of previous

psychiatric dysfunction is much more common in pseudodementia than in true dementia.⁶¹ Gerald L. Klerman elaborates:

One of the reasons pseudodementia is difficult to diagnose is that it is found in patients who have suffered from a low-grade despondency and pessimism for some years and who have had a recent flare-up or worsening of symptoms...Clinicians must be aware of the possibility that a condition that appears to be dementia can, in fact, be depression.⁶²

Kasziak et al illustrate a number of other factors of pseudodementia that seem to correspond to Al's particular mental deterioration. First, they note that in typical dementia, the disorder begins insidiously, with a history extending back many years. In contrast, with the dementia of depression, "there is a rapid progression of symptoms after onset."⁶³ This corresponds to Al's alarmingly swift descent upon being checked into the hospital after Christmas dinner; once he is placed in the hospital, he becomes significantly more depressed, and his dementia responds accordingly. I will address the specifics of this decline later in the chapter.

Further support of pseudodementia in Alfred's case can be found by again referring to Kaszniak et al:

While the dementia patient, at least at middle to later stages of the disorder, typically complains very little of memory deficit or other cognitive deficit, the depressive pseudodementia patient will complain considerably of these difficulties, often with elaborate detail and examples, emphasizing disability and highlighting failures. The dementia patient's complaints are typically more vague, with...evidence of pride in even trivial accomplishments. The dementia patient may hence appear relatively unconcerned about his or her illness, while the depressive pseudodementia patient usually communicates a strong sense of distress. The dementia patient's behavior is typically consistent with the clinically observed severity of cognitive dysfunction (e.g., the patient with apparent memory deficit is observed getting lost on the way to his or her hospital room). The depressive pseudodementia patient will often demonstrate incongruities between behavior and apparent severity of cognitive defect.⁶⁴

Looking at the characteristics of the dementia of depression, then, we can see that Alfred seems to fall quite neatly into that category. It is true that he does not

often complain out loud, due in part to his total lack of support from Enid, and also due to his fixation on privacy. If we read carefully, however, we can see that Al does in fact complain, albeit mostly internally, becoming more and more discouraged and disgusted with his mental failures. While struggling to repair a string of Christmas lights, for example, Alfred is intensely frustrated at his inability to figure out the complex wiring:

And so the goddamned lights made a victim of him, and there wasn't a goddamned thing he could do

You were outfitted as a boy with a will to fix things by yourself and with a respect for individual physical objects, but eventually some of your internal hardware (including such mental hardware as this will and this respect) became obsolete, and so, even though many other parts of you still functioned well, an argument could be made for junking the whole human machine

Which was another way of saying he was tired.⁶⁵

Alfred also shows concern for the progression of his illness in this reflection:

He had good days and bad days. It was as if when he lay in bed for a night certain humors pooled in the right or wrong places, like marinade around a flank steak, and in the morning his nerve endings either had enough of what they needed or did not; as if his mental clarity might depend on something as simple as whether he'd lain on his side or on his back the night before; or as if, more disturbingly, he were a damaged transistor radio which after a vigorous shaking might function loud and clear or spew nothing but a static laced with unconnected phrases, the odd strain of music.⁶⁶

Indeed, even in the grips of one of his frequent hallucinations, with his privacy guard somewhat relaxed, Al reveals his grief to his son Gary:

“Get him! Get him!”

“You’re hallucinating and it’s time to get out of the tub and go back to bed ”

“Do you see them?”

“You’re hallucinating Go back to bed ”

This went on for a while, ten or fifteen minutes, before Gary was able to lead Alfred out of the bathroom. A light was burning in the master bedroom, and several unused diapers were spread out on the floor .

“What is ‘hallucinate’?” Alfred said finally

“It’s like you’re dreaming when you’re awake.”

Alfred winced “I’m concerned about this ”

“Well Rightly so.”

“Help me with the diaper.”

“Yes, all right,” Gary said.

“I’m concerned that something is wrong with my thoughts.”

“Oh, Dad ”

“My head doesn’t seem to work right ”
 “I know I know ”⁶⁷

These passages show, of course, that not only does Al complain about his illness, but he is quite concerned and distressed about it as well—one aspect of the dementia of depression as opposed to true dementia.

Finally, there are clearly “incongruities between behavior and apparent severity of cognitive defect.” One moment, Al is struggling with hallucinations that reduce him to a child; the next, he is intelligently holding forth on “the mechanics of stabilizing an ocean liner.”⁶⁸ Alfred himself, in fact, crystallizes the unpredictability of his mental capabilities, seen in this passage:

[For Alfred] the problem of existence was this: that, in the manner of a wheat seedling thrusting itself up out of the earth, the world moved forward in time by adding cell after cell to its leading edge, piling moment on moment, and that to grasp the world even in its freshest, youngest moment provided no guarantee that you’d be able to grasp it again a moment later. By the time he’d established that his daughter, Denise, was handing him a plate of snacks in his son Chip’s living room, the next moment in time was already budding itself into a pristinely ungrasped existence in which he couldn’t absolutely rule out the possibility, for example, that his wife, Enid, was handing him a plate of feces in the parlor of a brothel; and no sooner had he reconfirmed Denise and the snacks and Chip’s living room than the leading edge of time added yet another layer of new cells, so that he again faced a new and ungrasped world, which was why, rather than exhaust himself playing catch-up, he preferred more and more to spend his days down among the unchanging historical roots of things ⁶⁹

The combination of these factors, then, does seem to suggest that Alfred is suffering not from Parkinson’s-related dementia, but from the dementia of depression, or perhaps a blending of the two. At the very least, we can assume that the dementia itself, and the frustration and anger that come with it, contribute largely to his overall depressive state.

This is the condition in which Alfred embarks on the elegant fall colors cruise with his wife—physically and mentally debilitated, incontinent, demented, and severely depressed. Though the cruise is, for Enid, the catalyst in her journey

to self-awareness and happiness, it is, ironically, the beginning of the end for Alfred. Enid returns to St. Jude having taken the first steps towards authenticity; Al returns home wishing he were dead, wishing he had let himself drown in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. What happens on this cruise to send Alfred into a depression that is not only severe, but suicidal?

On the most basic level, Al is far away from his comfort zone, the basement in St. Jude, “down among the historical roots of things.” He cannot collapse into his beloved blue chair, and he has lost the security of his nearby Yuban cans. Instead, he must engage in lucid conversation with strangers, must hourly search the ship for a convenient bathroom, and must carry around his old black raincoat to conceal any bladder control mishaps (amusingly, Al notes that the raincoat also has “the added virtue of offending Enid’s romantic sensibilities.”⁷⁰). He must sit down to meals three times a day, during which his table partners witness his shaking hands, his difficulty in feeding himself. Though Franzen does not give the reader specific details on Al’s response to his public suffering, we can imagine that it is almost intolerable for such a private man to be forced to exhibit his frailties. Enid, of course, is no help, as she rolls her eyes in unconcealed embarrassment at his “unsightly napkin,” as well as at his desire to go to bed at seven o’clock.⁷¹ Al, then, is surrounded by strangers (the only familiar face that of his unsupportive, mortified wife), constantly aware of the possibility of soiling himself, mindful of his every tremor being observed by thousands—and with nowhere to escape to but his stateroom, where he invariably encounters the manic, hallucinated feces.

It is on the cruise, in fact, that Alfred's hallucinations commence full force. He is tormented nightly by the raging turd, searching frantically for refuge under newspapers, in adult diapers, on the bathroom floor, in the shower stall, all to no avail. It must be conceded that Enid does her best to help him through these episodes, taking care of him in his panic as well as she can—until her acquisition of Aslan, after which Al must struggle through the night alone.

The final morning of the cruise brings new horrors and confusion for Al, setting the course for the misery that will be the rest of his life. After warring against the feces by himself, while his wife is safely snoring in the Lion's embrace, after awakening curled up in the shower stall amid crumpled and shredded diapers, Al has one specific goal in mind: "Simply holding things together—simply keeping the ocean of night terrors from breaching the last bulkhead—was his ambition now."⁷² Whether his pessimism is catching up with him, or whether he is simply doomed to a life of bad luck, his ambition is not realized.

Upon entering a bathroom he has fortuitously located, Alfred is first confronted with—what else—the angry feces. Turning from the toilet stall, he comes face-to-face with yet another hallucination, one that is significantly more disturbing than the offensive excrement. It is the one person who is most responsible for the pain and sorrow of the past fifteen years; Alfred recognizes the "blue-cheeked man in the bathroom as the man from Signals, as betrayal personified."

But the blue-cheeked man from Signals couldn't possibly afford a luxury cruise, and this worried him. The blue-cheeked man came from the distant past but was

walking and talking in the present, and the turd was a creature from the night but was afoot in broad daylight, and this worried him a lot⁷³

Desperate to regain mental cohesion, Al flees the bathroom and heads up seven flights to the Sports Deck, where he collapses onto a bench. Searching for a tangible location in the world as opposed to one outside of space and time, as in the bathroom, Al takes out a map and tries to “fix himself within a grid, identify some landmarks.”⁷⁴ It is a pitiful and heartrending scene: an old palsied man befuddled and “alone on top of the world,”⁷⁵ mindful of soiling himself, studying a map as best he can with his shaking hands, trying to orient himself in a way he can understand and cling to in the face of his confusion and distress.

Alfred is then faced with the more immediate problem of needing to use the bathroom, and searches for some suitable place to suffice in the emergency.

Beyond a protective railing to his right was a collection of thickly painted planes and cylinders, two navigational spheres, an inverted cone. Since he was not afraid of heights, nothing prevented him from ignoring the strongly worded warning in four languages, squeezing past the railing, and stepping out onto the sandpapery metal surface to seek, as it were, a tree to pee behind. He was high above everything and invisible.

But too late.

Both legs of his trousers were very soaked, the left leg nearly to his ankle. Warm-cold wetness all over everything.⁷⁶

This is the point at which Alfred tumbles off the cruise ship, frightened, wet, cold, trembling, lost, and alone. What he thinks about as he falls into the water can perhaps give us a clue as to the kind of man he really is beneath the gruff exterior:

He was remembering the nights he'd sat upstairs with one or both of his boys or with his girl in the crook of his arm, their damp bath-smelling heads hard against his ribs as he read aloud to them from *Black Beauty* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. How his voice alone, its palpable resonance, had made them drowsy. These were evenings, and there were hundreds of them, maybe thousands, when nothing traumatic enough to leave a scar had befallen the nuclear unit. Evenings of plain vanilla closeness in the black leather chair; sweet evenings of doubt between the nights of bleak certainty. They came to him now, these forgotten counterexamples, because in the end, when you were falling into water, there was no solid thing to reach for but your children.⁷⁷

At this point Alfred's story leaves the narrative and the reader is unsure if he is alive or dead. We soon come to learn, however, that he has been rescued from the ocean, having sustained quite a few injuries.

When we next encounter Alfred, he is back home in St. Jude, amid his wife's detritus and manic Christmas preparations. Enid is far too preoccupied to tend much to Al, as she is obsessively decorating, writing Christmas cards, and bullying her children into coming home. Her husband, meanwhile, is in the basement with a shotgun, deeply regretting his rescue from certain death:

The problem was insoluble. There he'd been, in extremely cold salty water, his lungs half-full and his heavy legs cramping and his shoulder useless in its socket, and all he would have had to do was nothing. Let go and drown. But he kicked, it was a reflex. He didn't like the depths and so he kicked, and then down from above had rained orange flotation devices. He'd stuck his working arm through a hole in one of them just as a really serious combination of wave and undertow—the *Gunnar Mydal's* wake—sent him into a gargantuan wash-and-spin. All he would have had to do then was let go. And yet it was clear, even as he was nearly drowning there in the North Atlantic, that in the *other* place there would be no objects whatsoever: that this miserable orange flotation device through which he'd stuck his arm, this fundamentally inscrutable and ungriving fabric-clad hunk of foam, would be a GOD in the objectless world of death toward which he was headed, would be the SUPREME I-AM-WHAT-I-AM in that universe of unbeing. For a few minutes, the orange flotation device was the only object he had. It was his last object, and so, instinctively, he loved it and pulled it close.

Then they hauled him out of the water and dried him off and wrapped him up. They treated him like a child, and he reconsidered the wisdom of surviving. There was nothing wrong with him except his one-eyed blindness and his non-working shoulder and a few other small things, but they spoke to him as if he were an idiot, a lad, a demented person. In their phony solicitude, their thinly veiled contempt, he saw the future that he'd chosen in the water. It was a nursing-home future and it made him weep. He should have just drowned.⁷⁸

Because we know the circumstances of Alfred's life—his depression, his illness, his lack of support—we can likely understand the reasons for his wish to die.

Looking at the psychoanalytic literature, however, can give us a clearer view of the factors leading to suicide in the elderly. Because “depression prior to suicide is probably universal,”⁷⁹ I will not reiterate the sources of Alfred's depression, but

rather, highlight the factors of suicide that are particularly relevant to the elderly (though, it should be noted, not uniquely so).

One of the most important predictors of suicide in the elderly concerns their view of the future. As Chaisson-Stewart contends, “man is essentially a future-oriented animal. When he views the future without hope, he despairs and suicide pervades his thoughts. Deprived of a future to hope in, he embraces death.”⁸⁰ The elderly often have negative expectations of the future, whether because of poor health, deaths of friends or a spouse, diminished capabilities, and so on. Alfred is certainly more apprehensive than ever of what lies ahead; he can clearly see the “nursing-home future” that awaits him, and wants desperately to avoid it. Although one can assume that being placed in a home is undesirable for anybody, it is particularly so for Alfred, because of the extreme importance he places on privacy. Alfred himself makes note of this when he locks himself in his laboratory with his shotgun: “...it all came down to privacy, didn’t it? Without privacy there was no point in being an individual. And they would give him no privacy in a nursing home. They would be like the people on the helicopter and not leave him be.”⁸¹ Underscoring Al’s dread of being placed in a nursing home or hospital, Osgood observes that fear of institutionalization is common in the suicidal elderly.⁸²

Osgood further explains various factors that come into play concerning suicide in late life. She states in an overview that,

suicide among the elderly most often represents a permanent solution to what is perceived to be, and may actually be, an intolerable life situation. The elderly kill themselves when life no longer has any meaning for them, when they feel helpless to alter present life conditions or the future, and when they retain no hope that things will improve. Unlike many younger individuals who choose

suicide as a permanent solution to what in reality may be a temporary problem, the elderly usually choose suicide because the problems they face are not easily solvable.⁸³

She goes on to discuss what M. Miller considers the eight main factors contributing to late-life suicide, which are essentially reactions to the following: physical illness; mental illness; retirement; death of a spouse; threat of dependency or institutionalization; pathological personal relationships; alcoholism or drug abuse; or a combination of any of these.⁸⁴ Thus, we can see at a glance that Al must contend with almost all of these factors; only alcohol or drug abuse and the death of a spouse are not applicable to his situation. We already clearly understand his feelings about the Parkinson's and dementia, his fear of being placed in a home, and his unhealthy and unsupportive personal relationships. With this understanding of Alfred's suicidal depression, we can now consider the circumstances surrounding the third of Miller's factors—Al's retirement, undoubtedly the most psychically traumatic event of his last fifteen years, brought about, as it was, by Denise's betrayal.

Alfred has steadily and rapidly deteriorated, mentally, physically, and emotionally, since his return from the cruise. By the time Christmas rolls around and his children begin to arrive, he is in a deep suicidal depression; what stops him from using the shotgun, in fact, is his sense of privacy: "...to be seen as the finite carcass in a sea of blood and bone chips and gray matter—to inflict that version of himself on other people—was a violation of privacy so profound it seemed it would outlive him."⁸⁵ His preoccupation with death consumes his lucid moments, though his instances of confusion and dementia are more and more common as he continues in his depressive decline. Denise has the opportunity to

witness his rapidly failing mind when she attempts to help her father with some stretching exercises recommended by his doctor. It is in this scene, upstairs in her parents' bedroom, that Denise, along with the reader, first learns of the betrayal with which Alfred has been struggling for a decade and a half, a betrayal that led directly to his forced retirement.

Franzen has, earlier in the novel, provided some back-story. The summer before Denise leaves for college, she is employed in the Signal Department of her father's company as an office assistant, copying and filing thousands of railroad diagrams. She is the only female employee in the office, "and here, in a big sunny room with twin rows of drafting tables, she became acquainted with the desires of a dozen older men."⁸⁶ One of these men, Don Armour, has a particularly distressing effect on Denise:

He wasn't good-looking. His head seemed too large, his hair was thinning, and his face had the dusky nitrate red of a wiener or bologna, except where his beard made it blue. But she recognized an amusement, a brightness, an animal sadness in his expression; and the saddle curves of his lips were inviting...

What she was aware of, that afternoon, were the problems. That Don Armour wanted to put his hands on her but couldn't was a problem. That through an accident of birth she had *everything* while the man who wanted her had so much less—this lack of parity—was a *big* problem. Since she was the one who had everything, the problem was clearly hers to solve. But any word of reassurance she could give him, and gesture of solidarity she could imagine making, felt condescending.

She experienced the problem intensely in her body. Her surfeit of gifts and opportunities, in comparison to Don Armour's, manifested itself as a physical botheration.⁸⁷

Denise solves the problem of life's inherent unfairness by losing her virginity to Don Armour in her parents' house, while they are away for the weekend. The passionless affair continues throughout the summer; when Denise leaves for college, she assumes that Don Armour will stay in the past.

Fifteen years later, however, she realizes that he is suddenly, unexpectedly, very much in the present. Ever the dutiful daughter, she encourages her father to learn the exercises that Enid insists will improve his health: "It took her five minutes to calm him down and stretch him out on his back on the bed in his wool shirt and his pajama bottoms; and here at last the truth came pouring out."⁸⁸

"Just your right leg," she said gently. "And keep your knees bent."

"Denise!" His voice was high with strain. "There's no point!"

. . . But now a tropical humidity was rising off him, a tangy almost-smell of letting go. The pajama fabric on his thigh was hot and wet in her hand, and his entire body was trembling...

"I'm sorry, Dad," she said. "Let me get you a towel."

Alfred smiled at the ceiling and spoke in a less agitated voice. "I lie here and I can see it," he said. "Do you see it?"

"See what?"

He pointed vaguely skyward with one finger. "Bottom on the bottom. Bottom on the bottom of the bench," he said. "Written there. Do you see it?"

Now she was confused and he wasn't. He cocked an eyebrow and gave her a canny look. "You know who wrote that, don't you? The fuh. The fuh. Fellow with the you know."

Holding her gaze, he nodded significantly.

"I don't understand what you're talking about," Denise said.

"Your friend. Fellow with the blue cheeks."

The first one percent of comprehension was born at the back of her neck and began to grow to the north and to the south.

"Let me get you a towel," she said, going nowhere

Her father's eyes rolled up toward the ceiling again. "He wrote that on the bottom of the bench Bommunnuthuh. Bottomofthebench And I lie there and I can see it. I nuh-nunnunnunn-unh," he said. "Told the fellow he was talking a lot of nonsense, but what can you do?" Alfred made a gesture of self-evidence or inevitability. "Thought he was going to Little Rock. You guh. I said! Gotta have seniority. Well, that's a lot of nonsense. I told him to get the hell out." He gave Denise an apologetic look and shrugged. "What else could I do?"

Denise had felt invisible before, but never like this. "I'm not sure what you're saying," she said

"Well." Alfred made a vague gesture of explanation. "He told me to look under the bench. Simple as that. Look under the bench if I didn't believe him."

"What bench?"

"It was a lot of nonsense," he said. "Simpler for everybody if I just quit. You see, he never thought of that."

"Are we talking about the railroad?"

Alfred shook his head. "Not your concern. It was never my intention to involve you in any of this. I want you to go and have fun. And *be careful*. Tell your mother to come up here with a rag."

With this, he launched himself across the carpeting and shut the bathroom door behind him⁸⁹

The reader is in the same position as Denise; we are beginning to grasp that her dalliance with Don Armour had something to do with Alfred's early retirement, but the details have yet to be made clear. Still, we share Denise's uneasiness and dread at the first glimmers of understanding.

Denise makes her way down to her father's laboratory, and there, under the workshop bench, she sees a heart-shape drawn in pencil, bearing the lettering "D.A. + D.L." For fifteen years, this has been underneath Alfred's workbench, the result of Don Armour's handiwork as he skulked about the house while Denise slept. Suddenly, everything is clear to Denise.

She flees the house, going for a walk and smoking cigarettes "until the nicotine had dulled her distress..."⁹⁰

She gathered that Don Armour, after the Wroth brothers had bought the Midland Pacific and commenced their downsizing of it, had failed to make the cut for Little Rock and had gone to Alfred and complained. Maybe he'd threatened to brag about his conquest of Alfred's daughter or maybe he's asserted his rights as a quasi-member of the Lambert family, either way, Alfred had told him to go to hell. Then Alfred had gone home and examined the underside of his workbench.

She hated to think of her father kneeling beneath his workbench and locating that penciled heart, hated the idea of Don Armour's drecky insinuations entering her father's prudish ears, hated to imagine how keenly it offended a man of such discipline and privacy to learn that Don Armour had been roaming and poking through his house at will.

It was never my intention to involve you in this

Well, and sure enough, her father had resigned from the railroad. He'd saved her privacy. He'd never breathed a word of any of this to Denise, never given any sign of thinking less of her. For fifteen years she'd tried to pass for a perfectly responsible and careful daughter, and he'd known all along that she was not.⁹¹

Alfred resigns from the railroad, then, seven weeks short of his sixty-fifth birthday, seven weeks short of his largest salary, to preserve his daughter's privacy. For fifteen years, Alfred has been taking abuse from his wife and oldest

son about his decision to retire early; he has withstood their badgering and accusatory hostility, and has never revealed his daughter's secret. It is quite likely he would have done the same for Chip or even Gary, such is his loyalty to his children.

One might argue, perhaps, that his first loyalty ought to have been to his wife; that he ought to have stayed on at his job to provide financial security for Enid in their later years, ought to have let his daughter clean up her own mess. This may be so, but it would have gone against everything Alfred believes in, and he is nothing if not a man of principle. Charles Sykes notes that, "Some commentators suggest that privacy is the essence of being human," as well as being "a means for defining oneself."⁹² For a person such as Al, then, violating someone else's privacy would be akin to denying his own humanity and fundamental nature. Furthermore, and perhaps even more unimaginable to Alfred considering his fidelity to his children, to reveal Denise's secret would be to eradicate her own being, something that Alfred would not do at any cost.

Why, though, does Alfred value privacy so highly, and at the cost of his own well-being, financial and otherwise? Janna Malamud Smith, in her essay, "Privacy and Private States," provides some answers. She argues, for instance, that, "People need privacy from others so that they can rest from the strain of being what others desire."⁹³ Certainly this is true for Alfred; his wife makes it painfully clear that she wishes he were something other—healthier, less embarrassing, a better earner, more loving, more fun, more social, more energetic, less contemplative, less philosophical, and on and on and on. Gary, too,

constantly berates his father for being responsible for Enid's quality of life, and never misses an opportunity to tell Alfred how he *should* be behaving. Al keeps Denise's secret to save her from the same. He does not want to give Enid (or Gary, for that matter, the intrusive older brother) any further ammunition to fire at Denise; she is already badgered incessantly about her failed marriage, her career as a chef, the way she dresses. If Gary and Enid had the information about Don Armour, they would never let Denise forget it. In this instance, Al operates by the Golden Rule, respecting Denise's privacy as he respects his own.

Smith further explicates her understanding of privacy by highlighting what Alan Westin calls "the privacy of reserve." She observes, "In a state of reserve, people... preserve privacy by not speaking about what they believe they know... In this sense, the privacy of reserve is the privacy of not being forced to openly acknowledge what... you know."⁹⁴ She elaborates on the privacy of reserve in a manner that perfectly corresponds to Alfred's feelings: "Reserve is a cornerstone of civility. Its premise is that most exchanges are better off partial, most days improved by not telling much to many."⁹⁵ Clearly this premise is attractive to Alfred, but why? As Smith argues, "Words can be indelicate, and can tear the fragile gauze of lifelong intimacy. In their inexactness or awkwardness, they may cause unnecessary pain by making something too explicit."⁹⁶ Imagine how indelicate and awkward Alfred would feel in discussing his knowledge about Don Armour with Denise! Or with Enid, or Gary, or his superiors at the railroad. Knowing what we do about Alfred's personality and values, it is truly inconceivable. Al keeps his silence, and with it, Denise's secret.

Thus, in addition to the factors of Alfred's depression already discussed at length, we can now include the fact that he has quietly withstood fifteen years of abuse and criticism from Enid and Gary on the subject of his retirement. He has been accused of being selfish, inconsiderate, and thoughtless, when, in fact, he has exhibited self-sacrifice, respect, and concern for his daughter's privacy.

Alfred has, in short, endured much more than seems fair for one lifetime. He is understandably ready to put an end to his misery, if not for the acute infringement on his privacy that that would entail. Incidentally, it is worth noting the reaction of his family, his "support system," upon discovery of the shotgun, as it reinforces how truly, exceptionally alone he really is.

Gary notices the gun in his father's workshop, while Al is snoring in his blue chair outside the lab. He first reacts with mere curiosity, then absolute callousness:

A shotgun in a canvas case was leaning against the lab bench. He didn't remember having seen it here earlier. Could he have somehow failed to notice it? Ordinarily the gun was kept in the under-porch storeroom. He was sorry indeed to see that it had moved.

Do I let him shoot himself?

The question was so clear in his mind that he almost spoke it out loud And he considered. It was one thing to intervene on behalf of Enid...there was life and hope and pleasure worth saving in Enid. The old man, however, was kaput

At the same time, Gary had no wish to hear a gunshot and come down and wade into the gore. He didn't want his mother to go through this, either.

And yet, horrible though the mess would be, it would be followed by a huge quantum uptick in the quality of his mother's life.

Gary opened the box of shells on the bench and saw that none were missing. He wished that someone else, not he, had noticed that Alfred had moved the gun. But his decision, when it came, was so clear in his mind that he did speak it out loud. Into the dusty, uric, nonreverberative silence of the laboratory he said: "If that's what you want, be my guest. I ain't gonna stop you."⁹⁷

Gary shares the information about their father's possible suicide with Chip, who reacts in a similarly insensitive manner:

“Isn’t that kind of Dad’s own decision?” [Chip said.]

“That’s what I was thinking yesterday,” Gary said. “But if he wants to do it, he’s got other options. It’s supposed to be down near zero tonight. He can go outside with a bottle of whiskey. I don’t want Mom to find him with his head blown off.”

Chip didn’t know what to say. He silently dressed in the old man’s clothes. The shirt and pants were marvelously clean and fit him better than he would have guessed. He was surprised, when he put the cardigan on, that his hands did not begin to shake, surprised to see such a young face in the mirror.

“So what have you been doing with yourself?” Gary said.

“I’ve been helping a Lithuanian friend of mine defraud Western investors.”⁹⁸

So, to recap: Gary continues to be an ineffable bastard; Chip reacts with what can best be described as indifference, then proceeds to admire himself in his father’s borrowed clothes. The two brothers then exchange pleasantries.

As for Denise, for whom the shotgun’s presence takes on new meaning after her father’s delirious revelation about his retirement, after she learns she is indirectly responsible for his quitting—what is her reaction? She essentially ignores her discovery, as she chooses that moment to go for her walk, smoke her cigarettes, and clear her head. Franzen gives no indication that Denise has given any further thought to her father’s potential suicide, until Enid sends her downstairs to fetch him from the basement. She sets about this task with fear and trepidation:

“Denise,” Enid said. “Go see if he’s in the basement.”

Denise didn’t ask “Why me?” although she wanted to. She went to the top of the basement stairs and called her father. The basement lights were on, and she could hear a cryptic faint rustling from the workshop.

She called again: “Dad?”

There was no answer.

Her fear, as she descended the stairs, was like a fear from the unhappy year of her childhood when she’d begged for a pet and received a cage containing two hamsters...Every morning, when Denise went to the basement to give them pellets and change their water, she dreaded to discover what new devilry they’d hatched in the night for her private speculation—maybe a nest of blind, wriggling, incest-crimson offspring, maybe a desperate pointless wholesale rearrangement of cedar shavings into a single great drift beside which the two parents were trembling on the bare metal of the cage’s floor, looking bloated and evasive after eating all their children, which couldn’t have left an agreeable aftertaste, even in a hamster’s mouth.⁹⁹

I do not intend here to portray Denise as being as uncaring and insensitive as her brothers; she has consistently showed sincere concern and devotion to her father throughout her life, and especially during his illness. She is utterly devastated upon learning of her role in Alfred's retirement, and she expresses her regret and apology to him as well as she is able. She is also the only family member to actively take measures to prevent Alfred's suicide when she fears he is actually going through with it. However, it does seem rather bizarre that she would approach her father in this instance with dread and anxiety instead of her usual concern and attention, likening it to the unpleasant discoveries of her hamsters. Furthermore, she has quietly sat on the knowledge of the gun's implications for so long that Alfred could easily have had an opportunity to act on his suicidal wishes if he so desired.

And Enid? Her reaction cannot be construed as pitilessness so much as general neglect. Before Alfred reveals his secret to Denise, before she realizes that her father may actually use the gun to kill himself, Denise points out its presence to her mother, whose response is alarmingly nonchalant:

“Oh, he's been meaning to sell that gun for years,” Enid said. “AL, ARE YOU EVER GOING TO SELL THAT GUN?”

Alfred seemed to run this sentence slowly through his brain several times in order to extract its meaning. Very slowly, he nodded his head. “Yes,” he said. “I will sell the gun.”

“I hate having it in the house,” Enid said as she turned to leave. “You know, he never used it. Not once. I don't think it's ever been fired.”¹⁰⁰

Enid is, arguably, the one person who should be most concerned about the gun, most attuned to what it may mean, there in her husband's workshop. She has been present through Alfred's steady decline; she has witnessed his continual spiral into a deeper and deeper depression. She is fully aware that Alfred has

never before used the shotgun, nor has he shown the slightest interest in doing so over the past fifteen years. Shouldn't its sudden appearance in the laboratory of her severely depressed husband raise a few red flags? One would imagine so, but Enid is far too consumed with her Christmas mania to give it a second thought.

And so there are the reactions of his family, of the only people in Alfred's life who can give him a measure of sympathy and comfort. Enid is oblivious, Denise is merely uneasy, Chip is apathetic. As for Gary, his father's potential suicide is the one instance in which he can be said to be supportive of Al's wishes.

The appearance of the gun in Alfred's workshop, available for all to discover, raises an interesting question. Why would such an intensely private man purposely put this weapon on display, announcing his intentions to commit what is surely the ultimate private act? Perhaps the answer can be attributed to something as simple as Alfred's failing mind—or perhaps it is the only way that he knows to ask for help, to let his family know that he is in extreme pain. As Miller suggests:

Lying dormant within all of us is an extremely personal equation which determines the point where the quality of our lives would be so pathetically poor we would no longer wish to live. This "line of unbearability," as it might be called, usually exists only subconsciously and we are therefore not normally cognizant of it. However, when we actually find ourselves in an intolerable situation, even for the first time in our lives, we become conscious of our "line of unbearability." Once the line of unbearability is crossed, a crisis is triggered. *Those who still maintain hope cry out for help.* Those who don't are likely to kill themselves quickly and with determination.¹⁰¹

If, indeed, Al has attempted a cry for help, he has now had an opportunity to see for himself that his wife and children do not seem to care if he lives or dies.

This brings us to the long-anticipated Christmas breakfast, an unqualified disaster that seals Alfred's fate. After Gary humiliates his father and leaves him raving and confused on the dining room floor, Alfred's days in the Lambert home are numbered. Enid is forced to realize and accept that her husband does indeed need care beyond the home, and thus checks him into the hospital shortly after Christmas. This, for Al, is the equivalent of a death sentence; not quick and painless, but slow and excruciating.

Alfred's rapid decline in the days and months following the cruise are indicative of pseudodementia; as he becomes more and more depressed, as he continues to wish he had died in the ocean, his dementia responds accordingly. And, in fact, if we suppose that Al's display of the gun was a cry for emotional support, we can see that the result of his family's ignoring his pleas is a dramatic, marked descent deeper into the dementia of depression. Even Chip and Denise notice an obvious degeneration in the short time they are home: "How long has Dad been like this?" he asked Denise. 'Like this? Just since yesterday. But he wasn't great before that.'"¹⁰² And the situation only gets worse once Al has been checked into the hospital.

Whereas previously Alfred "had good days and bad days,"¹⁰³ able to a degree to function on his own, hold a logical, articulate conversation, or manage his uncooperative bladder and bowels, in the hospital he is nothing short of a raving lunatic, with only the occasional coherent thought breaking through. The reasons for this are multiple and evident. First, Alfred is again far from his comfort zone, with no hope of ever returning to his big blue chair. Secondly, he

has lost all autonomy and is forced to allow the hospital staff to poke and prod him at will. Thirdly, he has almost completely lost control over his body, a difficult condition for a man of such personal discipline. Fourthly, and most importantly, Alfred no longer has any measure of privacy whatsoever; doctors, nurses, physical therapists, psychiatrists, all descend upon Alfred, witnessing his outbursts, his urinary accidents, his misery, and taking notes on it all. The combination of these factors, all intolerable for Alfred, contribute to his severe depression and thus to his pseudodementia.

In his infrequent lucid and semi-lucid moments, Alfred thinks of nothing but suicide. He has no control over any aspect of his person, however, and is indeed strapped to a chair to prevent his escape, though Al believes he is immobile because his belt is caught. Delusion and reality mingle within his mind as he desperately tries to free himself:

His only hope was to get his belt free of the chair somehow. Get himself free, make a dash, put an end to it. Bad design to build a prison this many stories up. A man could see clear to Illinois. Big window right there. Bad design if they meant to house prisoners here. From the look of the glass it was thermal pane, two layers. If he hit it with his head and pitched forward he could make it. But first he had to get the goddamned belt free.

He struggled with its smooth nylon breadth in the same way over and over. There was a time when he'd encountered obstacles philosophically but that time was past. His fingers were as weak as grass when he tried to work them under the belt so he could pull on it. They bent like soft bananas. Trying to work them under the belt was so *obviously and utterly hopeless*—the belt had such overwhelming advantages of toughness and tightness—that his efforts soon became merely a pageant of spite and rage and incapacity. He caught his fingernails on the belt and then *flung* his arms apart, letting his hands bang into the arms of the captivating chair and painfully ricochet this way and that way, because he was so goddamned angry—

...He would have liked to remove his legs entirely. They were weak and restless and wet and trapped. He kicked a little and rocked in his unrocking chair. His hands were in a tumult. The less he could do about his legs, the more he swung his arms. The bastards had him now, he'd been betrayed, and he began to cry. If only he'd known! If only he'd known, he could have taken steps, he'd had the gun, he'd had the bottomless cold ocean, if only he'd known.

Alfred's only hope for assistance is Chip, who has miraculously agreed to stay a few extra weeks and give his mother a hand. It seems that at the very end of Alfred's life, Chip has decided to show some genuine care and concern towards his father. Al clings to his youngest son as his last hope for release from his prison.

Because we understand Alfred's pain and anguish, the reader, along with Alfred, maintains hope that Chip will help his father die with what shreds of his dignity remain. If Al were able to communicate with his son coherently, he would undoubtedly echo the sentiments of Seneca, who, in the third century B.C., delivered this discourse on suicide:

For this reason, but for this alone, life is not an evil—that no one is obliged to live. If life pleases you, live. If not, you have a right to return whence you came. I will not relinquish old age if it leaves my better part intact. But if it begins to shake my mind, if it destroys its faculties one by one, if it leaves me not life but breath, I will depart from the putrid or tottering edifice. I will not escape by death from disease so long as it may be healed, and leaves my mind unimpaired. But if I know that I must suffer without hope of relief, I will depart, not through fear of the pain itself, but because it prevents all for which I would live.¹⁰⁵

Surely such an argument would sway Alfred's intellectual son; but Al cannot, of course, convey his distress in this way. He does the best he can, however.

He swatted a pitcher of water against the wall, and finally somebody came running.

"Dad, Dad, Dad. What's wrong?"

Alfred looked up at his son and into his eyes. He opened his mouth, but the only word he could produce was "I—"

I—

I have made mistakes—

I am alone—

I am wet—

I want to die—

I am sorry—

I did my best—

I love my children—

I need your help—

I want to die—

"I can't be here," he said.

Chip crouched on the floor by the chair. "Listen," he said. "You have to stay here another week so they can monitor you. We need to find out what's wrong."

He shook his head. "No! You have to get me out of here!"

"Dad, I'm sorry," Chip said, "but I can't take you home. You have to stay here for another week at least."

Oh, how his son tried his patience! By now Chip should have understood what he was asking for without being told again.

"I'm saying put an end to it!" He banged on the arms of his captivating chair. "You have to help me put an end to it!"

He looked at the window through which he was ready, at last, to throw himself. Or give him a gun, give him an ax, give him anything, but get him out of here. He had to make Chip understand this.

Chip covered his shaking hands with his own.

"I'll stay with you, Dad," he said. "But I can't do that for you. I can't put an end to it like that. I'm sorry."¹⁰⁶

Though Chip obtusely refuses to understand, the wish to die is, not surprisingly, quite common in the ill elderly,¹⁰⁷ largely for the reasons described by Seneca, and also as a result of one's life conditions crossing Miller's "line of unbearability." Chaisson-Stewart notes that, "Suicide often follows a diagnosis of an incurable disease," because many elderly "cannot cope with infirmity and the limitations that it imposes."¹⁰⁸ She goes on to give an example of one elderly woman in her care, who is suffering from progressive blindness; this woman could be heard "shouting in her room to a nurse who was trying to feed her, 'Leave me alone. Don't you see, I am trying to die?'"¹⁰⁹

Certainly, Chip, who is clearly aware of his father's need for privacy, aware of Alfred's distress at the disobedience of his mind and body; Chip, the philosophical intellectual, should surely understand that to help Alfred would mean releasing him from unbearable physical and mental anguish; would be showing a great kindness to a tired and desperately unhappy old man.¹¹⁰ The reader holds out hope that Chip will indeed come to his father's rescue. Al maintains this hope as well:

Like a wife who had died or a house that had burned, the clarity to think and the power to act were still vivid in his memory. Through a window that gave onto the next world, he could still see the clarity and see the power, just out of reach, beyond the window's thermal panes. He could see the desired outcomes, the drowning at sea, the shotgun blast, the plunge from a height, so near to him still that he refused to believe he'd lost the opportunity to avail himself of their relief.

He wept at the injustice of his sentence. "For God's sake, Chip," said loudly, because he sensed that this might be his last chance to liberate himself before he lost all contact with that clarity and power and it was therefore crucial that Chip understand *exactly* what he wanted. "I'm asking for your help! You've got to get me out of this! You have to put an end to it!"

Even red-eyed, even tear-streaked, Chip's face was full of power and clarity. Here was a son whom he could trust to understand him as he understood himself; and so Chip's answer, when it came, was absolute. Chip's answer told him that this was where the story ended. It ended with Chip shaking his head, it ended with him saying: "I can't, Dad. I can't."¹¹¹

And thus, Alfred sees his last hope slip away. The reader cannot help but be infuriated by Chip's dubious, newfound morality—here is a man who was fired for sleeping with one of his students; a man who was sexually excited to discover that his new girlfriend was married; a man who spent months in Lithuania operating an international investment scam. Only a week ago, Chip hadn't seemed to care one way or the other about his father's potential suicide, had, in fact, gone for a walk "to pursue the important question of suicide with a cigarette to enhance his mental performance,"¹¹² just like a true philosopher. Now, his misguided sense of right and wrong leaves his father forsaken, hopeless, and trapped.

After a series of hospital tests through which Alfred is diagnosed with "parkinsonism, dementia, depression, and neuropathy of the legs and urinary tract,"¹¹³ his worst fears are realized; Enid places him in the Deepmire Home. It is here that Enid visits him each day, taking every opportunity to impart to her husband his indelible "wrongness," now that he can no longer fight back. Alfred still possesses a consuming wish for death, yet his wife tells him that, "He was

wrong to attempt to hang himself with bedsheets in the night. He was wrong to hurl himself against a window. He was wrong to try to slash his wrists with a dinner fork.”¹¹⁴

Alfred, however, is a persistent man, and he finally finds a means of ending his misery—he refuses to accept any food.

Alfred lasted longer after that than anyone expected. He was a lion to the end. His blood pressure was barely measurable when [the children] flew into town, and still he lived another week. He lay curled up on the bed and barely breathed. He moved for nothing and responded to nothing except to shake his head emphatically, once, if Enid tried to put an ice chip in his mouth. The one thing he never forgot was how to refuse. All of her correction had been for naught. He was as stubborn as the day she'd met him.¹¹⁵

Thus, though the conclusion of the novel is ambiguously happy for Enid, it is not so for Alfred. He dies after over two years of agony and despair, at last finding a way out of his hell. Though his wife and children are with him at the end, their presence likely does not bring much comfort to Al, as they were never a particular source of support for him, and he is still effectively isolated and alone in the prison of his mind. The reader responds with compassion as well as a measure of horror, which is conceivably just as Franzen intended.

The novel in general, and Alfred's story in particular, has significant parallels with Aristotle's concept of tragedy. A thorough discussion of the specific ways in which *The Corrections* corresponds to and departs from the elements of tragedy would entail another chapter in itself; therefore, I will limit this discussion to the very basics of Aristotle's definition.

“Tragedy,” Aristotle contends, “is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament; represented by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by

means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions.”¹¹⁶ Clearly, *The Corrections* easily fulfills the first, second, and fourth requirements. (Perhaps Aristotle would permit me to slide by on the third, as Franzen has sold the movie rights to his novel.)

Every tragedy, of course, needs a tragic hero, and Alfred perfectly fits into the role of contemporary tragic hero, à la Willy Loman. Aristotle maintains that a proper tragic hero must be one who is not singularly virtuous and decent, so that we are merely outraged at his downfall; conversely, he must not be so wicked and evil that we apprehend some sort of moral justice in his ruin.¹¹⁷ “There remains, then,” according to Aristotle, “the person intermediate between these. Such a person is one who neither is superior to us in virtue and justice, nor undergoes a change to misfortune because of vice and wickedness, but because of some error.”¹¹⁸ (I am omitting, for obvious reasons, Aristotle’s contention that the tragic hero must hold an elevated societal position, as, for example, Lear or Creon.)

The downfall of the tragic hero, then, comes about as a result of what Aristotle terms “*hamartia*.”¹¹⁹ *Hamartia* may be simply an intellectual mistake or an error in judgment; it may also be a character’s moral weakness. Applied to Alfred, we can see that both possibilities obtain. If we understand the effects of his downfall to be the suffering he endures in the hospital and in the nursing home, we can point to the “intellectual mistake or error in judgment” as being his failure to use the shotgun, or go outside with a bottle of whiskey, for that matter, when he had the chance. If the effects of his downfall are considered to be

isolation and lack of genuine personal relationships, culminating in a lonely and miserable, protracted death, we can regard his consuming need for privacy and his intractable emotional discipline as possible fatal flaws. I would not consider his depression to be a tragic flaw, because, like the Parkinson's, it is a disease, and therefore not attributable to moral weakness.

The fall of Alfred, our tragic hero, certainly produces catharsis in the reader. As we come to understand him more and more throughout the novel, our sympathies for Alfred likewise increase, until we are moved to pity by the circumstances of his final years. Similarly, fear ultimately combines with sympathy and pity, so that we feel compelled to wonder anxiously, *Could this happen to me?* The degree to which this catharsis is manifested in our real lives seems a question more appropriately addressed to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.¹²⁰

Alfred Lambert lived a difficult life and died an even more difficult death. He was pathetically misunderstood by his wife and children, who were largely too consumed with their own neuroses to pay significant attention to his physical, mental, and emotional decline. His family thought of him as a hard man to love, as cynical, pessimistic, negative, depressed; as a burden to be borne. There is indeed some truth to their perceptions, but Franzen has allowed the reader to see Alfred in another light—to see him as a man of great loyalty and fidelity, a man who has done his best, in his own way, to cope with the hand dealt to him, to struggle through life with his principles and values intact, even as his body and mind betray him to his ultimate, tragic end.

Notes

- ¹ Franzen, Jonathan, *The Corrections*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001, p. 532.
- ² Groden, Michael, "Privacy in Bloom." In *The Private I: Privacy in a Public World*, ed. Molly Peacock. St. Paul: The Graywolf Press, 2001, p. 71-72.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ⁴ Chaisson-Stewart, G. Maureen, and Edith Kettel, "Planning a Therapeutic Institutional Environment." In *Depression in the Elderly: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. G. Maureen Chaisson-Stewart. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1985, p. 332, 334
- ⁵ *The Corrections*, p. 7-8.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 510-511.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Ainsworth, Patricia, *Understanding Depression*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000, p. 49.
- ¹² This paper will not address the neurobiological theories of depression, which include genetic, neurotransmitter, neurohormonal, biological rhythm, and viral theories. This is simply because the reader is not given enough information about a possible genetic predisposition or any specifics on the biological workings of Alfred's brain. In reality, doctors tend to give equal weight to psychosocial and biological theories in the diagnosis of depression, but that is not possible here, nor is it particularly relevant to a character study.
- ¹³ *Understanding Depression*, p. 53
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Chaisson-Stewart, Maureen G., "An Integrated Theory of Depression." In *Depression In the Elderly: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, p. 77.
- ¹⁶ *The Corrections*, p. 268, 256, 262 (italics author's).
- ¹⁷ Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Idea*, ed. David Berman, trans. Jill Berman. London: Everyman, 1995, 1997, p. xxii
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.
- ²⁰ Solomon, Robert, "Nineteenth Century German Philosophers." Lecture Series: The University of Texas at Austin, Fall 1999.
- ²¹ *The World as Will and Idea*, p. xxiv-xxv.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxxii-xxxiii.
- ²⁵ "Nineteenth Century German Philosophers," Lecture Series.
- ²⁶ *The Corrections*, p. 266, 280 (italics author's).
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ²⁹ *Understanding Depression*, p. 51
- ³⁰ Cited in Chaisson-Stewart, "An Integrated Theory of Depression." In *Depression in the Elderly: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, p. 81
- ³¹ *The Corrections*, p. 266-276
- ³² Billig, Nathan, *To Be Old and Sad: Understanding Depression in the Elderly*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1987, p. 96.
- ³³ *The Corrections*, p. 85.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 172-173.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 496.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 545
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 547.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

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- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66-67.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 539, 547.
- ⁴² *Understanding Depression*, p. 51
- ⁴³ *The Corrections*, p. 252.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100, 177.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67-68.
- ⁴⁷ See Ainsworth, Chaisson-Stewart, Billig, Breslau, Lawrence D, and Marie R. Haug, eds., *Depression and Aging. Causes, Care, and Consequences*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1983; Starkstein, Sergio E. and Robert G. Robinson, eds., *Depression in Neurologic Disease*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1993; Karel, Michele J., Suzann Ogland-Hand, Margaret Gatz, and Jürgen Unützer, *Assessing and Treating Late-Life Depression A Casebook and Resource Guide*. Basic Books, 2002; Osgood, Nancy J., *Suicide in the Elderly A Practitioner's Guide to Diagnosis and Mental Health Intervention*. Rockville, MD: Aspen, 1985.
- ⁴⁸ "An Integrated Theory of Depression." In *Depression in the Elderly An Interdisciplinary Approach*, p. 66.
- ⁴⁹ *The Corrections*, p. 100.
- ⁵⁰ Kaszniak, A. W., Menachem Sadeh, and Lawrence Z. Stern, "Differentiating Depression From Organic Brain Syndromes in Older Age." In *Depression in the Elderly: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, p. 170.
- ⁵¹ *The Corrections*, p. 68.
- ⁵² *To Be Old and Sad*, p. 71.
- ⁵³ *The Corrections*, p. 11.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- ⁵⁶ See note 47
- ⁵⁷ "Differentiating Depression From Organic Brain Syndromes in Older Age." In *Depression in the Elderly An Interdisciplinary Approach*, p. 162
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163
- ⁵⁹ Osgood, Nancy J., *Suicide in the Elderly A Practitioner's Guide to Diagnosis and Mental Health Intervention*. Rockville, MD: Aspen, 1985. p. 29.
- ⁶⁰ *To Be Old and Sad Understanding Depression in the Elderly*, p. 27.
- ⁶¹ "Differentiating Depression From Organic Brain Syndromes in Older Age." In *Depression in the Elderly An Interdisciplinary Approach*, p. 168.
- ⁶² Klerman, Gerald L., "Problems in the Definition and Diagnosis of Depression in the Elderly." In *Depression and Aging Causes, Care, and Consequences*, eds. Lawrence D. Breslau and Marie R. Haug. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1983, p. 8.
- ⁶³ "Differentiating Depression From Organic Brain Syndromes in Older Age." In *Depression in the Elderly An Interdisciplinary Approach*, p. 168.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ *The Corrections*, p. 463-464.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 331.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 500-501
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 296.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 332.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 296-297.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 332
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 333
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 334.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 338.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 464-465.

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- ⁷⁹ Chaisson-Stewart, Maureen G., "Depression Incidence: Past, Present, and Future." In *Depression in the Elderly: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, p. 7.
- ⁸⁰ "An Integrated Theory of Depression." In *Depression in the Elderly: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, p. 84
- ⁸¹ *The Corrections*, p. 465.
- ⁸² *Suicide in the Elderly. A Practitioner's Guide to Diagnosis and Mental Health Intervention*, p. xxvi.
- ⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 11-12.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ⁸⁵ *The Corrections*, p. 466.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 353.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 365, 367-368
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 519
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 520-522
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 524
- ⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 524-525.
- ⁹² Sykes, Charles, *The End of Privacy*. New York. St. Martin's Press, 1999, p. 7, 20.
- ⁹³ Smith, Janna Malamud, "Privacy and Private States." In *The Private I: Privacy in a Public World*, p. 11.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 16
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 15
- ⁹⁷ *The Corrections*, p. 494-495
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 542.
- ⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 530-531
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 513
- ¹⁰¹ Cited in Osgood, p. xxxviii. (italics mine)
- ¹⁰² *The Corrections.*, p. 548.
- ¹⁰³ See note 66.
- ¹⁰⁴ *The Corrections*, p. 554-555, 559.
- ¹⁰⁵ Seneca, cited in Osgood, p. xix.
- ¹⁰⁶ *The Corrections*, p. 559-560
- ¹⁰⁷ See note 47
- ¹⁰⁸ "An Integrated Theory of Depression" In *Depression in the Elderly: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, p. 66
- ¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*
- ¹¹⁰ It is worth noting here that though what is going on in Chip's own psyche at this moment is not the focus or direction of this chapter, much could be said in his defense, from his point of view. The purpose of this section is to illustrate events from Alfred's perceptions
- ¹¹¹ *The Corrections*, p. 560
- ¹¹² *Ibid*, 548
- ¹¹³ *Ibid*, p. 566
- ¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 568
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid*
- ¹¹⁶ Leitch, Vincent B., William E. Cain, Laurie Finke, Barbara Johnson, John McGowan, and Jeffrey J. Williams, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Literary Criticism*. New York and London. W. W. Norton and Company, 2001, p. 95 (Thanks to Dr. Paul Cohen for giving me this invaluable anthology for Christmas.) The editors note the difficulty in defining precisely what Aristotle means by "catharsis" ("katharsis"), but I will use it to denote either or both of the following: purification of the audience's (reader's) feelings of pity and fear so that we understand better how we should feel them in real life, purgation of our pity and fear so that we can face life with less of these emotions or more control over them.
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 100
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88. Again, there is some discrepancy in defining the term, but the editors note that it translates literally to “missing the mark,” though it is frequently translated as “flaw.”

¹²⁰ Martin Heidegger proposes that *Rhetoric* is the first work of hermeneutics; that is, it considers how reader response is a factor in interpretation. (Source: *Norton Anthology*, p. 89.)

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