

Cultures of Relating:

**Contextual Therapy and
Family Novels in American Literature of the 21st Century**

Inaugural-Dissertation zur
Erlangung der Würde des Doktors der Philosophie
in der Fakultät Kulturwissenschaften
der Technischen Universität Dortmund

vorgelegt von

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Dortmund 2011

1. Gutachter: Prof. Dr. Walter Grünzweig
2. Gutachter: Prof. Dr. Christoph Ribbat

Herzlich bedanken möchte ich mich bei meinen beiden Gutachtern Prof. Dr. Walter Grünzweig und Prof. Dr. Christoph Ribbat sowie allen Dortmunder Amerikanist_innen für ihre Unterstützung und ihr konstruktives Wirken.

Mein besonderer Dank gilt auch meinen Freund_innen und meiner Familie für ihre Geduld, Hilfsbereitschaft und Unterstützung.

To my parents, Christa and Ernst

&

Anneliese

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Introduction

Recent American literature shows that family has become a significant topic once again. The revitalization of the – never well-defined – genre of the family novel suggests that writers are interested in the fictional investigation of the cultural and social significance of the family in contemporary American society. This development is not a result of disenchantment with politics and a retreat into the private realm, nor is it an escape into fictitious worlds that should teach us the ideal design of familial relationships frequently so painfully missed in society. Instead, this interest in the significance of the family is a conscious turn towards the literary subject as an agent integrated into a tight-knit network of familial relationships, which are commonly regarded as responsible for the socialization of an individual.

Indeed, authors such as Richard Powers, Matthew Sharpe, Jonathan Franzen, and Toni Morrison rethink the role of the literary subject. In an interview with Dave Weich for *Powell's Books*, Jonathan Franzen stated that “after the much talked about generation of postmoderns a lot of us are looking again at character and, in particular, at family”. The family models these writers present vary from novel to novel. At first sight, the traditional Midwestern family in Franzen’s novel *The Corrections* (2001) seems to depict the nuclear white middle class family as being in a fatal crisis from which it cannot recover. At the same time, this crisis may also usher in a newly defined notion of family, providing equilibrium between individual and ‘collective.’

And there are much more dynamic models of families such as the Jewish/African American family in Richard Powers’s *The Time of Our Singing* (2003). This family struggles to survive the loss of relatives in the Holocaust and times of segregation in the U.S. of the 1940’s and 50’s. They fight against pressure from the white supremacist society as well as racial discrimination among the black communities, as many of their members did not accept interracial marriages.

The Schwartz family in Matthew Sharpe's *The Sleeping Father* (2003), whose divorced father falls into a coma which suddenly leaves the two adolescent children in the role of caretakers, represents a single-parent household concept of the family that can be often found in today's U.S. society. The conflict here consists of false notions of freedom and a negation of familial ties as a protective measurement.

Toni Morrison's *Love* (2003) offers an introspective view on a black community before and after the times of desegregation. Here the unity of the family is endangered by sexual abuse, class-consciousness, jealousy, and a thwarted friendship between two girls.

However different in topic and setting these novels may be, they have one thing in common: they all reveal the *conventional* notion of family to have reached its end. The narrative of the family as the center of stability has been doubted, decentralized, fragmented, and yet still contains remnants of the old vision attached to it. It is still about experiencing love, a feeling of security and at times painful intimacy — but the acting out of these feelings is different. Characters no longer seem to be dependable agents with definite roles associated with them. For them, family no longer provides a matrix for comfortable continuity and identity. The family's role as a mediator for values that guide a person through the rest of her life has been abandoned. One does not receive answers; instead one accumulates even more questions.

As these models of fictional families become more and more dynamic, the question arises as to how literary criticism is able to analyze the cultural work the family novels perform. At the same time it needs to be able to do justice to the re-discovered role of the character acting in the network of close family relations. The families represented in my chosen novels contain a distinctive constellation of intergenerational relationships that shows the vulnerability of human relationships but also resources of change in the family system. They critically engage in the discussion about the function and relevance of the family for U.S. society and challenge the traditional notion of the nuclear family as an ideal design and object of adulation.

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, who founded Contextual Therapy together with his co-workers in the 1960's, saw in the glorification of the family as something untouchable a dangerous development in western society:

The reification of the family as a living creature and its mythical adoration is one of the neurotic defense games of mankind. The myth of the family has long served as a cover under which a multitude of personal needs, exploitations, and gains remain hidden and obscured. The disorder of a family is a pathogenic condition which can lead to various pathologies in the individual members. (*Foundations* 63)

The novels analyzed in this work certainly reject any notion of mythical adoration of the family. They represent their literary characters entangled in complex and oftentimes painful familial relationships stretching across differences of race, gender, cultures, and class. The novels show their protagonists exposed to the above-mentioned exploitations, personal needs, and unilateral gains. A reading of these novels in the light of Contextual Therapy illuminates the motivations and hidden forces that lead to the destructive relationships among family members and thus leads to a new understanding of inter-human relationships beyond the individual psychologies of family members.

With this investigation, I am proposing that the contemporary family novel plays an important role in the discursive ideological war between traditionalists and 'progressives' – and that it indeed does have a future, if only its basic groundedness in relationships is acknowledged.

Chapter 1

The Theoretical Framework of Contextual Therapy

Contextual Therapy is a branch of family therapy¹ that aims at understanding past damages to a relationship in order to prevent further violation among family members and is thus future oriented. It is dialogical on several levels, which I investigate in order to lay the framework for my later literary analysis. First, based on Buber's relational model of the *I-Thou* dyad as the smallest unit, the elemental basis of relating to the world is dialogical in nature, then on an existential level because no individual exists solely on her² own but always builds upon her existence through relating to others.

Second, in therapeutic practice, one of the main goals is to establish a constructive dialogue between the different members of a client's family. An atmosphere of openness regarding past injuries in relationships is crucial to beginning a process of healing, from which all present and future generations of the family will profit.

Third, the relationship between a client, her family, and the therapist is also dialogical, in fact multi-dialogical, because one of Contextual Therapy's main principles is the multidirected partiality of the therapist. In contrast to many other therapeutic methods, the therapist in Contextual Therapy at some point offers partiality to each of the family members involved in the treatment, and thus ensures that the concerns of each person involved are being heard and given due consideration. At this point, "the therapist becomes advocate for all within the basic relational context, i.e., the multigenerational extended family, including the dead" (*Handbook of Family*

¹ For an overview of the development of family therapy cf. Douglas C. Breunlin, Richard C. Schwartz, and Betty Mac Kune-Karrer. *Metaframeworks. Transcending the Models of Family Therapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992; Laura Roberto Giat. *Transgenerational Family Therapies*. New York: Guilford Press, 1992; Helm Stierlin. *Von der Psychoanalyse zur Familientherapie*. 1975. München, DTV, 1992; Martin R. Textor, ed. *Das Buch der Familientherapie. Sechs Schulen in Theorie und Praxis*. Eschborn: Fachbuchhandlung für Psychologie, 1984. A general introduction to family therapy can be found in Michael P. Nichols Richard Schwartz, eds. *The Essentials of Family Therapy*. 2nd ed. Boston: Pearson/ Allyn and Bacon, 2005 as well as by the same editors: *Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods*. 7th ed. Boston: Pearson/ Allyn and Bacon, 2006.

² In order to avoid awkward phrases such as *he or she*, *s/he*, and *him or her*, I have used the feminine pronoun to refer to both sexes.

Therapy 178). Multidirected partiality helps the therapist to build trust and find hidden trust resources among the family members. At the same time, it prevents the therapist from becoming unilaterally attached to one person's perspective. In doing so, the therapist gives up the authoritative meta-level, from which she is prone to judge individuals. This dialogue of multidirected partiality is for the most part non-verbal but applied in the therapist's attitude of utilizing the trust reserves and by avoiding any steps, which would work against that goal (*ibid.*).

When considering the aforementioned three facets of the dialogical nature of Contextual Therapy, it becomes clear that this branch of therapy is not only concerned with the relationship between individuals but also with the influences that the larger social contexts exert on the clients. Each client brings her own personal reality with her to the sessions, a reality which is created through social interaction with other people and society. Contextual Therapy thus provides a critical theory of society and reveals myths of freedom and independence, which are celebrated in different forms in cultural works of 21st century America and the world at large. It also sheds new light on the study of the individual and her relation to her family and her broader social context. In its theoretical framework, it is the extension from an *intrapersonal* to an *interpersonal* realm which challenges traditional notions of the individual and society with regard to therapy as well as to literary and cultural criticism. In order to 'translate' approaches of Contextual Therapy to literary studies, it is useful and important to take into account the influence of the philosopher Martin Buber³ on this branch of therapy, because it elucidates how literary characters act in family novels that function as laboratories of the world.

³ Martin Buber's writings have often inspired comparisons to and studies on other influential writers, e.g. Harry S. May "Martin Buber and Mohammed Iqbal: Two Poets of East and West." *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 18 (1969): 177 – 187.

Buber's Relational Model of Between-ness — A Place for Meeting

Martin Buber's influence on 20th century intellectual history is well documented. Buber inspired thinkers from various fields such as sociology, philosophy⁴, medicine, and theology. The poet and essayist Kenneth Rexroth called Buber "practically the only religious writer a non-religious person could take seriously today" (*Bird in the Bush* p.106). This statement was made in 1959 when postmodern thinking was on its way to ruling the (academic) world of literature.

His small book *I and Thou*, originally published in German in 1923, is markedly influenced by religious ideas and written in a poetic language richly saturated with metaphors taken mainly from metaphysics and Hasidic writings. In his book, Buber establishes a model of human relationships that seeks to make manifest and explain that which is at the core of man's relatedness to the world. It is a model rather than a fixed theory because firstly, Buber did not see himself as a theorist of either philosophy or theology. Instead he regarded himself as an educator whose deepest concern was "the close connection of the relation to God with the relation to one's fellow man" (*I-Thou* 115). Secondly, Buber did not seem concerned with "watertight" proof of his arguments, which theories naturally intend to establish. Accordingly, when asked to produce an autobiography for *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, published as Volume 12 of the Library of Living Philosophers Series edited by Maurice Friedman and Paul Schlipp, he came forward with twenty anecdotes of events and meetings that each had a decisive impact on his life, and stand as examples for his thoughts laid out in *I and Thou*. Together with the editors, he decided, very fittingly, to call them *Meetings: Autobiographical Fragments*, precisely because of his (non)theory

⁴ On the relationship between Buber's works and other philosophers, please refer to for example Ronald C. Arnett. "A Dialogic Ethic 'Between' Buber and Levinas." *Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies*. Eds. Rob Anderson et.al. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004. 75 – 90; Boni, Sylvain. *The Self and the Other in the Ontologies of Sartre and Buber*. Washington: University of America Press, 1982; Harold M. Schulweis. "The Personalism of Martin Buber." *Personalist*, 33 (1952): 131-134. For specific studies on Buber and Bakhtin please see e.g. Maurice Friedman. "Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogue of Voices and the Word that is Spoken." *Religion and Literature* 33.3 (2001): 25 – 36; Nina Perlina. "Mikhail Bakhtin and Martin Buber: Problems of Dialogic Imagination." *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 9:1 (1984): 13-28.

of relationship. Buber even saw himself as incapable of writing about himself and his own life, because in his view the individual's self is confirmed by *others* (Kepnes 413).

At the same time, throughout his books and essays, Buber appears to be remarkably consistent in establishing and further developing his model of human relation to the world.⁵ At the heart of this model lies the idea of a dyadic structure of the world, according to which man approaches that which is not him. Thus, Buber starts his book *I and Thou* with the following sentences: “to man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words, which he speaks. [...] The one primary word is the combination *I-Thou*. The other primary word is the combination *I-It*” (19).

Consequently, Buber regards the *I* to be one constituent of an irrevocable dyad consisting of a human being and an *other*. The other could be a human being, an animal, a thing or the eternal *Thou*, which in Buber's words stands for the relation to God. In addition, this means that the *I* of man is also twofold, since the *I* of *I-Thou* is not the *I* in *I-It*. This fact has far-reaching consequences for the further development of Buber's model because it implies that a human being cannot be *not* engaged in the world and not related to the world. In fact, one cannot even exist and define herself without the *other*. In *The Knowledge of Man: A Philosophy of the Interhuman*, Buber writes that “the inmost growth of the self does not take place, as people like to suppose today, through our relationship to ourselves, but through being made present by the other and knowing that we are made present by him” (61). Thus, extreme notions of often highly valued individualism or ostensible independence are, according to this model, rather expressions of a growing *I-It* relation to the world. Concerns for the other person are neglected and human relationships governed by self-interest. The *I-It* dyad is in essence a

⁵ Cf. Gilya G. Schmidt. *Martin Buber's Formative Years: From German Culture to Jewish Renewal, 1897 – 1909*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1995; Nahum N. Glatzer. “Aspects of Martin Buber's Thought.” *Modern Judaism* 1.1 (1981): 1 -16; Michael Zank, ed. *New Perspectives on Martin Buber*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006.

subject-object relation in which the other is being used to serve ulterior purposes without respecting her as an individual.

Meeting occurs when at least one of the parties speaks the word *Thou* (and thus the entire primary word *I-Thou* since the pair cannot be broken apart) with her whole being, meaning that she regards the counterpart not as an object that can be manipulated or experienced. It is rather that “I take my stand in relation to him, in the sanctity of the primary word. Only when I step out of it [the relation] do I experience him [the man addressed] once more. In the act of experience, *Thou* is far away” (24). The process of creating one’s existence as a person through another person cannot be forced or entirely realized by her alone. Instead, one also relies on the response because “the *Thou* meets me through Grace — it is not found by seeking. But my speaking of the primary word to it is an act of my being, is indeed *the* act of my being. *Thou* meets me. But I step into direct relation with it” (26).

Buber defines three spheres in which the relational moment occurs. Firstly, there is the life with nature. In this realm, meeting happens below the level of speech. When an individual encounters creatures with the primary word *I-Thou*, they “live and move over against us, but cannot come to us” (22) because speech is not a category of this realm. Secondly, there is the sphere of man. Speech is part of this realm and the relation is of an open nature, so one can indeed accept as well as give the *Thou*. Lastly, there is the life with spiritual beings. Here, a *Thou* may not be physically present but one feels addressed and thus answers (21 f).

Essentially, Buber’s relational model is based on a dichotomy of either experiencing or relating to the other. Therefore, as a general rule, where there is meeting, there must also be considered the possibility of “mismeeting” (*Vergegnung*). A “mismeeting,” or “miscounter,” describes the failure of a real meeting between men (*Meetings* 22). Buber’s difficult relationship with his mother made him understand the possibility of a “miscounter,” a missed opportunity to confirm the other through one’s person and in turn being confirmed by her.

Equally, his dichotomy between the world of *I-Thou* and the world of *I-It* also points to the quality of communication between the person addressing and the addressee. Buber defines the *I-Thou* relation as a genuine dialogue.⁶ Communication in this sense is not exclusively happening through words but again denotes the quality of the relation. If one is willing to enter into a relationship, this relationship will by nature be dialogical because she allows the other to be made present as a person. In turn, a monological stance will give rise to the *I-It* relation in which things are in order, predictable, and can be categorized and made manageable. In his introduction to Martin Buber's *Between Man and Man*, Maurice Friedman defined the dialogue as being

not merely the interchange of words – genuine dialogue can take place in silence, whereas much conversation is really monologue. It is rather the response of one whole being to the otherness of the other, that otherness that is only comprehended when I open myself to him in the present and in the concrete situation and respond to his need even when he himself is not aware that he is addressing me (xvi).

Buber's relational model is essentially of a dialectic nature. No one can exclusively live in a constant state of *I-Thou* relation because "every *Thou* in the world is by nature fated to become a thing, or continually to re-enter into the condition of things. In objective speech it would be said that every thing in the world, either before or after becoming a thing, is able to appear to an *I* as its *Thou*" (*I and Thou* 31). Therefore, going through this cohesive cycle of relating and distancing is a natural process since distancing entails meeting. In other words, without sidestepping into an *I-It* relation, true encounter is not possible.

⁶ Buber's model of the inter-human dialogue has been studied by various researchers. For more information see among others Jeanine Czubaroff. "Dialogical Rhetoric: An Application of Martin Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86.2 (2000): 168-89; Maurice S. Friedman. "Martin Buber and Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy: The Role of Dialogue in Contextual Therapy." *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 26.3 (1989): 402 – 409; Friedman. "The Vision of the Self in Dialogue." *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 55.2 (1995): 169 – 178; John Stuart. "Martin Buber's Central Insight: Implications for His Philosophy of Dialogue." *Dialogue: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Eds. Dascal, Marcelo and Cuyckens, Hubert. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1985. 321 – 335.

However, the opposite state, namely a continuous *I-It* relationship to the world, is absolutely possible. It occurs when a human being approaches that which is not herself by experiencing, objectifying, or using it (the word *It* in the primary word *I-It* can be replaced by *He* or *She* without changing the meaning of the primary word). Only if the individual is no longer able or willing to step yet again into this cycle of meeting and distancing but remains in the state of *I-It* relation will she suffer from a perpetually reified relationship to the world. Philosopher Ferdinand Ebner⁷ saw severe problems emerging from this permanent state of *I-It* relation and considered insanity to be “the end product of ‘Icheinsamkeit’ and ‘Dulosigkeit’ – the complete closedness of the I to the Thou” (qtd. in Friedman, 1955, 299). Similarly, the German psychiatrist Viktor von Weizäcker, who co-edited the periodical *Die Kreatur* with Buber, began to relate Buber’s relational model to psychotherapy and medicine and also sensed that the problems of his patients were linked to a disturbed relationship to his fellow man. He saw the cause of a psychotic’s over-valuation of the self in the isolation of the client: “the fact that he has no *Thou* for his *I*”(300).

Similarly, this dyadic structure of relation also informs Buber’s concept of reality. He differentiates between reality and unreality according to one’s twofold attitude.⁸ Reality is not constructed through a certain concept developed prior to meeting the world but reality ‘happens’ in encountering the other. Depending on one’s twofold attitude towards the world, there either is a chance of finding one’s stance in the real, in the very world of the primary word *I-Thou*, or of submitting to the reification of the world and living in what Buber called the unreal. Yet, again it is important to stress the dialectical nature of this process, for, as Buber says, “no man is

⁷ Cf. among others Rivka Horwitz. “Ferdinand Ebner als Quelle von Martin Bubers ‘Ich Und Du’.” *Untersuchungen zum „Brenner“*. Eds. W. Methlagl et.al. Salzburg: Müller, 1981. 283 – 298; Lucjan Suchanek. “Dialogue, the Other’s Word, and the Poetic Text.” *Issues in Slavic Literary and Cultural Theory*. Eds. Karl Eimermacher, Peter Grzybek and Georg Witte. Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1989. 451 – 461.

⁸ On Buber’s concept of reality see Elizabeth Petuchowski. “*Die Kreatur*, an Interdenominational Journal, and Martin Buber’s Strange Use of the Term ‘Reality’ (‘Wirklichkeit’).” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 69.4 (1995): 766-87.

pure person and no man pure individuality. None is wholly real, and none is wholly unreal. Every man lives in the twofold *I*" (*I-Thou* 69).

Implicit in Buber's relational model is a very specific idea of the human being that has far-reaching consequences for the concept of the self. The 'self' as an essential and non-dependent entity of its own is non-existent and therefore rendered meaningless unless put in relation to the other 'self'. Buber's relational model corresponds with the postmodern notion of the self inasmuch as the 'self,' or the individual as a person, has to be "constructed", is not given a priori, but needs to be generated. It is a departure from previous, more stable versions of the self, including the modernist notion, which, irrespective of the Freudian fragmentation or division into the tripartite model of the human mind, still existed as an entity for itself. It constitutes an elemental entity that cannot be further reduced or split into parts. Otherwise it will turn the dialogue into a monologue, in which we exclusively use the other for our needs and the *I-Thou* relationship becomes an *I-It* relationship.

The seemingly paradoxical result of Buber's definition of this relationship is that in the age of de-construction, there is an element that cannot further be de-constructed and thus runs counter to what postmodern thought celebrates as the liberation of the selves. The postmodern plurality is reminiscent of Buber's notion of the selves only inasmuch as it acknowledges the possibility of multiple selves of a person. However, this concept does not insist on the relational nature of the selves. The postmodern selves belong to the sphere of individual psychology, while Buber's model focuses on the interpersonal realm. In each *I-Thou* encounter, I am being confirmed as a person by the other and the other potentially confirmed by me. Each time I am being 'made present,' i.e. each time I experience self-understanding and self-awareness (*New Contextual Therapy* 72), my self is being made present as well. It may differ from the previous encounter because the situation has changed. In this sense, and only in this sense, we can speak of multiple selves in Buber's model. These selves are not self-sufficient but rely on a partner. In that sense, in each encounter there is always more than one self involved.

The family novels analyzed in this work show a re-establishment of a 'lost' relationship between fictional family members. They put into question the postmodern notion of a 'liberated' self that exists in solipsistic isolation outside of any relationship. These novels also prove the complex positioning of the literary characters between actual personal freedom and denial of relational responsibilities. Such denial is celebrated as a form of personal freedom in postmodern times.

Buber's model of relatedness had a decisive influence on the theory and practice of Contextual Therapy, which I will pursue below. Initially, it will be necessary to explain some concepts and terms that are of importance for the understanding of the theoretical framework of this therapeutic model.

The Language of Contextual Therapy

The following concepts are critical for an understanding of Contextual Therapy and form the core of its therapeutic tools and concepts in the daily work with clients. They are concerned with the use of language and narrative as means to establish a genuine dialogue between the members of a family and help to concretize the theoretical framework of the therapy. They also form the basis for the analysis of the family novels in the following chapters serving as tools for the interpretation of the fictional worlds of literary characters embedded in their multifaceted net of familial relationships. The most relevant concepts will be explained in connection to the various family narratives analyzed in this work, but an overarching sketch of the model will be provided here at the outset.

A central concept in Contextual Therapy is *bookkeeping*. It serves as an aid to realize and comprehend that which caused past wrongdoings. It helps in making the invisible history of familial relations "visible" inasmuch as it aims at expressing the motivations, patterns of behavior, and feelings as indicators for a deeper hurt, which people in treatment left unspoken and, more often than not, were not aware of. This metaphor taken from the field of accounting seems odd in the context of something as personal, subjective, and complicated as human relationships. Yet, it is of much help to the

contextual therapist in bringing clarity to the multilateral and multigenerational net of the client's family. Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Geraldine Spark explain their reasons for using such terminology, saying, "we could have stressed the inevitable 'power game' elements implicit in the victimization of the mate, the grandparent, or the therapist as they may occur in succession during family treatment. However, we have felt that it is more important to explore the motivational layer in which hope resides for repairing the hurt human justice" (*Invisible Loyalties* 53).

In spite of its sometimes-mathematical matter of fact metaphors, Contextual Therapy is far from simply taking account of past injuries or benevolent actions performed in human relationships. It does not encourage a summing up of past deeds in order to find out who suffered most and therefore is entitled to the therapist's understanding and protection. In this context, (hidden) hierarchical structures may be important for the analysis of family constellations, but they do not give an answer to the question as to which (unconscious) motivation existed for a certain action that hurt the justice within the family.⁹ The concept of power is very deceptive with regard to the motivational level of human interaction in relationships because the so-called "powerless" can turn out to be the ones who actually exercise power over other family members (56).

⁹ On the definition and role of justice in relationships see Barbara Krasner and Margaret Cotroneo. "Essays on Relational Justice: Two Essays." *Foundations* 20.4 (1979): 333 – 352.

Invisible Ledgers of Merits and Obligations are metaphors that belong to the concept of bookkeeping.¹⁰ They are at the heart of intergenerational family treatment because they serve as an accounting system which is built either overtly or covertly. “On the basis of these accounts, a just balance between individual ‘debits’ and ‘merits’ is negotiated across generations” (*The Language of Family Therapy* 209). Merits and obligations are negotiated through the fairness¹¹ of give-and-take in a relationship.

The concern for and establishment of *justice* within a family is very central in Contextual Therapy. Justice consists of a balance of fairness among the family members and takes into consideration both asymmetrical (e.g. parent-child) and symmetrical (e.g. husband-wife) relational constellations. In a fair balance of give-and-take, a child for example is not asked to contribute the exact same amount of care a parent could provide. The balance requires “equitable but not equal reciprocity,” because it would overburden the child in her capacity for giving (*Between Give & Take* 417). Thus, the intergenerational dependence prevents such a notion of fairness. If such a homeostasis of give-and-take is off balance, the children can be depleted of their natural trust resources. The results of such a detrimental outcome will be further explored in the chapter on *The Sleeping Father*. In a symmetrical relationship (e.g. husband-wife) an equal reciprocity can be expected for a fair balance of give-and-take.

Justice as a major dynamic concept in family theory is considered a multipersonal homeostatic principle with fair reciprocity as its ideal goal; if it is not established, it can become the source for repetitious, even cyclic feedback — a behavioral pattern is established that can determine actions of

¹⁰For the significance of the metaphor of the ledger in therapeutic practice cf. Jerome F. Adams, and Peter E. Maynard. “Contextual Therapy: Applying the Family Ledger to Couple Therapy.” *Journal of Couple Relationship Therapy* 3. 1 (2004): 1 – 11.

¹¹ On the role of fairness and trust in relationships cf. Blaine J Flowers., and Andrew Wegner. “Are Trustworthiness and Fairness Enough? Contextual Family Therapy and the Good Family.” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 23.2 (1997): 153 – 169; Judith Grunebaum. “From Discourse to Dialogue: The Power of Fairness in Therapy with Couples.” *One Couple, Four realities: Multiple Perspectives on Couple Therapy*. Eds. Richard Chasin, H. Grunebaum and M. Herzig. New York: Guilford Press, 1990. 191 – 228; Barbara R. Krasner and Joyce J. Austin. *Truth, Trust, and Relationships. Healing Interventions in Contextual Therapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1995.

family members for several generations; resentful accusations are the outcome and source of future detrimental actions (*Invisible Loyalties* 67).

Entitlement results from aforementioned reciprocal give-and-take in relationships. It is the “ethical claim to receive compensation that we have in any relationship where we have given or contributed in a responsible and reliable fashion” (qtd. in *New Contextual Therapy* 73). If the human justice is hurt it can lead to destructive entitlement, which is an expression of past unbalances in the relational ledger and consists of destructive emotions or detrimental actions as an individual’s claim of compensation (qtd. in *ibid* 75). Constructive entitlement is the right for due care and concern earned through considerate and fair action towards the other person in a relationship.

Trustworthiness is built and earned between partners over a long-term balancing of give-and-take. As an ethical concept, it is not related to feelings of trustworthiness because “a victim’s naïve trust in a con artist is no proof of the latter’s trustworthiness” (*Between Give & Take* 422). Without it, a fair and reciprocal consideration for the needs of both partners will be impossible. More often than not, trustworthiness is depleted through negative entitlement. Trustworthiness is considered a relational resource that comes into being through “a reliable, responsible, and considerate partner who justly gives what she or he is obligated to provide in the relationship” (qtd. in *New Contextual Therapy* 73).

Loyalty in a multipersonal context denotes the “existence of structured group expectations to which all members are committed” and is concerned with what Buber described as the arrangement of the human world. Commitment, trust, action, and merit form its frame of reference (*Invisible Loyalties* 37). Loyalty is triadic in nature at least: the preferring person, the one who is preferred and the one who is not preferred (*Between Give & Take* 218). Usually, loyalty conflicts arise in families because people are caught between the obligations towards two different parties, e.g. a wife senses the obligation to serve the contrary demands of both her mother and her husband.

Invisible Loyalty explains why partners sometimes exhibit unreasonable behavior in relationships (*New Contextual Therapy* 82). It works as a “pathological’ force that blocks commitment to a current relationship.” It is a concealed attempt at balancing a vertical relationship through an overt interference (mostly) with a horizontal relationship (*Between Give & Take* 417). It can be seen as an indirect action of an individual exposed to destructive entitlement in order to meet unjust obligations, which in turn would gain her love from her family of origin (*New Contextual Therapy* 82). Invisible loyalties are the reason for many problems in family dynamics because two different systems of loyalty patterns meet and are in potential competition with the demands and expectations of the spouse.¹² For example, a woman is resentful of her husband in their marriage, because she expresses her loyalty to her mother who suffered from an abusive husband in her own marriage. The wife secures her mother’s love by confirming the negative image of men in her husband. The actual problem, however, lies in the relationship between wife and mother.

Buber’s Relational Model and Contextual Therapy

Buber’s model of inter-human dialogical relationship played a decisive role in the therapeutic approach of Contextual Therapy. Therapists of this branch generally share the assumption that, at their core, human relationships are not based on psychological motives and motivations, but instead what happens “between” two partners in terms of building loyalties and earning entitlements within a relationship. These loyalties are often “invisible” and are part of a “translation” of Buber’s model of the *I-Thou* or *I-It* dyad respectively into a manageable therapeutic framework, which allows therapists to transform Buber’s philosophical ideas into a more concrete concept of inter-human relations that would be applicable in daily practice.

¹² For the complex interaction and competition between two systems see Cotroneo, Margaret, and Barbara R. Krasner. “Familie und Rechtsprechung — Die Überschneidung zweier Systeme in familienbezogenen Gerichtsgutachten.” *Familiendynamik* 4 (1979): 355 – 361.

Contextual Therapy evolved from dissatisfaction with psychoanalytical approaches to the treatment of schizophrenic patients in the late 1950's and early 60's. In their clinical work with clients suffering from this mental disease, therapists such as Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy¹³, Murray Bowen¹⁴, Lyman Wynne, and Helm Stierlin included the client's family members into the therapeutic work and thus extended the scope of treatment from an individual to an interpersonal level. Psychoanalytical methods were not sufficient to adequately respond to the patient's needs and lacked in efficiency and success compared to the integrative model of intensive family therapy¹⁵. The early attempts in practicing intensive family therapy developed into dialectical intergenerational therapy, which in turn generated Contextual Therapy as its offshoot (*Between Give & Take* ix).

Contextual Therapy in practice¹⁶ is based on systemic and transactional processes as well as on relational determinants of human behavior (43). It rather encompasses than opposes different therapeutic approaches in the field (47). Contextual Therapy aims at integrating insights from psychoanalysis, systems theory¹⁷, existential philosophy, and ethics (*The Language of Family Therapy* 73).

¹³ Cf. Ammy Van Heusden and ElseMarie van den Eerenbeemt. *Balance in Motion. Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and His Vision of Individual and Family Therapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1987

¹⁴ For an introduction to Murray Bowen's research on family therapy cf. Murray Bowen. *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*. New York: Aronson, 1978.

¹⁵ For further information on the foundation and methods of intensive family therapy cf.: Boszormenyi-Nagy, Ivan, and James L. Framo, eds. *Intensive Family Therapy. Theoretical and Practical Aspects*. New York: Harper& Row, 1985. The significance of family origins in family therapy is stressed by James L. Framo among other publications in *Family-of-Origin Therapy: An Intergenerational Approach*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1992; Framo. "A Personal retrospective of the Family Therapy Field: Then and Now." *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 22.3 (1996): 289 – 316.

¹⁶ Bernal, Guillermo Y. Bernal, Flores-Ortiz, and C. Rodriguez give a good introduction to the work methods of a practitioner of Contextual Therapy in "Development of a Contextual Family Therapy Therapist Action Index." *Journal of Family Psychology* 3.3 (1990): 322 – 331.

¹⁷ In this context, especially Charles Churchman's early studies of systems is of relevance for the understanding of Contextual Therapy approaches to families, cf. Charles W Churchman. *The Systems Approach*. New York: Delta, 1968. Evan Imber-Black gives an interesting insight into systems and family therapy in his book *Family and Larger Systems: A Family Therapist's Guide through the Labyrinth*. New York: Guilford Press, 1988.

As stated in the beginning, Contextual Therapy attempts at including and respecting the psychological and interpersonal conditions of all the members of a given family. In its approach to “reintroduce the truth of personal uniqueness” to systemic therapy, Contextual Therapy is based on the notion that in order to understand human existence one has to include both individual and relational realities (*Between Give & Take* 7).

Relational reality can be understood as a “large container that surrounds and includes the fundamental dimensions of individual uniqueness or personhood” (8). In an attempt to put these relational realities into a manageable design useful for therapeutic approaches, an ordering system of relational realities was established. It consists of the following four dimensions that influence every person’s and every family’s life. This ordering of the dimensions bridges the gap between individual and relational determinants, which were often treated as independent categories in traditional therapeutic approaches (44):

- Facts of the client’s background
- Individual Psychology
- Systems of interpersonal patterns
- Relational Ethics

The fourth dimension, the realm of relational ethics, is most decisively inspired by Buber’s model of human dialogue because it focuses on the interpersonal consequences of family constellations. It is so central to Contextual Therapy because Buber’s model confirms phenomenological and existential studies which “have emphasized the ontic rather than functional dependence of man on his relationships. [...] Man, suspended in ontological anxiety, experiences a groundless void if he cannot establish a meaningful personal dialogue with someone or something” (*Invisible Loyalties* 43).

This ontological anxiety is basically what Buber referred to as a perpetual *I-It* relation to the world or what Ferdinand Ebner called “Dulosigkeit”. This “Dulosigkeit” is a result of injuring the existential relation between persons, or in Buber’s terms, the justice of the human order (*The Knowledge of Man* 128). Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy repeatedly pointed out the importance of this notion of justice inherent in human life for the development of his dialogical approach:

Contextual therapists had to rely on a concept borrowed from Buber (1948), ‘the justice of the human order’, as a quasi-objective criterion of interpersonal fairness. [...] The objectivity of relational justice [...] is a dialectical criterion derived from the simultaneous consideration of the balance between two (or more) relating persons’ subjective, self-serving rights and entitlements (*Foundations* 306f.).

While Buber links the injury of the justice of the human order to existential guilt accumulated by disregarding the nature of genuine dialogue, he also points out that this existential guilt (not to be confused with guilt feelings) can be overcome firstly through acknowledging one’s guilt, even though one might not be the person responsible for its accumulation, secondly, by ‘persevering’ in this guilt, neither denying it nor using it as “self-torment but as a strong, broad light,” and finally by “restoring the broken dialogue through an active devotion to the world,” (Friedman 1998) since we are not only guilty in relation to ourselves but also in relation to others. The chapter on *The Sleeping Father* will analyze such a situation of the accumulation of existential guilt and expressions of guilt feelings on a literary basis.

By “translating” Buber’s relational model into the practice of Contextual Therapy, the question of guilt immediately becomes a question which also concerns the aforementioned equilibrium of a person’s entitlements, since “what Buber defined as the genuine ‘I-Thou dialogue’ is implicit in the systemic notion of the ledger of merits and of balances of give-and-take” (*Foundations* 160). Here, the ontic character of an injury of the give-and-take balance becomes manifest in the consequences influencing the ledger of justice, not just for the person involved in the actual injury but also for subsequent generations. Central to this concept is the fact that such an injury

indeed brings about an existential, a “true,” consequence and transcends the individual’s psychology. As Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Geraldine Spark emphasize in their groundbreaking work on the theory of Contextual Therapy, *Invisible Loyalties. Reciprocity in Intergenerational Family Therapy*,

the individual can be ‘caught’ in existential guilt through the actions of others as one inherits a place in the multigenerational network of obligations and becomes accountable to the chain of past obligations, traditions, etc. One may not be readily aware of the long-range *quid pro quo* moves, only of short-term obligations and repayments. The less he is aware of the invisible obligations accumulated in the past, for instance, by his parents, the more he will be at the mercy of these invisible forces. In families the system unit of accounting tends to include generations. According to the Scriptures, seven generations may balance out one major sin of an ancestor. (67f.)

In therapeutic practice, countless accounts of clients’ stories testify to these findings. Contextual Therapy is mainly concerned with securing the possibility of accumulating positive entitlement for future generations by uncovering hidden structures of entanglement and above all long forgotten or denied injuries of the justice of the human order. It is very much concerned with said justice for posterity, in order to break the cycle of negative entitlement and uneven balance of give-and-take.

In Contextual Therapy, a client’s narrative is at the heart of the healing dialogue between therapist and the client. It is evident that families and individual members of the family are influenced by themes that “are present in the preceding generation and are transmitted from one generation to the next through narratives, family stories, assumptions of ‘correct’ behavior, etc. E.g. we ... are survivors; or in our family, we never fight; therefore, we better not talk about ... (the problem)” (*Reading the Family Dance* 20). These narratives and family stories are then uncovered or re-produced during therapy and form the basic material for the therapist to work with. Therefore, the therapist is confronted with a narrative, as the client becomes the author

of her life story. In addition, just as in other models of family therapy¹⁸, contextual therapists are convinced that it is not an individual's psychology and stories that are the decisive element in shaping the image she creates of herself, but rather the family. Keeping this in mind, as well as the fact that the first access a therapist receives to a family is through the client's account of her life story, we can assume that the family is basically "a collection of stories — however differently compiled and told by different family members — through which each of us sees ourselves, interprets others, and makes sense of our world. It is a repertoire of 'forms of self-telling' by which we each transform our existence into experience" (Randall in Knapp 1997, 228).

¹⁸ For information on practical aspects of family therapy cf. Alan S. Gurman, ed. *Questions and Answers in the Practice of Family Therapy*. Vol.2. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1982. Mark A. Karpel. *Evaluating Couples: A Handbook for Practitioners*. New York: Norton & Company, 1994; Thorana N. Nelson, Gabriella Heilbrun, and Charles R. Figley. "Basic Family Therapy Skills, IV: transgenerational Theories of Family Therapy." *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 19.3 (1993): 253 – 266; Fred P. Piercy, Douglas H. Sprenkle, et al. *Family Therapy Sourcebook*. New York: Guilford Press, 1986; Robert Taibbi. *Doing Family Therapy. Craft and Creativity in Clinical Practice*. 1996. New York: Gilford Press, 1997.

*From Psychoanalysis to Contextual Therapy –
Literature and Contextual Therapy*

For almost a century now, psychoanalytical criticism has been a popular approach to analyzing fictional characters in literary and cultural studies.¹⁹ Over decades it has provided one of the foremost theoretical foundations for character analysis and/or the evaluation of the significance of the author's biography for the text. This theoretical approach, however, fails to be capable of adequately responding to the latest developments in the fictional writing about families. It employs, as the literary critic Jonathan Knapp remarks, "the psychological tools of an early twentieth-century intrapsychic psychology that no longer answers all the interesting questions posed by those standing on the brink of the twenty-first." He points out that "even recent psychoanalytical literary models that seek to incorporate contemporary psychological thinking such as ego psychology or language-oriented Lacanian theory [...] are still tied to many classic Freudian ideas" (Knapp 223). In psychoanalytical criticism, the family is only taken into consideration if it has a fundamental influence on the psychological realities and unconscious processes of an individual. Larger systemic contexts of the family are not analyzed.

Therefore, if the traditional psychoanalytical paradigm only focuses on the psychological realm of human existence and neglects the dynamics of family constellations, the question as to which approach can provide an alternative focus on family relations remains. How exactly can we analyze the interaction of characters operating in fictional families, especially in more dynamic models and focusing on interpersonal rather than psychological factors? Can we find culturally competent analytical tools for dealing with concepts of race and ethnicity in dynamic constellations of human relationship? If the modern-day fictional family is no longer the safe harbor or keeper of traditional values, what alternatives does it bring forward and how?

¹⁹ Henk De Berg gives a very interesting overview of psychoanalysis as a cultural theory in his book *Freud's Theory and Its Use in Literary and Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. 2003. Rochester: Camden House, 2004.

In an attempt to respond to some of these questions, literary scholars Knapp and Womack published the book *Reading the Family Dance. Family Systems Theory and Literary Study* (2003), which is a follow up to six articles published in a special edition of *Style* (1997)²⁰ The book comprises a variety of different models of family therapy whose analytical tools are applied to literary texts: Structural family theory as applied by Salvador Minuchin and Jay Haley, the teachings of family therapy pioneer Virginia Satir²¹, general systems theory, and family systems therapy form the multifaceted theoretical basis of this volume.

This collection of essays is divided into three sections which examine the development of the character's self in fiction, investigate the family and the discourse of community, and finally, reading family systems "in extremis," deal with the culture in which families are integrated at large.²² Reading the contributions in this book, it becomes evident that both thought and language of early family therapy are, respectively, strongly informed by cybernetics and general systems theory.

The different essays of the book are very broad in their scope. They are not directed to a specific culture and deal with topics in English, American, and Brazilian fictional and non-fictional works ranging from early seventeenth century to late twentieth century writing. These analyses focus on systemic transmission patterns of behavior and on the individual's attempts to delineate herself from destructive enmeshment in (non-)familial relationships.

While Contextual Therapy most decisively embraces the systemic character of the family in its therapeutic practice, it brings a new focus to the

²⁰ For information on the imagery of family systems cf. Paul C Rosenblatt. *Metaphors of Family Systems Theory: Toward New Constructions*. New York: Guilford Press, 1994.

²¹ Virginia Satir. *Conjoint Family Therapy*. 3rd ed. Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, 1983.

²² Contextual Therapy takes into account every client's individual and familial background and accounts for culture-specific problems in practice. For a more theoretical framework of dealing with cultural differences in family therapy and how families are impacted by cultural practices c.f. for example: Shlomo Ariel. *Culturally Competent Family Therapy: A General Model*. Westport: Greenwood Press 1999; Karen V. Hansen and Anita Ilta Garey, eds. *Families in the U.S. Kinship and Domestic Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998; Monica McGoldrick, ed. *Re-Visioning Family Therapy: Race, Culture, and Gender in Clinical Practice*. New York: Guilford Press, 1998.

analysis of fictional families. The focus on the ethical dimension of human relationships that is owed to Martin Buber's ideas of humankind's inter-relatedness with the world transcends the theoretical framework of general systems theory and family systems therapy and illuminates the invisible forces that are at work in complex family dynamics in the interplay between individual psychology, family, and larger social contexts.

Contextual Therapy approaches do not confirm traditional models of patriarchal family structures which have experienced a serious crisis in American society, nor does it invite regret over the "loss" of family structures. Instead, it facilitates an understanding of the reconfiguration of human relationships in fictional narratives of family life in American literature and focuses on the ethical dimension of inter-human relatedness, a dimension that family systems therapy hardly addresses.

Only very few references to the teachings of Contextual Therapy are made in *Reading the Family Dance*. An adequate analysis of literary characters according to the theoretical framework of Contextual Therapy has yet to be done; this is true within the framework of the family as well as more generally, within human relations as a systemic formation. Contextual Therapy embraces most of the above-mentioned approaches to the therapeutic treatment of families and shares with systems theory the fundamental belief that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The assumption that systemic rules underlie the fictional family also makes it clear that family dynamics have to be seen beyond the sum of the individual members' actions and motivations and that the dynamics of a family can never be explained properly by focusing on the intra-psychic processes of an individual. On the contrary, a significant action or development of an individual will affect all members of the system. Therefore, one needs to understand the system in which individuals act in order to develop an understanding of an individual's character (Knapp 1997, 225).

The importance of the family narrative as the center of focus in therapy constitutes one of the main points of intersection between therapy in practice and literary studies. Accordingly, Contextual Therapy shares with

literary studies this notion that families are essentially a compilation of stories. Generally speaking, human experience exists through narratives, because “we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (qtd. in Parry, 3).

The question remains whether a literary text and a patient’s narrative are subject to the same or similar rules of interpretation and production. The unifying assumption is that both are informed by language in its broadest sense: by written language, pictures, body language, or spoken language, to name only a few, and thus are intelligible to interpretation.

In literary terms, Contextual Therapy constitutes a deconstruction of the text respective to the narrative and challenges traditional expectations towards the family and thus also questions conventional reading expectations. It distrusts the teller *and* the text and uncovers hidden structures of power, hierarchy, and manipulation within the characters’ relationships. Thus, decisive factors for the relational dynamics of families such as behavioral and transactional patterns are contextualized with, and explained through, the hidden motivations that lead to such patterns.

A large study using the Buberian model of Contextual Therapy for the analysis of families in fictional works has yet to be done in order to illuminate the ontic rather than functional dependence of the individual on her relationships. In the few essays in which an attempt has been made to apply Buber’s model of genuine dialogue to works of 20th century literature, the analyses neglected the complex relational constellations of the characters and focused on an individual over and against a community which is rendered to the exploitative relational mode of the *I-It* world, in which human relations become a mere instrument for the satisfaction of egoistic needs of the individual. For example, in Un-chol Shin’s essay “The Image of the Outsider as ‘It’ in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*: A Buberian Interpretation,” the author focuses on the possible explanation of increasing violence in this novel, written by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe in 1958, by pinpointing the connection between the aggressor and his fellow villagers in Buberian terms

of *I-It*.²³ The author describes the motives for the violent action of the protagonist and the consequences for the village but limits the focus to one person's motives. A Contextual Therapy approach offers valuable analytical means, a further elaboration on and analysis of the complex system of human interaction in this novel. In expanding the focus from the protagonist to the multipersonal net of relationships, the reader develops a better understanding of the hidden dynamics in the depicted society, rife with distrust, violence, and invisible loyalties.

The theoretical framework of Contextual Therapy established and further developed by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, Helm Stierlin, Barbara Krasner, Margaret Cotroneo, and Janet Hibbs among others, provides the tools for an analysis of systemic structures of human relationships that exist within the dynamic interaction between the four dimensions of human relationships. It thus expands and transcends Buber's model of relatedness to the world and takes into consideration psychological as well as *interpersonal* factors of an individual's life.

It is in the multidirected concern for clients' narratives, which asks for hidden motivations and invisible loyalties, that Contextual Therapy is especially valuable to the analysis of character constellations in family novels. The question of who is to blame for what and why should be reformulated so as to get at the core of human action, how people are bound to each other and what effects this has on further action. In this way, one can attain a new understanding of the fictional family in novels that function as laboratories of the world.

²³ Another example of the model of I-It relations is Garifallia Doriza's "The Rise of the I-IT World in Flannery O'Connor's Monologic Community." *Literature and Theology: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Theory, Criticism and Culture* 19.4 (2005): 311 – 326.

Chapter 2

Injuries of Justice and Intergenerational Family Dynamics in *The Corrections*

In the little world in which children have their existence, whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice.

(*Great Expectations* 63)

In September 2001, Jonathan Franzen's third novel *The Corrections* was published and many reviewers and literary critics alike praised the novel as a marvelous achievement in fiction writing that draws an intimate picture of an American middle class family from the nation's heartland. Enid and Alfred Lambert, their two sons Gary and Chipper, and their only daughter Denise were perceived as fictional representatives of social and familial change in US society, and their stories were said to speak to the condition of America in the 1990's.

The following book reviews from a major magazine and newspaper respectively provide further insight into the reception of the novel among the wider public. This reception of *The Corrections* allows for conclusions on how family narratives are read and which underlying psychological discourses are prevalent in their analysis.

David Gates titled his article on *The Corrections* for *The New York Times Book Review* "American Gothic. Jonathan Franzen's novel explores the idiosyncrasies of a normal, everyday dysfunctional family." This headline evokes various associations in the readers' minds. The most obvious is the famous 1930 painting *American Gothic* by Grant Wood. In his review, Gates's version of the famous painting fittingly displays a black and white drawing of a house with a man probably in his mid thirties standing indecisively in front of it on a winter's day, facing his back to the viewer. This twenty-first century *American Gothic* depicts Americans and their relationship to their homes in bleaker colors and less ironically than the original painting did.

The home shown on the drawing of the article seems empty, resembles a house more than an actual home, and the only signs of domesticity are the curtains in the windows and the mailbox in the lower left corner. An air of melancholy surrounds the scenery with the man's shoulders slightly stooped as if heavy memories are pulling them down. Yet, leaving this place seems not an option despite his running shoes, and the connection between the man and the house go deeper than the colors that blend into each other. The sneakers symbolize the desire to turn one's back to the home and family and to leave behind the hurt and anger of the past. However, running away from the family only brings one faster back to them, a realization long confirmed by Contextual Therapy. Readers of *The Corrections* may realize after the first one and a half pages that the house epitomizes the alarm bell of anxiety that rings through Enid's and Alfred's house (3) and presumably through many other houses of the nation, too.

The second association David Gates evokes is the beginning of Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*, a much overused quotation in the context of familial misfortune: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." *The Corrections* explores the apparently uncountable ways in which literary characters can and will fail. Many factors need to be assured for happiness, while the absence of only one of these factors leads to unhappiness. Franzen carries the Anna Karenina principle to extremes and provides many reasons why the Lamberts struggle. The idiosyncrasies of the Lambert family in their individual unhappiness are scrutinized under a magnifying glass. The Anna Karenina association is fitting given the fact that many reviewers saw in *The Corrections* the return of the social novel with an auctorial narrator with an ironic twist to it as David Gates described it:

You could read "The Corrections" as a conventional realist saga of multigenerational family dynamics — that's how the publisher spins it. [...] Or you could read it as a trickier and trendier sort of work, which flawlessly mimics old-school plottiness, readability and character development in order to seduce you into realms of bottomless geopolitical-spiritual disquiet. Damned if I know. (Gates 10)

Such indecisiveness is understandable in the light of Franzen's ambitious work which covers all possible means for "correction" available in American society: "Psychodrugs (legal and illegal), the boom economy, the Internet, the therapeutic academy, postmodern educational philosophy" (Ribbat 565). Yet, while the idea of family dynamics is given credit but not further investigated in this review, David Gates does not leave the already well-trodden paths of popular psychological catchphrases such as "a normal, everyday dysfunctional family." The word 'dysfunctional' is, similar to the well-known opening lines of the probably most famous social novel of nineteenth century Russia, a much overused phrase in the popular discourse on the (un)healthiness of American families. Similar to Tolstoy's observations, it suggests that there are multiple ways of being dysfunctional.

"Dysfunctional" is never defined, just taken as a given as if every reader knew intuitively what this phrase entails. It labels a situation but does not explain the how and why of such family dynamics. In an interview for the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, Franzen puts such labeling into question and insinuates its uselessness when it comes to characterizing family life: "Ich finde diesen Ausdruck 'dysfunktionale Familie' sehr kurios. Er scheint zu implizieren, dass es so etwas wie eine funktionierende Familie gibt"²⁴ (Wellershoff 168). Yet, the functional family does exist, if only in our imagination against which we measure our own experiences, evaluate crises, and hope to reach the ideal if we only work hard enough for our goal. And it is a lucrative market, too. All sorts of different self-help books and a variety of different therapy offerings keep this industry alive and well, and the demand for such self-correction increases. However, as Franzen admits elsewhere, happy families do not lead to interesting books (cf. Winkler 23).

The Corrections is one of the interesting books which "creates the illusion of giving a complete account of the world, and while we're under its enchantment it temporarily eclipses whatever else we may have read" (Gates 12). The reviewer underlines the completeness of the picture drawn of the

²⁴ "I find the expression 'dysfunctional family' quite odd. It seems to imply that the functional family exists."

protagonists' worlds in the novel. He indirectly confirms the publisher's promoted reading of *The Corrections* as a conventional realist saga by attaching labels to the protagonists that are familiar in the context of the postmodern discourse on mental health and role assignment in the family.

Accordingly, he characterizes Chip Lambert as "the black-sheep son" in the family, (10) who fails as a teacher of literary theory at an exclusive East Coast college because he begins an affair with one of his female students. It does not become quite clear what exactly makes Chip the outsider in the family in the reviewer's eyes, besides Chip's unsettled way of living, which causes him to trade in his position as a specialist on literary theory for the career as an unsuccessful screenplay writer and his valuable book collections for fancy leather pants and gold earrings. His family, however, does not assign such a role to him. Compared to his siblings, he undergoes the greatest and most life altering changes and subscribes least to the values and code of conduct set by his parents. Chip carries the resistance to his parents' values to extremes. But does that really make him the so-called 'black-sheep' in the family?

In Contextual Therapy, the family member identified as the 'black-sheep' is most often also the identified patient, the person who carries the symptoms of 'sickness.' Yet, the patient usually holds a very important position within the family because this person ensures the status quo of (im)balances of give-and-take among family members. The question arises which invisible loyalties are at work here that make a family 'benefit' from such behavior and how this is related to the overall dynamics of the familial relationships. The review is stuck without an answer and hence does not offer a conclusive reading of *The Corrections*. Instead, it is integrated in this discourse of popular rhetoric that so neatly delineates the 'healthy' from the 'sick,' the 'functional' from the 'dysfunctional,' and the 'black-sheep' from the 'good child.'

David Gates comes to the conclusion that "if you don't end up liking each one of Franzen's people, you probably just don't like people. And by the way, assuming the book really does speak to our condition, it doesn't pretend

to know more about it than we do” (12). There is some truth to this, since Franzen succeeds in giving an engaging account of the family dynamics in which the Lamberts are entangled. All family members are created as well rounded, for the most part likeable, literary characters *despite* or maybe *because* of their faults and weaknesses. The microcosm of this particular middle class family is at the heart of the novel. At the same time, this family saga is also perceived as representative of many other families. In this respect, all unhappy families seem to be alike after all.

The omniscient narrator might be the reason why *The Corrections* does not pretend to be smarter than its readers. The narrator stays neutral for the most part as tragedies and crises hit the Lamberts, as they perpetually struggle to live up to their ambitions and dreams. And yet their efforts seem to be fruitless, if one reads the novel against the background of American success stories. The fate of the Lambert family is certainly not told with a moralizing undertone, pointing at transgressions of its protagonists. If at all, it is the transgressions of society at large that are targeted. The many ways of correction that the society offers for endless perfectibility are being exposed as pitfalls and illusions of an easy remedy from faultiness.

The novel does not spoon-feed the reader. The narrator does not suggest that there is a lesson to be learnt from the book: “What *The Corrections* is not is therapeutic. While Franzen may forgive a few characters, he won’t fix them. [...] Instead of therapy, he proposes transcendence,” (33) writes John Leonard in his article on *The Corrections* for *The New York Review of Books*. Yet, the novel is read and reviewed in the context of therapeutic discourses. Gates speaks of Alfred as “an open-and-shut case of anality and sexual repression,” (Gates 12) a description reminiscent of psychoanalysis and Leonard says that with *The Corrections* Franzen wrote “a wonderful novel about nuclear family fission, with more on his mind than Marx or Freud” (Leonard 33). Thus, both reviewers link their reading of *The Corrections* to a Freudian discourse.

The word play “nuclear family fission” deserves a closer look with regard to the reading of the novel linked to therapeutic discourse. The

nuclear family is a concept that is a central concern in American society. In the past it had been celebrated, idealized, doubted, deconstructed and fragmented, and then revived again by Franzen. Jeffrey Eugenides calls him a post-postmodern writer who belongs to a generation that learnt to deconstruct stories before it understood to tell them:

Franzen, der Rekonstruktivist, gibt uns die menschliche Person als denkendes, fühlendes, trauerndes, leidendes, strebsames Wesen zurück. Niemand, der gegenwärtig schreibt, schenkt uns Charaktere von größerer Tiefe, und genau darum dreht sich der ganze Wirbel, den sein Roman erzeugt hat: es geht um den altmodischen, vermeintlich abgenutzten allwissenden Erzähler. [...] Es mag also sein, dass wir unsere Seele wiederhaben, doch ist sie, wie Franzen meint, nicht unbedingt in guter Form. (107)²⁵

At the center of his novel Franzen works with a concept of family that the experienced reader is acquainted with. The specifics of the settings in which the literary characters are embedded may be postmodern, though the novel's design of the nuclear family is everything but that. It seems "as if nobody ever told Franzen that the social novel is dead and straight white males vestigial" (Leonard 33). Franzen puts together the pieces of the fragmented nuclear family and reassembles it in a postmodern social context. However, at the same time, he dissects parts of the psychological landscape of his protagonists and lets the reader partake in the inner struggles the characters are fighting with themselves and their other family members.

Therefore, this "nuclear fission," as John Leonard titled his review, may take place on the level of omniscient narration, that is to say the narrator provides a detailed idea of the psychological idiosyncrasies of the Lamberts. But this "nuclear family fission" does not happen when it comes to the familial relationships in the novel. The Lamberts may be a troubled family entangled in generation conflicts. All members are fighting with their own demons of the past and present. They are physically separated from each other. Alfred and Enid live in St. Jude, in the Midwest. Gary, Chipper, and

²⁵ "Franzen, a reconstructivist, gives us back the human person as a thinking, feeling, grieving, suffering, ambitious being. There is currently no one writing more deeply developed characters, and this depth constitutes the spine of his novel: it is all about the old-fashioned, allegedly worn out omniscient narrator. (...) It could be that we have our souls again, yet as Franzen sees it, they are not necessarily in good shape."

Denise live on the East Coast and only see each other sporadically. But this geographical and sometimes emotional distance between the individual family members never leads to fission of their ties to each other. Just the opposite can be observed. The geographical distance paradoxically illuminates the close ties of the children to their parents in the Midwest, and their futile attempts at correcting their parents' mistakes of the past only shows how strong these invisible bonds of belonging are. The events in the novel confirm Buber's model of relating according to which the dyadic structure of the world cannot be further split into parts and that the reason for inner growth does not lie in a constructive relationship to oneself but in engaging in relationships to others and in realizing and accepting that as an individual one is irrevocably part of such a dyad of relating. Further into the chapter, this thought will be elaborated on in the context of Gary Lambert's process of emancipation from his parents' influence.

The two reviews discussed above portray Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* as a return of the tradition of the classical social novel modified for a twenty-first century postmodern readership. Yet, both articles also acknowledge the unique creation of believable characters that transcends nineteenth century narrative traditions. In the description of the Lambert family, Gates as well as Leonard draw on the psychoanalytical model of character analysis. They also make use of terms and concepts from popular psychological discourse such as the 'black-sheep' concept, conventionally denoting a family member's outsider position and the role as the troublemaker within the family, or "everyday dysfunctional family," which arouses the reader's curiosity (after all, this is the purpose of a review) and offers a way for the reader to relate to the events in the book. The two reviews show how much the reception of fictional families is tied to popular psychological discourses in American society.

However, they also show how comfortably such concepts and terms are used in everyday contexts and how little role assignments and labeling are questioned. Terms such as "dysfunctional" and "passive-aggressive" (Leonard 34) are taken out of the specific therapeutic context and now live a life of

their own in the everyday language of American society. Thus, another reason why *The Corrections* might not pretend to know more than its readers is because the novel as well as the readership exist in and are influenced by the same therapeutic discourses.

A reading of *The Corrections* within the framework of Contextual Therapy re-interprets the complex family dynamics of the novel and sheds new light on the character constellation with regard to the therapeutic discourse in which Franzen's novel has been discussed. In *The Corrections*, the traditional design of the nuclear family is being re-affirmed in a major literary work. It is, however, not presented – in the way conservative ideologues would do – as a reconstruction of a nostalgic and ideological concept that offers the solution to the most pressing social problems prevalent in American society. The family in this novel is not the rock to lean on in stormy weather; it is the cause for these difficulties. The novel portrays a nuclear family in distress and its members as inevitably linked to each other. Yet each individual character seems lonely in its own way.

The family dynamics in *The Corrections* are partly characterized by the three Lambert children's strong desire for dissociation from their parents. This entails not just putting a geographical distance between them and their parents but also the rejection of their values and lifestyle which are shaped by the region of the Midwest. To a varying degree all three children are opposed to the example their parents set for them in life. Enid and Alfred are the products of their upbringing in the Midwest. This region plays a significant role in the novel because firstly, it is the location of many of the events portrayed and the home of Gary, Chip, and Denise although they leave it for the East Coast and only rarely and reluctantly visit. Secondly, the Midwest occupies an important place in the nation's cultural history as the 'heartland' of America. In the past, this part of the US was perceived as 'most American' with its optimistic egalitarianism, stability, friendliness, and family oriented social structure. The Midwest was seen as the nation's (real) birthplace, the place where the so-called 'national American character' came into being, and closely linked to this image is the idea of the pastoral garden. It is the bearer

of values that are embodied in a harmonious family and a home. This myth about the Midwest as the ‘heartland’ envisions a region

consisting of families, who for generations have owned their farms, as well as of small towns whose inhabitants are provincial, ingenuous and generally optimistically inclined and function as the moral and social mediators between the otherwise culturally much more diversified regions in the U.S.” (Poole)

In *The Corrections*, mother Enid Lambert is what one would call “the novel’s spokesperson for the values of the Middle West” (ibid). These values are closely linked to a certain image of the nuclear family as the stable center of life. Thus, Enid was very disappointed when her daughter did not march down the “heartland Protestant aisles” (*The Corrections* 136) with

a young man with a neat haircut of the kind you saw in ads for menswear [...] who had an upbeat attitude and was polite to older people and didn’t believe in premarital sex [...] and who came from a loving, stable, traditional family and wanted to start a loving, stable, traditional family of his own. (135)

This idea of home and family is basically the standardized Midwestern image of wholesomeness, and in Enid’s world “a miracle of niceness” (135). Thus, in the standardized kitsch of Midwestern weddings she “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” (135). However, the region which provides a matrix of identity for Enid is being rejected by her children.

Alfred Lambert’s mode of thinking and traits are influenced by hardship and sacrifice during his childhood in the Midwest. In the course of the events in the novel, the narrator only gradually gives a detailed insight into Alfred’s thoughts and the factors which influence his actions and his character. The following quotation is of significance for understanding Alfred’s mindset. He was brought up on a farm and “any soil that might have nurtured hope in Alfred had blown away in one or another west Kansas drought” (286). This statement reveals the reason why Alfred’s basic attitude in life is not shaped by hopefulness towards a happier and more satisfying future.

The quotation above constitutes a basic example of the interlocking of the first two dimensions of relational realities which, according to the theoretical framework of Contextual Therapy, characterize every individual's and every family's life. In my chapter on theory, I have shown that Contextual Therapy established four dimensions of human relationships. On the level of the first dimension, which contains the facts of a person's background, the quote gives the information that Alfred experienced hardship in his life due to longer lasting droughts which severely affected his parents' economic situation. In his essay "Contextual Therapy: Therapeutic Leverages in Mobilizing Trust" (the first publication that actually contains the name "Contextual Therapy"), Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy stresses the importance of what he calls "facts or destiny" for the individual's development because "the factual configuration of one's origins and genetic rootedness in sex, race, nationality, religion and family constitute essential determinants of one's basic nature and the fairness of obligations" (*Foundations* 203). Boszormenyi-Nagy's observations about the influence of "facts" on human existence refer to the ethical consequences these facts have on an individual's relational reality. The fairness of obligations is a central concern in recapitulating and surfacing family dynamics for Contextual Therapy. Engaging with the roots for the imbalance of give-and-take in a family provides the greatest potential for a healing process of all family members.

However, it also follows from Boszormenyi-Nagy's definition that the parameters of the dimension of "facts and destiny" are not simply objective or given circumstances as the terms might suggest at first, but are ultimately embedded in a larger socio-cultural environment. Concepts such as race and sex become ideologically charged in the social context and are closely tied to specific cultural dynamics such as racism or the assignment of gender roles. Thus, Enid's life as a housewife and mother as well as her position in the nuclear family along with Alfred's familial role are influenced by socially determined value criteria.

The second piece of information the quote on Alfred's upbringing in the Midwest reveals is how his individual psychology (second dimension) was

affected. He reacted with hopelessness in the face of dire poverty. This reaction to or consequence he bears out of this situation is processed in his mind. These reactions and consequences provide important information on the level of individual psychology. Contextual Therapy agrees with classical psychotherapy that “the continuous experience of a unique self and the organization of its behavior are *subjectively programmed* in each person’s mind” (*Between Give & Take* 50). The dimension of individual psychology is concerned with the way the individual processes the information from her environment and then “internalize[s] this into cognitive information concerning beliefs, experiences, emotions [...] It basically describes the process of how individuals develop traits that strive for love, power, and pleasure” (*New Contextual Therapy* 8). Therefore, an individual’s personality is formed in this dimension. Alfred’s puritan work ethic, self-denial and self-sacrifice as well as his behavior in his relationship to Enid can be traced back to his experiences on the Midwestern farm.

Alfred and Enid are part of the “Greatest Generation” which grew up during the Great Depression and WW II. This generation had little to expect from life during their childhood and had to learn to live on little money. Thus, frugality and hard work are two of the greatest virtues the people of this generation learnt. However, on the average, this generation also experienced unprecedented prosperity compared to the earlier generations which included owning a home, probably also a car, and the opportunity to secure a well paid job. Alfred was able to work until his early retirement as an engineer of the Midland Pacific Railroad company. Yet, with three children belonging to the baby boomer generation, money was nevertheless tight in the Lambert household. The narrator suggests that it is Alfred’s *early experiences* in his family of origin during times of economic hardship that affects most decisively his outlook on life and the relationship to his wife Enid. The comparably wealthier life the couple is able to afford later in life has never been as influential to their outlook on life as the deprivation during their childhood and adolescence.

On the level of systemic interactions (third dimension of relational realities) Alfred's and Enid's communication and behavior patterns become apparent. It is important to realize that "the behavioral interactions of the *supraindividual level* constitute an entity of their own. This entity, or system, produces transactions that regulate and define the system that we can see in the way of organizational structure, power alignments, and common system beliefs," (*New Contextual Therapy* 9) so that knowledge about the individuals' psychologies is not enough to explain transactional patterns of behavior. The system here turns out to be more than the sum of its various components. These relational patterns "become predictable for members in relationships and therefore lead to beliefs and actions around power and organization" (9-10). In other words, the systemic transactions become "objective" and can be observed.

As long as the children are still living with their parents, the organization of the Lambert family follows traditional patriarchal patterns, which Alfred already experienced in his family of origin. When Alfred and Enid were engaged, the couple visited his parents and saw that "his father kept a slave whom he was married to" (308). While Enid is certainly no slave to Alfred, he nevertheless repeats his father's pattern in his own marriage inasmuch he does not allow for back talk or disrespect of his person and confirms the structures of his family of origin. The following quotation stands out as a clear example of power hierarchies and relational and communication patterns that are prevalent in the Lambert family. The two sons, Gary and Chipper, come home after a long school day and run to greet their father with love and affection, but Alfred reacts with rejection: "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" (289-90). A clear hierarchy is thus noticeable between parents and children, observed here in the relationship between the members of the "Greatest Generation" and their children, the baby boomers. There is hardly any boundary dissolution between the generations. Parents of this generation were less likely to raise their children as their best friends or even

partners. This laissez-faire attitude of raising children is also a characteristic of the relationship between the baby boomer generation and their children.

To a certain extent, Alfred takes Enid for granted, a pattern of behavior that stems from his life on the Midwestern farm. As stated above, Alfred's basic virtue is discipline and a merciless work ethic to which not only he himself has to subordinate but which also his wife, children, and friends must follow. Thus, it is not surprising that he shows no pity for Enid when she is four months pregnant and left alone with two sick kids and a tremendous load of housework, "his own mother had driven a team of plow horses around a twenty-acre field when she was eight months pregnant, so he was not exactly sympathetic" (289). The narrator further explains that

if she tried to get credit for these labors of hers, however, Al simply asked her whose labors had *paid* for the house and food and linens? Never mind that his work so satisfied him that he didn't need her love, while her chores so bored her that she needed his love doubly. In any rational accounting, his work canceled her work. (288)

Alfred's authority within the family as the breadwinner does not allow for a difference of opinion or for the consideration of Enid's needs; though she works very hard in her own respect, it is unpaid labor and therefore less valued in the family.

The quotation cited above also expresses ambivalence with regards to Alfred's individual psychology. He is not as self-contained as he likes to appear and his desires and hopes in life go far beyond his work alone. This, however, he keeps to himself and only in his head he admits to his very intimate longings. He secretly wishes

that he might someday not have to worry about money: it was a dream identical to the dream of being comforted by a woman, truly comforted, when the misery overcame him. The dream of radical transformation: of one day waking up and finding himself a wholly different (more confident, more serene) kind of person, of escaping that prison of the given, of feeling divinely capable. (313)

The novel does not provide any further hints as to why Alfred developed such an image of himself other than the few references to his stern Midwestern

upbringing. In this context, the different passages in which Alfred cites the philosopher Schopenhauer give further information concerning his views on life. The following passage concerns his disappointment with Enid, when he retreats to his basement after work but secretly hopes she would come and pity and comfort him because this was

the one thing he asked of her, the one thing—
(Schopenhauer: *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.*)
But no rescue was forthcoming. (306)

The one thing he asks of her, consolation, is being denied to him, and he equally denies Enid her demands she makes on him: attention, understanding, and love. The philosophical citation indicates, though never explicitly expresses, which attitude Alfred has towards the duties of a woman in the life of a man, something Enid does not fulfill to his satisfaction. Many such Schopenhauer quotations can be found in *The Corrections*, all of which are used as a means to describe Alfred's view on life in a more sophisticated way. An analogy between the Schopenhauer quotations and Alfred's actual opinions is rarely directly drawn. Instead, they are only juxtaposed to certain events in his life, which adds to the affect his momentary feelings and thoughts have on him. They indicate the severity of the situation's impact on Alfred.

Of Enid's personal background the reader learns even less. During the Great Depression she worked at her mother's boardinghouse, was in charge of the bookkeeping and tax regulations, saved money to go to night school in order to get a degree in accounting "which she hoped she would never have to use. [...] Her mother had married a man who didn't earn and died young. Avoiding such a husband was priority with Enid. She intended to be comfortable in life as well as happy" (308). Therefore, her aim in life was to find a provider, following the expected way of women of her class and in her generation. The few men who crossed her path and actually proposed to her she was skeptical of. When Alfred came into her mother's boardinghouse because of his work for the Midland Pacific Railroad company, she wondered

“what to believe about Al Lambert? There were the old-man things he said about himself [related to Schopenhauer’s philosophy mainly] 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” (309).

Her choice of her future spouse is decisively influenced by the experiences she had in her family of origin. She envisions a different life for herself than her mother had. Yet, she shows her loyalty to her mother by not choosing the soldiers who proposed to her because they were in danger of being killed in combat during WW II. Had she done that she feared her life would likely have developed like her mother’s. Therefore, in rejecting these men she confirms the values and standards set by her mother not to marry hastily and without due consideration.

Instead, she invests her energies in Alfred, who seems promising, despite his peculiar world views. Once she becomes a mother and settles for a life as a house wife, her disappointment with life sets in. At this point the narrator gives an explanation for her being torn apart by her disappointing choice: “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” (309). This means that it would have been easier for her to deal with his secluded and at times rude character and the disappointments and emotional pain he caused her.

Alfred, however, communicates with her in an obstructed way through behavioral patterns which she cannot decipher as affectionate. It seems likely that Alfred subscribes to an assumption which many partners in relationships have and which is also the reason why communication between the couple is difficult. It is the belief that one’s needs will automatically be met simply because one loves or is loved by another person. This, however, is an erroneous belief (*Try to See It My Way* 22).

This deception has two sources, both of which are rooted in childhood experiences. First of all, mind reading cannot be equated with love. Yet, as a child an individual often has the experience that her needs are being met without having to identify them because her parents know her well enough to

know her needs for nurturing and care (23). There is no indication in *The Corrections* that Alfred experienced this kind of upbringing. The second source for such behavior seems much more likely in his case. Parents have the difficult task of knowing what it is like to be their child and to figure out their child's needs in order to then respond sensitively to these needs.

However, if parents are not interested in these needs and respond in ways that are interpreted as rejection, the children develop a sense of vulnerability if they are asked to express their needs because this includes a possible rejection of the articulated need (23). Since Alfred's father "kept a slave to whom he was married," it seems unlikely that his father took Alfred's needs and opinions into account. It can be assumed that Alfred was a subordinate to his father even though the text does not allow for a clear proof of this assumption. Therefore, Alfred feels too vulnerable to actually explicitly state what he wants and needs. Towards the very end of the novel, a statement made by Denise, who is probably the closest to Alfred Lambert, supports the aforementioned assumption about Alfred's insecurities: "She'd never really known her father. [...] With his shyness and his formality and his tyrannical rages he protected his interior so ferociously that if you loved him, as she did, you learn that you could do him no greater kindness than to respect his privacy" (*The Corrections* 604f.).

So far, I have referred to the first three dimensions of Contextual Therapy to explain the relationship of Alfred and Enid. The first is concerned with the "facts and destiny" as Boszormenyi-Nagy named it. These facts concern the families of origin Alfred and Enid are born into and their environmental determinants such as social class, the occupation of the parents, and contemporary historical events, e.g. the Great Depression, Draught, and WWII. The second deals with the individual psychology of Alfred and Enid. It is the dimension in which their individual characters are shaped. It basically denotes the process of how they react to their environment and which conclusions they draw about themselves as individuals. For example, Alfred's processing of the events evolving around the drought and the following economic hardships on top of the hard physical

labor leads to his pessimism, a world view that is decisively fueled by the writings of Schopenhauer. Enid's experiences made in her personal environment leads her to the conclusion that she is looking for a provider as her future spouse so she can attain her goal of living happily and in financial security. The third dimension is concerned with systemic interactions and patterns of communication and organization of power to name only some determinants. The sum of the individual psychologies of the family members does not add up to the whole system. Therefore, these patterns have to be investigated on a *supraindividual* level. They manifest themselves in observable and objectifiable interactions in relationships.

The first three dimensions are well-known in the practice of a variety of therapeutic approaches. What sets it apart from other therapy branches is the fourth dimension, which deals with the intergenerational consequences of give-and-take and loyalty commitments. While a therapist is able to trigger a progress of healing among the family members on the level of these observable transactions, the practice of Contextual Therapy illuminates that "a simple intervention based on the present family transactions does not address the intergenerational issues of relational ethics, and will leave the family members vulnerable to further developmental challenges" (Hibbs 37).

In the previous chapter on the origins and specificities of Contextual Therapy, the fourth dimension has been introduced as the realm of human relationships that is concerned with the dialectic of relational ethics. It contains the other three dimensions of an individual's relational reality and influences what Buber called the justice of the human order, a criterion of interpersonal fairness (*Foundations* 306). Due to the fact that these dimensions are dynamic concepts which are interdependent, it is difficult to establish a clear hierarchy between them.

To be more concrete, relational ethics refers to claims and balances of fairness in intergenerational relationships. The concept of fairness is part of the justice system of a family, which manages the balances of give-and-take between the individual members (Hibbs 31). In therapeutic practice, the ledger of merits and obligations is a means to keep track of the reasons for as

well as consequences of transactional patterns among family members. The fairness model of a family is decisively influenced by the two different concepts of fairness the two partners brought with them from their family of origin.

In the case of *The Corrections*, Alfred's lack of understanding for his wife also results from his own family of origin. However, this is not a consequence of systemic determinism with regard to family dynamics. A certain relational pattern does not automatically transfer to another relationship. But Contextual Therapy in practice shows that it is often likely to happen, and when it does, destructive entitlement and an already lopsided ledger of merits and obligations as in the case of Alfred and his parents is further put off balance in the next generation. The more unaware one is about these relational patterns the likelier it is, though, that one's life will unconsciously evolve in similar ways and the more one potentially becomes subject to these dynamics. The next part of this chapter explains the system of justice within the relationship of the Lambert parents with regard to the dimension of relational ethics.

Alfred's relationship to Enid, which is also expressed in the aforementioned transactional patterns of communication, is influenced by the model of fairness of his and her families of origin respectively. In the course of the events the reader gets to know Alfred's aforementioned familial circumstances. From them the fairness model based on authoritative patriarchal structures becomes clear. The few passages about Alfred's upbringing suggest that he accumulated destructive entitlement in the relational ethics of his family of origin, which means "expecting that one can receive with no obligation to give in return" (32). The lack of due consideration for Alfred's needs and wants and an insufficient investment of his parents in his well-being probably led to his negative loyalty towards his father.

In the relationship to Enid it becomes clear that he is withholding care yet demands due care of his needs and wishes and thus confirms his father's model of off-balanced fairness: "Care manifests itself in the physical and

emotional tasks of caretaking [...] Someone's concern for us is the magnet of our reciprocal concern. When we do not experience another's concern for us, we tend to withdraw from the attempt of reciprocity in order to 'take care of ourselves'" (Cotroneo, 1986, 416). While Alfred does not entirely withhold the attempt of reciprocity, after all he is the breadwinner of the family and provides for his family financially, he obstructs and restrains it, which causes Enid much grief in her marriage.

Negative entitlement is accumulated if the balance of give-and-take is violated, meaning if members of the family do not receive due investment in their well-being, their trust reserves are diminished. They then do not develop a sense of providing due care for others in relationships. The result is that Alfred is not free to make loyalty commitments to his wife. Since Alfred did not receive heartfelt attention he feels entitled to demand it from his wife. The justice system in his family of origin was violated and he deals with "these injustices, as many adults do, by a retreat, both internally and from the actual parental relationships" (35). In doing so, he tries to recharge the trust reserves that had been diminished in his family of origin by depleting the ones in his relationship to Enid.

A thorough analysis of the marital relationship between Alfred and Enid and their justice systems in their respective families of origin is impossible due to the lack of sufficient insight into their family of origins. The narrator does not provide enough information to include Enid's model of fairness into the analysis. However, in transactional patterns of power structures and communication, it is possible to draw conclusions and make assumptions from their behavior as to what influenced their realities of relational ethics. In this, such a reading of *The Corrections* equals the techniques of contextual therapists who often have to be content with similarly little information of a client's background and family of origin due to the fact that the other members are either unwilling to participate or in many cases are already deceased. In other instances it is simply too painful and traumatic for the client to include all family members personally into the therapy sessions.

In this case, it is important to pay close attention to concrete patterns of behavior and power alignments in order to get to the justice system and connect it to the different models of fairness of the individual family members. Since this form of therapy is strongly based on language and storytelling, the therapist also has to pay close attention to specific formulations and statements which convey, perhaps unconsciously to the client, information about the relational realities of the family. Then conclusions about the relational ethics and its implications for each of the family members can be drawn. It is in the interest of the therapist to include all the members' models of fairness and to give due consideration to the viewpoint of all people involved in the therapy sessions. Through this multidirected partiality, the therapist makes sure that the trust reserves of all family members can potentially be mobilized in order for a process of healing to start and to prevent further damage to the ledger of justice of already existing and future generations.²⁶

Such a reading informed by Contextual Therapy also transcends interpretations of family constellations focusing on the individual intrapersonal realities. Thus, these "idiosyncrasies of a normal, everyday dysfunctional family" (Gates 10) are analyzed beyond popular psychological discourses which often evolve around psychoanalytical approaches and notions of character analysis. Expressions such as "sexual repression" as applied to Alfred or the "black-sheep" concept used to describe Chip's role in the family are, in their everyday use, misleading or denote only a small part of the complex family constellation in *The Corrections*.

The family ledger of give-and-take that influenced Alfred's relationship to Enid, who brought her own family of origin model of fairness into her marriage, also influences their children's lives. Thus, this ledger is not only applicable to the vertical relationship between the parents but also to Gary, Chip, and Denise, who are the direct bearers of possible consequences from a lopsided balance of give-and-take in this family model of fairness and justice.

²⁶ Cf. Judith Grunebaum. "Multidirected Partiality and the 'Parental Imperative'." *Psychotherapy* 24.35 (1987): 646 – 656.

It is part of the “facts” into which they are born, their heritage from their parents’ families. Underlying this idea is the assumption that disturbances in the family ledger, which were caused by injustices at one point in the family history of two generations or in a horizontal relationship of one generation, affects the trust reserves and accumulation of destructive and constructive entitlement of a third generation and so on.

Often it is the continuance of unjust and just actions which have an effect on the ledger of merit and obligations within a relationship and not so much a single action that was detrimental to the trust reserves in human interactions. The repercussions of the injured justice within a relationship depends on the one hand on how the individual reacts personally to the events and behaviors that led to the hurt and on the grade of awareness of such injuries on the other: “Depending on the nature of the injustice suffered and its consequences, children, as they grow up, will develop justice-seeking behavior, which reflects and attempts to right prior imbalances of give-and-take. This quest for justice takes place first within the original context, then, failing the restoration of justice, outside of it” (Hibbs 32). The parameters that determine what an individual considers fair to her are the intersection of cognitive maturity (on the level of individual psychology), the makeup of the justice system of her family of origin and the previous loyalty expectations within the relationship (32). However, Contextual Therapy in practice shows that if an individual was subjected to injustice within the family of origin, she is prone to continue this injustice as a “norm for relating outside the family” (Cotroneo, 1986, 418).

In *The Corrections*, Gary Lambert exhibits such justice-seeking behavior first in its original context in the vertical relationship with his parents and then, failing to attain what he considers due justice to him, in the horizontal relationship to his wife. This situation becomes more complicated as he has three sons with his wife who are, due to the systemic nature of the justice concept, also exposed to the dynamics of the lopsided balance of give-and-take within the family structure. The three sons Aaron, Caleb, and Jonah become subjects to behavioral patterns initiated by Gary’s wife Caroline that

are known as split loyalty, a form of parentification that forces the children to choose between one or the other parent. In what follows, the consequences of the ledger of merits and obligations from his family of origin for Gary's life will be analyzed in connection to the influence his relational realities have on his own family with his sons and wife.

Gary, forty-three years old, is the oldest of the three Lambert children and the vice president at CenTrust Bank. His wife Caroline is a former lawyer from old money and quit working after she gave birth to her sons in order to spend more time with them. Gary lives with his family in northwest Philadelphia, and is mainly concerned with correcting and avoiding the mistakes his father made in life. He feels constantly uncomfortable with his background, blaming his parents for being the person he now is. His relationship with his parents is very strained, and he seems resentful of growing up in this family:

But his entire life was set up as a correction of his father's life, and he and Caroline had long agreed that Alfred was clinically depressed, and clinical depression was known to have genetic bases and to be substantially heritable, and so Gary had no choice but to keep resisting ANHEDONIA, keep gritting his teeth, keep doing his best to *have fun* ...(207)

This quotation contains several points that are of relevance for the understanding of Gary's relational realities. Firstly, the disapproval of the father figure Alfred, whose life serves as a negative example in Gary's own way of life, is emphasized in this citation. He feels strongly opposed to the life choices his father made. As a result, he measures his choices according to the degree to which they equal his father's life. Secondly, depression seems to be part of the family history of facts that Gary inherited. At least, this is his fear and since Gary invests much energy to erase any character traits that would remind him of being his father's son, the thought of suffering from depression is heavy on his mind. Thirdly, this quote reveals that he found in his wife Caroline an ally in his efforts to oppose the influence of his father on his personality: "She was the sole trustee of Gary's ambition not to be like his father" (197). Therefore, she exercises an enormous influence on his mental and emotional well-being, a position which she is able to exploit for her own

benefit when it comes to putting him under pressure to achieve what she wants.

Gary could very well be the male figure who is standing in his running shoes in front of the house of the 21st century new *American Gothic* drawing described in the beginning of this chapter. None of the Lambert children puts as much effort into running away from his background as he does. To assure himself of his difference to his parents and of the comfortable certainty of being a non-Midwesterner he reacts snobbishly to everything he identifies as belonging to the Midwest. He, as a materialist and a proponent of consumerism, takes some comfort in the fact that he is a well-dressed, good-looking, and well-earning male adult to whom women look up in admiration.

On his rare visits to St. Jude he is extremely delighted when he notices people socially lower ranking compared to him: “Not one woman half as pretty or as well dressed as Caroline. Not one man with a decent haircut or an abdomen as flat as Gary’s. [...] God, he hated the Midwest!” (204) He is almost disgusted at the people he meets, who are over-weight, badly dressed, drive the ‘wrong’ cars, and buy the ‘wrong’ goods. In his efforts to use the region as a negative matrix for his self-image, he identifies the role of the Midwesterners as having the ungrateful task of being the ‘mob’ of society: “Who would perform the thankless work of being comparatively *uncool*? Well, there was still the citizenry of America’s heartland” (226). ‘Unfortunately’ this citizenry migrates to the cooler, more sophisticated coasts — a tendency he observes with anxiety. He wants the Midwesterners to stay where and how they are, “in order that a strategic national reserve of cluelessness might be maintained, a wilderness, of taste which would enable people of privilege, like himself, to feel extremely civilized in perpetuity” (227f.).

Gary’s feelings of elation at the sight of less privileged Midwesterners are a sure sign of his dissatisfaction with life and of his insecurities. It follows that for Gary the Midwest serves as an ‘anti-place’ which stands in opposition to his values, principles, and desires. But his background is deeply rooted in his personality. Gary could get out of the Midwest, but he is not able to get

the Midwest out of him. He is a good example for Buber's notion of the irrevocable dyad consisting of a human being and an *other*. Again, Buber's observation that "the inmost growth of the self does not take place, as people like to suppose today, through our relationship to ourselves, but through being made present by the other" (*Knowledge of Man* 61) is relevant to Gary's development. His "confusion of emotional freedom with physical separation" (*Invisible Loyalties* 12) as a symptom of western societies is also the reason why he has such difficulties in coming to terms with his family of origin. His attempts at separating himself, his lifestyle and his way of raising his children from the ways of his upbringing only show how deeply ingrained the influence of his family of origin is and how little of the past he was able to process in the course of his adulthood.

The justice system of Gary's family of origin leaves him devoid of approval from his parents. Gary, being the oldest child, holds a special position within the family because most of the expectations which his parents had for their own lives are now being transferred to him. The oldest child in the family often is the one who confirms the values and norms parents set in the family, identifies with authority²⁷ and also feels in charge of the well-being of the family. At the age of ten, Gary already tried to play the mediator in the family, the one who keeps the moods of his parents in balance and therefore contributes to the maintenance of the status quo in the relationship of Alfred and Enid: "Every night after dinner he honed this skill of enduring a dull thing that brought a parent pleasure. It seemed to him a lifesaving skill. He believed that a terrible harm would come to him if he could no longer preserve his mother's illusions" (304). The sense of an impending catastrophe which would hit him if he did not fulfill the role which he very likely assigned to himself is fueled by expectations which the parents put on him. It can be assumed that children keep repeating patterns for which they are either recognized or praised by their parents. Gary finds his niche in the family as the one responsible for their happiness. Noticing that he does make

²⁷ For a more thorough analysis of personality development among children of a family in connection to the rivalry for parents' favor and investment see Frank J. Sulloway. *Born to Rebel. Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives*. London: Abacus, 1996.

them happy gives him pleasure and confirms him as a family member. However, failing in meeting these expectations would lead to self-inflicted feelings of guilt and this sense of being punished.

As Gary keeps trying to please his parents throughout his childhood and also in his adulthood years, his trust reserves are diminished because he senses that no matter what he does it is never quite enough. At a visit in St. Jude a few years after he started his own family, Gary is repeatedly exposed to his mother's criticism. In bragging about her daughter's life style, she indirectly passes judgment on the way he lives his life:

And in her [Enid's] backhandedly comparative way she carped about Gary's "materialism" and "ostentation" and "obsession with money"— as if she herself weren't dollar-sign-headed! As if she herself, given the opportunity, wouldn't have bought a house like Gary's and furnished it very much the same way he had! *He wanted to say to her: Of your three children, my life looks by far the most like yours! I have what you taught me to want! And now that I have it, you disapprove of it!* (252)

The narrator expresses in this quotation a criticism and disapproval of Gary's choices in life which follows a certain communication pattern that Enid adopted towards her children. Chip makes the same observation when Enid sends letters to him containing praise or disapproval of one or another of her children: "Enid was skilled at playing her children off against each other" (60). It is difficult to determine the motivation behind this model of communication when it comes to criticizing her children. It may be the conclusion she drew from her position within the family in which she felt as the underappreciated wife who had to accept the subordinate role to her husband (who as explained above defended his position as the head of the family through his function as the breadwinner in the family).

Such playing the children off against one another or against her husband has a negative effect on the trust reserves of the family members. The following scene from Gary's and Chip's childhood demonstrates how the children become the victims of Enid's and Alfred's unresolved marital conflicts. While Alfred is in his lab in the basement and Enid and Gary are playing ping pong, Chip is forced to sit at the table until he has eaten the

vegetables he dislikes so much. The order comes from Alfred, who quickly leaves for the basement. In an attempt to get to Alfred through using her youngest son against him, she justifies her not intervening and leaving him at the table for hours as follows:

She reasoned that if the problem in the dining-room was her responsibility then she was horrendously derelict in not resolving it, and a loving mother could never be so derelict, and she was a loving mother, so the responsibility must not have been hers. Eventually Alfred would surface and see what a beast he'd been and be very, very sorry. (310)

Her actual problem was her justified claim for attention after a two weeks separation from Alfred due to his work. His negligence of her is fought out through their children, since “there was something almost tasty and almost sexy in letting the annoying boy be punished by her husband. In standing blamelessly aside while the boy suffered for having hurt her” (302). Enid finds sexual pleasure in her husband’s exercising his authority over their children. Alfred’s punishment of Chipper indirectly gives her the attention and protection she longs to get from her husband. Even if Alfred does not spend quality time with her, then at least he acknowledges her pain caused by their son.

Enid’s and Alfred’s power struggle leaves the children in the middle of the dispute. This kind of injustice endured over longer periods of time will most likely express itself through the (in)ability of the children to form meaningful relationships and will affect the family’s ledger of merits and obligations negatively. One earns merit or positive entitlement through caring for the other and at the same time the other is assigned the obligation to return care in a relationship of a meaningful balance of give-and-take. Similar to what Alfred does in his relationship, namely trying to balance the injustice endured in his family of origin, his children will most likely also seek ways to get what they consider fair to them, first in their family of origin and, if this is not possible, in other relationships meaningful to them.

The circle of negative entitlement and endured injustice closes for Alfred when he sees his youngest boy sitting at the dinner table and being treated unfairly: “The kitchen and dining room were ablaze in light, and there appeared to be a small boy slumped over the dining-room table, his face on his place mat. The scene was so wrong, so sick with Revenge, that for the moment Alfred honestly thought the boy at the table was a ghost from his own childhood” (314). Bringing Chip to bed, he acknowledges the unfairness if not to his son then at least to himself and confronts Enid: “You’re using him against me, and I don’t care for it one bit. He should have been put to bed at eight” (318). The parents agree upon the fact that this is not going to happen again. Yet, this incident leaves a mark on Chip: “And if you sat at the dinner table long enough, whether in punishment or in refusal or simply in boredom, you never stopped sitting there. Some part of you sat there all your life” (311). Metaphorically speaking, the last quote shows the impact injustice has on the relational realities of the individual who had to suffer from it. Some part of Chip never forgot the unfair treatment and will always be able to go back to the time it happened.

Gary’s behavior in his relationship to his wife Caroline is shaped by his family of origin system of justice and the notion of what was considered to be a fair towards the different family members. Since it is Gary’s secret obsession not to become like his father, he consciously tries to do exactly the opposite to what his father would do in his situation. He forces himself to behave in a way not reminiscent of his upbringing and as mentioned before finds in his wife his main ally for this undertaking. What drew him to her in the first place was that he had “always loved how tough she was, how unlike a Lambert, how fundamentally unsympathetic to his family” (211). This quote illuminates the competition between two family systems. On the one hand, despite his efforts to run away from his upbringing, he still shows loyalty to his parents in some situations or at least questions the new way of living he adopted with the help of his wife. On the other hand, he wishes to be able to wholeheartedly subscribe to the “All-Time Caroline Ten”, a list of remarks

from his wife which he in private collected in order to refer to and get strength from in tough times:

1. You're nothing at all like your father.
2. You don't have to apologize for buying the BMW.
3. Your dad emotionally abuses your mom.
4. I love the taste of your come.
5. Work was the drug that ruined your father's life.
6. Let's buy both!
7. Your family has a diseased relationship with food.
8. You're an incredibly good-looking man.
9. Denise is jealous of what you have.
10. There's absolutely nothing useful about suffering. (211)

This list reveals many of his anxieties and fears and cover different realms of his life most of which can be linked to his family of origin. Number two and six certainly have to do with his Midwestern upbringing with parents who both had to endure the economic consequences of the Great Depression. Concerns about or even a bad conscious and feelings of guilt over spending money is a sign for his loyalty to his family's values which he tries to reformulate for his life and change according to their usefulness in his endeavor to change his personality. At this point, the family system of Gary collides with his wife's set of values learnt in her family of origin. Together they need to find a common ground to negotiate the values, rules, and goals they as a family want to set for their children and themselves. Since Gary subscribes openly to Caroline's world view more than he secretly admits his loyalty to his parents, it seems clear to him that he is on his way to reach his goal in life, namely correcting his father's faults.

However, this fight is not as easy for him as he would like it to be. He is torn apart between his concept of family life and Caroline's, which does not equal his own upbringing at all. It is difficult for him to come to terms with the justice system in his family with his wife and sons when he has to struggle with unresolved loyalty conflicts: "A person's commitment to his family of origin on the one hand and his peer commitments on the other hand often collide and conflict in terms of priority. Thus, loyalty conflicts seem to be ubiquitous causes of marital and partnership incompatibilities" (*Between Give & Take* 15). A closer look at Caroline's family of origin could further

illuminate the reasons for these loyalty conflicts. However, the narrator gives only a few insights into her past, which may contribute to a more complete picture of the family system in which Gary and Caroline, together with their three sons, are embedded.

Caroline comes from old money, is a semi-orphan and inherited a significant sum from her grandparents. Her mother is a seventy-six years old major benefactor of the California Democratic Party and visits once a year to brag about not being “one of those old women’ who were obsessed with their grandkids” (191). This suggests that her mother is not much involved in their family life and seems detached from her daughter. Furthermore, if we can trust the narrator to be a reliable source, then “Caroline was more alone in the world than he [Gary] was,” (191) and that “he’d [Gary] understood that at the ticking heart of Caroline was desperate insecurity. Sooner or later, if he withheld his love, she came knocking on his chest with her little fist and let him have his way” (233). The reader is allowed limited information about the character Caroline and many ‘facts’ are actually presented through Gary’s judgment. Therefore it is important to pay close attention to her actions and reactions in the family in order to develop an idea of the motivations behind her behavior.

The above-mentioned quotation also reveals what Gary found attractive about Caroline and what made him marry her. It is her vulnerability and neediness which confirm him in his role as a man: “From the start, he’d loved and pitied Caroline for the misfortune and neglect she’d suffered growing up. He’d undertaken to provide a better family for her” (191). Being needed gives him a sense of self-worth in the relationship with this “semi-orphaned girl whose most fervent wish it was to be on *his* team” (211). What Gary envisioned as a ‘better family’ turns out to be an unaccomplishable dream, which he would have liked to confess to his sister Denise, who has been living in the same city for fifteen years yet was more remote from him than ever before: “There was no way around her [Denise’s] properness, no way to convey to her that the depth of his disappointment that, of the rich family-filled future that he’d imagined, almost *nothing* had come to pass” (250).

Most of his visions of a happy family life did not become reality because he chose his partner, consciously or unconsciously is difficult to determine, according to his antagonism to his family of origin. The value system and the notion of fairness prevalent in the Lamberts family do not match the loyalty system of Caroline's family of origin at all. This does not mean his marriage is bound to fail, but it requires open communication to understand the needs and wishes of the partner.

As the years pass by, bit by bit he comes to understand the incompatibility between his wife's vision of family life and his own. Therefore Gary realizes that "it seemed that the nature of family life itself was changing— that togetherness and filiality and fraternity weren't valued the way they were when he was young" (190). This estimation of his childhood experiences lets him arrive at this conclusion. Given his bitterness and disappointment with his parents, this evaluation of his upbringing seems like a self-deception. Yet, it fits in his individual frame of reference and corresponds with his notion of togetherness learnt in his family of origin. It is part of his individual psychology which he incorporated in his life story as he tells it to himself and in this case to others as well.

The incompatibility between the two family of origin systems also becomes apparent in the attitudes of raising their children. In the marriage of Gary and Caroline, it is often the small, everyday routines that become the battle ground for their power play. While Gary emphasizes the importance of home cooked meals, his wife declares in a controversy over whether to cook or not that "you're the one who's bent on having these sit-down dinners. The boys couldn't care less [...] Gary: it's not important to me, it's not important to the boys, and we're supposed to cook for you?" (189-90). It is interesting to note that she confidently speaks for all three of her sons without including them directly into the conversation. Caroline knows how to push her husband's buttons and frequently accuses him of being depressed, a judgment which hurts him especially much because this would mean he resembled his father. "'You're depressed,' she said 'and I want you back. I'm tired of living with a depressed old man'" (211).

Caroline considers herself an expert on psychological matters because “she’d undergone five years of twice-weekly therapy which the therapist, at the final session, had declared ‘an unqualified success’ and which had given her a lifelong advantage over Gary in the race for mental health” (182). This commentary from the narrator has an ironic connotation especially if put into context to her child rearing and her trust in postmodern self-help and pop-psychology books on how to raise kids in a high-tech world. Unlimited allowance of watching TV meant to her that her children would not be ostracized by their peers who assumingly were also allowed unlimited hours of TV while “to Gary, who as a boy had been allowed half an hour of TV a day and had not felt ostracized,” this philosophy seemed nonsense. Yet, trusting her judgment on this he did not intervene (197).

Gary sees his wife’s manipulative reactions to his request to go to St. Jude and visit his parents over Christmas as a game to put him under pressure: “You’re fucking with my head! And there is no lower trick than that. There’s no meaner trick in the book” (232). Every time he accuses her of eavesdropping or of pretending to have hurt her back while running to the phone because his mother called a dozen times to make sure they are coming to St. Jude for one last Christmas before his parents might move to a condo, Caroline retorts that he is depressed and that he should listen to himself how much he has changed: “What you don’t understand, Gary, is that this is an emotionally healthy family. I am a loving and deeply involved mother. I have three intelligent, creative, and emotionally healthy children. If you think there’s a problem in this house, you better take a look at yourself” (210). She doubtlessly is a loving and involved mother but that does not mean she is always fair to them, even though on the surface she claims to act in their interest.

Instead, the children are affected by their parents' power play in a serious manner. It influences the main principle of relational ethics, namely, "the balance of giving and receiving and the dialectic of receiving through giving" (Boszormenyi-Nagy 1997). From the point of view of relational ethics, the balance can only be maintained if trust reserves are not being depleted through injustices done to any of the family members involved. However, by influencing the kids to side with her, Caroline potentially affects the trustworthiness of their relationship and puts in jeopardy the future dialectic of receiving through giving in the relationship to her children.

To Caroline, Gary's request to her and their sons to go to St. Jude for Christmas is a violation of a rule they both agreed upon and thus also a violation of the fairness system in the family. In turn, she strikes against her husband allowing the children freedoms she knows Gary will not tolerate. Claiming to want to give her sons maximum opportunity for a creative development, e.g. by allowing their middle son Caleb to put the kitchen under electronic surveillance as a means to work with new technology to which Gary's first reaction is the thought to himself that "*the liquor cabinet is in the kitchen*" (*The Corrections* 179). She decides against her husband's wish and encourages Caleb to pay for it with his own money which rules out Gary's permission to do so. This very act of overruling Gary is part of the fairness system of his family that would have been unimaginable at his parents' house. In this case, Caroline continuously controls Gary over his concern for his depression and paranoia, a practice which he recognizes as unfair against him.

The fact that Aaron speaks up and yells at his father after Gary got into a fight with Caroline over her behavior towards him shows that the hierarchies within this family are permissive and negotiable, which can serve as an empowering factor for the development of their sons' personalities, but not if it adds to the lopsided balance of fair give-and-take. In this case, it turns out to contribute to the mother's attempt at demoralizing Gary. Again, Gary finds himself in the middle of the two systems of his own family and his family of origin. This situation puts him under a lot of stress because he is not able to

negotiate between the two different dynamics and it leaves him powerless because it affects his greatest fear, the fear of becoming like his father: After Aaron yells “God, please, Dad, do— not— shout— at her,” Gary tries to comfort his son and

his [Gary’s] sense of isolation deepened by this demonstration that his wife had strong allies in the house. Her sons would protect her from her husband. Her husband who was a shouter. Like his father before him. His father before him who was now depressed. But who, in his prime, as a shouter, had so frightened young Gary that it never occurred to him to intercede on his mother’s behalf. (183f.)

In his fear of repeating well-known and much hated patterns of behavior known from his father he is afraid of intervening anymore and thus strengthens Caroline’s position among their children, which also gives her greater latitude for exploiting her children.

Aaron and Caleb are the most pronounced victims of their parents’ conflict over whether the family is going to St. Jude for the last Christmas or not. The role that the two oldest sons assume in their parents’ power play puts them into the position of split loyalty:

Split loyalty is literally “split self.” Split loyalties represent cutoffs from actual or potential trust resources for a child. The child, in a triadic relationship to both parents, feels that in order not to lose one parent, he or she has to choose against the other. In a situation of split loyalties, the child owes some loyalty to each parent, but is faced with two (or more) competing sets of loyalty expectations. When the child chooses one standard, he or she automatically disappoints the other. (Hibbs 41)

Gary’s realization that his wife has *strong allies* and that her son would *protect his mother* against him are initially statements that have to be assessed carefully because the narrator presents them as part of Gary’s individual perception. Such estimation of his family’s relational reality corresponds with his anxiety of being regarded as depressed and paranoid.

A closer look at the family dynamics, however, reveals that Caroline ostensibly gives their children much leeway in terms of their own decision-making, but also assures that these decisions are against what Gary considers

appropriate or acceptable. The following scene shows how Caroline has influenced her second son Caleb to be on her side meaning siding against his dad. Gary asks “what should we do for dinner?” and “his wife and middle son traded glances as if this were the stick-in-the-mud sort of question he was famous for” (186). Another scene, in which Gary has grilled for the family, emphasizes this ‘conspiracy’ between Caroline and Caleb: “Caroline had opened a second large bag of potato chips. ‘Don’t spoil your appetite, guys,’ Gary said in a strained voice, taking food from plastic compartments. Again mother and son traded glances” (187). After a comment that felt to Caroline like an insult she goes to the sink, puts her food into the garbage disposal and goes upstairs. Her two oldest boys follow her after they too put the food that Gary grilled into the sink.

These seemingly small gestures and actions already reveal that Caroline managed to split the family by gaining ‘allies,’ just as Gary thought. These are the beginnings of a split loyalty situation that if continued will surely gravely impact the family dynamics because the children are pushed to support one parent while they actually owe loyalty to each parent. They are stuck between two different sets of loyalty expectations. With maturation children will think over their relationships to their parents and feel as if their trust was misused to serve a certain goal, in this case to assist their mother to win against their father, which leads to negative entitlement towards their mother. What Caroline does in this situation violates the trust reserves and justice system of the family even though the children might temporarily benefit from this situation, e.g. watching unlimited hours of TV with their mother or putting the kitchen under surveillance.

Interestingly enough, Gary recognizes patterns in his family that are a repetition of patterns from his family of origin: “From the entertainment room upstairs came the woofing of prime time. Gary felt briefly sorry for Aaron and Caleb. It was a burden to have a mother need you so extremely, to be responsible for her bliss, Gary knew this” (191). He is familiar with this situation because this was exactly his position in his family of origin. He was also overburdened by the demands his mother put on him. His mother’s

neediness caused Gary's parentification, which means that he had to take on an age-inappropriate role as the 'caregiver.' He was the one responsible for making his mother happy with activities that bring joy to her life and not necessarily to his. This repetitious pattern, however, is in this case not initiated by him but by his wife. Through his reluctance to intervene he turns himself into a tacit supporter.

Dankoski and Deacon stress that "according to relational ethics, the person with the split loyalty is held responsible for balancing the ledger in both systems, and yet has limited resources to accomplish this" (59). For Aaron and Caleb, it would mean that not only are they subject to their father's system of justice and loyalty but also to their mother's. If Caroline has them subscribe to her system then they are necessarily cut off from their father's to which they also owe due consideration. In turn, the parents need to pay due consideration to the fact that the children are in this predicament, which they can only escape if they are allowed to show loyalty to both parents. Instead, this split loyalty situation intensifies and Caroline increases her power game with Gary. She increases the pressure on Gary by reinforcing the suggestion that he is clinically depressed. And to support this impression of him, she urges the two oldest sons to join in and be extra nice to their 'depressed' father:

Caroline's countermove was to endorse his proposal enthusiastically. She urged Caleb and Aaron to go and *enjoy the time with their father*. She laid curious stress on this phrase, causing Aaron and Caleb to pipe up, as if on cue, 'Mountain-biking, yeah, Dad, great!' And all at once Gary realized what was going on. [...] He saw why his children had turned agreeable and solicitous: *because Caroline had told them that their father was struggling with clinical depression*. What a brilliant gambit!" (231)

Again, this situation is presented more from Gary's point of view and again this interpretation fits the impression he already developed about his role in the family. The family dynamic is changing and it neither favors him or confirms him in his role as a respected father. His son's reaction to the accusation that Caroline indeed encouraged them to be extra nice to their father, however, supports Gary's suspicion:

“I know you’re telling everybody I’m depressed, but, as it happens, I’m not.”

“Gary.”

“Right, Aaron? Am I right? She told you I’m clinically depressed—right?”

Aaron, caught off guard, looked to Caroline, who shook her head at him slowly and significantly.

“Well, did she?” Gary said.

Aaron lowered his eyes to his plate, blushing. The spasm of love that Gary felt then for his oldest son, his sweet honest vain blushing son, was intimately connected to the rage that was now propelling him, before he understood what was happening. He was cursing in front of his kids. He was saying, “*Fuck this Caroline! Fuck your whispering!*” (264)

Gary’s conscious move to expose his wife through the ‘confession’ of his son equally contributes to the situation of split loyalty in which the two oldest sons find themselves. Jonah, the youngest, tries to intuitively counterbalance this development by being interested in going to St. Jude for Christmas and by engaging his father into activities instead of joining his brothers who, for example, watch TV with Caroline. Jonah’s intuitive ability to even things out within his family also becomes clear in the context of his relationship to Enid: “Enid has always preferred little kids to big kids, and Jonah’s adaptive niche in the family ecosystem was to be the perfect grandchild, eager to scramble up on laps, unafraid of bitter vegetables, [and] under-excited by television and computer games” (204). Children developing niches in order to be able to compete with siblings for the investment and favor of parents and grandparents is part of a child’s psychological development and contributes significantly to her character formation. Jonah’s reactions to the conflict between his parents show such a development of a niche that is beneficial to him, since the two older brothers took the ally role. He shows a behavior in situations of conflict that illuminates his desire to balance the two competing systems of justice.

So far, I have shown the systemic character of gaining constructive and destructive entitlement in transgenerational family ties through the consequences that Alfred’s upbringing in his family of origin had for his relationship with Enid and later also with his children. I explained the four

dimensions of relational realities established by Contextual Therapy and I emphasized the importance of the fourth dimension of relational ethics for the explanation of motivation for action and the balance of the ledgers of merit and entitlement. I also argued that Gary finds himself between competing loyalty systems and notions of fairness and justice within his relationships to his different family members, including the situation of split loyalty in which his two oldest sons are involved due to Gary's conflict with his wife. His difficulties standing his ground when facing his upbringing testify to his unresolved conflicts with a possibly lopsided ledger of justice inherited from his family of origin.

However, Gary is not the only child of the Lambert family who has difficulties with the consequences that arouse from the specific family ledgers of justice, merit, and obligation respectively. Denise, the youngest of the three children and the only daughter, equally has to fight her mother's disappointment with her. As shown above, in one situation Enid highlights the success of one child to communicate indirectly how disapproving she is of the other child. It seems as if Enid transfers the wishes and desires she herself could not fulfill to her only daughter. This can be seen in the disappointment the mother feels when Denise comes home married to a Jewish cook who neither in terms of physical appearance nor occupation nor religion matches the future husband she envisioned for Denise. While Enid confirms her mother's model of what to look for in a husband, i.e. financial security, provider for the family, which is why she married Alfred, or rather the mental image she had of Alfred in hopes he would develop into this ideal man, Denise seems to rebel against this expectation, no doubt because she saw that the values Enid holds in such high esteem are misleading and do not lead to a satisfactory life but rather to an unhappy marriage.

Sexually, Denise is depicted in the novel as being in an experimental stage of her life. She engages in heterosexual as well as homosexual relationships and is trying to understand her sexual preferences. She belongs to a generation that lives in what sociologist Michael Rosenfeld called "the

age of independence”.²⁸ In his eponymous book he investigated the reasons for the change of American families, especially which effect this life relatively independent from parents has on the *type* of families adults form. Rosenfeld explains that

in the past when adult children lived with their parents, parents had much more control over their children’s eventual mates. Adult children who were economically dependent on their parents could not easily form romantic relationships against their parents’ wishes. Now, when young adults choose an interracial or same-sex partner, their parents are usually without recourse to prevent the match. Not only do parents no longer hold veto power over their children’s mate selection, but also parents have increasingly come to believe that children have the right to choose whatever mate suits them. The demographic reality of looser intergenerational ties has changed the way we think about personal freedoms. (3)

Contextual Therapy in practice shows that the choice of mates is (often unconsciously) influenced by the ledger of justice and give-and-take of the family of origin. Parent’s leniencies when it comes to choosing a mate is certainly a tendency to be welcomed in society because it contributes to an individual’s growth to maturity if such freedoms can be exercised in one’s personal life. However, decisions concerning partnerships are often governed by (injustices) experienced in the family of origin. Gary’s falling in love with Caroline certainly also has do to with the fact that she and her family of origin are so different from his own. As shown above, in Gary’s case there are vastly opposite families of origin and therefore ledgers of justice which may not only constitute a creative and liberating element in the newly formed family but can also lead to complex situations of competition and conflict.

Denise is the one Lambert child who makes extensive use of these newfound freedoms in this age of independence not only with regard to her sexual orientation but also in connection to her lifestyle and choice of profession. Yet, this so-called independence of hers is deceptive because she is also trying to run away from her Midwestern background. Just like Gary she left home after high school, went to college for a few months and then

²⁸ For family therapists’ perspectives on sexuality cf. G. Pirooz Sholevar, ed. *Changing Sexual Values and the Family*. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1977

started a career as a chef. For her, too, physical separation does not equal mental freedom from her upbringing as she has difficulties in coming to terms with the legacy from her family of origin.

Denise's relationship to her father is difficult since he also exhibits the same reluctance to open up to her as he shows in the relationship to his sons. Yet, Alfred saw in her birth also a valuable chance because

a last child was a last opportunity to learn from one's mistakes and make corrections, and he resolved to seize this opportunity. From the day she was born he would treat her more gently than he'd treated Gary or Chipper. Relax the law for her, indulge her outright, even, and never once force her to sit at the table after everyone was gone. (323)

He keeps his promise, stays loyal to his daughter and protects her privacy in the face of possible embarrassment caused by one of his co-workers. Only in the end does Denise find out why Alfred withdrew from his job just two years shy of official retirement, which would have secured him and his wife a higher pension. His reasons for this early retirement was a threat by one of his co-workers to tell that he had slept with his teenage daughter in Alfred's house many years earlier. In an attempt to protect Denise, Alfred agreed upon retiring sooner than planned so his blackmailing co-worker could keep his job at the railroad company instead of Alfred.

The dialogue about this incident fifteen years ago is one of the few open dialogues between father and daughter in the novel. Despite or maybe *because of* his mental and physical impairment due to his Parkinson's disease, Alfred is astonishingly honest and loving about this situation as can be seen by his daughter's estimation of the awkward conversation: "He'd saved her privacy. He'd never breathed a word of any of this to Denise, never giving 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" (604).

For Denise, his silence is a sign of his love for her and she is deeply impressed with his behavior. However, in keeping this secret and not wanting to expose his daughter, he created a situation that was unfair to his wife, the

rest of the family, and possibly also to himself. By protecting his daughter, he deprived himself of the well-earned pension he would have received had he decided to go on working for the full amount of months that were left on his contract. He would have secured a chance for himself to not have to worry about money anymore, one of the longings discussed earlier in this chapter. What is more, he also deprived his wife of a financially better position and an opportunity to secure better medical attention once they grow old and become in need of it. This is a fact which Enid also stresses in a conversation with Denise:

And Denise, it would have made all the difference for us financially. It would have nearly doubled his pension, just those two years. We would have been in so much better shape now. [...] But he never talked about it with me. You know— he never tells me anything. He just decides. Even if it's a financial disaster, it's his decision and it's final. (607)

This neglect for his wife's concerns started right from the beginning of their marriage, especially with regard to money. Franzen uses a Schopenhauer quote to express Alfred's attitude about women handling money: "(Schopenhauer: *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*)" (322). Never mind the fact that Enid actually has a talent for investments as her handling of her small inheritance from her mother showed. Time actually proved that this money would have come in handy with his Parkinson's disease. After all, it is his wife who has to take care of him. However, Alfred's conclusion is that "there are things in life that simply have to be endured" (201). Living with the repercussions of Alfred's decisions seems one of them in the Lambert family.

In his review for *The New York Review of Books*, John Leonard calls "[Alfred carrying] his son to bed — one of two fatherly acts of which he has any right to be proud, and the other is a secret" (33). This secret as the reader comes to know in the end is of course the reason behind the decision to go into early retirement. In this situation Alfred was in a loyalty conflict that he did not acknowledge. Protecting his daughter's privacy meant not giving his

wife due credit and consideration which again diminishes her trust reserves. Therefore, viewed from the angle of Contextual Therapy, his decision affected the family's ledger of justice severely and leaves his children and Enid with the expected burden to just deal with his decision and care for him. Yet, his unforeseeable Parkinson's disease makes this decision all the more tragic.

In a greater context, this development of the Lambert family also stands for a reevaluation of family life and values as well as social norms that appear to govern togetherness. Franzen brings back the literary characters as fictional representatives of social and familial change in US society, embedded in human relationships that are governed by ethical motives. *The Corrections* does not constitute a return to the traditional nuclear family but a reassessment of the concept, exposes the illusory character of assumed freedom from family ties, and suggests a dynamic concept of family that asks and allows for changes for a brighter future. It seems that along with Alfred a concept of a patriarchal family constellation dies, one that has served its time, maybe even lasted too long in a changing society in which all sorts of corrections are celebrated as an act of freedom and progress. In its place comes not a radically new ideal design of the family but hopefulness for the future generation, even if this hope is initiated by a seventy-five-year-old widow whose husband Alfred subscribed to the principle of resistance, even if that meant to go against his wife's needs or children's demand for "the one thing he never forgot was how to refuse. All of her [Enid's] corrections had been for naught" (653).

It is characteristic that in Chip's development this idea of a continuation of the family in altered form is most radically and obviously shown. Gary's serious struggle in his nuclear family to stand his ground as a father is actually an expression of a break with or renouncement of the patriarchal nuclear family. However, the counter-design which his family constitutes is also not an alternative to the traditional model that *The Corrections* renounces. Gary's laissez-faire attitudes concerning his position within the family led to a situation of split loyalty for his children and disrespect for and negligence of his family of origin. In this contempt fueled by Caroline and

later on added to by Gary himself lies a disrespect for one's own family ledger and a denial of familial relationships that are detrimental to the third generation involved. In this case it afflicts Aaron, Caleb, and Jonah.

Chip's development constitutes an alternative to Gary's family concept. Reviewer David Gates called Chip the "black-sheep son," which is a generalizing characterization of Chip's status in the Lambert family. None of the family members themselves calls him that, but he, too, is prone to mimic his siblings' pattern of avoidance of family ties. He is the most radical of the Lambert children in his actions to avoid his familial legacy. From his early introduction in the book, the reader gets the impression that he is antagonizing his Midwestern upbringing just as much as Gary and Denise are. "He blamed his parents for the person he had become" (20). His choice of profession was not well received by his parents; "Alfred had once mildly but unforgettably remarked that he didn't see the point of literary theory" and Enid also disapproved of his choice as she "had regularly begged Chip to abandon his pursuit of an 'impractical' doctorate in the humanities" (37). Even though there are no radical expressions of an extensive competition between Gary and Chip in the novel, it can be assumed that Chip chose this profession not only because he did not consider himself suitable to meet his parents' expectations of a career in the financial field, but also because he developed a niche for himself where he could avoid competing with his older brother. This counts especially since Gary was the one who dedicated his early life to pleasing his parents before he turned away from their outlook on life altogether.

Chip's main statement to which he subscribed is that "children are not supposed to get along with their parents. Your parents are not supposed to be your best friends. There's supposed to be some element of rebellion. That's how you define yourself as a person" (68). Contextual Therapy holds that a person defines herself through engaging with her family legacy and through meeting the other halfway in an exchange of give-and-take, which is the essence of the ethical dimension in this therapeutic approach. While setting

oneself in opposition to parents is a stage that most individuals go through, engaging with one's legacy is the key to actual personal freedom.

The 'liberation process' usually starts with an intellectual understanding of what happened in the past of one's family. This is an act of exoneration. A therapist tries to make a client or the family involved in the sessions understand why a person acted in the past the way she did. This is the first step to re-mobilizing trust reserves among family members. Ideally, such exoneration would also lead to forgiveness, which transcends the intellectual act and enters the realm of ethical considerations and emotional engagement with the problem at hand. Therapists are usually well aware of the fact that not all actions of the past can be processed as described above. Nevertheless, it is worth attempting because it liberates the victim and sets free trust reserves for future as well as existing generations.

In *The Corrections*, Chip's mind is consumed with his job loss due to his affair with a female student and his midlife crisis so an overdue constructive engagement with his family is not an option for him. His initial bitterness towards his family and especially his father is ironic because

to Chip, unfortunately, it seemed that Alfred cared more about his children only to the degree that they succeeded. Chip was so busy feeling misunderstood that he never noticed how badly he himself misunderstood his father.[...] Chip couldn't see what everyone around him could: that if there was anybody in the world whom Alfred did love purely for his own sake, it was Chip. [...] Chip was the one whom Alfred had called for in the middle of the night, even though he knew Chip wasn't there. (605)

Here the narrator functions as a reliable authority that exposes Chip's self-absorption and inability to acknowledge his role within the family. This quote gives further insight into Chip's individual psychology, which has a decisive influence on his outlook on the relationship to his father. Yet, the development that Chip undergoes in the novel is a hopeful sign for the continuation of the family as an institution that still has its place in the American society. His starting a family of his own with his wife who is pregnant with twins and Enid's resolution to make changes in her life as a

septuagenarian are an expression of confidence in human relationships and the family.

A reading of *The Corrections* informed by Contextual Therapy goes beyond an examination of behavioral patterns that determine how characters function in their larger familial and social systems. Contextual Therapy's concern for the dimension of relational ethics is uniquely able to illuminate the 'invisible' ties to the family and motivations behind transactional patterns. It explains the consequences that violations of justice or the balance of fairness have for families in a multigenerational context.

The Corrections portrays the lives of the Lamberts, a white middle class family in the Midwest. The family dynamics are determined by generational conflict between parents and children. Gary, Chip, and Denise try to escape their Midwestern upbringing by settling on the East Coast. Martin Buber pointed out that human beings are irrevocably connected to each other in a genuine dialogue and that expressions of extreme individuality and personal freedom are often really expressions of an attempt to disengage from or avoid genuine human relationships.

Contextual Therapy bases its central concern for relational ethics of human relationships on Buber's model of the genuine dialogue. Reading *The Corrections* in the context of this theoretical framework explains the intergenerational family dynamics of the Lamberts. Using the metaphor of the ledger of merits and obligations illuminates how wrongdoing to the human justice in one generation transfers into peer relationships as well as into the interfamilial relationships of the following generation. In the case of Alfred Lambert, a stern upbringing in the Midwest during the Great Depression, and a strict father who very likely showed little affection towards his son, led to destructive entitlement in the family ledger of justice.

Contextual Therapy holds that children are entitled to receive due care, love and affection from their parents, while parents have the obligation to give due care to their children. Since children naturally are not able to equitably give back to their parents they are obligated to give due care to their children in turn, so as to fulfill the intergenerational 'contract' of equal give-

and-take. Alfred Lambert did not receive due affection and love from his parents and thus the intergenerational cycle of give-and-take is disturbed. This explains Alfred's motivation behind his observable patterns in his marriage.

The relationship between Alfred and Enid shows that Alfred demands of his wife the care, attention, and love he did not receive from his parents. He considers himself entitled to make these demands of her, in order to balance out the wrongdoings in his family of origin. Alfred is demanding, takes Enid for granted, and expects life on his terms. This can be seen especially well in the financial decisions he makes for the family. A disregard for the concerns of others drains trust and perpetuates the vicious cycle of destructive entitlement.

The Lambert children all develop different strategies in coping with the legacy of their family of origin. The repercussions of a lopsided balance of give-and-take in the family ledger can especially be seen in Gary's marriage to Caroline. The theory of Contextual Therapy is a suitable tool to explain the exploitation of their children in terms of split loyalty and thus reveals the dynamics behind the victimization of the children.

Reading *The Corrections* in light of Contextual Therapy enables the reader to understand intimate human relationships beyond a description of the individual's positioning in the system of the family. It illuminates how a concern for justice or a balance of fairness shapes family dynamics apart from power struggles, exercising of authority, patterns of behavior and communication, and gender differences.

Chapter 3

Parentification in *The Sleeping Father*

'Do you think our family's fucked up?'
'In what sense?'
'I don't know.'
'Like your mother and I are divorced, your
sister's a religious fanatic, your father's
depressed and his face is numb, sort of
thing?'

(*The Sleeping Father* 33)

Matthew Sharpe's novel *The Sleeping Father* (2003) tells the story of an upper middle class Jewish American family in Bellwether, Connecticut, that is ill prepared for the events that are about to disrupt their uncomfortable routine of daily life. The nominal head of the family is Bernard Schwartz, who lives together with his two children in a single-parent household. His wife, Lila Munroe, divorced him and left her family six years ago to study law at U.C. Berkeley. Bernard's accidental combination of the two incompatible anti-depressants Prozac and Nardil leaves him in a coma and his son Chris, seventeen years old, and his daughter Cathy, sixteen years old, in shock. All of a sudden the two adolescents are faced with important decisions concerning their father's medical and subsequent rehabilitation treatment. The doctors' questions about whether or not their father has a living will, or about putting him in a nursing home were he ever to wake up, burden the children with taking on the role of the decision-makers. They are forced to act like responsible adults who have to decide their father's future.

The novel raises essential questions about a person's development. When does childhood stop and adulthood begin? Is this process related to a certain age or mental maturity? From a personal perspective, which decisive components trigger maturation? Is it a matter of education and increasing responsibility, which usually come with age in an individual's life, that encourage the process of growing up? Or is it the larger system of the family (or caregivers in the broadest sense) that teaches individuals how to act responsibly? The novel itself does not give clear-cut answers to these

questions but makes interesting suggestions. In this context, it ties in with the investigation of a person's maturation process in literature. Nancy D. Chase argues that

one of our current 'cultural preoccupations' is with trying to understand, and perhaps constantly revise for the better, the roles and responsibilities associated with particular chronological periods of the individual life span, i.e., childhood and adulthood, immaturity and maturity, youth and aging. Consequently, eroding lines of general boundaries and revised scripts associated with age-related behaviors emerge as a dominant theme in literary work of the modern and postmodern period. (269)

It is this dissolution of boundaries Chris and Cathy experience in *The Sleeping Father* on different levels. In the middle of an adolescent no man's land, they are finding themselves confronted with a call to grow up. Their father's coma forces them to make decisions and demands of them practical hands-on care that calls for a non-age-considerate liability.

In Contextual Therapy, putting children or adolescents into an overburdening position that asks for age-inappropriate behavior is called parentification, as mentioned in relation to Gary in my last chapter. It constitutes an essential concept in Contextual Therapy, because parentification influences the development of individuals from being a child to becoming an adult and has a severe effect on the familial ledger of merits. This chapter deals with the different forms of parentification in the novel *The Sleeping Father* and aims at analyzing interpersonal and generational boundary dissolutions in this literary work by using analytical tools from contextual family therapy.

Parentification is a term introduced to therapeutic practice by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and his co-workers in the 1960's. Boszormenyi-Nagy and his colleagues observed a pattern of spousal parentification and parent-child role reversal in their clinical practice occurring among participants of both individual and family therapy (Jurkovic xii). But literature has known the phenomenon of parentification long before the therapeutic discourse found a name for it. In fact, many significant works of American literature illustrate the concept of parentification in both familial and larger social contexts. As

Nancy D. Chase argues, “the emotional utility of children and revising of general boundaries has historical and social dimensions evident in America’s literature for two centuries” (265). In her reading of Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, for example, Chase sees a decline of the nuclear, patriarchal family triggered by economic hardships that affect older and younger generations alike and catapult them into a role reversal where “future generations bear the burden of systemic, institutional, i.e. governmental, neglect of ‘the people’ and their needs” (268). It seems as though American literature, always a seismograph for progressive developments in American culture, anticipates the phenomenon described by Boszormenyi-Nagy and his associates.

In a postmodern literary context, this trend intensifies and becomes fine-tuned. Role reversals of parents and children or partners taking on the role of parents in spousal relationships become significant in a larger discourse on the interplay between individual mental and physical health, family, and society. In fact, the majority of the novels analyzed in this study depict situations of role reversal. *The Sleeping Father* (2003) by Matthew Sharpe and *The Corrections* (2001) by Jonathan Franzen are two early twenty-first century novels that present generational boundary dissolutions against the backdrop of coming of age stories and emotional abuse in family life. Both novels convey characterizations of adults who, in their vulnerability, turn to their family members for age-inappropriate help.

The Sleeping Father explores the challenges and opportunities of contemporary family life, and exposes the idea of the nuclear family as an illusion. A more fluid and less authoritarian family system emerges in its place that corresponds in its literary form with the changing realities of family life in the US. Divorce splits the nuclear family, which gives Lila the opportunity to move away, finish her law degree, and then work as a successful lawyer, while Bernard raises the children in a single-parent household. His falling into a coma leads to a complete role reversal within the family. However, even before the accident Bernard did not compare with an authoritarian father figure. Hierarchies were more fluid within the family. In his son’s eyes, his status was more the one of an older friend:

‘Anything I can do?’ Bernie said.
‘Couldn’t you be more dadlike?’
‘In what sense?’
‘Like when I say the word *fuck*, hit me across the face.’
‘So, be more authoritative?’
‘Yeah.’
‘I’ll try.’
‘Oh, you’ll have to do better than that.’
‘Don’t you talk to me that way, young man. I’ve had just about
enough of your backsass.’
‘Yeah, good. Like that.’
‘I mean it. Shut up or you’ll be sorry you were ever born.’ (34)

Chris’s demand for his father to lead and to show him what is right and wrong originates in Chris’s insecurities, which increase when Bernard accidentally takes the wrong medication. The divorce and his coma can be read allegorically with regard to the altering status of the father in US society. With the change in hierarchies the traditional patriarchal structure is put into question and contested. *The Sleeping Father* goes a step further and does not simply suggest the removal of these patriarchal structures. In their place stands a development towards a more democratic organization of familial life. This re-ordering, however, takes its toll on the different generations and in its most extreme forms, leads to the above-mentioned complete parent-child role reversal, which will be analyzed in this chapter.

The events in the novel do not only cover large geographical spans from small town life on the East Coast to a more metropolitan existence in California but also fathom extremes which cover mental landscapes varying from the anxieties of growing up to the fears of grown-ups. It is a coming of age story in which the rite of passage happens suddenly: with neither announcement nor celebration. In its unexpectedness it is brutal yet not without comic undertones. Indeed, the novel’s events resemble a soap opera in which the characters struggle bravely but perpetually to gain control of their lives. One answer the novel seems to give to the myriad of unresolved problems is the use of irony not as a mere strategy of survival, but as a basic mode of attitude towards life.

Even the beginning of the novel is symptomatic of the overall tone and theme. Subtle indications of parentification are noticeable in the children’s

behavior towards their parents even before Bernard fell into a coma. In this context, a special emphasis lies on the bond the two male family members have developed between each other; Bernard's depression is diagnosed by Chris and not the father himself: "Chris figured it out first because that was how things worked in this family. Soul of son and soul of dad were linked by analogy. No tic or mood swing in the one did not go unrepresented in the susceptible equipment of the other" (3). The quote testifies on the one hand to the emotional closeness between father and son and anticipates the future role reversal in the family on the other. Much like a doctor, Chris notices the change in his father's behavior and mental state and acts as a caregiver by initiating further treatment of the illness.

Their father's hospitalization and subsequent need of care leads to their new role assignment within the family. Much earlier than anticipated, they experience the natural side of parentification that many people will have to go through and which the life cycle predicts: parents are getting older and will be in need of care. At this point, the question as to how the siblings will proceed with their father in his vulnerable physical state arises. On the one hand, Chris and Cathy would benefit from social institutions such as hospices or nursing homes, because it would relieve them of the considerable responsibilities taking care of their father at home would entail. Especially in light of the actualities of the adolescents' lives with the area of conflict between receiving a formal education and the desire to establish independence from their parents, it is difficult for them to balance familial obligations and their own lives.

On the other hand, according to Contextual Therapy, nursing an ailing parent at home has an impact on the balance of give-and-take on the level of relational ethics between individuals. Taking care of their ill father would give Chris and Cathy the possibility to return due care and affection they once received from him when they were younger and dependent on him. It offers them the opportunity to earn constructive entitlement in the relationship with their father and leads to the further accumulation of positive entitlement within the family. Even though they will not be able to completely equate

their father's efforts of due care throughout their lives, they will be motivated to re-invest it in their future children and thus the cycle of give-and-take is perpetuated.

After their father eventually comes out of the coma, he stays briefly in the hospital to begin his recovery. During this time, Bernard's close bond with his children, especially Chris, is further strengthened. Though this is not a factor in their decision, Chris and Cathy eventually decide in favor of nursing their father at home, instead of bringing him to a hospice. Chris's initial disappointment at his father's physical and mental state after he woke up from the coma is mitigated through very emotional dialogues. They testify to an understanding between father and son that deepens with each day they spend together but also show Chris's helplessness in the face of Bernard's condition:

'Take the cigarette, Dad.' Chris placed the cigarette between his father's lips, which closed around it. Lisa Danmeyer removed the cigarette and threw it on the floor. 'What is the matter with you?' she said. 'This is not a joke. Your father is still in grave danger.' [...] 'Doctor,' Bernie said, in his stroky drawl. 'Be— kind— to—Chris. He is— suffering.' (105f.)

This situation shows that Chris has not yet accepted his new role as a person responsible for his father's health and seems to be in denial about the seriousness of Bernard's state of health. Instead he treats him as if he were the same person as before he slipped into a coma and his father instantly understands Chris's sorrows and soothes the situation.

The Sleeping Father shows a highly complex concept of parentification. In order to understand the different forms of boundary dissolution one has to comprehend the different factors which play a decisive role in this multifaceted concept. Firstly, practices of parentification take place on multiple *relational levels*, with different implications for the lives of the literary characters and with varying consequences for the net of multiple relations each person is embedded in. In *The Sleeping Father*, parentification affects the horizontal level between spouses as well as the vertical level between parents and children. Secondly, the *mode* in which parentification

takes place in the novel also takes on different qualities, which means that the degree of awareness of parentifying actions varies from unconscious parentification to fully conscious practices. Thirdly, in *The Sleeping Father*, *imagined forms* of parentification exist side by side with *existential forms* and together affect a complex multipersonal and generational system of human relationships.

The social environment in which these three factors of parentification are effective has to be taken into consideration in the analysis of *The Sleeping Father*, because social circumstances influence how individuals deal with role reversals in their lives. Therefore, it is important to ask whether Chris and Cathy have a mentor, teacher, or relative to whom they can turn for help and which role social institutions play in sanctioning or preventing their parentification.

Psychologist Gregory J. Jurkovic called the study of the social environment the “ecological analysis” of human development. In his work with parentified children, he included in his analytical framework, in addition to the four dimensions of Contextual Therapy, the “ecological” context in which the children live. He thereby stresses the importance of larger socio-cultural influences and parameters on an individual on the one hand, and the effect parentification has in a broader social context on the other. Such a focus on the ecology of human existence is indeed also included in the theoretical framework of Contextual Therapy but does not assume the importance Jurkovic attaches to it.

Based on Bronfenbrenner’s four social contexts that play a role in a child’s development, Jurkovic connects ethical-ontic considerations to environmental concerns. The first context consists of the immediate settings of the child (family, peer group, school), and constitutes the microsystem of the environment. Concerning Chris and Cathy’s lives, these immediate settings are largely characterized by isolation and a feeling of disconnectedness to the world, as will be further explained later in the chapter. Beyond their father’s support they experience little positive concern

for their well-beings, except for the occasional calls from their mother and Chris's friendship to Frank Dial, the only meaningful peer relation in his life.

Secondly, there are the transactions between the different settings, which Bronfenbrenner called the mesosystem. These transactions between family, peer group, and school are hindered in *The Sleeping Father* because there are hardly any points of contact between the different realms. Each setting exists for itself and only on a few occasions, such as the Halloween party at the high school, do they meet. When they do meet, their meeting is either obstructed or awkward and ultimately confirms the isolation of the literary characters.

The third context is the exosystem, which consists of formal and informal social networks with which the child does not directly engage but nevertheless have an influence on her environment (e.g. parent's friends, work place etc.). In the case of *The Sleeping Father*, an isolation of the literary characters is again noticeable, especially in connection to Bernard. He works from home and therefore has no contact with co-workers. His work situation is detrimental to his mental state because "working out of a home office may be fine for obsessive-compulsives or borderline personalities, but it's the kiss of death for the chronic depressive" (27). Furthermore, his illness makes him unreliable to himself: "But now that he was taking an antidepressant, he wondered where the drug ended and he began" (27). As a result, Cathy and Chris are not in contact with a meaningful exosystem which could provide the prospect of stability in their lives.

The fourth context constitutes the macrosystem of the child's living environment. In Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework, it includes "general patterns of the culture or subculture that are manifested formally in recorded laws, rules and regulations, and informally in the ideologies, customs and everyday practices of society's members at the micro-, meso-, and exosystemic levels" (*Lost Childhoods* 14).

Informal customs and everyday practices on all above-mentioned levels are either at the heart of the complex concept of parentification or influence it decisively. The investigation of the macrosystem is one of literary

criticism's major concerns. It is at this intersection between family dynamics and larger socio-cultural developments where therapeutic methods and literary studies meet. While general patterns in the form of rules and regulations, as well as in their informal manifestations of ideologies or customs, are observable on a descriptive level, Contextual Therapy asks for the ethical dimension of human behavior, for motivations and invisible interrelations between the systemic levels that only in the second step manifest themselves in the aforementioned customs, laws, and ideologies.

When Chris and Cathy decide, for example, to take care of their father at home and not to leave him at a health care institution, one not only has to take a closer look at the personal consequences for their lives, but also at which societal circumstances made such a profound decision possible in the first place. This in turn also leads back to the question of an individual's maturation process. Besides that of the personal stage of development, there is also the question of when society, in this case in the form of educational and medical institutions, considers a person to be an adult and in which ways the larger social context contributes to both parentification and maturation of an individual. The narrator in the novel depicts institutions as agents that exercise power over the two adolescents:

In the lives of Chris and Cathy Schwartz, hospital and school exchanged roles. Hospital was now the place where they went to be educated and socialized by illness and the resistance to illness; school was the place where they visited their gravely ailing secondary education. It wasn't as if they'd been learning much in school anyway. The hospital, on the other hand, offered them the opportunity to become wiser by way of pity and terror. (109)

School as part of children's microcosm is heavily influenced by and interacts with the societal macrosystem inasmuch as it sets the legal environment for education on the one hand and potentially provides a social network on the other. Compulsory school attendance for example assures a child's formal education and structures her daily routine. However, it also determines when an individual is considered eligible to fully enter the work force and hence when childhood and adolescence end and adulthood starts on a legal

basis. These regulations are obviously not universal but are a cultural product.

Chris and Cathy's compulsory school education is effective because home schooling is not an option in their household. Bernard Schwartz worked at home. As a result, his profession as well as his mental health prevents the children from being educated at home. However, whether the children are better off being educated at school is also doubtful given the fact that Chris and Cathy's personal world seems cut off from their environment with very few substantial friendships to support them. Therefore, it is characteristic of Cathy's situation that her first love is not someone outside the family's wider circle but her brother's friend.

The novel puts normative education standards into question. The above-mentioned quotation on the impact of school and hospital on the children shows two things: first, school and hospital switching roles in society fuels the adolescents' maturation process and confronts them with actualities of life which force the children to go beyond their known emotional boundaries. Contextual Therapy assumes that a temporary parentification can support the maturation process as long as the efforts of the children are acknowledged and the parentifying situation is eventually reversed again. Second, school as an institution reveals itself to be incapable of fulfilling its actual function within society. Instead, as an essential part of the children's microsystems, school just represents a physical place where humiliation and a feeling of misplacement are officially sanctioned and fostered. School here has a parentifying role as well because it demands that children endure an age-inappropriate and detrimental situation which has a negative effect on their trust reserves.

In the novel, a reevaluation of education takes place: instead of math and English, pity and terror constitute the lesson plans, a school of life. In particular, terror and pity are reminiscent of Aristotle's theory of the Greek tragedy. The catharsis in Chris and Cathy's lives, however, fails to appear. Teenage agony haunts them in lieu of providing a purging effect. School as well as the hospital experience adds in different ways to the ostracized

position both children find themselves in. The former institution reinforces Chris's outsider role through peer ridicule so that the peer community does not function in a constructive way in this novel; the latter through pushing the adolescents into the roles of caregivers who are forced to make grave decisions concerning their father's future medical treatment.

Chris is an outsider in his class. Especially his nemesis Richard Stone, resembling the stereotypical bully of high school movies, is gunning for Chris. He is one of the few references to the exosystemic network in Chris's life and further destabilizes Chris's already fragile self-confidence. Richard, a brawny, tall member of the school's football team usually surrounded by his pack of followers, exhibits merciless behavior towards the seventeen-year-old boy, who in his insecurity and awkwardness seems to be the jock's exact physical opposite. Richard is portrayed as "a psychopath who had it in for Chris" (14) and "who was hatred made flesh, [...] a six-foot-tall fire hydrant: wide and cylindrical and hard, with hard geometrical protuberances" (21). Stone is the personification of all things Chris loathes about school as well as a reason for Chris to come to school with such personal doubts and insecurities.

Against Stone's impressive physique Chris's smaller and more fragile frame is even more pronounced. This kind of character pairing is common in coming of age narratives and as in such stories, physical strength is here outbalanced by wit. Thus, the general tone of the novel also ties in with Chris's basic motto in life: meet everything with irony because "anyone who didn't embrace irony was a fool, because whether you embrace irony or not, sooner or later irony embraces you" (146). However, even this secret weapon fails to support Chris in threatening situations and reveals his inner unease.

In the novel, Richard Stone functions as the usurper of the traditional school authority and as such exercises his despotic power over students he does not like. As stereotypical as Richard Stone's character may be in his simplicity and meanness, he sees right through Chris's fragility: "I gotta hand it to you niggers. You guys got balls. Look at the Jew. Too scared to say a word" (22). Stone's analysis of Chris's insecurities, which put in a nutshell

the incident in the woods behind their high school, makes Chris's vulnerability painfully visible to all parties involved. After catching Chris and his best friend Frank Dial rolling in the grass together and kissing, Stone's instant racist slurs hit the two boys hard. However, while Chris stays mute to the attacks, Frank, "the short, thin, elegant young man," (22) who "had a word for everything, and often not a nice one," (9) hits back with witty remarks, which ultimately leads to him being beaten up by Stone.

His slurs illuminate the fact that, despite all the differences in character and appearance, Chris and Frank are unified by one commonality they painfully share together: being ostracized in school and society. Frank Dial is one of the few black students at the school and lives in the small all-black area of Bellwether. Racism is part of his daily life which he attempts to master through irony. The friends' writing project *Everything in the World* is characteristic of their coping with their outsider roles in the school community. It is a collection of aphorisms which they plan to adapt for a computer screen saver program customized for users who, like them, embrace an ironic view on life. Sentences such as "You know you're dead when ... your friends throw dirt in your face" (3) indicate the witty-defiant stance they take towards the world. As a matter of fact, they view their world in a very postmodern way, because "the world was weary of itself- had trod, had trod, had trod, or whatever; now ground out shoddy reproductions of stuff it used to take pride in producing. Trees, shrubs, cats, people, clouds, and stars were now 'trees,' 'shrubs,' 'cats,' 'people,' 'clouds,' 'stars'" (10 f). A sad discovery that Chris has to make is that his father, too, has become a 'father': a mere representation of the person he once knew. Frank and Richard play antagonistic roles in the exosystem of Chris's environment, beyond which Chris has no access to social networks, either of his own or through other family members, making it hard for him to reach out for help in his position as a parentified son.

From the situation described above, it becomes clear that on an institutional level, school does little to help in the constructive maturation process of the children, neither in its official educational mandate nor by harboring nurturing social settings and networks. Generally speaking the novel depicts all its protagonists as largely cut off from most of their micro- and exosystemic environments because rarely do peers, friends or colleagues play a significant part in their lives. Instead, the plot evolves around family members living next to their fellow humans but not with them. The core family is broken into parts, which does not mean they are no longer connected on a psychological or ontic level, but this physical separation takes its toll on family life and influences it significantly. Chris and Frank's relationship certainly constitutes an exception in the novel when it comes to close peer relations but even the equilibrium of their friendship is very fragile and easily endangered.

Cathy is certainly the most extreme example of the remoteness from genuine human contact. Her life is definitely void of close peer relationships, except for her love to Frank Dial, which ultimately leads to her pregnancy. On the familial level, Cathy sees herself also as an outsider without close ties to the other members. Her confession to her comatose father at his bed testifies to her self assigned role:

I know you two [Chris and her father] can kind of reach each other without talking, through each other's hearts. I don't know how I know it but I do. It's okay, Dad, that you and I don't have that. And it's okay that I don't have it with Mom, or anybody. God can reach my heart. I feel that and I know that [...] So I might seem like I'm alone with no one to really comfort me or take care of me, but I'm not, because God does. So you don't have to worry about me. (81)

Her religious fervor is the expression of her desire for meaningful existence, a life with a higher purpose, but also a source of comfort and guidance through her turbulent adolescent years. In Buber's understanding of relatedness to the world, Cathy does not acknowledge that her perceived remoteness to people is a misinterpretation of her position. One cannot not be related, all existence is dialogical and defined through relationships. Her lack of felt connectedness to the world hints at an *I-It* relation to the world.

For self-delineation as well as for self-affirmation, she needs a relationship that confirms her as a person in her existence. In this context, her forced religious fervor is utilized to give meaning to her life.

Through the actions of hospital officials it becomes apparent that the hospital has a special status in the “ecological” analysis of the adolescents’ development. The hospital, as the other institution involved in Chris and Cathy’s process of growing up, initiates both maturation and parentification or, to be more concrete, maturation through parentification. Bernard’s doctor Lisa Danmeyer plays a key role in the process of parentification; she treats Chris and Cathy like adults and consequently talks to them in matter-of-fact language. This is apparent in her explanation of what happened to their father: “The serotonin syndrome caused a temporary arrhythmia in his heart, which in turn caused a small thrombus or clot to form [...] The clot traveled to his brain’s left hemisphere. That’s what a stroke is, or at least that’s one kind of stroke” (57). Her choice of keeping the conversations within a medical discourse reveals her professionalism on the one hand and hides her emotions behind the very same on the other. This becomes apparent in conversations with Chris, who quickly forms his opinion about her as an overly ambitious doctor with little other purpose in life: “You’ll do your self-assured medical jargon routine for him [Bernard] and he’ll say, ‘Chris, get me away from this amazingly intelligent doctor before she bores me to death’” (70). Considering Danmeyer’s own familial background, this is a remarkably astute observation by Chris and she secretly admits to his suspicion. At the same time, his reaction also reveals his immaturity in dealing with women and his crush on the doctor, which he conceals through irony. Danmeyer is unwilling to take on the leadership asked of her because she is hiding from her own insecurities with her father.

Chris is confronted with enormous difficulties in the face of his father's coma and the parentifying role he has to take on. His methods for coping with the father's vulnerability take on grotesque forms:

I know this is going to sound a little crazy, but I've always — I don't know why this is — I've always wanted to see how you'd look in a Hitler mustache. [...] Anyway we've got to do something to make you more, I don't know, let's call it *effective* in the world. A little self-esteem, a little authority, a little charisma. The Hitler look is one obvious way to work toward achieving these goals. I'm not saying you are not going to offend some people, but you knew that from the moment we started this Hitler thing fifteen seconds ago. People will notice you is the thing. Men, women, it couldn't hurt.
(73)

The irony of falling into a coma after taking anti-depressants of all things is heart wrenching. Anti-depressants are supposed to enable a patient to enjoy a meaningful life again. Instead they force Bernard into the ultimate state of passivity. A Jewish American father falling into a coma and being turned into a Hitleresque figure to give him “a little self-esteem, a little authority, a little charisma” testifies to the crudeness with which Chris approaches his world and at the same time to his inability to accept his father's coma. In terms of reception, this passage comes across as dark humor. In the framework of Contextual Therapy, however, this is a central passage, because Chris tries to re-establish the authority of a father figure that did not satisfy him in the first place.

The act of ‘beautification’ constitutes a meek attempt to process the sudden changes in his life. This long ‘dialogue’ between father and son immediately before the painting of Bernard's face adds to Chris's sense of helplessness and his difficulties in dealing with the status quo of their relationship. Thus, a general sensation of excessive demand for the son to take care of his father finds a release in this act of taboo breaking.

The role reversal between father and son is expressed in small actions and gestures between them such as singing nursery rhymes: “He halfheartedly sang ‘The itsy-bitsy spider went up the water spout,’ and tried to make his father do the thumb-to-forefinger, my-hand-is-a-dumbass-spider gestures as way of reconditioning his impaired spatial perception and

motor coordination” (133f.). Interestingly, such small signs of endearment are the rule between Chris and Bernard before and after the coma, which again testifies to the love they feel for each other, while Cathy’s reactions to her father’s coma are more rationalized, forcibly adult-like, ostensibly mature, but ultimately also only signs of helplessness, and no less an expression of her devotion to Bernard. In her choice of language, Cathy unconsciously confirms her aforementioned self-assigned remoteness to her human environment: “Our father doesn’t ‘rock,’ Chris,” Cathy said. ‘I understand that you’re frightened, but why must you cover it up with this immature glibness?’” (104). In essence, she tries to counterbalance Chris’s childish actions with overly mature reactions. The use of ‘our father’ instead of the term of endearment ‘Dad’ and her assumed condescension towards Chris support this assumption.

The roles which both hospital and school play in the maturation process of Chris and Cathy make up important parts of the framework in which parentification is situated and supported in the novel. The more immanent and far-reaching process of parentification is played out on the basis of personal relationships. Difficulties for Chris and Cathy arise not only through the coma itself but also through other people’s actions, which place an excessive load of responsibility on the young adolescents.

In this context, the mother Lila Munroe plays a central role in the parentification of Chris and Cathy. It has been stated before that in *The Sleeping Father*, parentification takes place on a vertical level between adults and their children as well as on a horizontal level between spouses and is complicated through different grades of awareness concerning these parentifying actions. Both levels are intrinsically connected and cannot be seen as detached from each other, since they form the intergenerational network in which relationships are imbedded.

Lila Munroe exercises an important influence on the intergenerational network of relations because she plays a significant role in the parentification of her children on the vertical level of relatedness but is simultaneously also exposed to those acts in her family of origin. Thus she is

not just the active party, the “giver”, in the parentifying situation, but is also the “receiver” of actions which deplete her natural trust resources.

In Contextual Therapy, the notion of taking on adult-like roles that are not age-appropriate is not necessarily destructive but is likely to become detrimental if a child’s naturally caring propensities are perpetually manipulated and exploited (*Between Give & Take* 78). This is the case with Lila Munroe and her children. In fact, while temporarily taking care of one’s parent exposes us to a considerable amount of stress, it also enables us to step into a role that prepares us for responsible behavior in our future lives (*Invisible Loyalties* 151) and gives us the opportunity to balance the aforementioned cycle of give-and-take and earn constructive entitlement vis-à-vis our parents.²⁹ In view of this, Chris and Cathy’s caring for their father offers the possibility of such an accumulation of constructive merit on the one hand, and enhances their capacities for responsible behavior on the other. As has been shown before, the experiences at the hospital constitute key factors in accumulating positive entitlement and affect the maturation process through contributing to parentifying situations. Yet, the detrimental effects of these parentifying familial situations are the dominant factors for the relationship between mother and children.

As explained in the previous chapter on theoretical foundations of Contextual Therapy, positive entitlement can only be earned in close relationships which are based on mutual understanding and caring, and meaningful relational ethics and cannot be transferred to another relationship (*Between Give & Take* 416). Damage that has been done to one relationship cannot be mended through responsible behavior in another. The question remains what effect it has on the generational balance of give-and-

²⁹ According to Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner, entitlement is one of the main concepts in Contextual Therapy, which deals with the far-reaching consequences of positive and negative entitlement in inter-human relationships. An individual may feel overentitled for merit within a relationship. However, this does not exempt her from having to consider earning more entitlement. Earning merit cannot be ethically transferred from one relationship to another but it can improve the capability of engaging in meaningful relationships in general. As a rule, the ethical meaning of entitlement has to be distinguished from the psychological state of an attitude of entitlement because “a person’s feelings of entitlement may or may not coincide with *being* entitled” (*Between Give & Take* 416).

take if such a positive entitlement has not been earned on the vertical level of parent-child relations. Which results can possibly be anticipated for the third generation born into this specific situation of interpersonal entanglements? And how does it influence the relationship to one's life partner? The family narrative in *The Sleeping Father* explores these questions and shows the multigenerational consequences that mutual indebtedness between family members can cause.

Destructive parentification occurs when parents exploitatively use their children to balance their own inadequacies and to meet their own needs for care in various ways. In *The Sleeping Father*, Lila Munroe exhibits a behavior that shows such a balancing. Lila, together with Bernard, is in the middle position in the multigenerational net of human relationships depicted in the novel. She is the biological and also ethical-relational link between her father Tim and her children Chris and Cathy in the vertical linear rank of the generational chain. Since natural hierarchies of birth order do not translate into mature, ethically responsible behavior in this particular fictional family, it is more appropriate not to speak of a linear vertical chain but rather a triangle with blurred parent-child boundaries and rotating positions. Depending on who is in charge of taking on responsibilities for the family members, the top of the triangle is occupied by various persons. Speaking in terms of parentification, this position at the tip can be either instructive and beneficial for children, because responsible behavior is being fostered through momentary caregiving functions, or destructive and depleting if the position is permanent and age-inappropriate. In this triangle, every generation is connected with each other ontically and ethically. As Bernard Schwartz's situation shows, the rotation of the triangle is not only indebted to the natural cycle of life when parents grow older and will eventually be in need of care, but also to premature physical or mental ailments such as severe depression or coma.

Lila Munroe's relationship to her children is tense and especially complex with her daughter. Cathy developed an inimical attitude towards her mother's world. Even the very first encounter of mother and daughter after

Bernard Schwartz fell into a coma, despite the scene's comic relief through irony, foreshadows later tensions between the two of them and at the same time indicates the disagreements of the past: "The meeting of mother and daughter had about it the undertone of a meeting between the wary representatives of two hostile tribes" (*Sleeping Father* 56). Cathy's gestures appear affected and forced and lack any sign of genuine emotion towards her mother: "She put her hands on her mother's shoulder and asked, as if Lila were an emotionally weak friend suffering a loss, 'How are you?'" (56). Such behavior of acting as a responsible person is a typical sign of parentification. Through this small gesture Cathy expresses her care-giving role, which is overburdening her. Here again, her reactions fit with her aforementioned self-evaluation concerning her lack of connectedness to her fellow human beings. To compensate for these inadequacies, she frantically attempts to implement an overly religious attitude in her life, searching for a way to force a meaningful relationship with God. In the novel, there are some significant references to her religious fervor. For Halloween, for example, she dresses up as Edith Stein, a female pioneer in the field of philosophy and assistant to Edmund Husserl. She perished in the Holocaust at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1942 during World War II. Cathy's development shares some similarities with Stein's. Both were raised in Jewish families and both converted to Catholicism. While Chris turns his father into the Hitleresque figure of authority, Cathy turns to a vastly different authority, namely to the very hierarchical religion of Catholicism with the Pope at its head.

Cathy grew up in a secular household, while Stein was born into an orthodox Jewish family. Cathy's religious ambition is unheard of by family members who developed their own way of living their religion: "Practice it? I [Chris] don't practice it. That's the beauty of Judaism in this family and families like ours all across America. We're not the kind of Jews where you do anything. We're the kind where you just are it. Judaism isn't just a religion. It's a whole, like, thing" (7). In other words, Chris, Bernard, and Lila live secular lives while Cathy searches within herself for a special connection to God. A lack of meaningful relationships in her vicinity leads her to

establishing a relationship with God, in an attempt to become part of a permanent and more trustful *I-Thou* dyad.

The reason for Cathy's awkward and estranged behavior towards her mother is suggested to the reader much later in the book when Lila Munroe reminisces about her sex life during her marriage and her repeated affairs with other men. Up until this point in the book the reader might wonder about Cathy's strong longing for the religious practices of Catholicism, or about her sternness and insecurities. In addition, her wish to live like a Catholic saint can also be interpreted as a cover-up for her sexual frustration or avoidance of her own sexuality. Her initial resistance to Frank's advances and her subsequent prayers for the strength not to give in to the 'sins' despite her strong interest in Frank, testify to her ambiguous attitude towards her own sexuality. Lila herself determines the point at which the fragile bond between her and her daughter had been broken as follows:

A terrible thought came to her, a mental picture of her daughter's face. Not Cathy's face as it looked now, but as it had looked a half a dozen years ago; as it had looked, to be precise, at the moment when Cathy had entered the bedroom of the father of her best friend and discovered that gentleman on his knees before her seated mother doing something the girl had never seen or thought of before but instantly understood. Lila considered that the moment when she lost her daughter, which always returned to her memory in the form of that stricken ten-year-old face, a face which a great enough amount of pleasure or success did not exist to erase from her mind. (85)

Her mother's sex life puts Cathy into a position in which even chastity becomes an interesting alternative to having sex. It seems as if Cathy's refusal to have sex is an act of resistance to growing up. Lila's *joie de vivre* is a red flag to Cathy's self chastening ways of living because it brings her back to that sexual incident the daughter was never meant to witness. The following quotation shows Lila's answer to Cathy's strict self-containment six years after the divorce from Bernard, which strikes Cathy as a key principle of her mother's life. At the same time, Lila's statement reminds her of the day she caught her mother in the act and brings her back to the moment she would rather forget: "But don't forget you're sixteen, Cathy. Don't forget to have fun. Don't forget pleasure'. [...] With the word *pleasure*, all was revealed. [...] — the

same kind of *pleasure* Cathy has seen her enjoy when she was ten years old and walked into the dark room to see her best friend's father doing that thing to her mother. Pleasure indeed" (154).

Lila's parentifying actions become especially prevalent once she finds out about Bernard's coma. After she flies back to Connecticut to see him, she reacts to his physical state with panic in the face of the impending consequences for her personal life. She is frantic and has to comfort herself by assuring her independence and freedom of action:

Lila had to say to herself again and again that she was not a thirty-five-year-old housewife [...], she would not have to eat every meal with these people, she would not have to return every noon and night to this room occupied by these same three people for the next several weeks, months, years, or decades. And then, of course, she wished she'd been able to do just that. (56f.)

This illuminates her inner conflict between the desire to belong and her inability to face the consequences of her relationship to her children and Bernard. She prefers physical separation to meeting her obligations towards earning more entitlement in order to strengthen the balance of give-and-take in the relationship to her children and intends to fly back to California. Instead, she increases her indebtedness to her children by pushing them even deeper into the role of parentified individuals. In relation to Buber's model, such a strong desire for alleged independence and physical separation expresses her increasingly *I-It* relation to her children's world because she endeavors to avoid a genuine dialogue with them. She uses her children to secure her own freedom.

After Dr. Danmeyer explains what has happened to her ex-husband, Lila transfers future responsibilities to her children:

No, but I have a request. Understand that this man is not my husband. These people here, however, are his children. They are intelligent and mature and I encourage you to tell them everything. I live in California. These two are the ones to be kept informed about the prognosis of their father. They will convey the information to me and we will do what is necessary. I don't mean to be cold, I merely mean to make a special plea that you treat Chris and Cathy as adults. I think that will be quite helpful to them now, actually. (59)

Her panic attack after seeing the three of them at the hospital, and what could count as an empty assurance of personal freedom, seems to suggest that this request to treat her children as adults is the result of ulterior motives. Their roles as care takers enable her to live her life in California. Her reaction is an expression of egotism rather than concern for her children. A deeper look into the history of her family of origin reveals Lila as the link between both levels on which parentification occurs: the vertical as well as the horizontal level, which will be discussed later in this chapter. This position leaves her to be the parentifier as well as the parentified, the “victim” and the “culprit.”

In her interactions with her children she wavers between emotional availability, distant politeness, and off-putting coldness: “Lila was good for a genuine soft hug, a cheek kiss, a quick hand squeeze, and then — back off — back the fuck up, to put it in the language of urban American T-shirts” (218). The text itself constitutes a deconstruction of the visible, the obvious family narrative. Giving an explanation for Lila’s actions, the narrator offers an answer to the question of what effect they have on the generational balance of give-and-take when positive entitlement has not been earned on the vertical level between Lila and her father Tim.

The head-palm came back to Lila now in the wake of her father’s death, and caused her to reflect that she had been and probably always would be close to her father after all; not close insofar as she had cleaved to him or shared interests or intimate moments or spoken to him often — he wouldn’t have wanted that, nor would she; not close by proximity but by resemblance: she stayed close by imitating his distance from her with an equal and identical distance from him and, extending out into the world beyond the father-daughter dyad, from all of humanity. (218f.)

Her realization that she imitates her father’s way of relating to the world becomes gradually a conscious act and is made visible on the behavioral level. Beyond that distant wall between her and the world lies her hidden legacy of her family of origin with its loyalties and unbalanced account of give-and-take. This legacy affects her relationship to her other family members as well. Thus the initial dyad becomes part of complex family dynamics. At this point

the systemic character of family life becomes apparent, a characteristic example of the fact that family dynamics have to be seen beyond the sum of the individual members' actions and motivations. Lila's experiences in her family of origin show the imbalanced account of give-and-take in the family ledger. From the information about Lila's upbringing one can conclude that she suffered from her father's negligent actions.

While a Contextual Therapy approach by no means suggests this repetition of behavioral patterns to be a fatalistic and unavoidable result of her father's actions, clinical practice shows that such a repetitive action is not uncommon among clients whose relation to their parents was characterized by either neglect or depletion of trust reserves caused by irresponsible behavior. On a literary level, indications for Lila's accumulation of negative entitlement and the subsequent irreverent demands of her children are observable in various accounts of family life. The following excerpt from the novel depicts an ostensibly harmless scenario at a grubby restaurant during a summer vacation at the West Coast after Bernard went to a rehab facility for further treatment. "Tim's [Lila's father's] red-nosed friend Sporty Swenzler walked into the pizza place and said, 'Am I late?' 'Just on time, just on time,' Tim said, and to his family: 'Well it's been nice seeing all of you. I'll pay for this and then Sporty and I have some serious business to attend to.' [...] The younger generations of Schwartzes and Munroes were defeated, crushed. Lila said, 'You brought us up to this pizza place because this is where you agreed to meet up with your drinking pal?' 'I wouldn't put it that way.' 'How would you put it?'" (16of.). The disappointment in the children and Lila is blatantly noticeable; after all it had been years since the grandchildren had seen Tim, who with his rather mindless and hurtful actions alienates his family, firstly by bringing them to a common pizza place even though he promised to cook, which he completely forgot about, and secondly by making plans to meet his friend Sporty at the very same spot in order to go on a drinking binge afterward.

His daughter seems to sense that disappointments like these are bound to occur; yet they hurt her nonetheless. One single conflict will most likely not lead to a depletion of trust reserves and growth of negative entitlement but it is the frequency with which such irresponsible behavior is experienced that makes the disappointed person prone to withhold due care for the next generation. In Lila's case that would mean the previously mentioned difficulties in coming to terms with her responsibilities towards Chris and Cathy and their overburdening through parentifying actions. Lila ostensibly did not receive due care from her father and thus accumulated negative entitlement, which plays out in her demanding actions towards her children. She now claims what the invisible account of give-and-take suggests as her 'right': to withhold considerate behavior in the ethical intergenerational balance. At the same time, she demands this ethical behavior towards herself from her children and friends so that she might receive what was actually due from her father.

The result of this invisible state of the family ledger manifests itself in the overburdening and parentifying strategies of her interactions with Chris and Cathy. Hence her aforementioned demand at the hospital: "I live in California. These two are the ones to be kept informed about the prognosis of their father. They will convey the information to me and we will do what is necessary" (59). Her request to the doctors is thus a factual account of her living circumstances. She is indeed physically far away from the place where decisions are being demanded. She lives on the West Coast, has an established career there as a lawyer, and her work commitments do not allow her to spontaneously partake personally in the decision-making. However, at the same time, her sentence "I don't mean to be cold" is an expression of her anxiety that someone (or maybe even she herself) could think exactly that and is thus also an indicator that she herself must find her statement about treating her children as adults if not disturbing then at least odd in this situation, since it bears grave consequences for them.

Due to the fact that the reader gets to know very little about Tim Munroe besides his propensity for drinking considerable amounts of alcohol and general carelessness when it comes to familial relationships, it is practically impossible to define with certainty to what extent he made this hurtful behavior a leading motivation in his own life. Yet, the reader finds some cues for irresponsible behavior on the father's part which are disrespectful to Lila and put her into an overburdening situation: "Encounters with her father produced in Lila five or six different emotions that usually made her cry, which made her father wonder how this frail and volatile woman could have become a rich lawyer" (155). The word "usually" indicates a repetitive behavior that is detrimental to the relationship between daughter and father. These five or six emotions are a marker for the difficult time Lila has dealing with her father. The fact that these feelings are not being more closely defined leads to the assumption that the narrator lets the reader know that Lila herself cannot pinpoint the nature of her reaction and that the only outlet these emotions find is through tears. An understanding on a verbal level appears to be impossible, thus the sentences the two exchange with each other are of a certain off-putting and distant nature.

It is characteristic that imbalanced accounts of give-and-take are in many cases not realized by the family members in question but that they nevertheless 'come to the surface' in behaviors detrimental to the already hurt ethical dimension of human relations. In this context, it is significant that Cathy's opinion of her grandfather fits the assumption that Lila had to deal with an irresponsible father in her youth: "To hear her mother call this infantile man Daddy made Cathy feel sorry for the woman" (156). However, this estimation of Tim partly stems from Cathy's overly strict judgment of adults behaving in unacceptable ways, which she tries to set herself apart from to confirm her own moral stability, which is seriously shaken throughout the novel.

The invisible loyalties that bind a person to her family of origin are not rationally realized. Yet they exist and constitute an essential part of the motivations for action. A dialogue between Lila and Cathy concerning Tim

Munroe's drinking habits sheds light on Lila's visible and invisible loyalties to her father:

'I'll call him tomorrow,' Cathy said.
'Maybe you should call him tonight. He gets very busy.'
'Really? What does he do?'
'I don't know. He makes lots of plans with his friends.'
'His drinking buddies? They plan in advance to go to a bar and drink?'
'Cathy! Stop it! I can't take it any more.'
Cathy felt a thrill in her belly and turned around.
'You're carrying this holy righteousness too far. I will not be judged by you in this way and I will not have my father judged by you. I will not tiptoe around you and try to say only things that will be acceptable to this narrow and naïve and untested morality you are so goddamn aggressively thrusting on all of us.' (153f.)

Lila herself was hurt when Tim invited his friend Sporty to the pizza place. Yet, in the light of her daughter's criticism of his behavior she starts to defend him and articulates her loyalty to her father by rebuking Cathy's show of disdain for Grandfather Tim. On the level of invisible loyalties, Lila confirms in her actions the fairness model learnt in her family of origin, and thus stays paradoxically loyal to her father and probably her family of origin's model of give-and-take. Seen in this light, "even self-destructive behavior, like delinquency, drug addiction, psychosis, and other forms of 'symptoms' may be maintained in compliance with family loyalty expectations" if one supposes that the family system is based on loyalties (*Foundations* 128). Lila's gain from this adherence to internalized loyalties in the form of her (non-)relatedness to her children lies in the avoidance of obligations created by past and present imbalances in the family ledger of give-and-take.

Keeping Lila's actions and reactions in mind, a naive reading process supports the idea of putting easy blame on Lila, especially in a conservative reading context, which denies women the personal freedom to create a life outside their role as a mother. Seen in this light, her leaving her marriage and setting up a life for herself seems selfish, especially since she left the children as well. In addition to that, the incident where her daughter witnessed her enjoying oral sex adds to the disturbing picture of Lila's way of life. From her standpoint, it is also a form of liberation and her well-off economic situation

allows her to make use of this liberty. However, the repercussions of her decision are at least partly also known to her as can be seen in one of her inner monologues:

Still: *That selfish bitch* was her nickname during her children's vacations, phrased just like that in the third person, though in reality only Lila called herself *that selfish bitch*, and never out loud; *not* in reality [...] Lila as seen by Lila's own mental Chris and Cathy was a Lila Lila couldn't stand: *that selfish bitch*. In the rest of her life — her life away from her children's dissatisfied gaze, real or imaginary — she was free to be *that fabulous bitch* or *that bitch who can do anything* or *that glorious woman*. (140f.)

This is an excerpt from her inner realm of individual psychology with interjections by the narrator. Her self-evaluation reveals a guilt-ridden image of herself in the context of her children on the one hand, and the positive 'liberated' woman she aspires to be once detached from her family on the other. Concerning her children, her assessment of herself is very harsh and it can be assumed that she developed this image of her own personality due to her past actions as part of her factual background (first dimension). The narrator intervenes by explaining that she is actually the only one who comes to such a conclusion. Her children's assessment of her as a person is much more complex (as will be shown later) and not limited to the derogatory term "bitch". This reduction to "bitch" is also a mentally visualized element of the dimension of relational ethics because it is based on her actions and behavior towards her children, which influences the family ledger decisively. In turn she arrives at a highly subjective judgment of herself through her actions. This shows the interlocking of the different dimensions of human relationships: "From the contextual therapy perspective, as individuals experience the objectifiable and external dimensions of facts and systemic interactions, they make meaning³⁰ in the

³⁰ The authors Hargrave and Metcalf relate this making of meaning and creating of reality in the context of a) beliefs of the self and b) actions and behavior in relationships to Chomsky's nativist theory of language acquisition concerning "a consistent methodology *in the manner or method*" of language construction (*New Contextual Therapy* 29). In their development children seem to acquire a pattern formed over time concerning self-image and actions that also seem to follow a methodology in the manner or method of shaping their individual reality. In that this approach follows the postmodern constructivist assumption of "multiple socially constructed realities" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, cited in *ibid.*). For further reading also cf. Hargrave & Metcalf.

subjective and internal dimensions of individual psychology and relational ethics” (*New Contextual Therapy* 29). It then follows that facts of an individual’s personal life are dependent on an interpretation through which they are incorporated into one’s life story and an importance that affects the relational ethics of a system is subsequently attached.

The Sleeping Father contains some very strong metaphors and images related to the assessment of Lila’s personality. Chris especially developed an image of his mother as a strong and unbending woman:

Often when he thought of his mom in California, he thought of her standing tall and strong in a long white robe at the edge of the ocean, her arms aloft, her hands clenched in fists, watching a thirty-foot wave approach her. The wave breaks on top of her head, and when it has subsided, there she stands in the same position, fists high, face wet, eyes open, wet hair streaming down the back of her white robe. (4)

This image of a confident, defiant woman who braves the elements does not match her own assessment of her children’s opinion of her at all. Chris’s mental picture solely belongs to his own individual psychology but interlocks with the system of interpersonal patterns (third dimension) in that it influences his attitude and behavior towards his mother and thus also the fourth dimension of relational ethics, which functions like a container holding the other dimensions. Another metaphor, which contains a powerful meaning with regard to the relationship between mother and son, can be found in Chris’s dream about his mother:

In the dream, his mother was lying on the couch that Chris was in reality sleeping on. Chris himself, in the dream was lying on the floor next to her [...] He was listening to Franz Schubert’s String Quintet on headphones, and so was his mother. No, they were not headphones. The Schubert String Quintet was entering Chris’s brain via his mother’s hair. [...] The hair was not the vehicle for the music, the hair *was* the music, and vice versa. [...] Each hair that began beneath the surface of his mother’s head ended beneath the surface of his own. They were Siamese mother and son, connected by the hair. Chris’s mother used their mutual hair to think the music into Chris’s mind. Chris had a perfect understanding of the music [...]. Then he woke up, and could not hum even a single bar of the quintet. He felt he had lost something vital to his happiness. (51f.)

The reoccurring theme of dreaming in *The Sleeping Father* is evocative of the classic works of Freud's dream analysis. In a Contextual Therapy understanding one can go a step further and relate this dream not only to a missing delineation between the personality of the mother and the son, or a compulsive submission of the son to the mother, but also as an expression of the tight-knit net of familial relations and the ontic dyad that both of them irreversibly form on the level of blood relations but also on the level of relational ethics. Just as much as the hair in the dream is not the sum of both individuals' hair but actually only *together* form the hair so is the family as a system also more than just the sum of the individuals.

In a similar fashion to Chris's image of Lila standing at the ocean, Cathy as well assesses her mother's personality as relentless and strong: "She did not regard her own mother as a whole woman because, in order to remake herself as an effective woman and possibly even a happy woman, [...] Lila Munroe had to pay the price of being a hard and impermeable woman. Cathy felt her mother did not and would not ever know surrender. Surrender was necessary for wholeness" (59). According to the narrator, Cathy herself is indecisive about the meaning of "wholeness" and what it entails. Her estimation nevertheless shows her mental image of Lila, which, similar to her brother's, does not quite equal "bitch" but contains this elusiveness in form of her mother's actions that is so hard to accept for the children. This rigidity in her personality translates into her statement concerning her children being treated as adults now because she lives in California and cannot possibly be involved personally in the issue other than via her children and only over the telephone.

As mentioned above, Lila's self-image of being a "bitch" reveals a guilt-ridden attitude about her relationship with her children. It can be assumed that the oral sex incident her daughter witnessed is partly the reason for her conclusion of how her children must assess her. In Contextual Therapy, guilt takes on two qualities: on the one hand the feeling of being guilty towards one or more persons, and on the other existential guilt that affects the dimension of relational ethics. This concept, which distinguishes

between “‘groundless’ neurotic guilt”³¹ and “an ontic, interhuman reality,” (*Knowledge of Man* 47) derives from Martin Buber’s model of human relatedness to the world. According to Friedman, guilt entails a contradiction because “the predominance of neurotic guilt in our culture and the traumatized response to it on the part of many individuals makes it difficult to discuss real guilt without evoking the same reactions of acquiescence or rejection that are triggered by neurotic guilt” (*Healing Dialogue* 158).

Indeed, in a public (literary) discourse explanations for neurotic guilt have been addressed and analyzed in the context of Freud’s psychoanalytical naturalistic approach to the concept of guilt, which is assigned solely to the psychological landscape of an individual and does not allow for “metaphysical and religious teachings of the existence of an absolute and of the possibility of a relation of the human person to it” (*Knowledge of Man* 124). In other words, guilt is only important in psychoanalysis if it has a detrimental effect on the client herself. Guilt here becomes a concept that pertains to the realm of perceived feelings of guilt.

In Contextual Therapy, however, ontic guilt becomes an existential reality which goes often unnoticed and is also more unacknowledged by clients in therapy. This is guilt’s pathological side, which “isolates, insulates, and forces people into unintended disengagement from lived life” (*Truth, Trust, and Relationships* 33). Indeed, the world depicted in *The Sleeping Father* deals with this existential guilt regarding the (im)balance of give-and-take on the level of family ledgers. While Lila is partly conscious of her guilty *feelings* (even though she never uses the term ‘guilt’), her parentifying actions are part of this *ontic reality of guilt* because they affect the trust resources of her children and violate obligations towards the younger generation. Here the accumulation of negative entitlement creates existential guilt. Lila does insulate and isolate herself and despite her wish to belong with her family, she also shies away from them and is torn between living her

³¹ For further discussion of the differences between Freud’s psychoanalytical understanding of guilt feelings and ontic guilt see Buber, Martin: “Guilt and Guilt Feelings”. In: Buber, Martin: *The Knowledge of Man. Selected Essays. Edited with an Introduction by Maurice Friedman*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965, p. 121-48.

life far away from them and actually being more involved in their lives. Guilt and guilty feelings do not necessarily go hand-in-hand because “paradoxically, perhaps, existential guilt can exist without concomitant psychological guilt” (*Between Give & Take* 164). In Lila’s case it is the guilty feelings that are part of her consciousness and the existential guilt, of which she is unaware, that is part of her relational reality.

Her conflict between simultaneously wanting and not wanting to be close to her children, as her above-mentioned statements show, indicates that Lila desires separation from her family and incorporates it into her own life narration as autonomy: “Living alone and having an important job gave her the confidence to do what she felt like doing and get what she wanted” (*The Sleeping Father* 53). In that sense she stands as an example for a development that Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy described as follows:

Familial and larger societal processes interlock in a meaningful fashion. Contemporary Western civilization encourages escape through denial from hard confrontation with one’s relationship system. Greatly increased physical mobility, overburdened capacity for communication through the media, glorification of superficial success in ‘adjustment,’ confusion of emotional freedom with physical separation, and a high valuation of a superficial and unfounded pseudofriendliness are among our society’s ‘advantages’ which support refuge from rather than facing of the accounts of relationships. (*Invisible Loyalties* 12)

Lila’s reactions reveal that she confuses emotional freedom with physical separation because her feelings of guilt, as well as her reaching out to her children without ever actually engaging in a genuine dialogue with them and seeing them as intruders coming into her life, shows that she is not as emotionally free as she wishes: “Every time her kids entered her life, they set about pulling it apart, and continued to pull it apart until it was no bigger than it had been when she was married” (*The Sleeping Father* 140). Nevertheless, for her the divorce was an act of liberation. We can see this in her comparison of her married life to a small closet that does not allow for generous physical or indeed mental movement (*ibid*). However, she also sees the benefits of such a ‘closet’: “And yet, she had to admit, the little airless

closet had a coziness her life otherwise lacked, and which she missed when her children left” (*ibid*).

Beyond the relationship between Lila and her father Tim Munroe, the reader gets to know little about her role in her family of origin and her possible destructive entitlement. Nevertheless the effects on the third generation, which inherits this legacy, are noticeable, for example, in Lila’s aforementioned parentifying of Chris and Cathy, which results in an accumulation of existential guilt in the family ledger.

However, not only her children are involved in her legacy but her relationship to Bernie is also affected by it. Naturally, each partner brings his or her own legacy of the family of origin into the relationship and into the new family they are about to create. Past imbalances in the ledger of fair give-and-take are determinants that structure and influence the new relationship as well. Thus the question of which model of fairness each partner brought from their family of origin into the relationship is an important step towards understanding motivations for actions on the individual’s level, and in a broader sense for the specific family system as such (*Try to See It My Way* 266). Lila’s model of fairness from her family of origin is distorted, as has been shown above, and does not constitute a constructive element for positive entitlement in the future generation. The past imbalances experienced in the relationship to her father manifest themselves in her behavior towards her children, which is overburdening and protective at the same time.

About Bernard’s model of fairness stemming from his family of origin, next to nothing is revealed in the novel; neither one of his parents are part of the plot. The narrator focuses on his loving relationships with his children, while Lila’s literary character is embedded in the larger system of the family. Both spouses are largely cut off from their social environment. Only a few of Lila’s love interests are mentioned in the text. This information allows for conclusions about her non age-appropriate behavior in relationships, which leaves her to cope with love like a twelve-year-old would, according to her own judgment (*The Sleeping Father* 271).

In the beginning of this chapter, I wrote that in *The Sleeping Father*, parentification takes place on vertical and horizontal levels and can be imaginary, therefore created in one's mind, as well as real. Imagined parentification on the horizontal level takes place between the ex-spouses Lila and Bernard. In Contextual Therapy, mental forms of parentification are also incorporated into the family's narratives of human relations because these stories of an imagined role reversal, or assignment of a parental role, serve a specific function: "If the act of falling in love is always partly based on imaginary parentification, then most marriages can be considered as subsequent life-long contracts for balancing this fantasy with responsible and giving marital mutuality" (*Invisible Loyalties* 151). This quotation expresses a paradoxical assumption that may seem astounding in connection to marriage. Upon entering adulthood, the individual separates from her family of origin and when marrying or committing to a long-term partner, enters a new relationship in which ideally mutual respect, love, and caring form the basis of this partnership.

By contrast, the desire to enter another parent-child like relationship through marriage that ensures yet again a dependency and source of parental care seems immature, if not infantile. After all, looking for a substitute of parental care in a partner seems to testify to one's inadequacies and insufficiencies when it comes to emotional balance and personal development. In the western world where the prevalent assumption is that two individuals make one couple upon joining in marriage, and at the same time preserve their individuality and personal freedom through self-affirmation, the notion of a searched for and desired subjection appears to be a confession made only in secrecy.

Lila also makes such a secret confession at the hospital bed of the still comatose Bernard after she has flown in from California to see him. His condition gives the other members a possibility to speak frankly about their feelings towards him:

I suppose I don't have a right to say that, but you are necessary to me. You are necessary to the life I have in California. I don't mean just that you are raising our kids — oh, don't think I don't think about that, toots. No, I mean the idea of you back here in Connecticut bolsters me. Every day I think of your sweetness existing somewhere in the world. I have a mental map of the eastern United States and it's got your sweetness and goofiness on it. I carry a small Bernie around in my mind. It's like a precious little doll that someone I cherished gave me in childhood. I need it.
(54)

In this statement two themes are interlocked which have been addressed earlier: autonomy, or rather more specifically physical separation, and parentification. Lila draws part of her confidence from the fact that her ex-husband is in Connecticut and thus could not be much further away from her within the US. As her statement reveals, her separation does not equal genuine autonomy. Genuine autonomy in Contextual Therapy is characterized as follows: “Paradoxically, the individual’s goal of *autonomy* is inextricably linked to his capacity for relational accountability. In fact, responsibility for the consequences of one’s action on his relational partners may be the true test of autonomy” (*Between Give & Take* 62). Lila’s absence certainly changes the dynamics of the whole family system and initiates a shift that makes Bernard the only parent the children trust. However, her decision to move to California and become a lawyer does not discharge her from her familial loyalties to either her husband or her children. As stated above, physical absence is no sign for individuation or psychic emancipation. Autonomy means engagement with one’s relationships and with the balancing of obligations and entitlements.

This notion also derives from Buber’s model of relatedness to the world, especially from meeting the *Thou* in a meaningful dialogue, which entails a confirmation of self-worth through the other. Lila’s little doll of Bernard, which she carries around, is a metaphor for her unresolved and

imbalanced account in her part of the marriage and a form of imaginary parentification. Paradoxically, it is the image of a little doll that manifests her needs, because dolls as toys are objects of projection, but very small and trivialized, and only function as protection and caregivers in children's imaginations. However, the doll of Bernard, as indeed such a protector and caregiver in the broadest sense, is a sign for an imagined parentification of him because at the same time Lila can feel like a girl: cared for by it in her mind just like a small girl would do with her actual doll.

Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark state that in the form of imagined parentification among adults "the distortion usually occurs through a fantasied [sic], often unconscious, regression of the self to a childlike position. In comparison with the self, the mate appears as one who should be obliged to be a provider, defender, or nurse" (*Invisible Loyalties* 152). Even though parentification in its imagined form is less detrimental and destructive to the family ledger, it nevertheless is damaging if reciprocity of give-and-take in a relationship is not given. Thus, parentification becomes the indicator for a disengagement of relationships. In the case of the family in *The Sleeping Father*, such reciprocity is disconnected because the two partners divorced and throughout their marriage the equilibrium between obligations and entitlements never existed.

The different types of parentification in *The Sleeping Father* denote a boundary-blurring of the roles of children and parents. As the title of the novel indicates, the father role in the novel is 'sleeping.' The coma of Bernard Schwartz stands allegorically for the changing hierarchies in families. Bernard is not able, and Lila not willing, to fulfill their roles as parents and responsible care givers. Parentification leads to a new family dynamic in which the balance of give-and-take is re-negotiated. It entails a notion of a cyclical and mutual give-and-take in intergenerational relationships. Chris's view of his future after he is shot and suffers a severe blow to his head during a robbery testifies to the boundary dissolution between parents and children: "Lying in the ditch, fading from conscious thought, Chris had this vision: him and his father trading comas in a brain damage round-robin: coma, rehab,

coma, rehab, coma, rehab, father and son, on and on, in that finite loop of breakdown and consolation known as the future” (345).

This quote at the end of the novel makes clear that a return to traditional hierarchies between parents and children is impossible for the Schwartz family. However, it shows that meaningful relationships between children and parents are re-established and that family life is not dissolving but re-negotiated. A Contextual Therapy approach to the novel shows the intergenerational consequences that parentification has on the family dynamics of the Schwartzes. It fosters an understanding of the effects negative entitlement, accumulated in the parent generation, can have on the following generation and what consequences a violation of the justice of the human order has for human relationships.

Chapter 4

Existential Guilt and the Politics of Race in *The Time of Our Singing*

“Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay, and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix...”

(qtd. in *Interracial Intimacy* 95)

In 1959 Virginia circuit court Judge Leon Bazile ruled in favor of the state’s law against racial intermarriage and declined the appeal of Richard Perry Loving and Mildred Loving, who would not accept that their union was against the law in the state of Virginia. This interracial couple was sentenced to a year in prison but set on probation if they agreed to leave Virginia and settle in another state. The quotation above is Bazile’s explanation of his ruling against the Lovings. His account attempts to echo eighteenth century Enlightenment thinking according to which God implemented natural laws, which one, using reason, can be interpreted in order to explain the perceived reality. Bazile’s notion of race is based on eighteenth century categories of the difference between races. While his statement does not postulate a superiority of one race over the other, it nevertheless claims that differences between individuals are reason enough to keep them separated and thus declares racial intermarriage impossible and intolerable before the state law. In 1967, however, The United States Supreme Court would overrule this lower court’s decision, effectively making interracial marriage legal throughout country. The Attorney General of Virginia argued in the case of interracial marriages that

inasmuch as we have already noted the higher rate of divorce among the intermarried, it is not proper to ask, ‘Shall we then add to the number of children who become the victims of their

intermarried parents?’ If there is any possibility that this is likely to occur— and the evidence certainly points in that direction— it would seem that our obligation to children should tend to reduce the number of such marriages. (*Intermarriage* 334f.)

Bazile’s justification of his verdict against the Lovings and the Attorney General’s explanation in favor of the laws against racial intermarriage testify to the fact that approximately one hundred years after the abolition of slavery, the US was still subject to enormous cultural divisions along the race lines, and that these divisions had a severe effect on family life as well. The concern for the welfare of children has been an effective means for social reform movements as well as social control in the past (*Age of Independence* 172). The concern for the children’s well-being is a prime issue in the debate about interracial marriages but has also been used as a self-serving declaration to propagate white supremacist causes. For the Attorney General, the best protection measurement for biracial children is to prevent the interracial marriage in the first place.

The arguments against legalizing such relationships are monolithic since they do not take into account the social circumstances under which interracial couples had to lead their lives. Engaging in an interracial relationship often entails pressure from family members, peers and, as the case of the Lovings illustrated, also from governmental institutions. Here, the personal becomes political and the social forces that exercise their influence on the couples are not to be underestimated in a country that faces great difficulties in coming to terms with its violent past of centuries of slavery. In this debate on legalizing racial intermarriage, the possible social reasons for the high divorce rate are not addressed, but the possible effects of such marriages on the children are over-emphasized, cut off from the social basis and de-contextualized. Thus, biracial children “who become the victims of their intermarried parents” are actually the victims of a reactionary society and not of their parents’ ‘reckless behavior’ and ‘ignorance.’

Through this agenda of anti-intermarriage that many white Americans approved of, the inherent ambivalence of race relations in the US becomes clear. The denial of such relationships between black and white people strikes

at the heart of the country's difficulties to come to terms with its past injustices done to the black population during slavery. It seems as if an open acknowledgment of interracial marriages between black and white people reminded a white majority of the fact that such relations had already been in existence for four hundred years albeit in most cases in a different form. A large percentage of African Americans in the U.S. whose ancestors were slaves also have a European genetic background. In many cases white masters took advantage of their black female slaves and pressured them into sexual relations or plainly raped them. The children then would be biracial and a consistent proof of the injustice done to this part of the population. Legalizing interracial relations between blacks and whites also meant that the public would be forcibly made aware of this violent history that is part of the nation's repressed consciousness. It is safe to assume that no one likes to be reminded of one's ancestors' faults or the atrocities of the past.

In the previous chapter on *The Sleeping Father*, I have demonstrated how existential guilt accumulated in one generation affects the members of the next generation on a personal, familial level. Contextual Therapy assigns such accumulation of injustice also to a country's ledger of justice at large. Boszormenyi-Nagy points out that

it is important to distinguish here between *personal responsibilities of individuals* and *collective responsibility* for a multigenerationally accumulated, systemic debt. The latter leads to even larger, societal ledgers of obligation and indebtedness. Today's white citizen would justly deny any personal responsibility for the importation of slaves from Africa many generations ago. On the other hand, he has to share awareness of an obligation for society to collectively repair the aftereffects of slavery that have continued to hamper and hurt many descendants of the slaves. (*Invisible Loyalties* 74)

Contextual Therapy adds an interesting approach to the issue of slavery and the ongoing debate over the effects slavery had and still has on the development of U.S. society as a whole. It contributes a theoretical framework to the discourse of slavery and its repercussions for later generations and the social climate, in which the descendants of both the victims as well as the perpetrators of slavery will grow up. The metaphor of

the ledger of obligation applied to the complex range of topics around slavery illuminates the effects of the past on the present. On a collective national level, it has been argued that the formation of ghettos, the inequality of the labor market and, as a consequence, the lack of opportunities for education and other woes that trouble today's America are long-term results of the inhumane system of slavery.

On a more personal level, many social workers and scholars alike assign the disintegration of black families to this atrocious institution, an idea which has been dealt with in many texts across all media. If families are torn apart, children are being sold to other masters, sometimes as soon as they are born, and the position of black fathers and mothers in these families is denigrated both through violence and denial of their most basic rights on such a large scale, then effects of such atrocities are prone to show up in future generations as well. These descendants are overburdened through the legacy of slavery in many ways. Family life is the one realm in which the repercussions can be felt most severely.

In this context, the popular counter-argument is also part of this discourse, namely that slavery had ended in 1865 and that one cannot take this institution as an excuse for subsequent shortcomings. Such an argument is a double-edged sword because it allows for the avoidance of obligations for both blacks and for the descendants of the white population who are able to denounce the collective responsibility for justice in society. Contextual therapists consider these practices of denial and avoidance as counterproductive to the 'healing process' of a nation and of individual families in question.

Reestablishing justice to the human order on a larger social level is difficult if the willingness to acknowledge past injuries is not there. The Jim Crow laws implemented in the 1870's that separated blacks and whites in society, and which were not abandoned until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, testify to the denial of equitable status for blacks. They are the institutionalized legal manifestation of an avoidance of dealing with the

country's ledger of injustice at large. In 1984, Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark wrote that

the greatest cultural task of our age might be the investigation of the role of relational, not merely economic, justice in contemporary society [...] Traditionally, it has been the function of the parents and other elders to keep accounts of the family's just human order. Chieftains, kings, and emperors did the same, actually or symbolically, for the larger social units. (*Ibid.*)

In the twentieth century, it is the federal government with its executive, legislative, and judicial branches that is in charge of keeping the human justice accounts of society in order. In the case of the legal status of interracial marriages, justice is no concern. This illuminates the effects social dynamics have on the family. The larger system exercises power over the family system and enforces further injustices of the human order that become prevalent in the concrete structure of marriages.

In the case of intergenerational (in)justice, guilt is not a moral category but seen as an existential reality that manifests itself daily in cultural phenomena such as racism or in institutionalized discrimination, as in the case of interracial marriages. Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark argue that

Society itself as a whole can be charged with unearned guilt as far as each emerging generation is concerned. Whereas few contemporary white Americans would accept guilt for the enslaving of hundreds of thousands of Africans several generations ago, the impact of slavery has affected the justice of black children for a number of generations. It is reasonable to assume that the white person who wants to deny or ignore the current and continuous implications of past slavery for the justice of black citizens is guilty of what Martin Luther King called 'covering misdeeds with a cloak of forgetfulness.' (55)

Therefore, history does matter, both on the level of one's own family narrative and on the larger level of cultural discourses of a nation. Goldenthal stresses the importance of knowledge about unfairness and injustice experienced in a client's past when using Contextual Therapy, and points out that "some aspects of people's histories are strictly individual, some refer to their families, and some apply to members of their race, gender, or cultural group" (*Doing Contextual Therapy* 5).

The family narrative presented in Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing* has to be seen in the context of the family members' as well as the nation's history, specifically in the context of race and race relations. The novel explores the social and familial circumstances and massive forces the interracial couple David and Delia Strom encounter when they live their love semi-openly. The novel draws an intimate picture of the Strom family in a racially segregated society that, being in denial of its own past charged with the oppression of one racial group by another, is not ready to accept interracial marriages as an appropriate form of living.

The Time of Our Singing (2003) connects the social history of segregation and race relations in the U.S. of the twentieth century with an engaging discourse on classical music and physics, irrevocably intertwined with the history of the Strom couple, their three children Jonah, Joseph (Joey), and Ruth, and their families of origin. Their coming of age stories as biracial children in the late 1950's and early 1960's reflect the controversy over interracial marriage in the U.S. On the surface, the Strom children's experiences in a society divided along racial lines seem to confirm the Attorney General's statement against interracial marriage as a concern for the repercussions biracial children might suffer. The three Strom children are indeed troubled by their personal legacy inherited from their parents. However, in the case of the family in *The Time of Our Singing*, it is not the divorce that is threatening the children's well-being. The threat to them comes mainly from the outside in the form of racial prejudices and discrimination that make it very difficult for Jonah, Joseph, and Ruth to develop their own sense of identity when society expects them to be either white *or* black, but not *both*.

The parents, Delia Daley and David Strom, meet at the Marian Anderson concert on Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939. This open-air concert in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., was organized by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt after the Daughters of the American Revolution had denied the famous contralto a performance in Constitution Hall because of her African American background. Eleanor Roosevelt's reaction to the rejection of

Anderson's talent based on racial prejudices alone had a signal effect and was interpreted as a bold statement against racial oppression in the U.S. For the events in the novel, this concert has an important symbolic function because it embodies the victory of talent over racial resentments. This concert represents on a large public scale what Delia and David wish for in their lives on a personal level: acceptance of difference in America. The description of their meeting at the Lincoln Memorial can be read as a fictional account of a genuine meeting of two people according to Buber's relational model of *I-Thou*: "Inside those too-wide eyes, the man looked out, seeing her. *Her*: nothing larger. No sign but herself. She, at most ten years younger than he [...] Could there be whites who might not, after all, hate her on sight for the unforgivable forgiveness they needed from her?" (221f.). She is confirmed through him in her individuality as a human being, not as a representation of a larger concept of race or an embodiment of guilt, just as much as she confirms his being in this special moment of meeting.

David, a Jewish scientist, and Delia, the daughter of a doctor and member of the black elite in Philadelphia, thus find each other in the crowd at the concert and quickly fall in love. Their taboo union produces their three children, all of whom are musically gifted, but Jonah, their oldest son, is considered a singing prodigy. The parents are well aware of the fact that the children's environment is resentful towards them, yet, they believe through their marriage they can contribute to the nation's future which they see as colorblind: "Their sons will be the first ones. Children of the coming age. Charter citizens of the postrace place, both races, no races, *race* itself: blending unblended, like notes stacked up in a chord" (*Time of Singing* 345). Delia and David's motto is an old Jewish proverb: "The bird and the fish can fall in love..." (143). But for them the question remains as to *where* this unlikely couple will build their nest, since there are not only social constraints but, more importantly, Delia's family is also very resistant to her marriage to a German Jewish immigrant.

Delia's family fought hard to advance in life; her parents made many sacrifices for their children and put great hope in them, especially in Delia. Even in her childhood, her father William Daley projected his own dwarfed dreams of advancement in society onto Delia, his firstborn:

Black's not even half the battle. She, William Daley's firstborn—*cleverest baby ever birthed, either side of the line*— has been his dream for achievement beyond even the unlikely heights he's scaled in this life. She should go to medical school. He did. He did. Pediatrician, internist, maybe. Do anything, if she weren't so headstrong. Pass him up. Go to law school, first black woman ever. Force them to take her, on pure skill. Run for Congress, Lord help him.[...] *Who's going to move it down the line, if not the best?* And the best, he insisted, was her. Somebody's got to be the first. Why not his little girl? *Make history. What's history, anyway, except uncanting the can't?* (35f.)

These hopes and demands on Delia put her under a lot of pressure. She not only fights the rules and regulations of a segregated society but also has to come to terms with the legacy of her family of origin. In her position, every decision becomes political. Her rejection by a renowned music school because of her race despite her outstanding singing talent again testifies to society's unmet obligations to strive for fairness. Her choice to pursue a career in singing despite the aforementioned setback jeopardizes not only the relationship to her father and his hopes for her but also contests the loyalty system of her family.

After these many decades of hard work in order to escape the repercussions of slavery in her own family history, her decision to marry a white Jew is perceived as betrayal of the family's legacy. Her marriage to David puts Delia in a loyalty conflict that suffocates her at times. On the one hand, she does not want to disappoint her family of origin. On the other hand, she loves David, eventually marries him and then also has to meet her obligations to him. In the novel, her being torn apart between both sides does not lead to a serious rift in her marriage but to her expulsion from her family of origin. Strong internalized loyalty demands, which exist by way of belonging to the Daley family with their specific race-related history, clash

with her love to David. Contextual Therapy holds that such a situation is often the starting point for marital problems due to invisible loyalties:

Marriages flounder because of imbalances between the two people most involved (horizontal). They also founder because of vertical imbalances. A contextual therapist understands the massive impact of intergenerational conflicts and tries to help a couple explore them. He can identify just how one spouse's invisible loyalty to her family of origin can undercut the marriage's potential [...] A combination of vertical and horizontal loyalty conflicts may finally block any chance that partners might give to their marriage, or to other closely committed, loyalty-based relationships. (*Between Give & Take* 315)

The invisible loyalties Delia is exposed to do not cause her marriage to fail. However, living with David comes at a high price for her. Instead she internalizes the conflict between family of origin and her marriage and turns against herself. Self-doubt and self-blame are the results of her inner conflict. What is more, the relationship between her children Jonah, Joey, and Ruth and the grandparents is obstructed and becomes closer only later in their lives.

Delia's father's vow that "no Daley would ever again have a master, even another of her own" (85) contradicts his own patriarchal position in the family, which he uses to move his daughter into what he considers the right direction, namely not to become a singer. His motive seems reasonable given the fact that black artists had a very hard time in the realm of classical music and that Delia is coming of age during the Great Depression during which tens of thousands of workers were laid off. In reality, his concern for his daughter's future is also a claim for his dreams of a higher social status for the family to come true.

To be more precise, Delia's conflict is aggravated through the complicated demands that the loyalty to her family puts on her. On the one hand, she is being praised as the smartest child ever born into the Daley family and is encouraged to go her own way without letting anyone stop her, even if society rejects her because of her skin color. On the other hand, as soon as William Daley sees how serious his daughter is about becoming a singer of classical music, he manipulates her wishes, and even betrays his

own statements about wanting her to become the best at whatever she wants. He repeatedly lets her know that he disapproves of her desired career and tells her that singing is neither an occupation that is valuable nor can it become one. Only his conviction about the Daleys being free and 'slaves' to no one keeps him from destroying his daughter's dreams.

The conflict between personal freedom of choice and the demand to meet the obligations of the family's legacy coupled with the challenges of coping with the larger cultural implications of this legacy weighs heavily on Delia given the specific history of her family of origin. In her family, the question of belonging and identity had always been closely tied to the color of their skin:

Delia Daley was light. In the gaze of this country: not quite. America says "light" to mean "dark, with a twist." By all accounts her mother was even lighter. No Daley ever spoke of where their family's lightness came from. It came from the usual place. Three quarters of all American Negroes have white blood— and very few of them as a matter of choice. (72)

Delia's outward appearance is part of what contextual therapists would classify as part of the first dimension, the facts of her background. Undoubtedly, the 'fact' of her skin color is culturally loaded with racial discrimination, rejection, and prejudice, not just in relation to the white population but also within the black community. Instances of colorism, the discrimination against people because of their complexion within one ethnic group, are portrayed in the novel in the form of attraction to and choice of partners because of their light skin. Delia's mother, Nettie Ellen Alexander, is described in the novel as her husband's "radiant conjugal trophy, his high-toned lifelong prize," (72) and at the same time her lightness frightens him away sometimes. He is afraid of people's judgment because he is married to such a light skinned woman (76).

Delia is born into these cultural burdens that define for her who she is: the lightness of her skin clearly tells an entire story of her familial background without her having to say a word about her family. Her mother had been judged accordingly within the black community. The daughter goes

one step further and willingly ‘betrays’ her cultural heritage and marries a white man. Her mother very likely is the offspring of a forced sexual relation in which the white man takes possession of the black woman. ‘What is Delia’s excuse?’ might ask the members of the black community. Her family certainly disapproves of her, in their eyes, ‘backstabbing’ ways. Her dishonoring the family’s and her race’s suffering by the hands of the white community is the ultimate expression of betrayal in the eyes of her parents. Her father’s reactions speak volumes about the pain Delia causes him:

“What ever possessed you to side with those who’ve done your own-” [...]

“You’re a colored woman. Colored. I don’t care how high-toned you are. I don’t know what the world of that white music has been leading you to—”

“Daddy, you’ve always told me it’s whiteness makes us black. Whiteness that makes us a problem.” [...]

“Don’t you dare turn my words against me. And don’t you dare pretend you aren’t doing what you’re doing. A public proclamation that none of the eligible, accomplished men of our own race—” [...]

She tries to hold his gaze, but his unmask her. She must look away or burn. Defeating hers, his eyes take on four hundred years of violence coming from all directions. (217f.)

However, it is not just her racial group at large she is betraying, but more specifically the hard work and effort the Daleys put in to rising above and being their own masters in a white society that, in the end, still determines the pace of their progress. William Daley’s ancestors fought hard to climb up the social ladder. His great-grandfather James was a freed house slave who settled in Philadelphia while the other slaves he worked with went to Cape Mesurado— Christopolis, Monrovia. James, however, was light— *too* light to live in the black Diaspora. As it turns out, even though he was almost as light as his former master, he was too black to be accepted in ‘America.’ This polarizing expectation for somebody to be either white or black, but not both, runs like a common thread through the history of the Daley family. A few generations removed, James’s great-great-grandchildren Jonah, Joey, and Ruth will still be exposed to society’s racial discrimination. It is what the Daley ancestors called “twoness.” Depending on the social context they are either black or white but never just themselves.

James opened a barbershop, which he eventually enlarged despite the economic hardships in the beginning: “He did with so little so his sons might do with a little bit more” (74). Frederick, his second son, kept the store open even longer, so his son Nathaniel could go to Lincoln University and “returned, walking with a step his father couldn’t fathom and his still-enslaved grandfather couldn’t even see” (74). Nathaniel opened a small pharmacy and “brought the family into the forms of legitimacy no Negro Daley had ever known” (75). Finally, William, the great-grandson of James, the former house slave, attended Howard University, “came home almost a decade later, a doctor of medicine and certified member of the Talented Tenth” (75).

William Daley defines and validates himself in relation to his own family of origin through dedicating himself to the Daleys’ personal family narrative of social uplift through talent and a strong work ethic. The Daley family’s genogram information contains patterns of expectations that aim at social excellence and education. Every member is expected to make the respective commitments to continue the family saga. The Daley children would go to college as their mother Nettie had wanted to but was not allowed to. And Delia, as the eldest, had to be the role model for her siblings. William and Nettie Daley communicate their expectations through positive affirmation of Delia’s abilities. Through that they also put pressure on her not only in terms of academic excellence but also through an implied future disappointment if she does not meet their expectations:

They fed their young on the upward hope of the oppressed: *How much we’ve done, from inside the tomb. How much more we might do, with just a little living space.*

Such was the squeezed hope that made up Delia’s birthright. William’s first child to live was his pride and religion. “You’re my trailblazer, baby. A colored girl, learning everything there is to learn, a colored girl sailing through college, following a profession, changing the laws of this country. What’s wrong with this idea?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it, Daddy.”

“Damn right, nothing. Who’s going to stop it?”

“Nobody,” Delia would reply, sighing. (81)

The small word “sighing” indicates Delia’s growing frustration over the pressure her father places on her. Because William Daley put so much hope in her and believed in her as if she was his “religion,” his later disappointment over her marriage to a white man is immeasurable: “Her father wrestles with the physics. The optics. For generations now. It’s been their secret scale, the pull that led him to her mother. Light as you can, right on up to the invisible edge, but never over. *Over* is unthinkable betrayal, even though loyalty never asked questions along the graded way” (219).

In stark contrast to Delia’s detailed history of her family of origin stands David’s familial background. It represents a great void in the family narratives of *The Time of Our Singing*, which becomes all the more obvious compared to the multigenerational conflicts in Delia’s family. His story is one of loss and insecurity about the whereabouts of his siblings and extended family. David fled from Nazi-Germany in the late 1930’s to the U.S.; he was the only one of his family to do so. He is a physicist. Friends of his invited him to participate in a physics study and thus rescued his life. In the course of the events, the study turns out to be part of the Manhattan Project, the outcome of which was the development of the atomic bomb.

The destiny of David’s family is only one of the many losses in the intergenerational history of the Daleys *and* the Stroms. David’s recollections about and concerns for his missing family are described in passages scattered throughout the chapters of the novel. Though the reader anticipates instantly that his family’s disappearance is caused by Hitler’s destruction of the Jewish population in Europe, an explicit explanation of the exact circumstances of their disappearance is missing in the book. The word Holocaust is mentioned three times in *The Time of Our Singing*, twice in direct relation to David’s family. The novel is literally lost for words when it comes to the fate of his relatives.

Therefore, the readers, as well as David’s children themselves, get very little information about the legacy David brings into the newly founded family: “Everyone is dead. All those names no more than myths to me [Joey] — Bubbie and Zadie and Tante — everyone we never knew. All of them gone.

But all still here, in the shake of our Da's head" (151). Silent and complete bewilderment are David's reactions to the tragic loss. Loss for him is something that he can only attempt to process in his work on 'bending' time. The theory of relativity serves him as a means to communicate his thoughts about the trauma he experienced but his children cannot follow him. With statements such as "*now* is nothing but a clever lie" (151) he tries to explain to his seven and eight year old sons his understanding of time.

It is the family's *stories* about the missing members that act as a valuable source for background information concerning the Strom children's legacy and against forgetting their Jewish origins. Yet, the only person who would be able to tell them about the legacy of the European side of the family is of course David, who increasingly lives in his own world of science and who after the loss of Delia to a fire becomes less and less available to his adolescent children.

In Contextual Therapy these highly subjective stories told about members of the family who have already passed on, are unwilling to participate, or constitute a threat to the client, are of great importance to the therapeutic process. Just as in the case of the Strom family, these stories are at times the only source for information and build the only foundation for potential exoneration: "Exoneration typically results from an adult reassessment of the failing parent's own past childhood victimization. It replaces a framework of blame with mature appreciation of a given person's (or situation's) past options, efforts and limits" (*Between Give & Take* 416). Depending on the amount of damage and pain a person caused, such an act of exoneration can mobilize trust reserves again, because an understanding of the motivations for the hurtful actions in the family's past can be incorporated into the therapeutic process.

In the specific case of the Strom family, the children, especially Ruth, deprive themselves of a chance to further understand their paternal familial background. Since "much of the intrafamilial struggle cannot be adequately described in terms of conflict, love, hostility [...] the real struggle is to possess a secure ground for one's sense of selfhood — and that ground consists of the

other” (*Foundations* 87f.). Securing a basis for one’s sense of self also conditions communication, which is being hampered between the family members on various levels. David’s previously mentioned scientific explanations as his form of communication bewilders his daughter. Her anger and frustration about this culminates in her hopeless realization that “the man never knew how to talk to me [...] Never on this planet” (567). Yet, she also never bothered to ask, nor did her brothers ask directly.

Ruth’s denial of her father’s suffering also means a denial of the ‘white part’ of her heritage and her legacy of obligations as well as inherited merits. A substantial part of her past is cut off in an attempt to give clear answers to the question of belonging in a world that knows no shades of skin color, only black or white. By that, she also cuts off the resources for exonerating her father and therefore an opportunity for personal growth, not only in light of her own person, but also in the context of her children’s legacy.

Only on few occasions does one of David’s children acknowledge him for the losses and injustices experienced in his family of origin. This has to do with the discourse on race and how experiences of past multigenerational injuries have ‘written themselves’ into the family narrative of the Daleys in the U.S. The only one who actually expresses an understanding of what David is going through is his wife Delia: “But what of her boys’ other family, that lineage she knows nothing about, cleaned out, solved, finally, by this world that stands no complications? Isn’t that family every bit as much theirs?” (479). One possible explanation for this very noticeable absence of family ties could be his inexpressible pain over this loss, because Delia knows that “her man is in agony. The agony of his family, lost in bombed Rotterdam. The agony of his family, hiding in the dark in burning Harlem, while he is gone. ‘Nothing really changes. The past will run us forever. No forgiveness. We never escape’” (344). This epiphany silences him and makes any attempts at reconciliation with the past and future in the form of talking to his children obsolete.

Another reason why David does not talk about his family could be his feelings of guilt about having survived. This is a common emotion found with people who have lost family members for example, in natural disasters, wars, and genocides. Even though David does not explicitly state his guilt over having survived, he shakes his head in utter bewilderment at the fact that he is still there, while they had to go. The question of why, the meaning behind all this senseless suffering is perpetually in his mind and the fact that he cannot come up with a suitable answer strikes at the core of his sense of self. Contextual Therapy holds that survivors are over-entitled in life for due consideration of their sufferings and the tremendous efforts they have made to start a new life. Yet, they suffer

feelings of indebtedness to those who were unjustly killed even though the fact that people perished is obviously not their fault [...] There are often inescapable feelings of indebtedness to those who have perished; their group for its future survival; posterity, through the survivor's efforts not to burden their young with manifestations of destructive entitlement [...] Often, the parent who survives does not want to burden the offspring with knowledge of his or her experience. (*Between Give & Take* 391)

David's behavior makes it likely that the above-mentioned factors play a role in his silence about his family of origin. This puts a strain especially on the relationship to his daughter, who condemns him for having married her mother.

The last, and to David the most hopeful, reason for not sharing his tragic family story (which he had not known for a long time since there were no letters from his relatives) is his concern for the future. David and Delia's hope for their children is that their society will in the future be one that will finally be able to see beyond ethnic origins and skin color, a place in which both the black and the Jewish population find a space to be more than mere representatives of their respective groups.

Therefore they try to instill in their children a sense of belonging which is not dependent on the cultural parameters of racial discrimination and prejudice. However, outside the walls of their cozy apartment, the world is not ready for such a bold ‘experiment’ as the one the Stroms are undertaking:

Their children were the first supposed to be beyond all this, the first to jump clean into the future that this fossil hate so badly needs to recall. But their children do not jump clean. The strength of the past’s signal won’t let them. Strom and his wife, so lost in time, guessed wrong— too early, too hopeful by decades, (274) [...] but until that day, she’ll [Delia] give them— however illusory or doomed— self. (481)

Selfhood without the knowledge of one’s ancestors’ history might be a blessing in the moment, but in the long run it can make the individual unwittingly become victim to her own unknown familial background. Jonah, Joey, and Ruth will never be able to understand how their parents interact in the system of their family if they do not allow themselves the opportunity for exoneration and thus change. Only on his deathbed, and already delirious, does David say something about his family to which Joey remarks “You should have taught us, Da, at least about our relatives” (463).

David’s suffering goes unacknowledged not only by Ruth but also by his father-in-law William Daley and the rest of his family, because as Delia’s brother Charlie used to say David’s skin color “was too light for pain” (351). At the wake for Charlie, who died as a Marine in WW II and whose body is on the bottom of the ocean, a conversation between David and William anticipates their final fall-out a few years later. The narrator presents this scene from Delia’s perspective. She is standing at the window watching her husband and father lost in a conversation under a Maple tree and therefore later has to rely on her husband’s words to find out what they talked about.

The topic of their conversation was as David says “why my people had to be stopped” (354) in the war. By ‘David’s people’ William Daley refers simply to white people, and reduces the conflict to skin color and annihilates any right David might have had to mourn his own family, which almost completely perished in the Holocaust. By indirectly negating David’s suffering and ignoring David’s familial legacy of past injuries, Daley ensures

that his own story is heard: the suffering of the black people in America should not be silenced in favor of yet another ‘white story’ about loss and injustice. As a consolation David tells him about his theory about time, that “time backward and time forward: Both are always. The universe does not make a difference between the two [...] I told him that the past goes on. I told him that your brother still is” (355). If David is right and Daley’s son still is alive, then in his eyes, so too are the atrocities done to the black people, of that Daley is sure and his son-in-law belongs to the group of oppressors. It is not David’s specific personality or flawed character traits that make Daley reject David, but what his skin color symbolizes. David and Delia try to open a space of racial between-ness for their children, while Daley only sees that David is closing the space he tried to open for his daughter as a member of the Talented Tenth.

The conflict between Daley and David culminates in a dispute from which the relationship between the two men never recovers. In the conversation under the tree, David must also have told him about his work on the atom bomb. A few weeks after the dropping of the second bomb a letter from Daley reaches David, in which he demands answers from his son-in-law about the injustice done to the people and the inhumanity of the second bombing. While Daley has “no trouble in accepting the first explosion,” he is appalled by the second. In his eyes, the atom bomb was created to consolidate white supremacy. In the letter he asks:

Would this country have been willing to drop this bomb on Germany, on the country of your beloved Bach and Beethoven? Would we have used it to annihilate a European capital? Or was this mass civilian death meant, from the beginning, to be used only against the darker races? [...] You may not understand my racializing these blasts. Maybe you’d have to spend a month in my clinic or a year in the neighborhoods near mine to know what I want this war to defeat [...] If you could show me what I’ve failed to understand, I’d be much obliged.
Meanwhile, rest assured that I do not consider you to be supremacy, power, barbarity, Europe, history, or anything else but my son-in-law. (415f.)

David would have dropped the bomb on Germany as well. That was never a question for him. He is troubled by the thought that Daley holds him

indirectly accountable for what happened, that he is after all an accomplice of supremacy, a thought he rejects vehemently. For him, his work on smaller details of the whole project does not add up to compliancy in this barbarous attack against humanity. That would mean compliance with an ultimate act of accumulating existential guilt for generations to come. The last lines of the letter are misleading because William Daley is against his daughter's marriage. He might not take him for white supremacy itself, but behind David's skin color is an entire history of violence and oppression that makes it very difficult for Daley to see in David only a regular person.

The outcome of this letter is a fatal meeting between Daley and David which renders future civil contact with the Daley family impossible: "That horrific night: David and her father trading accusations: an Olympics of suffering. The moral leverage of pain. Two men who couldn't hear their nearness" (483). While the experiences of the Holocaust and slavery are unique and impossible to compare, they find a sad common ground in the annihilation of the justice of the human order, in pain and suffering, in the destruction of individuals, families, and communities. The two men share more commonalities with each other than either of them can afford to admit.

Daley's view on history and future is fundamentally different from what his daughter thinks of them. She is hopeful and has faith in the possibility that her children might live 'beyond race' – which is also a protective measurement to justify her own marriage without being forced into feelings of guilt for her 'carelessness.' Her father is convinced that this is not possible and that she has betrayed not only her family of origin and her children in having them believe in this impossibility, but also herself. Delia gives up a promising career as a singer, which her father strongly disapproved of in the first place, for a man who belongs to the group of people who enslaved her ancestors in the first place. It follows from that that William Daley sees Delia as guilty of creating a situation in which the people involved are only losing. Her husband is her ignorant accomplice at best and the perpetrator at worst.

The Time of Our Singing portrays a complex discourse of guilt both in terms of what contextual therapists would call existential guilt, namely a serious violation of the justice of the human order on either a familial or social level with grave consequences for the following generations, as well as feelings and accusations of guilt. This discourse is a central issue of the familial relationships depicted in the novel and is very closely tied to identity and the development of a sense of self. Above I have explained that according to her father, Delia burdened herself with guilt in betraying her race's history and her family's legacy of suffering. David fights against the accusation that he is guilty of consolidating brutal savageness and supremacy over the "darker races" by working on a science project related to the development of the atomic bomb. At the same time, together with his wife, he is accused of turning his children 'white', of denying them the truth of their belonging and of lying to them about their choices in life. According to William Daley, the history of African Americans in the U.S. proves this notion to be foolishness and that security and rescue lies in siding with the part of their heritage to which society is going to reduce them anyway: their blackness.

In terms of Contextual Therapy theories, both William Daley and David accumulate existential guilt in face of the lives of Jonah, Joey, and Ruth because they deny them access to their ancestral roots and thus an opportunity for exonerating their parents' and grandparents' past deeds that influence the ledger of give-and-take within the family decisively. The result of the silence about past conflicts and events translates into the narrative the children tell about their own existence. Blame and feelings of guilt characterize their stories.

Joey, born in 1942, the second son of Delia and David, is for the most part the narrator of the stories surrounding the family life of the Stroms themselves. While the history of the Daleys and the clashes with David are told from the view point of a third person omniscient narrator, Joey presents the parts which he reliably would have been able to actually witness himself, as he claims. Thus, the narrative of the Strom family is highly subjective in tone, steeped in melancholy, regret over missed opportunities, and generally infused by his expressions of guilt.

The source for these feelings of guilt is very hard to locate. There is no incident in the novel that objectively explains the origin of his emotional state, which corresponds with Contextual Therapy's notion of guilt as a moral category as part of a human being's individual psychology. In essence, these feelings are highly subjective in nature and while they may or may not have a valid source, they can influence a person's behavioral patterns decisively and make a human being an unknowing 'victim' to family loyalties. These feelings fundamentally show a deep involvement and interest in the family's ledger of give-and-take.

Joey takes on the role of the mediator in the family. Already at the age of three he shows signs of sacrificial behavior that anticipates his seemingly self-claimed position as a parentified child: "Delia Strom turns from it, reeling, and there is her little boy, crippled already by selflessness, watching the thing that will grind him underfoot. He just stands there, offering, terrified, ready to give away everything. Sacrificed to something bigger than family. Something that trumps even blood" (477). In this quotation, the narrator describes the scene after David and William Daley have their falling out over white supremacy that never ends and the invalidity of David's theory that the boys have a chance in society if they are raised "beyond race". This "something" that is larger than family are the prejudices that the children await in life as 'blacks' that refuse to buy into this dichotomy of *either-or*.

Already at this young age Joey is a pleaser and intuitively senses that his mother needs him to behave in a certain way so he would comfort her. The readiness to give himself as a person and to give up his own dreams to

regulate the emotional balance in his family is characteristic of him throughout the novel. According to Contextual Therapy,

even very small children are sensitive barometers; they know when their parents are overburdened with anxiety, guilt and mistrust. Moreover, they want to do something about it. Clinical observation of families gives ample indications of how enormously giving and caring very young offspring want to be toward their massively needy parents. (*Between Give and Take* 15)

Joey describes himself in the account of his family narrative as a negotiator between the different members of the family. He is the one following his brother Jonah to a prestigious school because he did not want to leave him alone where the student body consisted mostly of white students who did not know what do make of them either. Jonah and Joey are very light skinned, Jonah more than Joey, and they almost pass for white but only almost. Questions about their identity are asked wherever they go, be it in the above-mentioned school or on their concert tours. The ambiguity of their identity follows them. Joey takes care of Jonah, the musical prodigy whose voice is so clear that the critics celebrate him as *the* new tenor in America. The offers he gets at the Metropolitan Opera, however, typecast him. Jonah declines and turns his attention to music before 1750.

Joey attempts to keep the family together even though his existence is mainly determined by Jonah's rhythm of life: "It falls to me, in this life, to make sure no one I love goes unanswered" (293). Joey is fourteen years old, a year younger than Jonah, when their mother dies in an explosion in their apartment. After that, he cleans and cooks for the family and seems to take on the role of the main caregiver when he is home from school. Interestingly enough, according to his descriptions, no one told him to do so either directly or indirectly. His propensities for care are enormous and out of necessity he tries to fill the void his mother's death left in the family. Despite his efforts, however, he cannot do the role justice. Circumstances and his concern for the family show his increasing state of parentification. His father tries to find consolation in his physics theories and drifts more and more into his own world, in which his wife is still alive. Joey says of himself that, "I'm the peacemaker, the conciliator, the crossover. The thing she [Ruth] won't, yet,

call me” (296). He is the least political in his views and sides with neither the black nor the white part of his heritage. Joey is the one who most fervently holds on to his parents’ teachings of living beyond race. Therefore, he is predestined to take on the role as the negotiator. At the same time, this role does not leave him any space to fully identify with either side.

There are many passages in the novel which attest to the validity of Joey’s self-assessment as a peacemaker. He, for example, is the only child at his father’s deathbed, the one who has to tell the others their father died. Jonah is in Europe on a concert tour and Ruth broke with her father years earlier. So the duty is on him to break the news to at least Jonah, since Ruth had temporarily cut ties not just with her father, but the rest of the family as well. The narrator also backs up to Joey’s self-assessment: “Even before he can walk, he’s a helper. He doesn’t want to put his mother out, even to feed him” (335).

He is especially close to his talented brother who seems to take the musical world by storm even though he is stigmatized as ‘only’ a black artist. The union between them is very close; they confirm each other in their existence and identity as children of an interracial couple. For Jonah, Joey makes great sacrifices, such as not graduating from music school because Jonah has an audition, and according to him only Joey is able to accompany him at the piano: “Jonah or school [...] But Jonah was my brother, and the greatest musical talent I had any chance of working with. If he couldn’t bring Mama back alive, what hope had I?” (204). It follows from this that Joey had great trust in his brother’s talent. He is also the one who could best keep their mother ‘alive’ through the music he sang; the invisible tie shared by all of the Strom children.

In their attitude towards what is valuable in life, however, the brothers differ greatly. Jonah is very focused on his career, takes Joey’s sacrifices for granted, sometimes even demands them and reacts with resentment when Joey does not comply with his demands and wishes. Together they form a symbiosis that protects them from the racist world of music. The following

quotation illuminates their different views, which nevertheless complement each other:

We chat with Mr. Weisman [the music agent] about his client list from the golden age [...] Jonah wants to know about these men: what they ate, how much they slept, whether they talked at all the morning before a concert [...] All I want to know is whether these famous men were kind, whether they cared for their families, whether they seemed happy. The words never come up. (241)

For a long time, they go through the world together and it is only after years that they separate and Jonah goes on tour in Europe while Joseph stays behind and plays piano in a small bar in Atlantic City. It is also Joey who takes care of his father when he falls ill with cancer. Joey is the one who earns entitlement vis-à-vis his other family members due to his caring ways. Yet, time and again, when his brother needs him, he gives his life over to Jonah's whims: "Everything I had belonged to him. My pleasures, my anxieties, my accomplishments and failings: These were all my brother's piece. So it had always been. Years would go by, and I'd still work for him" (544). He does the same when his sister finally reaches out to him and asks him to become a music teacher at a school she supports. The question arises how Joey benefits from his self-afflicted position of a parentified child. It may well be his way of dealing with his feelings of guilt vis-à-vis his family.

Despite all the attempts at keeping the family together, Joey is guilt-ridden in his descriptions of himself and has low self-esteem. He constantly notices that he is the least talented of the three children, that he only was accepted into Juilliard because his immensely talented brother, the most promising of all students, refused to be taught there if Joey was not allowed to enroll as well. He is afraid he cannot live up to his family's expectations: "I was destined to disappoint everyone I loved, everyone who thought there might be something in me worth composing" (493). Even when he masturbates, he feels guilty: "Each time I gave in to pleasure, I'd feel as if I'd sentenced Mama to death again, betrayed every good thing she'd ever praised or predicted for me. Each time, I swore to renew myself" (181).

The guilt he feels over his mother when he masturbates certainly belongs to the realm of neurotic guilt, something that Freud would have ascribed to the introjections of a harsh superego, seemingly ‘groundless’ feelings triggered by breaking a taboo (*Healing Dialogue* 158f.). At the same time, it can also be an expression of intergenerational loyalty to the set of values instilled in him by his parents. On a textual basis, these expressions of guilty feelings are groundless, inasmuch as there is no passage in the book that would even allude to a reaction the parents showed regarding, or a certain mindset they tried to teach concerning sexuality.

Yet Joey’s expressions of guilt are graver than the reference to his sexuality suggests. This hints at the fact that “the depth of the guilt feeling is not seldom connected with just that part of guilt that cannot be ascribed to the taboo-offence, hence with the existential guilt” (qtd. in *ibid* 160). His feelings of guilt towards his family members seems to be of an existential nature, of which he is actually half aware, since he expresses his concern for not being available enough for the family. Existential guilt is accumulated if a person does not relate to the world with her whole being:

Real guilt is neither subjective nor objective. It is dialogical — the inseparable corollary of one’s personal responsibility, one’s answerability for authenticating one’s own existence, and by the same token, for responding to the partners of one’s existence, the other persons with whom one lives. Where there is personal responsibility, there must also be the possibility of real guilt — for failing to respond, for responding inadequately or too late, or for responding without one’s whole self. (159)

All the characters in the novel accumulate guilt in a certain way according to the definition given in this quotation. That is a part of human relationships, but some moments define the existence for the individual who is not met in the encounter. Most notably, Ruth nurtures resentment in her family and accuses Joey of having left her alone with her father who is lost in his own grief over the death of Delia. She addresses Jonah even less because she knows he will not respond to her complaints and questions.

The consequences of the imbalances in giving and receiving care and fairness that exist in her family also affect Ruth gravely. Of the three children,

she is the one who most decisively goes against her father for having brought them into a life in which she also has to suffer from the larger imbalances in fairness that society produces in the aftermath of slavery. Having married her mother was his greatest mistake because, according to Ruth, her father deprived Delia of the only protection her mother paradoxically could fall back on: her blackness. Making a clear statement in favor of Delia's African American roots would have kept Delia within the black community. Marrying a white man led her to ostracism. From then on in the world's eyes, she neither belonged to the black nor white community. Her husband could not give her much protection either, since he, as an immigrant, could not provide a supportive network of familial ties.

Ruth has difficulties living with her family legacy. In skin tone, she is the darkest of the three children but not accepted as fully black by society. Her crisis in life is closely connected to the early loss of her mother. Ruth was ten when the explosion happened and she was the first to be at the apartment and see the devastation. Therefore, Ruth relies on the stories her brothers tell her about her mother, hoping that they could provide more information.

"How black was she?" Ruth Strom asks her brother one Christmas night many years after their mother died in a fire. "What do you remember about Mama? [...] Mama's blurring on me. I can't hold her" (291f.). These questions concern important information which Ruth needs to know in order to form a mental picture of who she is. Her difficulties of making sense of herself as a person are intensified by the fact that no one in the immediate family is able to aid her in finding out about her heritage. Some significant spots in her family picture are missing – those which would allow her to see herself in the context of her ancestors.

As I explained earlier, the reasons for this lack of knowledge lie partly in the actions of her grandparents and parents. Ruth and her brothers are the immediate bearers of the transgenerational consequences caused by the generation before them. Contextual Therapy regards these consequences as part of the children's factual and relational legacy (*Give & Take* 132). The contact to the Daleys is cut off and none of the children knows why. Only

much later do they find out about the conflict between their father and maternal grandfather.

Ruth's inherited legacy brings up the question of belonging and identification, which is precisely what she struggles to answer for herself. Delia's parents would only start to speak to her mother again once she stopped "scrubbing these leopards spotless," (483) meaning once she stopped pretending her children would ever be anything other than black in U.S. society, where the one-drop rule determines race and identity. Since her mother refuses to give up her and David's vision of raising the children "beyond race," Ruth is raised in an atmosphere of 'color blindness.'

Ruth's problems with belonging become very concrete during her college years. Due to her skin tone, she cannot easily be categorized by her peers and evokes suspicion everywhere she goes:

Nobody at school knows what to make out of me. Gangs of those Irish-Italian-Swede dumpling girls talk to me slowly, through foot-long smiles, swearing how close they've always been to their domestic help. But at the Afro Pride meetings, there's always some sister grumbling out loud about infiltration by funny-featured, white-talking spies. [...] I sit there in those classes full of crew-cut white business majors, all set to carry their fiancées back home to Levittown. The nice ones look at me like I'm neutered, and the cretins come to me like I'm some kind of exotic barnyard lust machine. (298)

Her peers seem to have answered the question of belonging for her. She is neither white nor black but a mixed-race, a third race, yet to be categorized. The experiment her parents ran in raising their children "beyond race" as they were not tired to explain to her family had failed. The children were not able to jump into their own futures, were not allowed to live beyond race because the nation as a collective has equally been unable to meet the consequences resulting from its own legacy of centuries of slavery. This is exactly why the question of how black her mother was is of such existential importance to Ruth. She needs her mother for her own narrative of identity. Without her mother, knowledge about an integral part of her legacy is missing and she has to take the bits and pieces of what her relatives are able

to tell her about her mother in order to assemble a picture of where she comes from.

As I have explained in a previous chapter, in Contextual Therapy, identity, and ultimately also narrating one's identity, are inseparably linked to relating to others and engaging in dialogue, the origins of which lie in Buber's relational model of *I-Thou*. In Ruth's case, the *Thou* is missing on many levels. Her brothers are touring the U.S. and Europe, the contact to her grandparents is non-existent, and her father speaks a language she is not able to understand. Without the *Thou*, she has to fall back on what she has been told about her mother and has no opportunity to reassure herself in the light of a relationship with her. Boszormenyi-Nagy points out that "with the loss of a relationship goes part of our self-delineation; with the loss of the ground, the definition of the figure is also lost, at least partly" (87).

With her mother gone, Ruth nevertheless attempts to engage in a dialogue with her inasmuch as she reassembles the information necessary to construct her own interpretation of her family's version of her mother's death and thereby challenges the one dominant story that supposedly every member of the Strom family subscribes to: Delia died in a fire caused by a defect furnace.

This family narrative is decisive for the way the children go on living their lives. While Jonah, the oldest son, pursues his career as a classical singer of *lieder* with his brother Joseph accompanying him wherever he goes, Ruth follows a different path which was triggered by her disbelief in this dominant myth told by the other family members. Ruth suspects the fire to have been an act of racism. She rejects the "white supremacist music" her brothers engage in and refuses to sing any longer. Her husband Robert, a Black Panther activist, supports her secret suspicion and encourages her to further investigate the death of her mother. Due to newspaper articles and police reports she is convinced it was murder and the man who was responsible for it was her father: not because he manipulated the furnace but simply by marrying her mother, bringing her into the situation of giving up her career and instead having to go through the daily humiliation of being

stared at, excluded, judged, and ultimately killed by an act of racism. David is devastated by his daughter's judgment: "Ruth has told me to my face that your mother died ... because I married her. [...] Have I been in terrible error all this time? Did your mother and I do wrong by making you children?" (359).

Ruth's answer to this question is clear and she therefore rejects not just her father but all that is connected to him: she leaves him to be the ignorant and guilty one. She denies David even a verbal dialogue and attempts to exclude him from her life entirely: "The man's not clever enough to know what started the fire. But he's responsible for her death just as if he had. [...] The man is a white man. He has no concept of such things. He needed it to be an accident. Otherwise, her death is on his conscience" (370). By reversing the family myth, this dominant story which had been told about the incident, Ruth re-creates a fundamental ground for identification and confirmation of her own aforesaid family story. At this point, Joseph, the novel's second narrator, and the one who reports most of the incidents in the Strom family concludes: "And Ruth: she needed it to be the opposite. Mama murdered, and by someone we'd never know. Someone who might not even have known us. It was the only explanation that left her any place in the world to live" (372).

The "dialogue" Ruth establishes with her mother has to be seen in the context of her mother's own history. As mentioned above, in Contextual Therapy, dialogue describes "a dialectical rule of relational balance rooted in a mutuality of commitment" (*Give & Take* 415) and is part of what contextual therapists call relational ethics, the fourth dimension of relational reality which "focuses on the (consequences) of actions for future trust, and the balance of giving, receiving, asking and crediting in shaping the justice or fairness of relating over time" (Cotroneo, 1986, 421).

Physically, this mutuality is broken by Delia's early death; the commitment, however, persists and is expressed in the transgenerational patterns of loyalty and legacy. Legacy here denotes the entitlement and inherited endowments of a current generation and its obligation to posterity

(*Give & Take* 417) and is thus future oriented. In Ruth's case, this would mean a constructive engagement with her family history in order not to overburden her children with destructive attitudes and behavior earned in her own relational reality. In this way, it is easier for subsequent generations to meet the invisible loyalties and in turn build an account of trust for their children. Instead, Ruth votes for her mother's family and leaves her father until his death in the position of the evildoer without facing his part of the legacy he brought into her life.

In choosing one side of her family of origin over the other, in fact blending out her father's part of her inherited legacy, Ruth avoids a loyalty conflict which is created by larger societal circumstances as well as her personal family history, namely society's unwillingness to think in terms of shades instead of black and white and her parents' split with her grandfather. As her ancestors before her, she is the victim of the same cultural processes that leave no space for identity in-between the races. Avoiding this conflict and avoiding meeting the demands her legacy imposes upon her strengthens her personal narrative of identity. By blaming her father for her difficult position in life, she reestablishes the allegiance to her mother and mother's family of origin and creates a place of belonging for herself.

The path she chooses in life testifies to this assumption. She will not have her future children exposed to the ambiguity she had to go through and chooses Robert Rider as her life partner who was "a man a couple of years older than Jonah and several shades darker" (367). While she made her stance on the topic of belonging clear, she accuses her brothers of catering to the dominant culture and of wanting to pass for white:

"You're stuck in time. Look at what you're peddling. Look who's buying. You don't even see. How can you play that jewelried shit while your own people can't even get a job, let alone protection under the law? You're playing right into the power-hoarding, supremacist... [...] Is this the world you want to live in?" (373)

Her demand on Joey to turn his back on his profession as a musician and ultimately on his father leaves him torn between the two sides: "I couldn't even breathe without betraying some blood relation" (377). And just as much

as Ruth needs her mother's death to be initiated by racists in order to ensure her identity, her brother needs it to be an accident to go on living the life he chose for himself. Ruth increases the pressure on him and forces him to understand her version of the family's story, in her eyes the truth about their mother's death: "[What does any of this have to do] with how your mother died? I thought it might help you decide whose son you are. That's all" (378).

By saying this, she emphasizes yet again her decision to reject her father and instead focus on her mother's family line. That is why she needs to know how black her mother was, a question her brother hesitates to answer for her. What he wants to say to her is: "Very black. Blacker than her mule sons can enter into. Black inflicted and black held on to. Black by memory and invention. [...] But every bit as light in skin, hair, features, and all things visible as her mixed-race daughter, who hates herself for not being simpler." But he does not say so. Instead his short reply is "Black, Ruth. She was black" (297).

Ruth's oldest son, Kwame, repeats the pattern she began with her father, blaming her for any inherited 'whiteness' he had:

"He's taken to call me ... names [...] We argued. He called me 'white.' White! 'you so white, woman. Little car wreck. Nigga don't care 'bout no old hooptie.' Where does that come from? The boy's fourteen years old, and he's holding his genes against me! Hating him for infecting him." Her body shook as if she were freezing. (591)

Ruth meant well in falling in love with her late husband Robert, whose skin was so dark that he would not fall prey to the ambiguity she had had to live with, which is confirmed by her son's color. In raising Kwame without racial ambiguity, she tried to avoid the mistakes made by her parents. She even reestablishes contact to the Daleys and gives her two sons the family she never had. Yet, as it turns out, now *she* is the one person called "white" in the family.

The family narrative of the Stroms and Daleys ends in the early 1990's, when Jonah dies as a result of the Los Angeles riots triggered by the Rodney King trial. He simply stopped breathing in a hotel room after he participated

in the riots. His participation seems like atonement after decades of living for his music alone and not becoming involved in the debate over race relations in America. He was always interested in witnessing the struggle for equality but never saw the urge to be outspoken about it. He made his statements through his music, and in the world in which he lived, people in America decided what he was for him.

The division of belonging across the racial line depicted in *The Time of Our Singing* is mercilessly executed inasmuch as most of the events in the novel do not allow for any space 'in-between,' do not create room for the literary characters to simply be the individuals who they feel they are. They always either stand for or fight against something larger that transcends the individual as a human being: the family, and even society at large. Everything is permeated by the quest for identity. The characters first turn to or away from their families but the family always serves as a matrix for the formation of selfhood. However, family is trumped by the forces society exercises over the Daleys and Stroms in the form of racism.

Critics have claimed that the depiction of race relations are too contrived, especially since Jonah, Joey, and Ruth have three different shades of skin color, varying from very light, indeed almost passing for white, to darker, but not passing for black. Read in the context of the novel's events, the three different shades of brown symbolize the absurdity of the system according to which people are being classified and put down. It also shows the hypocrisy that governs the discourse on race in American history.

A reading of *The Time of Our Singing* in the light of Contextual Therapy stresses how legacies belonging to a specific family genogram are interlocked with the legacies of injustice of a nation. The injustices of the past manifest themselves in different realms of daily life, for example in laws that consolidate the damage done in history, as can be seen in the laws against interracial marriage up until the late 1960's. They exercise a tremendous power over the form families take and at times tear familial structures apart.

The process of self-validation in relation to an individual's family of origin becomes a political issue in *The Time of Our Singing*. A simple

marriage turns into a bitter fight for survival in a racially segregated society. The children of this union have to suffer the consequences of the existential guilt that the institution of slavery created for the U.S. as a nation. After its abolition, the injustices still affect inter-human relationships of many generations to come.

Chapter 5

Exoneration and Multidirected Partiality in *Love*

*You could call him a good bad man,
or a bad good man. Depends on
what you hold dear — the what or
the why. I tend to mix them.*
(*Love* 200)

Toni Morrison's novel *Love* (2003) investigates life in a black community on the East Coast. One of *Love*'s central themes is the friendship of two girls who later become bitter rivals. Christine and Heed the Night Johnson's (Heed) platonic love for each other is thwarted by jealousy, class-consciousness, shame, and miscommunication. It turns into distrust, hatred, and loneliness. Secrets caused by sexual abuse and betrayal stand in the way of them rekindling their love for each other.

It is also a narrative of loss: of innocence, of family, and of faith. Christine and Heed are separated by forces they are each incapable of resisting. In the foreword to the 2005 Vintage edition of *Love*, Toni Morrison explains what first drew her to the theme of love and betrayal: "I became interested in the manner in which African Americans handled internecine, intraracial betrayals, and the weapons they chose in order to survive them" (xi). Only late in their lives do Christine and Heed find these 'weapons' that end their hatred and contempt for each other.

Love is one of those rare novels that "explore the losses that went with the gains brought about by the Civil Rights era," (qtd. in Gallego, 93) and investigates the social circumstances of a black community in which some of its members learnt how to benefit from the segregated society Jim Crow laws created. With the desegregation era the decline of the family hotel is sealed. Black businesses suffered and the black community underwent great changes. In the novel, betrayal takes place not only on a personal level between family members but also in the larger context of the community. The novel covers the very intimate family saga of the Coseys and is embedded in social upheavals during a crucial point in black history.

The narration stretches over several decades, beginning with the 1940's (with a few flash backs into the past). Bill Cosey, the owner of a hotel and the patriarch of the family, plays a pivotal role in the complicated system of human relationships. The Great Depression being almost over and Jim Crow laws ensuring segregation, *Cosey's Hotel and Resort* is the hot spot for the black bourgeoisie of the 1940's. All those who can afford it, enjoy the benefits of their wealth with good music, good food, and exclusive company.

Those were the days when Cosey's Hotel and Resort was the best and best-known vacation spot for colored folk on the East Coast. Everybody came: Lil Green, Fatha Hines, T-Bone Walker, Jimmy Lunceford, the Drops of Joy, and guests from as far away as Michigan and New York couldn't wait to get down here. [...] Cosey's resort had more handsome single men per square foot than anyplace outside Atlanta or even Chicago³². (6)

Two decades later, the hotel's heyday is history. The Civil Rights movement and desegregation did not only open new vacation spots for the well-off black class but also altered the black community in which the Coseys live. Bill Cosey is no longer seen as the community's benefactor and supporter of the poor. For some he turns into a race traitor, who would not sell land to progressive activists. Their plan was to create some kind of cooperative with small businesses, classes on black history and cultural centers. Instead it is sold to a land developer who made a fortune on money by the Department for Housing and Urban Development (45). Bill Cosey was blamed for this.

However, even before the decline, Bill Cosey was class conscious:

Cosey didn't mix with local people publicly, which is to say he employed them, joked with them, even rescued them from difficult situations, but other than at church picnics, none was truly welcome at the hotel's tables or on its dance floor. [...] Even when a family collected enough money to celebrate a wedding there, they were refused. Pleasantly. Regretfully. Definitely. The hotel was booked. (41)

With its focus on some of the losses the events of the Civil Rights movement brought about for African Americans, the novel challenges one of the official versions of the struggle for liberty and draws a more complex picture of black

³² Quotations given in italics are information provided by the novel's second narrator L.

history in the U.S. It connects the relation between individual and society with the private world of the members of one family and at the same time “reveals not only the dynamics of segregationist practices in the United States, but also gender and class politics within the black community” (Gallego, 93). Instead of consensus in the fight against discrimination, people also tried to secure the benefits of segregation in their community.

In *Love*, this is discussed in the form of lifestyle Bill Cosey tries to secure for his family and himself. As the above quotation demonstrates, Cosey was conscious of who should enter the hotel and mingle with the exclusive guests so as to make sure that its reputation as a high-end hotel and resort would be maintained. In this context, Toni Morrison remarks in the foreword that “beneath (rather, hand-in-hand with) the surface story of the successful revolt against a common enemy in the struggle for integration (in this case, white power) lies another one: the story of disintegration — of a radical change in conventional relationships and class allegiances that signals both liberation and estrangement” (xi).

May Cosey, the daughter-in-law of Bill Cosey, defends class alliances very fervently, and is also primarily responsible for the disintegration of the friendship between her daughter Christine Cosey and Heed. While some think the smell from the fish cannery eventually made the place unattractive for the guests, May sees in the social upheaval surrounding the Civil Rights movement the true reason for the decline of the family and the hotel resort: “*Freedom, May said. She tried hard to keep the place going when her father-in-law lost interest, and was convinced that Civil Rights destroyed her family and its business. By which she meant colored people were more interested in blowing up cities than dancing by the sea shore*” (8). Ultimately, hurricane Agnes contributed greatly to the decline of the community as did land developers.

May assigns herself the task of protecting the hotel from outside intruders who want to destroy the social order and thus endanger the family business. What first was mere concern for the resort turns into madness with May. She becomes a kleptomaniac and hides valuables and important documents from others and from the fires lit by the protesters. Once a defender of segregation, “she discovered that her convictions were no longer old-time racial uplift, but separatist, 'nationalistic'. Not sweet Booker T., but radical Malcolm X” (80).

Behind her concern for the status of the hotel and thus of her family stands another motive which is of a much more personal nature. She wants to protect her daughter Christine from the fate so many of her ancestors had to suffer. May, the poor preacher's daughter, intends to keep Christine away from the lower classes, the ones that were not able to profit from the social uplift blacks could experience via Booker T. Washington's separate but equal philosophy. The person to challenge May's worldview is Heed, the poor girl from the neighborhood, who befriends Christine and who becomes Bill Cosey's object of sexual desire.

The events in *Love* are presented in a very distinctive narrative strategy. The novel features two narrators. There is an omniscient third person narrator, who exclusively presents the personal and therefore necessarily highly subjective perspectives and truths of the single characters in the novel and above all their individual relationships with and opinions of Bill Cosey. Second, there is L, a narrator that cannot easily be categorized because of her special role within the narrative. She assumes a hybrid position in *Love*. Her name is never clearly revealed but hinted at with a reference to the Bible: “*If your name is the subject of First Corinthians, chapter 13, it's natural to make it your business*” (199). This quotation suggests that L stands for “Love,” which is very fitting for the understanding of the novel because she has so much more insight than the third person narrator and tries to analyze the inter-human relationships from a different angle. Yet, her position is also somewhat removed from the Cosey family because she is no longer directly involved in the events but functions as a narrator overlooking the past and present. She is some kind of “ghostly witness to the Cosey saga” (Gallego 93).

Her hybrid narrative function results, on the one hand, from her once having been the cook at *Cosey's Hotel* and therefore a fundamental guarantor of the resort's success. She has, as she claimed, witnessed the incidents involving the Coseys. She also basically raised Christine since May lost herself more and more, first to the work at the hotel and then to her conspiracy theories about the Civil Rights movement. On the other hand, L is also commenting on the thoughts and actions of the other characters, because she is so much more knowledgeable about the emotions and, above all, the events linked to Bill Cosey's past. She shares with the other female characters the sympathy for this patriarchal figure but her feelings have a different motivation, because she knows him so well. Therefore she is part of the family constellation, yet can also comment on the events from a superior position. Her "ghostly" character is attributed to the fact that she comments from a sphere detached from Christine and Heed. It is said in the novel that she started to cook for a restaurant once Bill Cosey had passed away. L died while standing at the stove at the restaurant.

Interestingly enough, this position of the narrator L does not make her more unreliable than the third person narrator, but probably more reliable because she is able to *connect* reactions and thoughts of single characters with each other and thus gives the narration shape and allows the reader to see beneath the surface of the events.³³ At times, L goes so far as to explain a character's motivation. Yet, since she had once been a part of the family, her versions of the truth are also subjective in nature. What she offers is a deeper understanding and an alternative interpretation of the events in the novel.

Scholars commenting on the novel's composition especially emphasized the patricentric aspect of the narration (Wyatt 197). As the different characters of the novel tell their stories of what happened at the resort, the reader finds out that Bill Cosey is the sun around which they revolve. Indeed he functions as the link to all stories. However, focusing on Bill Cosey's central role in the novel should not obfuscate the apparent

³³ For further interpretations of L as a narrator see Wen-ching Ho. "I'll Tell' — The Function and Meaning of L in Toni Morrison's *Love*". *EurAmerica* 36.4 (2004): 651-675.

relational structure between the characters. Such an approach may invite a division of the novel into sub-narratives isolated from each other.

The narrative structure of the novel stands in the tradition of African American oral story telling (Palladino 1). In its fractured, and partly dissolving nature, it resembles the history of African Americans in the context of slavery:

Morrison's fictions, taken as a whole, rewrite African-American history — a history of disruption, dispossession, and displacement; in her later novels especially, formal breaks in chronological sequence reflect these upheavals and the psychic dislocations that accompany them. (Wyatt, 193)

In *Love*, these 'psychic dislocations' manifest themselves in an account of subjective narratives all dealing with personal wounds or traumas mostly in relation to Bill Cosey. As the third person narrator presents the different attitudes of the characters, the reader is informed of their longing for this man, sometimes mixed with bitterness, envy, disappointment, and hatred, yet at other times full of admiration and love, glorified and romanticized. Read as subjective formations of meaning and personal views, the novel's chapters taken together result in a mosaic of Bill Cosey's character, a man who had many different aspects to his personality. To be more specific, it is a mosaic of relationships that describe Bill Cosey as a man in his different roles in the family and society. However, these chapters say just as much about the women who loved and lived with him as they give information about him.

The way *Love* is narrated is astonishingly akin to the approach Contextual Therapy takes to the accounts of clients and their family members. As mentioned above, the third person narrator mainly presents the subjective truths of the protagonists, and even though these stories are told in third person they resemble personal accounts. Taken to extremes, this novel can be read as a fictionalized transcript of therapy sessions, because every character of the novel gives her own highly subjective version of the story, each reaching a climax at the end, which leads to the opening up of trust reserves between at least Christine and Heed.

In the chapter on *The Corrections*, I stated that, in literary terms, Contextual Therapy constitutes a deconstruction of the text with respect to the narrative. A therapist does not stand on a meta-level and does not function as an authority on what is 'right' and what is 'wrong.' Through her multidirected partiality, she gives due credit to all the individual stories the different clients are telling about the problem(s) in the family. Using this technique she is ideally able to start a process of exoneration among the members in question. Making the family understand hidden motivations triggered through an imbalance of the family ledger can mobilize trust reserves and thus a change in the intergenerational net of human relationships.

Love represents such a process through its disruptive narrative structure. Of course there is no therapist in the book and no character who could take on such a position. But the different versions the characters tell shed light on each other and they are, as stated above, always biased themselves. The narrative structure represents a very realistic situation in therapy. In Contextual Therapy, the question of what is 'real' becomes obsolete, because all different points of view are valued, dealt with, and if necessary also exposed as overly detrimental. Despite her 'supra level' of narration, the narrator L also does not know exactly which parts of the accounts given by the different characters are only psychological inventions.

However, she understands these different positions of the characters. Her narrative incorporates a bird's-eye point of view, yet she herself is biased. All the characters are involved; no one knows for sure what exactly led to the disintegration of the relationships depicted in the novel. Only L is able to provide a different angle on the situations. If she were a participant in a therapy session, she would be able to give very valuable information for the process of exonerating the members of older generations of the family. As a reader of *Love*, one never reaches the point where one 'knows,' one always has to circumscribe and bring every character's story in.

In Freud's psychoanalytical approach, therapists can treat their patients as unreliable, but in the narrative model of Contextual Therapy,

therapists cannot do this, and neither can the reader of *Love*. In the multidirected partiality for all the characters and clients involved, the book's structure and the narrative approach of Contextual Therapy coincide. Contextual Therapy allows every family member's statement to be truthful. The answer to what is 'true' is not given in terms of *either/or* but in *both/and*. Reading *Love* can thus teach one much about narrative structures and approaches to clients' accounts.

Contextual Therapy distrusts the teller *and* the text inasmuch as it has to set the different narratives in relation to each other in order to arrive at a picture of complex familial relationships that is informative and instructive for the ongoing therapeutic process. It thereby remains necessarily incomplete because some members can often not be included in the sessions because they are either already dead or their presence would be too upsetting for other participants.

In its narrative structure, *Love* differs from other Morrison novels. The family members' accounts *are* the novel. The women focus their attention on Bill Cosey. The story is about these women not as individuals but as participants in relationships. In that, *Love* confirms the relational model of Martin Buber and his idea about the *I-Thou* dyad. Expressions of extreme freedom or individualism are missing for large parts of the novel. Hence, the narrative structure of the novel does not so much stress the patricentric focus of an author's implied intention as Wyatt suggested but is more a way to tell a story from different angles. This method is, on a deeper level, less concerned with the actual person the accounts talk about but more so with the different ways in which the characters relate to their worlds and to each other.

The stories' inter-connectedness and relational qualities are also apparent through the titles of the different chapters: "Portrait," "Friend," "Stranger," "Benefactor," "Lover," "Husband," "Guardian," "Father," and "Phantom." Seven of these titles denote an individual's role or position within a relationship. Most of them refer to an involvement of Bill Cosey. The different views on him also relate to a central principle in Contextual Therapy: the identified patient is not necessarily the sole cause for the

disruption of familial ties. She might show the symptoms but the origins of the problems usually lie much deeper in the imbalances of the ledger of give-and-take in a family.

At the very beginning, L establishes herself as a woman set apart from the later generations of women and also from the Cosey women who do not know the power of silence. She thereby evokes a feeling of trustworthiness as a narrator:

My nature is a quiet one, anyway. As a child I was considered respectful; as a young woman I was called discreet. Later on I was thought to have the wisdom maturity brings. Nowadays silence is looked on as odd and most of my race has forgotten the beauty of meaning much by saying little. Now tongues work all by themselves with no help from the mind [...] Before women agreed to spread in public, there used to be secrets — some to hold, some to tell. Now? No. Barefaced being the order of the day, I hum. [...] My hum is mostly below range, private; suitable for an old woman embarrassed by the world; her way of objecting to how the century is turning out. Where all is known and nothing understood. (3f.)

This description of herself suggests a knowledge gained through life experience and an instinct for social and personal developments that only a mind wide awake can process. L's voice has an undertone of regret, sentimentality, and compassion throughout the novel, which adds to her stance of multidirected partiality towards the characters of the book. She is first understanding, then explaining, often exonerating and only ultimately judgmental of the characters' decisions in the book, especially when it comes to Bill Cosey. She understands, for example, that it was not the social upheavals that ended the heyday of the hotel as May suggests: "*Listen to me: something else was to blame. Besides, Mr. Cosey was a smart man. He helped more colored people here than forty years of government programs*" (9). This "something else" was the wedge that was driven between the family members in the Cosey household through their own actions.

Vida Gibbons's character introduces first the suspicion that Bill Cosey had been murdered many years ago, a fact that saddens her very much since she embodies the people who profited from the *Cosey Hotel*. He offered her a job at the resort so she could quit the fish cannery and earn some extra money. Together with her husband Sandler, she raises her grandson Romen, because her daughter enlisted in the army. She contributes the first piece of the jigsaw, which adds to the picture of Bill Cosey drawn in the novel. In a conversation with her husband she defends the man she feels indebted to:

“Somebody killed him as sure as I’m sitting here. Wasn’t a thing wrong with that man [...] I saw him the day he died. Hale at breakfast; dead at lunch.”

“He had a lot to answer for, Vida.”

“Somebody answered for him: ‘No lunch.’”

“He paid us good money, Sandler, and taught us, too. Things I never would have known about if I’d kept on living over a swamp in a stilt house. You know what my mother’s hands looked like. Because of Bill Cosey, none of us had to keep doing that kind of work.” (17 f.)

For the opportunities Cosey provided her, Vida answers with loyalty to him, despite the allusions of her husband about Cosey’s misdemeanors. This shows the great respect many people had for Bill Cosey because he was a very economically influential man in Up Beach, where the hotel was, as well as in Silk, the neighboring community. Vida describes him as generous in not deducting the cost of the dresses he bought Vida for her work at the receptionist’s desk from her pay: “His pleasure was pleasing. ‘The best good time,’ he used to say. That was the resort’s motto and what he promised every guest: ‘The best good time this side of the law.’ [...] His laugh, his embracing arm, his instinctive knowledge of his guests’ needs smoothed over every crack or stumble [...] Bill Cosey’s charm and L’s food won out” (33f.).

His effect on people and his charming ways last even beyond his death. When Junior comes to the house in which Christine and Heed live—both now old and still in a bitter feud over the inheritance of Bill Cosey — she can still sense his presence even though she never met him in person. Junior answered Heed’s advertisement in a local newspaper for help in writing down her book on the Cosey family. Junior is one of the women who L described in

the beginning as “*spreading in public*,” (3) in her case meaning wearing a skirt so short it could have been underpants. However, Junior is also one of these women who are victims of vertical relationships gone bad:

Naturally, all of them have a sad story: too much notice, not enough, or the worst kind. Some tale about dragon daddies and false-hearted men, or mean mamas and friends who did them wrong. Each story has a monster in it who made them tough instead of brave, so they open their legs rather than their hearts where that folded child is tucked.” (4f.)

L’s statement is a form of exoneration, an explanation for the development and actions of individuals. This explanation does not make the repercussions of the women’s stories less detrimental, but the reader’s response less judgmental. In a therapeutic context, explanations such as the one above trigger the process of understanding among the family members. The members are still held accountable for possible injuries they inflicted on the justice system of the family, but the understanding of the motivations for these injuries lie in the stories of the members’ past.

When Junior enters the house, Christine is naturally very suspicious because she does not trust Heed, for whom she cooks and with whom she lives in one house. Despite their living situation, Christine has no desire to even talk to Heed. Junior goes upstairs to Heed’s room and notices the special presence Bill Cosey has in their lives and soon will have in Junior’s life.

All under the influence of a bed behind which a man’s portrait loomed. [...]
“That’s him. It was painted from a snapshot, so it’s exactly like him. What you see there is a wonderful man.” Heed sighed. [...]
The face hanging over her new boss’s bed must have started it [Junior’s dream]. A handsome man with a G.I. Joe chin and a reassuring smile that pledged endless days of hot, tasty food; kind eyes that promised to hold a girl steady on his shoulder while she robbed apples from the highest branch. (25ff.)

Subsequently, Junior incorporates Bill Cosey into her personal story as the imaginary father figure she never had in her life. She comes from a very poor background. In her family, verbal and physical abuse is a daily routine. Her crippled foot stems from an incident with her uncle who ran over it with a car when she tried to run away. Later, in the corrective institution to which she was admitted, she was sexually abused by one of the teachers working there. Therefore, Bill Cosey was the first man she felt protected by and she fantasizes about him being her protector and guardian even though he is already dead. She calls him her “Good Man.”

The only one who provides a different picture of Bill Cosey is Vida’s husband Sandler. He is not as easily lured into siding with Cosey as the women surrounding him. Sandler is twenty-two years old when he first goes fishing with Cosey, who is seventy-four at that time. Naturally, the two men, whose life experiences differ greatly, perceive the topics they talk about differently. In semi-intimate conversations, Cosey reveals some of his personal thoughts and shares his opinions on women, politics, and business all of which lead Sandler to distrust Cosey:

But the more Sandler learned about the man, the less he knew. At times sympathy conquered disappointment; other times dislike overcame affection [...] Rich people could be like sharks, but what drove them was a kid’s sweet tooth. Childish yearnings that could thrive only in a meadow of girlish dreams: adoration, obedience, and full-time fun. Vida believed a powerful, generous friend gazed out from the portrait hanging behind the reception desk. That was because she didn’t know who he was looking at. (44f.)

Sandler’s statement indicates that Cosey has a darker side to him that he does not show to many other people. Most of the criticism directed at the hotel owner is in the form of rumors: stories told without much proof of truth. Information, such as in this last quotation, is given by the different characters about Cosey throughout the novel.

A pivotal passage for the understanding of Bill Cosey's character and intentions is a scene he describes to Sandler on one of their fishing trips:

Like the time Cosey told him a story, something about how when he was little his father made him play in a neighbor's yard to see who came out the back door. Every dawn he was sent to watch. A man did slip out one day and Cosey reported it to his father. That afternoon he saw the man dragged through the street behind a four-horse wagon.

"You helped catch a thief, a killer?" Sandler asked in admiration.

"Yep."

"Good for you."

"Bunch of kids ran after the wagon, crying. One was a little girl. Raggedy as Lazarus. She tripped in some horse shit and fell. People laughed."

"What'd you do?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"You were a kid."

"Yeah." (43)

Yet again, the reader needs the comments from L to figure out how important this childhood reminiscence is for Cosey. Having been used as a snitch by his father, whom all people in town only called Dark, left a deep impression on Cosey. He felt especially sorry since there were children involved in the punishment of the man, a fact Cosey could not anticipate at his young age. It is this very scene that L uses to give the story about Cosey a certain twist towards a more sympathetic portrait of him in light of his decision to marry eleven-year-old Heed, at that time the best friend of his granddaughter. People wondered about this marriage but eventually settled for a version of truth that upsets Sandler: "Vida, in her tale of wickedness, had not said a word about Bill Cosey. She acted as though Heed had chased and seduced a fifty-two-year-old-man, older than her father [...] They [most people] forgave Cosey. Everything. Even to the point of blaming a child for a grown man's interest in her" (147). The fact that Cosey is forgiven for this unusual marriage testifies to his position within the community.

The wedding upsets Christine and May tremendously. Heed's wedding picture testifies to that:

The woman with the rose held his arm, and although he was looking at her, his other arm was around the bare shoulder of his tiny bride. Heed was swamped by the oversized wedding gown falling from her shoulders and the orange blossoms in her hand were drooping. To Heed's left was a sick-looking handsome man smiling to *his* left at a woman whose clenched hands emphasized more than the absence of a bouquet. (60f.)

The description of this picture already reveals the different attitudes the family members have towards each other by that time, which, however, only becomes clear when reading this passage retrospectively. The description of a "tiny bride" and the "oversized wedding gown" allude to a problematic factor of the narrative, enforced by the description of the honeymoon: "Only in the evening was she alone, for a few hours while he [Bill] visited friends tended to business. None of which Heed minded, because she had coloring books, picture magazines, paper dolls to cut out and clothe" (128).

Her delicate features and her devotion to coloring books indicate that Heed must have been very young, in fact too young, to be married. The suspicion, however, that Heed's story is actually connected to sexual abuse, is concealed by her descriptions of her tender feelings for Bill throughout large parts of the novel: "Her insight was polished to blazing by a lifetime of being underestimated. Only Papa [Bill] knew better, had picked her out of all he could have chosen" (72). She adores him beyond his death, idolizes him and incorporates him in her personal narrative as her savior, the man she can look up to and who will protect her from the criticism she is exposed to by Christine and her mother May. Therefore, she heavily relies on his benevolence and thus, when she was younger, came to the conclusion that "all she needed was him, which was lucky because he was all she had" (77).

As I explained before, L repeatedly exonerates Cosey in the narration. In Contextual Therapy, exoneration is "a process of lifting the load of culpability off the shoulders of a given person whom heretofore [one] may have blamed" (*Between Give & Take* 416). While L cannot completely take

the weight from his shoulders, she at least gives an alternative version of his motives to marry such a young girl. In her opinion, Cosey atones for his passivity in mentioning an early scene, when his father used him as a snitch:

And all because Mr. Cosey wanted children. Well, that's what he told his friends and maybe himself. But not me. He never told that to me because I had worked for him since I was fourteen and knew the truth. He liked her [...] That was the truth, but not all of it. I remember him telling me a tale about some child who fell down in horse manure running after a posse and how the white folks laughed. So cruel, the crowd enjoying themselves at murder. He repeated it every time he needed an example of heartless whites, so I supposed the point was he laughed too and apologized for it by marrying Heed. Just like he avoided Christine because she had his father's gray eyes, he picked Heed to make old Dark groan. I've come to believe every family has a Dark and needs one. All over the world, traitors help progress. (139)

L suggests here that Cosey defines and validates himself by negating the meanness his father tried to instill in him. He uses Dark as a negative matrix in order to mend an injustice that had deeply ingrained itself into the intergenerational history of relational injuries. By making young Cosey an accomplice in his money making 'trait,' namely reporting other blacks to the police, Dark seriously abuses the trust his son put in him. It can be suggested that this was not the only incident in which his father betrayed Cosey, since Cosey says of him that he hated him (111). Cosey processes this event in his individual psychology by storing resentment against his father. Yet, Cosey took the considerable inheritance that Dark left him with pleasure and bought the hotel and made it into what it had been for decades before its decline.

All the characters' opinions about Bill Cosey analyzed so far allow L to exonerate his deeds by looking at his past options, efforts, and limits. However, there are things in the novel which even L cannot and does not want to explain and forgive. This attitude is not only directed towards Bill Cosey but also towards May, whom she blames for a great misdeed in trying to separate her daughter Christine from her friend Heed.

The girls came to know each other at the age of nine. At that time, the children's love transgressed all social distinctions and was so strong that only May's manipulation could possibly transform it into hatred. They were instantly drawn to each other. L describes the feelings they have for each other in such tender yet strong words that the crime May committed by driving a wedge between them seems all the more unforgettable and cruel:

If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which one of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without. Heed and Christine found such a one. Most people have never felt a passion that strong, that early. (199)

May, however, sees in Christine's friend a threat to the development of her daughter. May is enraged by the latest developments in her family: "*Rewarded by watching her father-in-law marry her twelve-year-old daughter's playmate and put that playmate ahead of everything, including herself, her daughter, and all she had worked for. Not only that. She was supposed to teach and train the playmate to take charge of us [hotel staff] (138).*

Christine thinks her mother sees in Heed the reason why her daughter should not mingle with blacks of a lower class. Heed epitomizes all her mother had fought against. In retrospect, Christine sides with her mother because she has been the one neglected and put aside in favor of Heed, whom Bill Cosey protected as his wife from the wrath of the other family members. He preferred his wife to blood relations not only in terms of affection but seemingly also financially since he left all his inheritance to "my sweet Cosey child" (86). It was assumed by the judge that this could be no one else than his second wife Heed, who called him Papa. Therefore, Christine not only lost a friend when Bill Cosey selfishly married Heed but also a home and ultimately a family. Her explanation for her mother's intervention into the friendship is closely related to black history in the U.S. and May's personal story: "Now she finally understood her mother. The world May knew was always crumbling; her place in it never secure. A poor hungry preacher's

child, May saw her life as depending on colored people who rocked boats only at sea [a reference to Bill Cosey's habit of inviting prostitutes to his boat]" (96).

This anxiety of falling back into poverty and oblivion drives May to sabotage Christine and Heed's friendship. L strengthens this interpretation. While she exposes May's story of where the Cosey family comes from to be a fairytale, since she knows that Bill Cosey's ancestors were not the prototypical adherents of Booker T. Washington's philosophy of hard and honest work to be accepted by the whites that mattered, she supports Christine's presumption of May's class-consciousness:

That was the street-sweet story, anyway – the one that belonged to somebody else that she and Mr. Cosey took for themselves. He knew better, but May believed it and that's why little Heed with a man's undershirt for a dress looked to her like the end of that all – a bottle fly let in through the door, already buzzing at the food table and, if it settled on Christine, bound to smear her with the garbage it was born in. [...] Dead the question of what was best for the race, because Heed answered it for them. She was the throwback they both [Christine and May] had fought. (136ff.)

Had May been as well informed as L, who knew that Bill Cosey's wealth was not honestly earned but inherited from his father Dark, who made a living selling other people to the police, she probably would not have incorporated this success story that stretched over generations into her personal narrative of whose daughter-in-law she was. It is her way of defining and validating herself in relation to a respected man who is popular in the community. This means of identification seems to her much more attractive than the legacy of her own family of origin. Her poor background is something that shaped her desires and aspirations for the rest of her life. She acts within her means as a poor black woman in the 1940's and marries into a well-off family. Her low economic status does not leave her many options.

Many people knew how Bill Cosey came to money to buy the hotel, yet no one seemed to have a problem with it because he was seen as a role model. A black man, one of their own, could turn a hotel into a first-class address for

entertainment and pleasure. It seems as if May believed what she chose to believe, possibly to justify her position within the family. L identifies her as the family's "slave" because "*her whole life was making sure those Cosey men had what they wanted. The father more than the son; the father more than her own daughter*" (102). May is caught in her position and not able to free herself, nor does she ever express the wish to do so. Thus, she keeps this system of power relations within the family stable and helps to keep the unfair balance as do the other Cosey women, who blame each other for the state of the family and the hotel.

In Contextual Therapy, power is deceptive. Observable patterns of exercising power over family members do not determine the dynamics of inter-human relationships alone. In *Love*, class struggle and gender related dependencies are also part of the characters' relational realities. Beyond this are subjective loyalties, which sometimes maintain a tight grip on the individuals. The loyalty Heed has to her late husband, for example, is life determining for her. Until the end of the novel, Heed sticks to her version of her life story, of her husband having been her savior from his family and from her family of origin alike. While there seems some truth to it, she also embellishes the sexual molestation she suffered at his hands. This is her way of coping with the violation of her trust towards him. Her weapon in the struggle for survival in the Cosey family after her marriage is submission to his will when he is in her vicinity. She tries to consolidate her position within the family through constant suspiciousness towards May and Christine.

Heed's sexual molestation is a life-altering moment for both girls. The stress stemming from violations of their love and trust in Bill Cosey results in pain for both girls, which in turn triggers feelings of shame in them. In Contextual Therapy, shame belongs to the realm of individual psychology, yet is also closely related to the relational ethics of a relationship because trust and love have been betrayed: "Shame, on the other hand, is seen as an internal feeling of guilt or unworthiness in response to the caretakers' lack of love. Instead of blaming the caretaker, individuals who feel shame internalize

the lack of nurture as a feeling that they are unlovable” (*New Contextual Therapy* 37f.).

Heed’s reaction to Cosey’s touching her nipples under her bathing suit fits with the above given quotation about feelings of shame and guilt:

The old man saw it right away so all he had to do was touch her and it moved as he knew it would because the wrong was already there, waiting for a thumb to bring to life. And she had started it — not him. The hip-wiggling came first — then him. Now Christine knows it’s there too, and can’t look at her because the wrong thing shows. (192)

The ‘wrong thing’ that makes her unlovable only exists in Heed’s mind. She is convinced that her swinging her hips to the music in the hotel lobby in a bathing suit when she felt unobserved was the signal for him to start the sexual harassment. When Heed exits the lobby, she meets Christine, who “has spilled something on her bathing suit that looks like puke [...] She looks sick, disgusted, and doesn’t meet Heed’s eyes” (191). This incident will forever stay Heed’s secret, which she shares with nobody. Her running into Christine and seeing the vomit on her chest leads her to draw the wrong conclusions, namely that Christine concurs with her grandfather in the opinion that Heed has the ‘wrong’ already in her.

Especially fatal to the friendship of the two girls is that Christine also has a secret she does not share with anyone: the reason for the vomit on her bathing suit. She walks in on “her grandfather [standing] there, in her bedroom window, his trousers open, his wrist moving with the same speed L used to beat egg whites into unbelievable creaminess” (192). Overcome with disgust, she vomits. For both girls, the feeling of inner dirtiness is so strong that they could not talk about it:

Even in idagay [their secret language] they had never been able to share a certain twin shame. Each one thought the rot was hers alone [...] It was the other thing. The thing that made each believe, without knowing why, that this particular shame was different and could not tolerate speech — not even in the language they had invented for secrets.

Would the inside dirtiness leak? (192)

Contextual Therapy sees in secrets an influential factor in familial and other close relationships.³⁴ They can be part of the realm of privacy; in this case the secret does not necessarily have to be disclosed. In order to discern the impact of the given secret on the relationship, therapists investigate the following questions:

If a secret is being disclosed, who benefits and how?

Does the revealing of the secret result in everybody's gain on balance?

Or do individuals gain more if the secret stays undisclosed?

(Between *Give & Take* 343)

In Christine's and Heed's case, a disclosure of the secret would have been crucial to their future relationship because it would have diminished the feelings of shame both girls felt, which they think originate from their 'dirty' character. They would have benefited because the revelation of secrets also strengthens the trust between two parties. The girls could have formed a secret 'conspiracy' against Bill Cosey and could have assured their self-worth for each other. The only one who actually gains from the secret being kept is Cosey; thus, he maintains his authoritarian position in the minds of the girls.

There are other incidents in the novel that hint at Cosey's pedophilic tendencies: "Then one day the little girl's mother came to tell her she would have to leave her bedroom and sleep in a smaller room on another floor. When she asked her mother why, she was told it was for her own protection. There were things she shouldn't see or hear or know about" (95). Without explaining this to her daughter, May reacts to Cosey's behavior towards Christine and tries to protect her. This secret motivation for saving her daughter is not shared with Christine.

³⁴Cf. also Mark A. Karpel "Family Secrets: I. Conceptual and Ethical Issues in the Relational Context; II. Ethical and Practical Considerations in Therapeutic Management." *Family Process* 19.3 (1980): 295 – 306.

May's strategies of survival are misinterpreted by Christine, who feels hurt when she is sent off to boarding school once Heed married Bill Cosey. Her complaints that she is "always last; all the time the one being told to go, get out" (95) are a sign of her feelings of rejection and embitterment since the family's house was left to Heed. The stories the characters tell themselves and incorporate into their lives' narration and the actual motivation for their actions diverge and coalesce only after long painful decades of embitterment, mistrust, open hatred and finally a clarifying conversation with the nemesis. After decades of absence from Silk, Christine moves back to her hometown and into her house, which is now Heed's by heritage. The actual reason for Christine's moving back are a failed marriage, her abasing job as a prostitute and her subsequent poverty but she "discovered a way to convert a return to Silk in shame and on borrowed money into an act of filial responsibility: taking care of her ailing mother, and a noble battle for justice – her lawful share of the Cosey estate" (86).

Towards the end of *Love*, it becomes clear through the different opinions about his personality, that Bill Cosey is actually not the larger than life man so many in the community admire. He is not able to responsibly play the role of grandfather to Christine and is also not the father-in-law May needs him to be. His actions are detrimental to the black community as well as to his family and endanger the maintenance of both. His trustworthy behavior in some relationships cannot be transferred to others. If he gained positive entitlement vis-à-vis hiring Vida, that does not mean he can demand inconsiderable care from another person in a different relationship. In other words, his good deeds do not outbalance the guilt he accumulated in sexually harassing Heed, even though as Sandler reminisces, "Bill Cosey telling him that he had not touched her until her period came; waited a year and only then took her on a honeymoon for the initiation" (147).

L knows Cosey more intimately than any other character in the book. She is able to read him even better than his mistress Estelle, the prostitute, his actual "sweet Cosey child" to whom he would have left his entire estate and money if L had not intervened. L's exoneration has boundaries and she gives

the only valid analysis of Cosey's character that the incidents involving him allow for:

You could call him a good bad man, or a bad good man. Depends on what you hold dear — the what or the why. I tend to mix them. [...] I don't care what you think. He didn't have an S stitched on his shirt and he didn't own a pitchfork. He was an ordinary man ripped, like the rest of us, by wrath and love. I had to stop him. Had to. (200)

So it is L, the narrator, who understands, exonerates, and rarely judges the other characters in the book, who comes to a final judgment after all and poisons Bill Cosey, because in his blind vengeance he would have left the inheritance to Estelle and not to the women of his family. Cosey's death at the age of eighty-one is not the final defeat of the black community who suffered from the Civil Rights movement as much as it profited. The novel's bearer of hope for the community, in fact for humanity, is Romen, the grandson of Vida and Sandler. He refuses to participate in raping a girl at a party, whom some of his friends had tied to the bed. He also cuts off his sexual relationship to Junior, who had a detrimental influence on him and made him sell out the values his grandparents tried to instill in him.

The novel's title "Love" is an important indicator for the relationships depicted in the book. L, short for "love," defends the two girls Heed and Christine and the special bond they shared, and identifies the disruption of their feelings for each other as the greatest crime that could be done to them.

Heed and Christine were the kind of children who can't take back love, or park it. When that's the case, separation cuts to the bone. And if the breakup is plundered, too, squeezed for a glimpse of blood, shed for the child's own good, then it can ruin a mind. And if, on top of that, they are made to hate each other, it can kill a life way before it tries to live. I blame May for the hate she put in them, but I have to fault Mr. Cosey for the theft. (199f.)

Contextual Therapy works with three concepts of love in its daily practice with clients: erotic/romantic love, altruistic love that involves sacrifices, and companionate love. All three forms are important for the development for an individual's sense of selfhood. Companionate love is a decisive factor for young children in friendships as well as in the family because it teaches them

that no matter what might happen, they will not be left alone with their problems (*New Contextual Therapy* 30). The lesson Christine and Heed learn instead, is that for them, companionate love is either withheld or only comes with conditions the children cannot fulfill.

The quote above also hints at another element that is of utmost importance for inter-human relationships. Love is an essential factor in the formation of an individual's concept of self but not the only element that needs to be taken into account. Contextual Therapy holds that "trust is just as essential for healthy development and sound relationships because it is the primary relational resource from which we learn how to interact with others" (31f.). By manipulating her daughter, May introduced to her relationship with Christine the idea of distrust and suspicion. What is more, it also affects the relationship to her best friend Heed in detrimental ways to both of the girls. It violates the girls' innate sense of justice, which is the foundation of trustworthiness. As described in the theory chapter, trustworthiness is built over time by a fair concern for the balance of give-and-take in a relationship. However, the opportunity to build such a sense of trustworthiness in other people is spoiled in the girls' lives early on.

The sexual harassment and the subsequent feelings of shame as well as May's manipulative ways are only a few examples of crimes done to the girls besides the hatred instilled in Christine. The novel shows that love as a theme in the lives of the characters takes on many different forms. L's admiration for Cosey has to be seen in a different light than the love the girls have for each other. The different forms of love and the competing allegiances and loyalties among the characters also lead to betrayal. The best example is L's decision to poison Bill Cosey because he was about to betray the women in his life who gave up almost everything for him, who worked in the hotel and for its success. L's loyalty and love to Cosey has a weaker impact on her than the demands the loyalty to the Cosey women make of her.

If *Love* can be read in the light of strategies used in Contextual Therapy to mobilize trust reserves, then, in conclusion, one can say that the outcome of Heed's and Christine's bitter feud and lifelong hatred is outlasted by the

conciliatory ending of the book and that the different versions of personal truths amount in the end to a new quality of friendship between the women which they thought was never possible. Before Heed's death, they finally have the reconciliatory talk that restores their feelings for each other:

We could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of
looking for Big Daddy everywhere.
He *was* everywhere. And nowhere.
We make him up?
He made himself up.
We must have helped. [...]
He took all my childhood away from me, girl.
He took all of you away from me. (189, 194)

In the end, their trust reserves start to mobilize again and their friendship and love for each other wins over the decades of bitter hatred that took away their friendship and replaced it for a state of living that Martin Buber would have called a perpetual *I-It* relationship.

The core narrative strategies of Contextual Therapy are the principles of exoneration and multidirected partiality. As I have tried to show, such strategies can also be found in Toni Morrison's novel *Love*. The book's narrator L employs a stance that is similar to a therapist's attitude of multidirected partiality in her analysis of the events surrounding the Cosey family. However, since she is also part of the Coseys' extended family, her explanations cannot be objective. They are just as subjective in nature as the accounts of the other characters in the book. In that she equals a family member, her perspective on the entire situation is just as valuable as Bill Cosey's would have been, were he alive to provide it. L also exonerates Bill Cosey on several occasions because she takes into account his past options, limits, and efforts.

In *Because of L's* special position as a narrator, narrative parallels between the novel and Contextual Therapy can be noticed. Fiction and Contextual Therapy both establish a close dialogue on the basis of shared narrative strategies.

Conclusion

“Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city,³⁵” the actor and comedian George Burns once said. His ironic statement entails a desire for independence and individualism that is pivotal for the self-conception of many Americans. Yet, Burn’s ironical quotation also emphasizes the importance of the family in a person’s life.

I became interested in the manner in which people talk about the topic of family because I noticed that whenever conversations referred to “the family,” in Burns’s ironical sense or as a subject of study in literature, there often seemed to be a remarkably straight and clear idea of what “family” is and how its dynamics work. I was under the impression that because most everyone *has* a family, they all assume to have an expert concept of what it *is*. Yet, when I looked closely at these concepts, I noticed that these ideas provided little insight, drew on an antiquated theoretical framework or were often based on commonly held assumptions devoid of analysis.

I frequently came across the adjective “dysfunctional,” a vogue expression, it seems, in the entertainment media. “Dysfunctional” is one of these words that denote a condition of “the family,” whose meaning everyone implicitly seems to agree upon without ever feeling the need for an explanation of what is actually meant. It was also very surprising to see that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, families are often still viewed through the lens of early twentieth century psychoanalytical concepts or its more recent updates.

I was perplexed to find out that there is still a focus on the *intrapersonal* when in fact family constellations seem to function on the basis of complex *interpersonal* processes. This is particularly problematic because the labels “functional” and “dysfunctional” that are often used tend to oversimplify these very complex processes. “Functional” often refers to a socially constructed and therefore changing ideal of family life whereas

³⁵ Burns, George. *The Quotations Page*. 20 April, 2013.
<http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/26161.html>

"dysfunctional" always has a negative connotation. I argue, however, that all families are "functional," they just function in different ways and follow distinct dynamics. My dissertation set out to explore how these dynamics come about and which "invisible rules" they follow. Apparently, when families become "dysfunctional," they experience the symptoms of a relational imbalance the origin of which seems to be hidden from them. This is why I used the theoretical framework of Contextual Therapy for my analysis. Contextual Therapy seeks to answer exactly these questions and focuses on relational ethics, a dimension that has been ignored all too often in approaches to inter-human relationships.

The family has been the center of attention of sociologists, psychologists, and writers alike when it comes to 'taking the temperature' of the American zeitgeist. As an institution, it provides a matrix for identity that has been analyzed, criticized, marginalized, and at times also been neglected. Its ultimate disappearance seemed finally settled. My analysis of the four novels discussed in this dissertation, however, reveals a reappearance of the family as a significant topic in the American literature of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

This return to family-related themes points to more than a retreat into private realms after the rhetoric of unlimited economic progress came to a halt. This rhetoric has been critically re-examined since the beginning of the new crisis of capitalism and the end of the new economy boom in the second half of the 1990s. Especially Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) ironically comments on these events. However, it does not exclusively use the motif of family life as a vehicle to depict the larger societal discourse of progress in times of crisis, but— as do the other three novels of this study — explores how literary characters are shaped by their family ties as family itself presents the novel's central theme.

All four of the novels analyzed here create an intimate image of interpersonal relationships transcending earlier literary representation of family life. Those were written through the lens of high postmodernism and its experimental character creations. Instead, the four novels present open

designs of family structures that are postmodern inasmuch as they question and transcend the nuclear family as an ideal and desired model of identity formation. Yet, at the same time, they not only draw but also comment on the very therapeutic discourses that helped create and further strengthen this idea of a highly individualistic human existence in high postmodernism.

In my first chapter on the theoretical framework of Contextual Therapy, I outlined its central concepts as well as its historical development. I started by explaining the dissatisfaction with psychoanalytical approaches in clinical practice at the time and then traced how Contextual Therapy developed into a very relevant branch of therapy whose understanding of families is decisively inspired and shaped by the writings of the philosopher Martin Buber. In his most prominent book *I and Thou*, originally published in German in 1923, Buber establishes a model of human relationships that investigates what according to his understanding is at the core of man's relatedness to the world.

To Buber, human relationships are grounded in a dyadic structure of the world, through which man approaches his environment. In essence, his relational model is based on a dichotomy of either experiencing or relating to the other. Human beings either are involved in an *I-It* relationship, in which the other person is turned into an object that is expected to meet certain demands, or engage in an *I-Thou* relationship in which both partners experience mutual self-confirmation through what Buber called "meeting" the other person.

I then showed how in the 1960s the Hungarian immigrant Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, founder of Contextual Therapy, and his co-workers integrated Buber's ideas into their therapeutic practice. They shared the assumption that, at their core, human relationships are not based on psychological motives and motivations, but instead on what happens "between" two partners. This is a crucial step away from an intrapersonal realm to an interpersonal approach to human psychology. Thus, Buber's concept of the irrevocable inter-relatedness of individuals translates into Contextual Therapy's emphasis on relational ethics. This is the most

important dimension of human existence and distinguishes Contextual Therapy from many of the other therapeutic branches available nowadays. Relational ethics focuses on the dynamics of justice, loyalty, trust, and entitlement, four of the most pivotal concepts in the philosophy of Contextual Therapy. It essentially tries to uncover the invisible ties that bind and influence people in transgenerational relationships.

In the last part of chapter one, I investigated the connection between therapy in practice and literary studies by exploring the idea that both share a view of families as being essentially a collection of stories and by outlining which implications the dimension of relational ethics has for the analysis of literary texts.

In the second chapter titled “Injuries of Justice and Intergenerational Family Dynamics in *The Corrections*,” I focused on the transgenerational family constellation in Franzen’s novel with regard to key concerns of Contextual Therapy. This chapter illuminates how injuries in the parent generation affect the concept of justice in a particular family and what damage an imbalance of give-and-take can bring on later generations. In my analysis of *The Corrections*, I showed how the exploitation of trust reserves and an injury of justice that Alfred, the father of the Lambert family, experienced in his family of origin manifest themselves in the relationship to his wife Enid. As a result, in Contextual Therapy, partners who do not earn constructive entitlement use up the trust reserves of their children’s generation.

The events described in the novel show that such injuries of human justice can trigger a snowball effect in which the subsequent generation tries to negotiate between inherited injustices and the demands for their due care, love, and attention. This becomes especially clear in the life of Alfred’s oldest son Gary, who constantly tries not to become like his father only to find out in the end that the life he envisioned for himself is completely shaped by the exploitation and imbalance of justice in his family of origin.

The effects of the imbalances of the family ledger of justice, a central concern in Contextual Therapy, are paramount in my analysis of *The*

Corrections. Exploring the transgenerational family dynamics between the three generations of the Lambert family, it becomes evident how injuries in one generation are perpetuated in subsequent generations. Imbalances of give-and-take cause tensions in the marriage of Gary and Caroline that in turn result in a situation of split loyalty for their children. Their children are victimized to compensate for the destructive entitlement of their parents on an ontic level. It is this concern for ethical considerations in transgenerational family constellations that sets Contextual Therapy apart from other branches of family therapy and also provides the means to understand literary characters in their multifaceted net of relationships in ways that go beyond categories of e.g. struggle for power or feelings of guilt that at first *seem* to be motives for injuries of the relational justice.

In this chapter, I also included book reviews from a major US magazine and a newspaper to show how reading family narratives is informed by a psychological discourse that is very prominent in everyday life in the U.S. and in particular in popular culture. This discourse, however, adds to the manifestation and dominance of psychological concepts that are often taken out of their complex contexts and are broken down to be easily available when talking about family in a cultural framework. Reviewers thus use specific concepts as labels that they apply in their reading of individual family narratives. In doing so, they naturally have to simplify complex psychological concepts while at the same time shaping the readers approach to these texts. In the end, book reviews thus both reflect and shape specific stereotypes that inform how readers respond to family dynamics in literary texts.

In chapter three, titled “Parentification in *The Sleeping Father*,” I analyzed the role reversal between parents and children as a phenomenon that is apparent to varying degrees in all of my chosen novels and which in the past decades also developed into a cultural phenomenon in U.S. society. In Matthew Sharpe’s *The Sleeping Father*, however, it becomes the central theme of the family narrative. In this novel, parentification, a situation that puts persons into an overburdening position that demands age-

inappropriate behavior, takes place on a vertical level between parents and children but also on a horizontal level between spouses. The role reversal is either imaginary, therefore created in the characters' mind, or actually takes place in the characters' lives.

The actual ways in which parentification occurs in the novel are for example caused by the natural life cycle, namely when parents get older and eventually are in need of care. In the novel this process is accelerated due to the wrong combination of anti-depressants which causes the single father Bernard Schwartz to fall into a coma. This leaves his teenaged children Chris and Cathy in the position of involuntary caregivers. Their situation is aggravated due to the fact that social institutions such as high school or the hospital in which their father is treated reinforce the parentified role of the adolescents because neither institution steps up to its actual responsibilities.

However, the most significant case of parentification occurs because the mother Lila tries to balance the injustices experienced in her own family of origin when her father did not meet his responsibilities as a caregiver and instead opted not to engage with his daughter. When Bernard falls into a coma, she rather wants her children to be in charge and to be the ones to make major decisions instead of helping them in the difficult situation. As my analysis shows, Lila prefers physical separation to meeting her obligations towards her offspring. She therefore misses the opportunity to strengthen the balance of give-and-take in her relationship with her children. Instead, she depletes their trust reserves. She mistakenly assumes, similar to the literary character of Gary Lambert from *The Corrections*, that personal freedom and the expression of independence and individualism are guaranteed by the attempted disengagement from meaningful relationships.

In my analysis of *The Sleeping Father*, I also took into consideration the "ecological" context, explored by the psychologist Gregory J. Jurkovic. This approach reveals how parentification is allowed or even supported by Cathy's and Chris's surroundings. Jurkovic connects ethical-ontic considerations (the primary focus of Contextual Therapy) to environmental concerns. This theoretical framework lends itself to my analysis because the

novel impressively demonstrates how the literary characters are systemically trapped in the role of an involuntary parent by their immediate and broader familial and social environment.

In chapter four, called “Existential Guilt and the Politics of Race in *The Time of Our Singing*,” I extended the concept of justice from the more private realm of the family to the nation as a whole and connected it to the notions of existential guilt that first Buber and later on contextual therapists used to illuminate the damages that the injuries to the justice of the human order have caused on both personal as well as societal levels. In the case of intergenerational (in)justice, guilt is not a moral category but an existential reality that manifests itself daily in cultural phenomena such as racism or in institutionalized discrimination for example in the case of legal prohibition of interracial marriages up until the late 1960s.

Contextual therapists argue that unearned guilt in emerging and future generations can also affect society as a whole. Most white Americans probably would not feel guilty over the atrocities committed against the Africans brought to America to work as slaves generations ago. Yet, the repercussions of slavery have affected the ledger of justice for black children for many generations (*Invisible Loyalties* 55).

Therefore, history does matter, both on the level of one’s own family narrative and on the larger level of the cultural discourses of a nation. The family narrative that Richard Powers’s *The Time of Our Singing* develops has to be seen in the context of the family members’ as well as the nation’s history, specifically in the context of race and race relations. The novel explores the social and familial circumstances and massive forces the interracial couple David and Delia Strom encounter when they live their love semi-openly in the 1940 and 50s United States. Their three children are raised in a society that does not differentiate between shades of skin color but acknowledges only blackness or whiteness, according to which they are judged.

My final chapter dealt with Toni Morrison’s novel *Love*. The novel investigates life in a black community on the East Coast in the decades after

the Civil Rights era. *Love* focuses on the friendship between Christine and Heed, who later in life turn into enemies. Their platonic love for each other is balked by jealousy, shame, and miscommunication. Their friendship turns into distrust, hatred, and loneliness. Secrets veiling sexual abuse and betrayal prevent the two former friends from reestablishing their love for each other. Here, sexual abuse can be read as an extreme form of parentification.

I argued that the way *Love* is narrated is astonishingly akin to the approach Contextual Therapy takes to the accounts of clients' and their family members. The novel has two narrators: the omniscient third person narrator mainly presents the subjective truths of the protagonists, and even though these stories are told in the third person they resemble personal accounts. In view of this, *Love* can be read as a fictionalized transcript of therapy sessions. The characters of the novel give their own—highly subjective—versions of the events, creating the image of a highly complex net of interpersonal relationships influenced by the violations of justice on a vertical as well as horizontal level of human relationship. The other narrator is L, who views the events of the novel from a different, more intimate and knowledgeable, angle.

In this chapter, I argued that in literary terms, Contextual Therapy represents a deconstruction of the text and of the narrative respectively. The therapist, who gives up her authoritative status, no longer acts on a meta-level. By way of the therapist's multidirected partiality, she gives due credit to all the individual stories the different clients are telling about their problem(s) in familial relationships. This technique would enable her to start a process of exoneration among the members.

Love depicts such a process by means of its disruptive narrative structure. In this fictional family account, there is neither a therapist nor a literary character that assumes such a position. But the different versions of the events in the novel the characters tell shed light on each other in their complex situations and they are, as stated above, always biased. I argued that the narrative structure is akin to a very common situation in therapy. In

Contextual Therapy, the question of what is ‘real’ is of little importance to the healing process, regardless of the accuracy of the clients’ stories; the clients’ different points of view are valued, taken seriously, and if necessary also exposed as overly detrimental. This is the raw material the therapist works with in uncovering the hidden violations of the ledger of justice in a transgenerational context. Therefore, naturally, therapeutic sessions heavily rely on language and storytelling.

Though L as a narrator of *Love* operates on a ‘meta-level’ of narration, she does not know exactly which parts of the accounts given by the different characters are only psychological inventions. However, she explains the different motivations of the family members involved and applies a form of multidirected partiality that is used in Contextual Therapy. With her use of multidirected partiality, she strengthens the stories of the different individual family members. Narrator L thus functions as a translator who helps the reader understand the novel’s events.

My analysis of the four novels discussed in this study emphasizes the importance of narration in both Contextual Therapy and literature. The specific position of multidirected partiality that the therapist assumes in order to acknowledge the accounts of all clients involved presents a key element of “reading” fictional stories against the grain. Popular concepts of reading fictional family narratives often put “characters on the couch.” They analyze them on the grounds of the character’s specific singular relation to her outside world, neglecting the systemic character of her inter-human relationships and, what is more, they deny the ontic character of such relations. According to the theoretical framework of Contextual Therapy, there is a decisive difference between *feeling* guilty and *being* guilty on the level of invisible violations of the family justice. Therefore, Contextual Therapy transcends any moralizing interpretations of a family narrative and stresses relational ethics as its most important dimension in dealing with clients. Martin Buber’s philosophy of the *I-Thou* dialogue in interpersonal relationships provides the foundation for this reading of family narratives in

a therapeutic as well as in a literary context. This has fundamental consequences for how we read family novels.

The concern for the ethical dimension of inter-human relationships challenges one of the central narratives at work in the construction of American identity: the narrative of American individualism. My analysis of the four novels shows that individualism combined with a lacking awareness – or even self-willed ignorance of one’s ethical connection to meaningful relationships – leads to a dead end. My dissertation sheds light on a rhetoric that propagates stark individualism as the driving force in life. In this manner, the novels analyzed in this dissertation show what can happen to relationships when ethical boundaries are violated and responsibilities are neglected.

Analyzing texts from the 2000s provides new insights into the state of family in the U.S. in the first decade of the new millennium. Dissolving family structures certainly continue to exist. However, this dissolution does not end in mere destruction of old structures and cynical pessimism with regards to the role of the family. The novels neither offer a clear-cut remedy for postmodern lonesomeness nor do they chime in on the celebration of the solipsistic world view of stark individualism.

Contextual Therapy provides powerful tools for analyzing 21st century family novels because these tools offer an adequate answer to the dilemma between individualism and familial relations which the literary characters face. The model offers a relevant approach to studying fictional families because it allows us to examine how literary characters interact in their fictional worlds in ways that go beyond behavioral patterns and systemic structures of power. It illuminates the ‘invisible ties’ that bind a character to her family of origin and which influence her peer relationships as well. Using the theoretical framework of Contextual Therapy allows highlighting, underlining, and comparing conflicts of interaction between the literary characters in their complex relationships. It helps to discern how these novels comment on the zeitgeist of the first decade of the twenty-first

century, especially when it comes to the transgenerational tension between differences in ethically responsible behavior and individualism.

Two protagonists of the chosen novels show the dilemma between the longing for (extreme) individualism and the impossibility of cutting off familial ties particularly clearly. In *The Corrections*, Gary Lambert epitomizes the futile attempts at living in disregard of his family background. To be more exact, it is his ignorance with regard to the imbalances of the ledger of give-and-take in his own family of origin which makes it impossible for him to stand his ground in his own marriage. He is very aware of the fact that he does not want to become like his father and therefore establishes a list of mental reassurances in order not to fall into the trap of repeating the patterns of Alfred's life. But he unwittingly develops some of these same patterns which his father exhibited. His protest "Dad, really, no, what are you talking about? *I'm* not the one who sits in a chair all day and sleeps," is simply countered by his father's matter of fact statement "underneath you are, [...] one day you will see" (202). This is a prospect which frightens Gary and encourages him even more to resist his family ties, only to find himself under more pressure in the end.

The second character who mistakes denial of family ties for individual freedom is Lila Munroe in *The Sleeping Father*. Her disengagement from vital relationships does not allow her to lead a happier or more fulfilled life. However, the geographical distance to her divorced husband who raises their children helps her to ignore this problem. She experiences what Ebner called the "closedness of the I to the Thou" (qtd. in Friedman, 1955, 299), which translates in her life into anxieties about losing her 'freedom' and 'independence'. This results in grave consequences for her children, who are parentified on several levels.

When looking closely at the family patterns in the four novels, it becomes clear to what extent these books are part of and at the same time contribute to the psychological discourse that has influenced how people conceive of the concept of the family in every day life. The four family novels analyzed in this book develop to varying degrees fictional narratives that can

only be described as products of a therapeutic age. This does not necessarily suggest a healing process; rather the characters' urge for re-figuration of their selves, the strong desire to understand, define, and then to (re)invent their selves as independently existing entities are expressions of an era that since the early twentieth century has become increasingly individualized³⁶. Reading the novels in this light, it becomes clear that popular concepts such as the "self-sacrificing part" of a family or the "trouble maker" as opposed to the "healthy" child inform the self-conception of these characters who are very much characterized by individualism.

Here, Contextual Therapy does very valuable cultural work in uncovering the shortcomings and sometimes self-serving purpose of these concepts and patterns of thinking that the literary characters – at times without reflecting upon them, at other times deliberately – subscribe to. It uncovers the illusions of individuality and freedom in modern times that foster a self detached from meaningful relationships. Contextual Therapy deconstructs the text by looking for hidden motivations for the characters' actions that may reveal invisible loyalties and past injuries of their families' ledger of justice. Concretely, in literary terms, they are often expressed in metaphors such as "the black-sheep" or "the sacrificial goat." While the literary characters in the four novels rarely use these concepts explicitly, it becomes clear from their (re)actions that they perceive themselves or others in these terms. These concepts are not only powerful and strongly affect relationships but at times they are even used for controlling situations. One particularly fine example is the marriage of Gary and Caroline in *The Corrections*, where the mother puts herself in the role of a victim not only to get ahead in the marital struggle for power but also to compensate for the

³⁶ For further reading on the therapeutization of everyday life and the history of social values in the US please refer to following books: Roger G. Betsworth: *Social Ethics. An Examination of American Moral Traditions*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990; Philip Cushman. *Constructing the Self, Constructing America. A Cultural History of Psychotherapy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 1995; Eva Illouz. *Saving the Modern Soul. Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*. Berkeley et. al.: University of California Press, 2008; Robert Kegan. *The Evolving Self. Problem and Process in Human Development*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982; Philip Rieff. *The Triumph of the Therapeutic. Uses of Faith After Freud*. Fortieth-Anniversary Edition. Wilmington, De.: ISI Books, 2006.

imbalance of give-and-take experienced in the relationship with her own parents.

Reading the four novels through the lens of a framework informed by Contextual Therapy reveals that claims for individuality are not always heroic acts of emancipation from a relationship but rather outcries of helplessness, fear and avoidance of responsibilities that have their origins in imbalances of the familial ledger of justice. Most importantly, it shows the reader the detrimental effects these imbalances have on future generations. This is also how Contextual Therapy can once again bridge the gap between the individual and community by examining past injustices that could lead to future commitments and by investigating how these illusions of individuality and freedom can prevent ethically meaningful relationships in intergenerational family bonds.

My analysis stresses the significance of parentification as a cultural phenomenon of US literature at the beginning of the 21st century. The role reversal of parents and children is noticeable in all four novels analyzed in this dissertation, most significantly in *The Sleeping Father*. This novel presents a broad spectrum of role reversals from dream sequences, imagined parentification, and institutionally sanctioned role reversal to the aforementioned urge to express individualistic freedom that ultimately leads to parentification. Contextual Therapists agree that, while a temporary state of role reversal constitutes a fundamental part of adolescence and provides the opportunity to grow with such a challenge, a perpetual state of parentification is very detrimental to inter-human relationships and potentially has grave effects on the intergenerational balance of give-and-take.

Reading the fictional world of *The Sleeping Father* in the light of Contextual Therapy scrutinizes the socially sanctioned “promise of salvation” given by the pursuit of individual freedom at all costs and exposes it as a shying away from ethically meaningful relationships. In this sense, the great extent to which we encounter states of parentification in the western world can very well be interpreted as the outcome of an individualism gone wrong,

wrong in the sense that it jeopardizes the balance of give-and-take for future generations. Contextual Therapy does not suggest that this ends inescapably in an existential vicious circle to be perpetuated by generations to come. This conclusion would be a simplification because it does not recognize the idiosyncrasies of different familial dynamics. However, a look at how society at large creates and in some instances even fosters parentification tells us much about the state of *Dulosigkeit* (the lack of *Thou* in relationships) in which we often unknowingly find ourselves.

As I explained earlier, a reading of family narratives that is informed by Contextual Therapy also works for analyzing larger social developments. The novels *The Time of Our Singing* and *Love* transcend the personal realm of inter-human relationships. The events depicted in these books are closely tied to the history of the black communities in the U.S. They show that it is impossible to live 'beyond' the color distinctions in society, but they also show that the unity among people within the communities is endangered through a disengagement from meaningful relationships. My dissertation demonstrates that a nation's legacy of injustice can affect all close and familial relationships and that violations of justice are perpetuated across the different generations. Seen in this light, the rhetoric of conservatives who claim that slavery has been over for almost a hundred and fifty years and that it is now time to move on and look forward instead of backward is a form of window-dressing. It is doubtful whether a nation can afford such an attitude in the long run if it wants to "heal" and develop as a society.

My analysis of the chosen novels shows that the return to family narratives in literature at the beginning of the 21st century does not express a sentimental longing for the past, nor do the novels promote a return to traditional structures and hierarchies within the family. On the contrary, they represent hopeful signs of a return to *ethical* considerations in relationships, to that willingness to overcome "Icheinsamkeit" and "Dulosigkeit" in dynamic family systems that outstrip the conservative model of the nuclear (white) middle class family. In its place there is now a

design of family that reacts more flexibly to the changes and demands of society, and confronts the challenges with more hope for the future.

This dissertation addresses a fundamental challenge to literary studies. It strives to develop an approach for coming to terms with complex fictional family narratives as they are presented in literature of the beginning 21st century. Doing this it endeavors to transcend literary approaches to family narratives that are very much informed by theories based on intrapersonal character analysis, most notably analytical frameworks borrowing from psychoanalysis and from narrative therapy from the age of high postmodernism. Contextual Therapy makes it possible to establish a connection between the complex fictional character constellations that are embedded in systemic structures of familial and societal relations and an ethical dimension that stresses the ontic connection between human beings with a constructive concern for the future. In doing so, Contextual Therapy not only outgrew but also further developed its narrative roots originating in psychoanalysis.

Yet it must remain clear that this theoretical approach also operates within a discourse that is at least in part based on decidedly middle class concepts. Focusing to a large extent on middle class clients, this therapeutic field especially thrives in western societies. Still, one of Contextual Therapy's main achievements is that it challenges the rhetoric of the "anything goes" mentality in high postmodern discourses on identity formation. In Contextual Therapy, this "anything goes" rhetoric is restricted by the acknowledgment of the undeniable non-relativistic existence of ethical responsibility among human beings. In its understanding of familial relationships, however, Contextual Therapy draws on a more conservative idea of family. It for example stresses the importance of *biological* family relations that may have priority over *non-biological* relations within a human being's life when it comes to relational justice. Thus, an adopted child *may* be more influenced by the ledger of justice created by her biological parents than by the one of her actual caretakers. Also notable in terms of questions concerning gender, Contextual Therapy does make a distinction

between femininity and masculinity and their respective roles in relationships.³⁷ Interestingly enough, this distinction is based on biological givens such as the ability to birth children. According to contextual therapists, this automatically puts a woman into a different position of existential responsibility because she carries the risks brought about by pregnancy and birth. While in its practice, Contextual Therapy naturally also works with homosexual couples; heterosexual relationships nevertheless take on a special role in their creation of intergenerational balances of give-and-take also because of the stress on existential biological givens.

At first glance, exploring these emphases on the consequences biological factors have for inter-human relations may uncover the shortcomings of Contextual Therapy in the analysis of post-postmodern family narratives that opt for open family designs, which often decidedly do not follow a middle class pattern of family. However, its focus on relational ethics in inter-human relationships that highlight the importance of existential connections between human beings presents a unifying element in Contextual Therapy rather than a limiting one. It is inclusive of open family designs rather than judgmental or dismissive. Therefore, the biological factor in Contextual Therapy should be seen as a vantage point for further research in the field of literary studies rather than a limitation. The four novels analyzed in this dissertation do opt for open family designs, yet they are still based on heterosexual and biological relationships. There is much potential for future research in literary studies in terms of the analysis of same-sex relationships, questions of adoption and its effects on family dynamics. Also the role Contextual Therapy plays in questions of gender relations as they are discussed for example in feminist discourses could be a fruitful field of study.

³⁷ For further reading on interhuman relationships from a feminist standpoint please refer to e.g. Deborah Anna Luepnitz. *The Family Interpreted: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Family Therapy*. New York: Basic Books, 1988; Catriona Mackenzie, and Natalie Stoljar, eds. *Relational Autonomy. Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; Linda Thompson and Alexis J. Walker. "The Place of Feminism in Family Studies." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57.4. (1995): 847 – 865.

The analytical framework of Contextual Therapy holds great promise not only for looking at literary texts but for exploring other media as well. Gender roles and relations as well as open designs of familial relationships also occupy a central space in the contemporary TV landscape in the US. The popular genre of sitcoms for example uses humor as a strategy for dealing with social challenges that people face in the western world. These challenges include the debate of equality before the law of same-sex marriages or the adoption of children with an ethnic identity that differs from that of their adoptive parents. The short-lived TV series *The New Normal* (2012) for example explicitly puts the issue of same-sex partnerships and the fulfillment of fatherhood by using a surrogate mother at the center of attention. To create additional tension and a sense of humor, the position of the “new normal” male couple is juxtaposed by the role of the surrogate mom’s mother. She represents a decidedly right-wing, conservative, and also capitalist perspective on the development of society in contemporary America. The tone of this TV series is decidedly humorous and humor itself plays a central role in both the production and the reception of the family narrative. The use of humor in sitcoms functions in at least two different ways by either confirming existing stereotypes or asking viewers to call them into question. Here, Contextual Therapy offers analytical methods that deconstruct existing assumptions about the family such as stereotypical metaphors of family roles, e.g. the “black-sheep” or the label “dysfunctional” in a format that both multiplies existing stereotypes and creates new ones within the discourse of the therapeutization of everyday life. In doing so, Contextual Therapy renders visible specific dynamics within the family that might otherwise go unnoticed or remain unquestioned.

Similarly, Contextual Therapy may offer a new perspective for studying multicultural texts, which occupy a central position in American Studies. In addition to gender and class differences, characters in multicultural fiction often face particular challenges. These family narratives are characterized by intercultural processes of identity formations that transcend the middle class idea of family that Contextual Therapy followed

in its origins. Here, concepts of multiculturalism, for example their approach to identity narration, might enrich the framework of Contextual Therapy. It is this connection between Contextual Therapy, literary and cultural productions, and social realities that my dissertation seeks to investigate.

Two of the novels that I analyzed deal with the topic of race and race relations, which occupies a special place in the cultural and political history of the US. Contextual therapists agree that the violations of the ledger of justice committed during slavery and after looms large in everyday life. “Voluntary” segregation of housing for example can be interpreted as a serious repercussion of past tensions between different racial groups. The repercussions of slavery have an effect on the everyday lives of many black people that is not limited to the question of housing alone but also to other areas connected to it. These include school districts, economic power, education, the health system and, last but not least, the judicial system, be it in the case of the “positive discrimination” of Affirmative Action or discrimination by the police force. All of these issues have to be evaluated in a larger context of transgenerational legacies and commitments. Contextual Therapy is most prominently concerned with prevention of future violations. In order to prevent future injuries to the balance of give-and-take, the past violations need to be taken into account. The above-mentioned social and political areas in which imbalances exist also play a central role in fictional family narratives. Therefore, Contextual Therapy contributes greatly to a new reading of the interrelated nature of the world we are living in. In paying special attention to these social and political conflicts and their presentation in novels, which function as laboratories of the world, we gain a broader, and at the same time more encompassing, perspective on society and its development. Contextual Therapy offers us the great opportunity to learn from the past, to rethink our actions and to ultimately make decisions that take into consideration our concerns for future generations.

It seems that where there is despair, there is also hope. And this may be the most powerful message that Contextual Therapy has to offer to readers of fictional family narratives. Using its theoretical framework fosters

a reading experience that has the power to catapult readers out of the state of anger, disbelief, or bemusement when they are tempted to simply judge the characters according to their (non-)actions. Critical readers, however, may soon come to the realization that labeling concepts such as “the black-sheep” or “the healthy” child are only metaphorical tools that help us express our uneasiness in dealing with relationships that are too complex and too painful to be dissected by our cognitive abilities. Instead, they function as a protective shield or a comforter and are often nothing more than a band-aid for and signifiers of a hurtful violation in the past. And in this sense, reading the family novels in the light of Contextual Therapy is therapeutic. This is certainly a thought that future research can elaborate on.

Coming back to the initial quote by comedian George Burns, “[h]appiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city,” the four novels analyzed in this dissertation function as laboratories of the world. Their findings suggest that if individuals find common ground in ethically meaningful relationships, it does not matter whether their families live around the corner or in a place far away. They very likely are going to be loving, caring, and close-knit families. It is, maybe paradoxically, because of the steadfastness with which human beings engage in this genuine dialogue of I-Thou as the basis of human existence, that happiness can be found in life after all.

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