

Trapped in Excessive Choices: “Addicts” of Late Modernity in Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*

Lu Liu

China Pharmaceutical University

While critics have extensively investigated the psychological crisis in Jonathan Franzen’s novel *Freedom* (2010), they largely overlooked the critical role of addictive behaviors pervading the novel and profoundly shaping the lives of its characters. Applying Anthony Giddens’ s theoretical framework, which explores addiction within the reflexive culture of late modernity, this article examines how *Freedom*’s “addict” characters, in particular Richard Katz, constantly seek to define themselves among excessive choices, and eventually resort to compulsive behaviors as coping mechanisms. Their addictions, which manifest in destructive cycles of creative highs and depressive lows, are more than just personal failings but symptoms of larger social issues, underscoring how the promise of freedom and autonomy can paradoxically result in psychological entrapments rooted in radical individualism. To break free from such addictive behaviors, as the analysis of the novel reveals, necessitates a profound shift in lifestyle involving recognizing the importance of others and a more socially connected existence. Such a shift not only parallels the author’s attempt to reconcile his own stylistic inclinations to embrace a broader audience, but also offers an antidote to the isolating effects of late modernity in a world that increasingly values connection and community.

Keywords: Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom*, addiction, late modernity

Critics have argued that American literature, particularly since the advent of Modernism, has been populated by addicts (Diehl, 2020; Gilmore, 1987). The trend has not only continued into but also intensified in contemporary literature, in an era characterized by the pervasiveness of addictive behaviors. Since the 1970s, the definition of the word “addiction” has expanded beyond substance abuse to encompass a wide range of compulsive behaviors, often referred to as “behavioral addictions” (Banz, 2016; Grant, 2010), such as overuse of digital device and social media, compulsive shopping, excessive gaming, and even the overreliance on certain routines. While increasingly recognized by psychiatrists, addictive behaviors have also been captured by contemporary writers. American novelist Jonathan Franzen (1959 —) seems to exhibit a special interest in the topic of addiction in both his non-fictional and fictional writings. In an essay titled “The Essay in Dark Times,” he refers to himself as a “reptile-brained addict” (Franzen, 2018, p. 7), recounting

his struggles with cigarettes, computer games, and even the obsession with checking emails—behaviors he categorizes as addictions. The personal admission sets the stage for a more extensive examination of similar compulsive patterns permeating the lives of main characters in his novel *Freedom* (2010), the work that has won his great critical acclaim as the “Great American novelist” (Grossman, 2010).

Reviewers have valued Franzen for his ability to render the psychological texture of everyday experience for illuminating the socio-cultural and moral complexities of modern existence. This is particularly evident in *Freedom*, the novel which received extensive scholarly attention. Nelson (2013, p. 6), in “Life, Liberty, Happiness and Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*,” examines how Franzen uses the theme of happiness to delve into the psychological states of his characters, arguing that “it is not the happiness, but the suffering that the characters inflict on those who are nearest to them that gives the novel its dimension.” Similarly, Schwartz (2000) contends that while freedom and autonomy are highly valued in modern American society, as depicted in *Freedom*, excessive freedom can lead to negative psychological outcomes such as clinical depression, suggesting that optimal well-being may require significant constraints on freedom. Franzen’s Chinese critic Sun (2018) argues that *Freedom* explores the psychological crises of its characters, revealing how their relentless quest for autonomy

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lu Liu, School of Foreign Languages, China Pharmaceutical University, 639 Longmian Avenue, Jiangning District, Nanjing, 211198, China. Email: liulu@cpu.edu.cn

leads to personal distress, ethical conflicts, and a deeper understanding of self and societal constraints.

While critics commonly emphasize the intricacies between psychological turmoil and the pursuit of freedom in the novel, they have largely overlooked the significant role of addictive behaviors in shaping the characters' lives. As a matter of fact, around the protagonist Patty Berglund, characters in *Freedom* display their addictions in various forms, making it a pervasive issue in the novel. While Patty herself is trapped in an overwhelming reliance on exercise, alcohol and shopping, her younger sister Veronica has "adapted in various self-destructive ways including anorexia, promiscuity, and hard drinking" (Franzen, 2010, p. 660). Eliza, Patty's college roommate, has serious problems with substance abuse and habitual lying. Walter, Patty's husband, grew up in a family in which "his father and his older brother, who together had been the bane of his youth, were alcoholic" (p. 366). Patty and Walter's son Joey, who just started college, keeps squandering his money away as he "didn't want to be the poor kid who drank only one beer while everybody else was having six" (p. 305). The lives of several other main characters, in particular Richard Katz the "addiction-prone" musician (p. 83), are deeply affected by their reliance on medication, sex, or other destructive habits. Therefore, a closer examination of the motif of addiction in *Freedom* may help reveal the broader psychological and social themes in the novel, especially how the pursuit of individual freedom paradoxically leads to psychological entrapment, providing a richer understanding of Franzen's literary contributions to the landscape of contemporary American life.

The interplay between addiction and the quest for freedom in Franzen's characters reflects a broader sociocultural paradox, warranting an analysis through theoretical lens. Since late 20th century, addiction has been an interest of research for medical sociologists who view it as encompassing much more than just a physiological condition. Notably, Young (1998) introduced the concept of Internet addiction, bringing attention to the compulsive use of digital devices; Griffiths (2005) expanded the definition of addiction to include gambling, sex, exercise, videogame playing and Internet use. More recently, scholars noticed the prevalence of various behavioral addictions induced by lifestyle changes during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alimoradi et al., 2022). While increasingly examined by the medical field, addiction has also been gaining attention among scholars in the humanities. British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1938–), known for his theory of modernity and globalization, offered valuable insights on the social and

philosophical implications of addiction which he extends beyond chemical dependencies to include a wide range of compulsive behaviors. In his work *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), Giddens notes that the acknowledgment of alcoholism as a physical pathology diverted attention from the deeper connections between addiction, lifestyle choices, and self-identity. He elaborates how the term "addiction" became widely used in the mid-19th century, evolving from behaviors simply seen as social issues to being recognized as a significant social symptom, influenced by the broader societal shift towards reflexivity and the individual's need to negotiate lifestyle options in the absence of traditional guidelines. He defines addiction as "a patterned habit¹ that is compulsively engaged in," and the withdrawal from it generates an unmanageable anxiety," arguing that addiction can extend to almost any habitual pattern in the context of institutional reflexivity permeating social life, and is a "negative index of the degree to which the reflexive project of self moves to centre-stage in late modernity²" (Giddens, 1992, p. 76).

Drawing on Giddens's insights, this article aims at examining how *Freedom*, through portraying characters struggling with addiction, exposes the way these addictions intersect with the broader sociocultural shift towards a more individualized, reflexive lifestyle with excessive choices in late modernity. For characters in the novel represented by the protagonist Richard Katz, the pursuit of self-identity and autonomy paradoxically leads to new forms of psychological entrapment manifested as various addictions. The key to recovery, however, lies in fostering a more socially connected existence to counteract the self-absorbed isolation promoted by the culture of radical individualism prevalent in the novel.

Late Modern Subjects Trapped by Excessive Choices: The Social Forces Driving Addiction

To examine the psychological entrapment manifested through addiction in *Freedom*, it is essential to consider the social context of the novel, which reflects the characteristics

¹ Giddens (1992) makes distinctions between patterns of action, habits, compulsions, and addictions, noting that addictions encompass all these aspects but are distinguished by their compulsive nature and the anxiety experienced upon withdrawal.

² Social theorists and sociologists such as Scott Lash, Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, and Anthony Giddens maintain that modernization continues into the contemporary era, which Giddens refer to as "late modernity" instead of postmodernity, emphasizing that contemporary societies are a clear continuation of modern institutional transitions and cultural developments.

of late modernity described by Anthony Giddens as showing an unprecedented level of individual autonomy and choice. As traditional norms and values lose their hold over individuals, necessitating a more active and continuous construction of self-identity, late modern subjects engage in what Giddens calls the “reflexive project of self”, an ongoing process of self-actualization based on the multitude of choices available:

The self is seen as a reflexive project for which the individual is responsible. We are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves. This reconstructive endeavour is far more than just getting to know oneself better; it involves building or rebuilding a coherent and rewarding sense of identity. (Giddens, 1991, p. 75)

It is within this context of reflexivity that Giddens examines the concept of addiction. For late modern subjects, the constant self-reflection and identity construction can lead to a perpetual search for satisfaction, with addictive behaviors emerging as a coping mechanism for the uncertainty and existential anxiety resulting from the excessive choices available in life. Given this, a closer examination of how characters in *Freedom* confront their choices is necessary to understand their addictive behaviors.

Among the characters haunted by addictions in *Freedom*, Richard Katz, who plays a major role in the storyline, is particularly emblematic. As a talented musician, Richard’s life is deeply enmeshed in New York city’s rock music scene, and as a member of the central love triangle in *Freedom*, his life is entangled with those of Patty and Walter Berglund, the protagonists of the novel. “Although he appears to possess freedoms that the Berglunds lack and envy, he suffers similarly from the consequences of his choices” (Narcisi, 2015, p. 80). Indeed, Richard exemplifies an individual who faces excessive choices in both professional and personal life in a period marked by the unprecedented levels of fluidity and reflexivity in late modernity.

As noted by Narcisi, Richard is marked by his wanderings, and he “deliberately avoids feeling too attached to any specific place” (p. 83), constantly trying to redefine himself through ever-changing professional pursuits and transient relationships, which reflects the broader societal shifts towards individualism and away from traditional norms. In his early days as a college student in the 1970s, Richard plunges into the rock music scene, making the choice to diverge from the mainstream path of academic success and professional achievements. His preference for the rebellious

spirit of punk music for expressing his radical political views, sharply contrasts with his roommate Walter, who aspires to a decent career in environmental law and societal contributions. Richard’s music career is further marked by a series of choices that prioritized artistic independence over commercial success. His deliberately esoteric music appeals only to a select few—the “scruffy, well-educated white male fans” (Franzen, 2010, p. 232), leading him to decide that “he was never destined to be a superstar,” and that “becoming an anti-star was a more fitting choice” (p. 90). The disdain for commercial success also drives him to spend money as quickly as he earned it, ensuring that he remains flat broke to avoid the trappings of mainstream fame. In personal life, Richard demonstrates a similar pattern of making choices to resist any types of commitment. In his nomadic existence, he frequently changes romantic partners, shunning the possibilities of long-term relationships and the constraints typically associated with traditional family values: “He is the rock star whose existence is the antithesis of stable, monogamous, middle-class existence” (Miller, 2014, p. 249).

In fact, Richard is not an isolated case in *Freedom*, but serves as a window into the complex web of choices and uncertainties faced by other characters who continually strive for authentic identities in a reflexive culture, often at the expense of deeper connections and social responsibilities. The protagonist Patty Berglund, for instance, undergoes a series of pivotal choices through which she struggles to redefine herself constantly. Initially, feeling unappreciated by her parents, she seeks a basketball scholarship to attend college and excels as a player. However, she later abandons sports to become a housewife, a role she subsequently finds so unfulfilling that she engages in an affair with Richard. This affair prompts her self-imposed exile from home, until eventually she discovers a sense of purpose and satisfaction in a new career in New York. In a similar way, Patty’s husband Walter is perpetually seeking his place in the world amidst the multitude of choices: from leaving his rural family to pursue a college degree, to sacrificing his ambitions in acting and filmmaking to study law, to becoming a passionate environmentalist, and finally retreating to a lakeside house where he creates a bird sanctuary. Likewise, Patty and Walter’s son Joey embarks on his own quest for self-definition. To assert his independence from his liberal family, he moves in with his conservative neighbors and dates their daughter, followed by a series of bold attempts including a risky business deal with military supplies and a trip to South America. Each bold decision forces Joey to confront his values and navigate his moral

ambiguities. Overall, for most characters in *Freedom*, the abundance of choices available to them makes reshaping their identities almost a compulsive behavior.

However, such excessive choices pose problems both at the societal and personal levels. Walter's description of Richard as "completely self-absorbed" (Franzen, 2010, p. 123), underscores how the perpetual quest for an authentic identity can lead to radical individualism fostered by a culture that prioritizes personal liberty. Critics have pointed out that characters like Richard "embody the spirit of the American Beat Generation, seeking personal liberation through experiences like nomadic wandering, substance abuse, and indulgence in sex as a means to break free from societal constraints" (Chen & Yang, 2022, p.50). Such tendency resonates throughout the novel, affecting various characters. As Patty observes, both her sister Veronica and her roommate Eliza, in their obsession with pursuing their authentic selves, demonstrate "a nonconnection to ordinary logic, a sort of checked-out amusement regarding the existence of a world outside herself" (Franzen, 2010, p. 660). For these characters, while asserting their own way of existence, they can be "profoundly solipsistic ... remaining blind to their own selfishness" (Bresnan, 2015, p. 40).

Such solipsism aligns with Christopher Lasch's views in *The Culture of Narcissism* that late 20th-century America promotes a narcissistic preoccupation with self, that "self-absorption defines the moral climate of contemporary society" (Lasch, 1979, p. 25). Moreover, the pursuit for self-determination, when carried to extremes, "leads not to the freedom of choice but the tyranny of choice" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 81). Characters like Richard who are obsessed with defining themselves through constant choices find it impossible to form meaningful connections, ultimately leading to a profound sense of uncertainty, loneliness, and anxiety. Such stress can drive people towards addictions to substances, behaviors, or experiences that offer a semblance of stability and comfort, as will be explained in the following section.

Between the "High" and the "Low": Symptoms of Addiction Manifested in a Destructive Life Cycle

According to Giddens (1992), in a society marked by de-traditionalization and increased reflexivity, individuals who are "continually obliged to negotiate life-style options" may turn to repetitive behaviors, such as addictions to sex, food, gambling, or shopping, as a way of constructing a coherent

narrative of self (p. 74). Meanwhile, the proliferation of choices in modern life, while seemingly empowering, can lead to significant uncertainty, causing individuals resorting to compulsive behaviors as coping mechanisms. Either way, addictions serve as attempts to maintain a coherent self-identity in an otherwise fragmented and unpredictable world they have very limited control over, as they "provide a source of comfort for the individual, by assuaging anxiety" (p. 71), thus becoming "a prime source of ontological security" (p. 92).

Richard's life vividly illustrates the profound impact of addiction in a reflexive culture where excessive freedom leads individuals into compulsive behaviors. In the eyes of Patty, he is "self-absorbed, addiction-prone, unreliable" (Franzen, 2010, pp. 82–83). While his nicotine addiction is evident through his persistent smoking and tobacco-chewing habits, his obsession with physical intimacy manifests itself in numerous, often compulsive sexual encounters and fleeting relationships. Additionally, Richard has a history of substance use, including both drugs and prescription medications like mirtazapine.

Richard's addictive behaviors can be interpreted as a means of exerting control over his otherwise fragmented and chaotic existence, exemplifying how "addiction signals a particular mode of control over parts of one's day-to-day life" as a substitute for traditional anchors (Giddens, 1992, p. 74). Often labeled as a "womanizer" or "sex addict" by Franzen's critics, Richard's obsession with women stems from his desire to take control: having grown up in an environment lacking familial love-with a "lunatic and absent mother" (Franzen, 2010, p. 437) and an alcoholic father-the absence of a nurturing family drives him to seek immediate intimate relationships as a form of compensation. As Giddens (1992) notes, "the womaniser of today is not someone who cultivates sensual pleasure, but a thrill-seeker in a world of open sexual opportunities" (p. 74). Richard's obsession with sex, observed by his friend Walter as "his addiction, or one of them" (Franzen, 2010, p. 120), is driven more by a need for connection and control rather than for objectifying women.

More importantly, Giddens (1992) notes that one key characteristic of addiction is its ability to provide the "high," which is "an experience which is set apart from the ordinary, from the mundane characteristics of everyday life" and "a momentary feeling of elation which the person enjoys when a 'special' sensation is produced" (p. 72). To a great extent, Richard seems to rely on various addictive behaviors to provide the emotional intensity that fuels his music, driving his prolific output despite his lack of mainstream success.

Ironically, such addictions have even been perceived by people around him as being inseparable from his musical creativity: “his bread-and-butter clientele had been Tribeca artists and movie people who’d given him food and sometimes drugs and would have questioned his artistic commitment if he’d shown up for work before midafternoon, refrained from hitting on unavailable females, or finished on schedule and within budget” (Franzen, 2010, p. 244). Here, Richard’s chaotic lifestyle full of such addictive behaviors as drug use, late working hours, compulsive sexual pursuits, and money-squandering, are all seen as part of his creative identity, producing the “high” that fuels his artistic endeavor.

However, the sense of triumph and relaxation brought about by the “high” is always fleeting. As argued by Giddens (1992, p. 72), the endeavor to achieve a “high” will be translated into the need for a “fix,” that is, becoming psychologically necessary for the subject, and will inevitably be “succeeded by depression and feelings of emptiness” before the cycle begins again. Richard, like someone who empties his “whole liquor cabinet down the drain, after a binge” (Franzen, 2010, p. 120), finds that his indulgent lifestyle quickly consumes his passion for life. This is exemplified by how his obsession with sex eventually gets him “tired of girls so quickly and always ended up kicking them to the curb” (p. 169), falling into a deep emotional low. He turns to alcohol and drugs in a desperate search for solace, continually substituting one addictive behavior for another. This cycle ultimately leads him to a loss of interest in everything, making his recovery from depression increasingly difficult. As such, addictions drive him into a destructive cycle: “whenever he was off it, he remembered it as fantastic and unbeatable and craved it, but as soon as he was on it again he remembered that it wasn’t fantastic at all, it was sterile and empty” (p. 437). The fleeting “high” ultimately exacerbates his sense of isolation and emptiness, plunging him into a deeper “low,” further entrenching his reliance on addictive behaviors. The destructive cycle is also mirrored in Richard’s music career, characterized by “brief period of creative productivity, followed by a major change that turned out to be a disappointment and a mess, followed by drugs and despair, followed by the taking of a stupid job” (p. 287).

Even more troubling for Richard is that, whether in his setbacks in music career or his affair with Patty, his addictive behaviors are always the consequences of his own decisions, for which he bears full responsibility. This is a typical dilemma faced by late modern subjects who live in a society largely lacking traditional guidelines to direct them and is left to ponder on the moral consequences of their own

choices. Consequently, in the constant self-reflexive process, Richard’s sense of guilt and shame accumulates, plunging him into further despair: “He strongly disliked the person he’d just demonstrated afresh that he unfortunately was. And this, of course, was the simplest definition of depression that he knew of: strongly disliking yourself” (Franzen, 2010, p. 255). Eventually, Richard undergoes not only the decline of his musical talents but also prolonged periods of depression and even suicidal impulses. As Ehrenberg (2010) points out, depression and addiction are what trace the outline of the “sovereign individual” at the end of the twentieth century (pp. 11–12). Richard’s struggle between the “high” and the “low” is emblematic of the general existential crises in late modernity, where the pursuit of autonomy often leads to isolation and despair.

Richard’s case, while reflecting a broader societal phenomenon in late 20th century, somehow reminds readers of Franzen’s remarks on his writer friend David Wallace Foster: “he tr[ies] to escape his island prison by way of drugs and alcohol”, but only “find[s] himself even more imprisoned by addiction” (Franzen, 2012, p. 40). The similarities between Richard and Foster, both of whom are engaged in creative careers, suggests the novelist’s perception of a connection between intellectual complexity and the inclination toward addictive behavior. In the self-reflexive culture depicted in *Freedom*, well-educated characters and those with creative talents are particularly active in self-planning, constantly reshaping their bodies, lifestyles, and personal narratives through a series of deliberate choices. Not surprisingly, their attempts to exert control over their everyday existence often culminate in addiction and the accompanying depression. For the protagonist Patty, in her unsatisfactory life as a housewife she gets “a pretty serious exercise addiction going” (p. 287), and also indulges herself in shopping as she “needs something to spend it on” as well as turning to alcohol just like her father who “sometimes escaped his family by drinking too much” (p. 186). Her enjoyment of “one or two glasses” of wine gradually escalates to “six or eight” (p. 186), showing a growing reliance on substance for a sense of elation. Patty’s addictions, initially meant to help her maintain control in her life, inevitably lead to significant problems in her relationships with her husband and son, exacerbating the family’s overall dysfunction and adding to her own emotional problems, which she tries to cope with through increasing addictive behaviors. Furthermore, acknowledging that she must take full responsibility for her actions, she “blames nobody but herself” (p. 104), ultimately sinking into depression. Eliza,

Patty's college roommate, serves as another example of individuals trapped in the destructive cycle of addictive behaviors. Described by her psychotherapist parents as being "obsessional," Eliza frequently indulges herself in alcohol and drugs, and also pursues fleeting sexual encounters for instant pleasure and escape. Much like an addict using substances to create illusions and evade discomfort, Eliza habitually lies, fabricating stories about her family and a terminal illness to manipulate Patty, so as to get a temporary sense of power and relief from her insecurities. However, as the truth eventually surfaces, Eliza becomes estranged from Patty whom she seeks to control, and ultimately succumbs to a lonely existence and emotional instability.

Giddens (1992) observes that the growing dependence upon addictive behaviors "generates, not increasing feelings of well-being, but panic and self-destructiveness" (p. 97). As is manifested in characters represented by Richard in *Freedom*, addiction traps them in the vicious cycle of momentary releases and depression, turning the attempts to assert control and define oneself to actions that lead to the loss of control and self-identity. As noted by Franzen (2018) in his essay, the lonely individuals imprisoned in the island of addiction are just like Robinson Crusoe, who, obsessed with defending himself, shows "how sick and crazy radical individualism really is" (p. 52). The promise of freedom and autonomy of modernity traps individuals in their own mental and emotional struggles, disconnected from meaningful human connections.

From Isolation to Connection: The Path to Overcoming Addiction

Despite the initial sense of triumph these addictive behaviors might offer, they ultimately lead to depression—a pervasive affliction in *Freedom* many characters grapple with but find difficult to overcome. Interestingly, most characters in the novel tend to combat their depression and anxiety with pills such as Celexa or Lexapro, reflecting a broader social trend of addressing mental health challenges through pharmaceuticals, which, in turn, risks becoming a new form of addiction. However, Franzen (2002) obviously frowns upon reducing negative emotions to purely biological illnesses treated with medication, and in his essay "Scavenging" criticizes those who "take their Prozac and are undepressed" (p. 201). In *Freedom*, Franzen seems to suggest that depression resulting from addiction needs to be addressed by changes in the way individuals relate to themselves and

others, which to a great extent aligns with Giddens's (1992) view that overcoming addictions requires "profound changes in life-style and a re-examination of self-identity" (p. 75).

For characters in *Freedom*, the determination to recover is part of the late modern subjects' on-going identity-shaping process in a reflexive culture. This process necessitates moving beyond an individualistic focus, recognizing the significance of other people's place, and acknowledging the essential role of stable relationships. For Richard, a temporary phase of recovery takes place after his affair with Patty, the wife of his best friend Walter. Walter, who has long held a significant place in Richard's life, comes to know Richard "before he'd shut the door on the world of ordinary people and cast his lot with misfits and dropouts" and in time becomes "the closest thing he had to family" (Franzen, 2010, p. 257). Despite that Richard always gets "tired of girls so quickly," Walter remains the only person "whom he didn't get tired of" (p. 167), acting as the stabilizing force in his fleeting relationships, preventing from falling into the destructiveness of a life haunted by addiction: "as long as he'd lived with Walter, he'd avoided the alcohol that had ruined his dad...and moved forward steadily with his music" (p. 174). However, Richard's affair with Patty, one of his addictive, selfish, and irresponsible behaviors, irreparably damages his bond with Walter, causing "his diffusely warm world of domestic refuge" to collapse overnight (p. 257). Plunged into a deep emotional low, Richard is forced to reexamine his lifestyle, which has been damaged by excessive freedom of choice.

In a reflexive effort to regain control of his life, Richard cuts off contact with Patty to avoid further emotional turmoil, followed by shunning the indulgences contributing to his destructive emotional cycle. Apart from "abjuring sex" and "staying clean of drugs and alcohol" (p. 247), he also engages in "performing 250 hours of agreeably mindless community service at a Dade County park" and "read[ing] books in his apartment on the pretext of shoring up his defenses against the chicks and drugs that his bandmates all seemed able to enjoy" (p. 240). Additionally, he resorts to the physical and steady work of manual labor, particularly in carpentry projects like building decks for people, which, both literally and symbolically provides him a sense of purpose and stability. He later even participates in Walter's environmental project aiming at preserving the habitat of the cerulean warbler, which engages him in planning discussions with team members and contributing ideas to a greater cause. Through these conscious efforts, Richard at least temporarily adopts on healthier routines that facilitate his recovery, and comes

into contact with a broader diversity of people, thus forming new, meaningful relationships to distance himself from his narcissistic mindset which has been inseparable from his addictive behaviors.

It is intriguing to observe that Richard's shift away from a self-centered existence towards accepting others' roles in his life is accompanied by an evolution in his music style. Ironically, for a musician who has always prided himself on an antiestablishment attitude and a commitment to the independence of art, Richard's later album *Nameless Lake* blends alt-country influences with accessible melodies, and with its more popular appeal achieves remarkable commercial success, including a Grammy nomination. If his earlier avant-garde music was more or less influenced by the tumultuous experiences stemming from his addictions, *Nameless Lake* represents a turn towards the mainstream—a change Richard initially resists but ultimately embraces as part of his evolving identity—breaking free from the excessive self-absorption and irresponsibility that come with too much freedom, and confronting the solipsism that have long fueled his addictive behaviors.

Indeed, as has been noted by Franzen's critics, the stories of the main characters in his masterpieces are "all about fighting, against one's own inclinations and the drift of the culture, to grow up" (Deresiewicz, 2010, para. 14). Such "inclinations," often manifested as addictions in *Freedom*, indicates that recovery of any sort would mean profound lifestyle changes that involve repairing relationships and moving beyond self-centeredness. For instance, Patty's journey towards recovery begins with a conscious effort to reduce her dependencies: "She still runs every day, in Prospect Park, but she's no longer addicted to exercise or to anything else, really. A bottle of wine lasts two days now" (Franzen, 2010, p. 668). More crucially, she seeks to reestablish meaningful connections with other people. After leaving her role as a housewife, she relocates to New York and finds fulfillment and purpose as a coach, giving back "the total dedication and tough love and lessons in teamwork that her own coaches once gave her" (p. 668). The role allows her to channel her energy into positive interactions, focusing on her players' success rather than her own issues. Eventually, a healthier lifestyle free from addictions makes Patty ready to repair her estranged relationships with her husband and children. Similar transformations are seen in a few other characters in the novel. Patty's son Joey, "who from infancy onward, was a person more in the mold of Richard Katz—effortlessly cool, ruggedly confident, totally focused on getting what he wanted, impervious to moralizing, unafraid

of girls" (p. 187), was once consumed by impulsive behaviors and an obsession with materialism. As Joey matures, his growing sense of responsibility towards his girlfriend Connie, who he used to treat as a temporary distraction, becomes evident. Despite various opportunities to end their relationship, Joey commits himself to supporting Connie financially and emotionally. The new sense of responsibility gives him a clearer sense of purpose in his life, steering him away from a life driven by addictions and towards a somewhat successful career. Meanwhile, Connie, who previously relied on medication to manage her emotions, begins to work at a temp agency through which she seeks healthier ways to overcoming the self-pity that has always haunted her, demonstrating the determination to build a healthier life.

Much like his characters who manage to move beyond self-centeredness in *Freedom*, the writer Franzen himself has also been battling his own stylistic inclinations to recognize the importance of a broader audience and a more accessible writing style. As noted in Weinstein's (2015) biographical critique *Jonathan Franzen: Comedy of Rage*, Franzen "oscillate[s] ... between the polar orientations of rage-driven highbrow critique and love-energized mainstream appeal" (p. 11), which means he must reconcile his artistic independence with mainstream acceptance. In a much similar way with his character Richard, Franzen experiences sudden popularity after the publication of *Freedom*. However, his reactions are remarkably different: while Richard cannot help but feel bewildered and disheartened by his popularity coming with *Nameless Lake*—feelings he betrays in an NPR interview—Franzen, on the other hand, after the overwhelming success of *Freedom* catapulted him into the American literary canon, half-jokingly remarked in his own NPR interview that "Unlike Richard, I am happy to be here." This indicates that Franzen has come to terms with his work receiving mainstream acclaim (Bresnan, 2015, p. 40), and is determined to shift from a "Status model" writer of postmodern experimentalism to a "Contract model"³ writer of a more realist style as exemplified in *Freedom*. This shift involves moving from being "paralyzed by darkness" to "drawing strength from it" (Franzen, 2002, p. 93), testifying his literary approach of tragic realism, which seeks to channel personal emotional struggles into a broader

³ The "Status model" in fiction writing, as described by Jonathan Franzen, treats novels as high art that is appreciated for their aesthetic value, often appealing to an elite audience and valuing difficulty and complexity. The "Contract model" focuses on creating an implicit agreement between the author and the reader, aiming to provide accessible and enjoyable content that fosters a sense of community and connectedness (2002, pp. 239–40).

connection with the audience. It parallels his characters' journeys of overcoming self-centeredness to escape the grip of addiction.

Conclusion

As characters navigate the complexities of contemporary American life, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* offers a glimpse into the intricate relationships between addiction, self-identity, and the pursuit of freedom, characteristics typical of late modernity. An examination through the theoretical lens of Anthony Giddens, particularly his insights on self-identity in a reflexive culture, helps to better understand the psychological entrapment of the "addicts" in the novel. For characters like Richard Katz, the excessive freedom of choices and constant desire to redefine themselves eventually lead to addictive behaviors characterized by a destructive cycle between creative highs and depressive lows, which is deeply rooted in and exacerbated by a culture of radical individualism. The recovery, as it is suggested in the novel, necessitates a fundamental lifestyle change involving a shift away from self-centeredness towards recognizing the importance of others and a more socially connected existence. Ultimately, Franzen's commitment to exploring the depths of human emotion and societal interaction challenges readers to consider the complexities of freedom in a world populated with addicts, highlighting the paradox of seeking autonomy in a society that increasingly recognizes the limits of individualism and demands connection and community.

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