



## Imagination, Ethics, and the Burden of Responsibility in Contemporary American Fiction: A Franzen Perspective

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### Abstract

This paper evaluates the role of imagination as an ethical activity in modern American fiction by critically reading the narrative practice of Jonathan Franzen. Franzen, in his fiction, predicts the conflict between the autonomy of the individual and the weight of moral imperatives in an era of ecological precarity, technological saturation, and moral fragmentation. The research states that the narrative imagination is not only assembled by Franzen as an aesthetic tool but also as a morality-based system where issues of moral agency, responsibility, and relational duty are put to the test. Based on the narrative ethics, moral philosophy, and affect theory, the paper uses the actuality aesthetics of Franzen as a source of ethically compelling narrative spaces in which characters are faced by dilemmas founded on the family structures, environmental consciousness, and socio-political responsibility. His heroes often balance their sense of ethical conscious and paralysis of their morals, exposing weaknesses of liberal individualism in dealing with crises of mass actions. Franzen encourages readers to make imaginative contributions to the ethical dilemma using his techniques of interior focalization, moral ambiguity, and relational narration, making reading a moral reflection. The paper continues that the fiction of Franzen establishes imagination as a form of ethical attention, which is indifferent and requires protracted emphasis on the miseries, failures, and obligations of others. This paper will situate Franzen in a within discussion on the ethical competency of the novel demonstrating how modern American fiction can serve as a critically controversial site for negotiating responsibility in a divided moral landscape. Finally, the paper will state that the narrative imagination by Franzen reinstates the relevance of the novel as an ethical and moral responsive tool even in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Ethical Imagination, Narrative Ethics, Contemporary American Fiction, Moral Agency, Realist Aesthetics

### Introduction

The moral ability of the novel has been one of the key issues in contemporary literary research, especially within the realms of late-capitalist cultures of moral indeterminacy, environmental destruction, and technological mediation all around. With the dissolution of traditional ethical approaches to the challenges of globalisation, environmental crisis, and social-political disintegration, new American fiction reveals an increasing movement towards questioning the capacity of narrative

as a significant response to collective crisis that does not reduce moral ambiguity to ideological absolutism or attempt to impose moral judgment (Nussbaum, 1990; Booth, 1988). The novel remains a contentious field in this shifting critical environment, operating as an environment to discuss the moral responsibility, ethical agency and relational obligation.

The fiction of Jonathan Franzen has a unique place in these arguments because it opposes the closure of the narrative and prefigures the moral imperatives that both characters and readers must satisfy. In his novels, we always find characters caught in thick webs of relations of family, friendships, and physical environments, where the moral action is complex by the feelings of affection, moral indecision, and constraints of structure (Phelan, 2007). Instead of coming up with ideal moral subjects, Franzen creates protagonists whose moral consciousness is often coupled with moral paralysis, which reveals the ineffectiveness of liberal individualism in dealing with crises of a fundamentally collective nature (Taylor, 1989; Berlant, 2011).

In this paper, we will argue that imagination in fiction by Franzen is an ethical practice and not necessarily the representational or aesthetic role. Based on the narrative ethics and the affect theory, the strategies used by Franzen to create an imaginative space in which the ethical judgment is suspended, redistributed, and shared with the reader are narrative strategies (Franzen) with a focus on the following: interior focalization, moral ambiguity, relational narration (Keen, 2007; Ahmed, 2004). Such spaces drive the readers to actively participate in the unresolved moral issues and make the reading process more of an ethical reflection. This paper puts the fiction of Franzen into the context of the larger discussions on the ethical possibilities of the modern novel by analysing the way his narrative imagination deals with the conflict between personal agency and relationship accountability. Finally, it argues that the work of Franzen reiterates the relevance of the novel as a crucial location where the morality of responsibility is negotiated in a moral world which is growing more fragmented.

Jonathan Franzen places the fiction within the wider context of the shift of postmodernism into what is described by scholars as the post-postmodern realism. According to researchers, Franzen tries to bring back moral seriousness and social interaction to the modern American novel following the fracturing that goes with the postmodern narrative techniques. According to W. S. I. Ali (2017), *Freedom* by Franzen is a significant shift in the postmodern scepticism concept because it brings back the element of sincerity, morality, and realism in the form of narration. As Ali says, the work of Franzen tries to re-identify literary fiction with social reality and the focus on personal responsibility in the intricate social system. In the same manner, Aljadaan and Al-Sharqi (2021) posit that the novel *The Corrections* and *Freedom* by Franzen are a new aesthetic direction, which values trust, realism, and ethical interaction. Their work explains the narrative techniques of Franzen as a response to the ironic detachment that was a feature of post-modern literature.

Another approach that has been discussed by other critics is the way in which Franzen reinvents realism to raise contemporary social issues. The concept of crackpot realism introduced by Rohr (2004) can be used to refer to the exaggerated and yet socially realistic in *The Corrections*. Rohr says that Rohr uses realism and satire as an exaggeration to expose the contradiction in American culture, especially the media influence and consumer capitalism. In a similar vein, Gram (2014) writes that *Freedom* is a critique of the ideology of economic growth and neoliberal individualism based on realist narrative forms. All these studies show that the fiction of Franzen not only reintroduces the element of style of realism but also serves as a tool of questioning the current social and moral state. The other significant field that has been studied is the ethical conflicts that are inherent in the stories

that Franzen has written. According to critics, in his fiction, Franzen often focuses on the characters whose life paths are often full of moral contradictions and their attempts to fulfil various responsibilities that are related to their family, society, and political matters.

As pointed out by Singh (2018), the *Corrections* has some ethical ambiguity because the author depicts moral predicaments through imperfect characters unable to balance their personal and family needs. The novel introduces ethical decision-making as an act that is influenced by ambiguity and no longer defines ethical aspects by moral values. On the same note, Munim and Saad (2024) explore philosophical problems and questions related to human identity and moral responsibility in *Strong Motion and Freedom*. Their analysis shows how characters in the works of Franzen deal with existential issues about what it is to live righteously in the new social systems. Another aspect of ethics that is highlighted by critics of the work by Franzen is the relational aspect of ethics. Gonzalez Lopez (2015) addresses the issue of ideological tension in *Freedom* in the context of the idea that the novel reveals the contradictions between individualism and social duty in the US society. The analysis of the late modernity by Liu also emphasises the psychological impacts of too much choice in the culture of neoliberalism, according to which characters in Franzen are turned into addicts of the freedom of the modern and are caught between independence and morality. Collectively, these readings demonstrate that moral dilemmas presented in the fiction by Franzen are always foreshadowed in the family issues, social norms, and ideological misrepresentations. But they tend to treat these matters mainly on a thematic or philosophic front as opposed to looking at the narrative processes by which the ethical activity is generated.

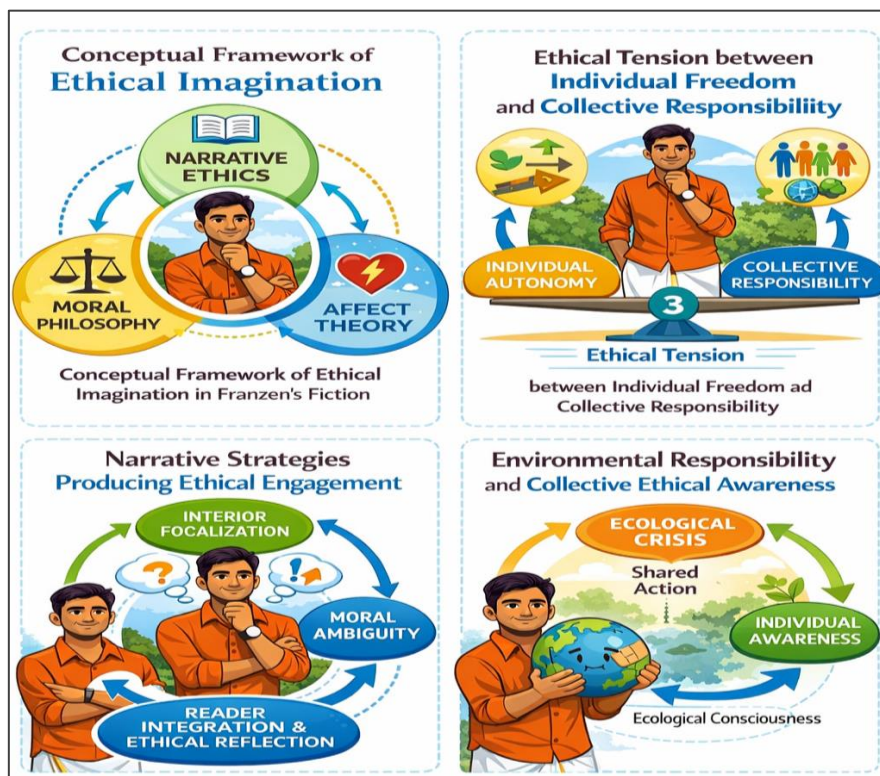
The fiction by Franzen is a criticism of the present-day social institution and the mass culture of media. The article by Ribbat (2002) explores how *The Corrections* was received by culture, especially how it engaged with the media industry and authorship and literary authority controversies. Ribbat states that the work by Franzen represents the fears concerning the connection between literature and celebrity culture on one hand and the discourse in the world on the other. Likewise, Sharpe (2018) defines *Purity* in connection with digital culture and reputation politics. The analysis indicates that the novel challenges the current traditions of openness and coming out of information and raises questions about ethical issues that digital surveillance and online identity create. These views disclose the way that the fiction by Franzen interacts with the larger social changes, especially concerning technology, information culture, and communal morality. More recently, Bădulescu (2022) looks at *Crossroads* as a story that incorporates entertainment with a serious ethical investigation. The paper postulates that the novel revisits the issue of faith, morality and personal responsibility in a modern cultural context. In these stories, Franzen still tries to examine the ethical ambiguity of the contemporary world, not going beyond realist narrative.

The current literature on the fiction of Jonathan Franzen is rather extensive; research gaps have been identified. The themes on which most of the studies about Franzen focus are realism, conflict in family or post-postmodern aesthetics. Nonetheless, there are not many researchers who explore how imagination itself is an ethical process in his narrative structures. Past studies tend to mention ethical dilemmas in the novels by Franzen at the thematic plane, i.e., moral uncertainty or social responsibility. The little discussion on the role of narrative techniques in creating ethical engagement in the reader, though, is limited to interior focalization, moral ambiguity, and relational narration. Although the authors of some of the articles consider the realism or social criticism of the works by Franzen, there are no studies which integrate narrative ethics with the affect theory to explore how such emotional experiences as guilt, hesitation, and moral anxiety influence the ethical

knowledge in his fiction. Little research has been done on the role of reader participation in ethical interpretation. The current body of literature is more inclined to consider characters and themes as opposed to the role of the reader in the interpretation of the ethical dilemma. Franzen unites his readers in the techniques of narration, encouraging them to take an active part in the moral thinking, but this matter has been left in the background of critical reviews. Minimal analysis of imaginative ethical imagination about environmental responsibility.

Even though the issues of environmental concerns are also present in discussions of *Freedom* and other works, little research has explored how Franzen appeals to narrative imagination to explore the collective ecological responsibility and the emotional depth of environmental crisis. The desire for an all-encompassing model of the linkage among fantasy, morality, and accountability is frequently considered in isolation in the current scholarship. What is required is a synthesised critical framework explaining the connection among moral responsibility, relational ethics, and modern social crises, as developed by Franzen in his narrative imagination.

**Materials and Methods**



**Fig 1. Conceptual Framework of Ethical Imagination in Franzen’s Fiction**

Narrative ethics emphasises the ethical consequences of narrative by analysing the way narrative structure shows figure 1 has an effect on moral perception and judgment, and moral responsibility. Instead of taking literature as a source of prescriptive moral teaching, narrative ethics emphasises the ethical labour of narrative forms, including focalization, temporality and characterisation. In response to critics, ethical narratives are known to develop attentiveness, empathy and moral responsiveness by drawing the readers into the inner world and ambivalent attitude of fictional characters (Booth, 1988; Phelan, 2007). Moral dilemmas in this context produce moral meaning by way of the work of the reader actively pursuing moral dilemmas as opposed to the deliberate moral decision-making or normative ending.

This approach is also informed by moral philosophy, e.g., by relational ethics theories that criticise the priority of autonomous moral agency. Other philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas and Charles Taylor highlight the ethical obligation as a result of some kind of interaction with the other and social embeddedness, and not the autonomy of choice (Levinas, 1969; Taylor, 1989). Such a relational conception of ethics is particularly applicable to modern fiction, in which moral responsibility is frequently shared within family, social, and institutional circles. Ethical agency, in these stories, is lived not so much as a decisive action but as a hesitation, compromise, and vulnerability on the moral front, showing the boundaries of liberal individualism when it comes to collective kinds of responsibility.

The affect theory supplements the narrative ethics by pre-empting emotional experience as an important location of ethical knowledge. The scholars of affect claim that feelings of shame, anxiety, discomfort, and ambivalence are not only the individual states of the psyche but the responses that are mediated in social contexts to contribute to the increased awareness of morality and moral orientation (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011). Ethical knowledge often comes out in the fiction of Jonathan Franzen, not by rational decision-making or moral judgment but by an emotive stalemate and emotional conflict. The inability to act morally in the modern social context is often manifested by the characters who stay in a state of restlessness and indecisiveness.

These ambivalent affective conditions stand in opposition to narrative closure, forcing the characters and readers to live in ethical ambiguity. Imagination, therefore, plays as a mediating power that can help transfer the affective experience to ethical attention so that the readers can perceive the moral complexity without making it ideologically certain. Franzen's fiction has been able to create an ethically charged narrative space through narrative ethics and affective imagination to call on short-term moral reflection and not absolute ethical judgment.

## **Results and Discussions**

### ***Actuality Aesthetics and Moral Tension***

Jonathan Franzen is devoted to the aesthetics of actuality, which can also be called everyday life, and his preoccupation with this matter has been evident over several years. His plots lie within and through vernacular domestic environments, family relations and common social institutions, where ethical conflicts are encountered as normal aspects of everyday social interaction and not dramatic confrontation over morals. Franzen highlights the fact that ethical responsibility is not abstract and idealised by putting moral conflict in the context of familiar social realities, stressing the presence of moral conflict in the routine practices, flawed relationships and flawed social setups. This aesthetic disposition enables Franzen to develop the moral tension as a continuous state and not an issue that is to be solved. The characters are often faced with ethical dilemmas that are presented by conflicting demands, namely, to the family members, professional assignments, communities, and environmental issues. These dead ends show the weaknesses of liberal individualism, especially its focus on individualism, self-actualisation, and choice. The individualism and freedom of choice in the fictional worlds created by Franzen constantly come into conflict with the relational obligations which are impossible to balance or to reject. Notably, such fights seldom get solved by instances of ethical clarity or bold moves. Rather than depending on the moral dilemma of narrative deferral, ambivalence, and emotional equivocality, Franzen thrives on ethical tension. The issues of moral failure, indecision, and compromise come to the fore as the major elements of the narrative and emphasise the challenge of ethical action in the modern social circumstances. In denying his book's narrative closure, Franzen opposes the triumph and redemption of ethics. Instead, his actuality

aesthetics pre-empt ethical challenge as an unremitting and inexorable aspect of ordinary living. By so doing, Franzen challenges the reader to appreciate the existence of moral responsibility as an ongoing negotiation process, rather than a moral accomplishment.

### ***Interior Focalization and Ethical Ambiguity***

The interior focalization is one of the strongest methods of ethics in the practices of narrative by Jonathan Franzen because readers can have sustained access to the subliminal character of his characters. Franzen opposes the reduction of morality and the stabilisation of moral positions by predicting the inner processes of thought, the emotion of reluctance to convey it, and the self-doubt of morality. Instead of representing characters as coherent moral agents, the interpretation of the characters is presented as incoherent subjects whose desires, values and responsibilities often conflict with each other. This method of narration reveals the unstable and disputed nature of ethical life, which, like, is as much the subject of emotional weakness and self-deception as of rational thought. Interior focus allows Franzen to bring out the fact that, in most cases, moral choices are undermined by fear, resentment, guilt, and ambivalence. The readers are presented with the circumstances of an ethical choice of the character and can see the rationalisation, evasion, and justification that go along with moral failure. Consequently, there is a structural ambiguity of the story, not a thematic decoration. The lack of a definitive ethical perspective compels readers to approve rival ethical statements without definite direction, interpreting an ethical performance. Moral judgment is imposed, neither accomplished nor adjudicated; rather, it is postponed, decomposed and made provisional.

Franzen also builds relational ethics where responsibility is shared instead of being concentrated through the change of mindsets of various characters. A wide variety of subjectivities are prised through ethical situations, and the prism is each of them, based on specific social standpoints, emotional backgrounds, and moral constraints. This plurality highlights the interdependentness of the ethical life and points to the inability to find moral responsibility in one agent or decisive act. Characters are both perpetrators and victims of moral failure, as they are the participants of systems of obligation that are beyond the control of individuals. This story multiplicity is inapposite to liberal forms of moral mastery, which are devoted to autonomy, intent and moral clarity. The action performed ethically in the fiction by Franzen is less redeeming or conclusive and rather subject to being limited, late or failed. The disconnection between ethical awareness and ethical agency, the emotional and structural limits which prohibit moral action, can thus be seen within interior focalization. It is in this grey zone of morality that Franzen submits readers to; it is through this grey zone that his stories become sensitive to moral ambiguity and not certainty. This approach brings to an end the idea that relational entanglement and vulnerability express ethical life and must be extensively contemplated before making a final decision.

### ***Environmental Consciousness and Collective Responsibility***

One of the most critical ethical issues in the fiction by Jonathan Franzen is the issue of environmental concern, which is a long-term test of moral agency limits in the case of an ecological crisis. Rather than being legitimate as heroic activism or redeeming action, the accounts of Franzen challenge the lack of moral action of individuals in the face of a sophisticated and huge environmental killing. The problem of ecological crisis in his fiction is not merely a thematic issue, but an ethical issue as well, disclosing the contradiction between the individual sense of conscience and the common sense of duty. When faced with the issue of environmental destruction, global warming or extinction of a species, the characters of Franzen are usually frozen with the ethics. This paralysis is not

symbolised as moral indifference but as a response to the abstraction and the vastness of the environmental harm. Finding identification with environmental responsibility, in general, may lead to feelings of anxiety, guilt and feelings of powerlessness rather than the ability to make a moral choice. It is these emotional responses that enable Franzen to reveal the emotional limitations of liberal moralist orientations that would emphasise individual choice and responsibility. In his fiction, the environmental crisis is beyond the ability of personal ethical thinking, and it requires a redefinition of responsibility as a relationship, distributed and perpetual.

### Conclusion

The argument this paper has presented is that imagination is conceptualised in a fiction by Jonathan Franzen as an ethical practice which is internalised in the narrative form and not as an aesthetic or representational facet. Through narrative ethics, affect theory, and moral philosophy, the paper has shown that ethically complex narrative worlds created by Franzen in his novels do not allow moral resolution and require long-term ethical attention on the part of both the characters and the reader. His fiction anticipates the challenge of moral judgment in the modern world that is conditioned by ecological crisis, moral fragmentation and affective uncertainty; according to his adherence to the aesthetics of actuality, moral responsibility is produced through the tangles of everyday relations instead of moral ideals. The affective aspects of ethical life, hesitation, guilt, and moral paralysis that make ethical agency difficult are also brought out through his interior focalization and narrative ambiguity. The paper has also presented how environmental consciousness is reproduced in the fiction by Franzen as a critical test case of ethical responsibility, which is distributed and relational and emotionally circumscribed. Through his opposition to redemptive ecological discourses, his novels make environmental consciousness a contributor to the feeling of ethical uneasiness that needs to be recognised but not to be ethically upright or resolved. In this case, imagination is sustained ethical attentiveness to loss, vulnerability and complicity. Lastly, Franzen applies the same ethical accountability to the reader, and this makes reading an ethical interaction that is based on attentiveness and imaginative involvement. His fiction restates the ethical usefulness of the contemporary novel as a crucial arena of negotiation concerning responsibility in a moral environment of growing fragmentation by not permitting narrative closure or even moral certainty.

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