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**Ecocriticism and Narratological Reading in American Fiction : Freedom
by Jonathan Franzen as a Case Study**

A Thesis Submitted as Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the
Degree of *Master* in Literature and Civilisation.

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Declaration of Originality

I, Abouda Nassima, hereby declare that the research study titled "*Ecocriticism and Narratological Reading in American Fiction: A Case Study of Freedom by Jonathan Franzen*" is an original work that I have undertaken as part of my Master's degree.

I have properly cited all sources from which I have drawn information and ideas that contributed to the development of my study. I also confirm that this work has not been previously submitted or published by anyone else.

Date:

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Nassima

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Abouda Nassima', written in a cursive style.

Dedication

To myself,

To my beloved family, whose constant support has been my greatest comfort,

To my best friend, Idir, whose faith in me never wavered,

To my precious newborn nephew and my favorite niece, whose innocent smiles have filled my heart with joy,

To all of you who have given me strength when I felt weak, believed in me when I was overwhelmed with doubts and stood by me, through every high and low,

I dedicate this work to you

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Abstract

This thesis examines the integration of narrative theory and ecocriticism in Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom*. The research aims to uncover how the novel utilizes narrative techniques to critique contemporary American life, with a particular focus on environmental issues. The study explores how these narrative elements contribute to a deeper understanding of the connections between personal experiences and broader ecological crises. The research adopts a qualitative method, analyzing how the novel's structure, perspectives, and narrative techniques enhance the depiction of ecological and social challenges. The approach involves a detailed examination of how *Freedom* portrays environmental concerns, highlighting the novel's critical stance on the impact of human actions on nature. The thesis also situates *Freedom* within the broader context of American fiction, assessing its role in contributing to discussions around environmental sustainability and social critique. The research scope is focused on *Freedom* but extends to explore its relevance in literary and ecological scholarship, providing insights into how the novel's narrative strategies engage with and address ecological issues. This study contributes to a growing body of research on the role of literature in environmental discourse, emphasizing the importance of narrative in shaping readers' awareness and understanding of ecological problems. The findings suggest that *Freedom* offers significant commentary on the interconnectedness of human lives and environmental sustainability, making it a crucial text for examining the relationship between literature and ecological thought.

Keywords: American Fiction, Ecocriticism, Environmental Critique, ecological sustainability, Narrative theory.

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General Introduction

In recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on the relationship between narrative techniques and environmental themes in literature. This exploration is crucial as it sheds light on how storytelling shapes our understanding of ecological issues. Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom* is a significant example of how literature can address these challenges. The novel not only tells the story of its characters but also connects their struggles with broader social and environmental issues. *Freedom* uses a complex narrative structure with different perspectives, storylines, and deep character development to critique modern American society. Franzen's storytelling techniques help to highlight the connections between individual lives and the larger environmental crises they face. This makes *Freedom* an important work for understanding how literature can explore the relationship between personal and societal issues, particularly those related to the environment.

This thesis investigates the intersection of narrative theory and ecocriticism in *Freedom*. It aims to understand how Franzen uses these literary approaches to deepen the novel's critique of modern American life. The study focuses on how the narrative structure enhances the exploration of environmental themes and the broader socio-political context. *Freedom* uses the story of the Berglund family to reflect on the ecological and social challenges that are faced by individuals and society at large.

While much has been written about Franzen and American fiction, the combined application of narrative theory and ecocriticism in *Freedom* has not been fully explored. This thesis addresses this gap by analyzing how Franzen's narrative techniques contribute to the novel's environmental and social commentary. The main goal of this research is to show how narrative strategies are used to engage with ecological themes, offering new insights into the role of literature in addressing environmental concerns.

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To examine how narrative theory is applied in *Freedom* to enhance its thematic content.
2. To analyze the representation of environmental issues through an ecocritical lens.
3. To explore the relationship between narrative techniques and ecological themes in shaping the novel's socio-political critique.

Focusing on the aforementioned approaches and methods, this research work attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How do narrative techniques in *Freedom* convey ecological and social themes?
2. What role does the novel play in reflecting and critiquing contemporary environmental issues?
3. How do narrative theory and ecocriticism work together to enhance the novel's critique of American society?

Several formulized hypotheses have been developed to guide the analysis, and to organize the research's projects, making them purposeful, focused, and scientifically valuable.

1. The interconnected storylines and unreliable narration in Freedom significantly enhance its critique of environmental and social issues.
2. Environmental degradation is a central theme in the novel, reflecting concerns about sustainability and ecological responsibility.
3. The integration of narrative theory and ecocriticism in Freedom offers a nuanced exploration of the complex relationship between personal and societal challenges.

This research contributes to the understanding of how narrative dynamics and ecological themes are used in literature to critique modern society. Situating Freedom within the context of American fiction and ecocriticism provides insights into how literature can engage with pressing environmental issues. The examination of narrative and ecological dimensions in Freedom offers valuable perspectives on the role of storytelling in shaping public discourse on environmental sustainability.

The thesis is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of Freedom, with each chapter contributing to the overall understanding of the novel's thematic depth.

The first chapter starts with an overview of American fiction, tracing its development from the early colonial period to the present. It highlights key texts and authors who have influenced the genre and discusses how American fiction has reflected and responded to socio-political changes over time. This background

provides a foundation for understanding how American fiction addresses various issues, including environmental concerns.

Following this, the chapter seamlessly combines narrative theory and ecocriticism to explore how these approaches can enhance literary analysis. Narrative theory helps us understand how stories are constructed, focusing on elements like narrative voice and perspective. This theory reveals how different storytelling techniques shape the reader's experience and interpretation of a text.

In tandem, ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment. It explores how literature represents and critiques environmental issues, including nature, environmental degradation, and human-nature interactions. When combined with narrative theory, ecocriticism offers deeper insights into how literary techniques contribute to the portrayal of ecological themes. To wrap up, the chapter includes a literature review of previous studies on *Freedom*. This review highlights key findings and identifies gaps in the research. It places *Freedom* within the broader context of literary and ecological scholarship, preparing the reader for more detailed analysis in the following chapters.

Furthermore, the second chapter delves into ecocriticism and American Fiction; it focuses on ecocriticism, beginning with a brief historical overview of its development. It covers the origins of environmental thought in literature and how ecocriticism emerged as a distinct literary theory in the late 20th century. The chapter then presents various definitions of ecocriticism from key theorists, offering a broad understanding of the field's concepts.

The chapter proceeds to explore the rise of ecocriticism as a formal discipline and its growing recognition in literary studies. It concludes with an application of ecocritical concepts to Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, analyzing how the novel addresses environmental issues and reflects broader ecological concerns.

The third chapter begins by introducing the Berglund family, central to Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. This overview sets the context for understanding the family dynamics and their role in the story.

Next, the chapter explores ecological themes in the novel, showing how environmental issues are integrated into the narrative. Following this, it focuses on an analysis of two key characters and how their actions relate to the broader ecological context.

The chapter then examines one significant passage from the novel to illustrate how Franzen combines narrative and ecocritical elements. Finally, it applies narrative and ecocritical techniques to deepen the understanding of how the novel addresses environmental concerns.

In conclusion, this thesis offers a thorough examination of narrative theory and ecocriticism in Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. It covers the historical background, theoretical frameworks, and textual analysis, showcasing how the novel intertwines storytelling with environmental themes. The analysis reveals how Franzen's narrative techniques enhance the portrayal of ecological issues and reflect broader environmental concerns.

The exploration demonstrates the intricate relationship between narrative structure and environmental consciousness in the novel. This thesis provides a foundational perspective, encouraging further research and discussion. It highlights the novel's significance in both literary and ecological contexts, underscoring its relevance and impact on ongoing scholarly conversations

Chapter I: Exploring American Literature, A Framework of Narrative Evolution and Ecocritical Insights

1.1 A Framework of Narrative Evolution and Ecocritical Insights

American literature captures a vast range of human experiences, often tied to societal transformations and the evolving notion of the American Dream (Gioia & Kennedy, 2017). This concept of the American Dream, intertwined with the promises of global capitalism, has long fueled the aspirations of individuals seeking success and fulfillment. However, authors frequently underscore the tension between this idealized dream and the harsh realities of economic and social inequality, revealing how these forces shape human lives in unexpected ways. Realism, one of the earliest movements to address such complexities, delved into the everyday struggles of individuals navigating these forces. Writers like Edith Wharton and Mark Twain intricately portrayed how personal dreams are often restricted by class and socioeconomic barriers, illustrating the intricate web of societal expectations and individual ambition (Gioia & Kennedy, 2017). Their focus on the minutiae of daily life reflects the early stages of exploring how the broader economic structures impact human lives and the pursuit of happiness.

As American literature evolved into the 20th century, modernism brought a shift in focus, responding to the rapidly changing world. The fractured, chaotic nature of modern existence mirrored the disillusionment many felt in the face of shifting societal norms and global economic pressures. Modernist writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway moved beyond merely depicting social realities to explore how the pursuit of the American Dream could lead to alienation and a sense of purposelessness (Gioia & Kennedy, 2017). Their experimentation with narrative techniques—like stream of consciousness and fragmented timelines—highlighted the disjointed experience of individuals trying to find meaning in a world increasingly shaped by global capitalism and industrial growth. This exploration not

only dissected the promises of personal success but also hinted at the growing awareness of the environmental consequences of unchecked industrial expansion.

Postmodernism, emerging in the latter half of the 20th century, further expanded the critique of global capitalism and the American Dream, reflecting a world deeply embedded in consumerism and commercial culture. Postmodern authors like Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo blurred the boundaries between fiction and reality, using techniques such as metafiction and pastiche to expose the artificial constructs underpinning modern life (Gioia & Kennedy, 2017). These writers engaged with the commodification of identity, illustrating how the pursuit of success had become intertwined with consumer culture, thereby complicating the American Dream's promise. In their works, the environmental and ecological implications of this relentless drive for economic growth began to surface subtly, as the natural world became an indirect casualty of humanity's ambitions. This nuanced critique of capitalism set the stage for the subsequent literary movement that addressed environmental degradation more explicitly.

While the literary focus on the American Dream and its discontents persisted, the late 20th century witnessed the rise of narrative theory and ecocriticism, which provided new frameworks for interpreting these evolving themes. Narrative theory, influenced by structuralists like Roland Barthes and Vladimir Propp, sought to understand the mechanics of storytelling, analyzing how narratives shape and communicate meaning (Barthes, 1977; Propp, 1968). As postmodernism questioned traditional narrative structures, narrative theorists began to explore fragmented narratives, offering insight into how authors like William Faulkner used techniques such as stream of consciousness to represent the fractured nature of human

existence (Barthes, 1966). Faulkner's exploration of time, identity, and memory mirrors the broader postmodern concern with the instability of meaning in a rapidly changing world. As narrative theory evolved, so too did the need to address the growing ecological concerns of the late 20th century. Ecocriticism, rooted in works like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), offered a new lens through which literature could be analyzed. It shifted focus from human-centered narratives to those that emphasized the interconnections between humans and the natural world, highlighting how literature reflects and influences our understanding of the environment (Carson, 1962). The environmental degradation caused by global capitalism, once a subtle undercurrent in American fiction, became a central theme in the works of authors like Barbara Kingsolver and Cormac McCarthy. Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) and McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) illustrate the profound consequences of humanity's exploitation of the environment, employing detailed descriptions of nature and dystopian landscapes to convey the urgency of ecological preservation (Buonadonna, 2018).

Through the interplay of narrative techniques and ecological themes, contemporary American fiction reflects the growing awareness of the complex relationship between human ambitions and the natural world. The evolution from realism to modernism, postmodernism, and finally, ecocriticism reveals an increasing preoccupation with not only the socio-economic implications of the American Dream but also its environmental costs. These literary movements, each building on the techniques and themes of the previous one, demonstrate the ways in which American fiction continues to interrogate the promises and consequences of global capitalism. As narrative theory expands our understanding of how stories shape meaning, ecocriticism highlights the urgency of addressing environmental challenges, creating a rich tapestry of literary exploration that reflects the multifaceted nature of the American

experience. This interplay of narrative techniques and ecological themes reflects a broader literary evolution, showcasing how American writers have used various strategies to engage with the complexities of their time. Narratological devices are employed by novelists to captivate readers, address thematic issues, and produce compelling narratives. Narrative voice is one essential narratological method.

1.2 Key Narratological Concepts and Methods in “Freedom”

Narrative voice:

It refers to the perspective and style from which a story is narrated. It includes the narration style—first-person, third-person, or omniscient—as well as the narrator's demeanor, vocabulary, and outlook. Narrative voice is a potent tool that writers can use to shape the reader's experience of the story, impacting their emotional engagement and understanding of the events. Authors can control reader expectations, develop intimacy with characters, or create narrative distance by employing a certain narrative voice (Genette, 1983).

Focalization is another crucial narratological approach.

Focalization:

It refers to the point of view from which the reader perceives and is presented with the story's events is known as focalization. It entails choosing a focalizer, who could be a story character an external observer, or a character in the story, and how the information is filtered through their viewpoint. A focused narrative enables the examination of subjectivity, bias, and untrustworthy sources from the writer's point of view. Focusing on specific details or leaving them hidden to evoke

suspense, irony, or dramatic irony, authors can use focalization as a tactic to influence the reader's comprehension of people and events. (Forster, 1927)

Flashforwards and Flashbacks:

Another narrative technique known as flashbacks and flash forwards causes a story's chronological order to be changed by showing events that took place either before or after the current chronology. While flash-forwards offer views into future events or outcomes, flashbacks usually provide background information or show the characters' prior experiences. Authors can enhance characterization, create tension, and complicate the narrative structure by utilizing these temporal shifts (Genette, 1983). In the same token, Genette stresses two distinguished orders of sequences: the normal sequence, “where story and discourse have the same order (1 234), and ‘anachronous’ sequences. And anachrony can be of two sorts: flashback(*analepse*), where the discourse breaks the story-flow to recall earlier events (2 1 3 4), and flashforward (*prolepse*) where the discourse leaps ahead, to events subsequent to intermediate events.”(Chatman, p.64)

Another device in narrative construction is foreshadowing.

Foreshadowing: In a story, an author uses the literary device of foreshadowing to bring attention to or infer possible future events or consequences. It entails the deliberate insertion of little allusions, symbols, or clues that foreshadow conflicts, developments, or plot twists later on in the narrative. From the standpoint of the writer, foreshadowing accomplishes several goals, such as heightening thematic resonance, producing dramatic irony, and generating suspense.

Authors might attract readers by hinting at important discoveries or events that capture their interest, increase the intricacy of the story, and give their storytelling a cohesive, inevitable quality.(Frye, 1957). This method was masterfully used by authors such as Agatha Christie in her mystery books.

Narrative structure and chronology:

It describes how events are arranged and presented in a story. The sequence in which events are portrayed is a conscious decision made by the author; it may be nonlinear, employing flashbacks, flashforwards, or linear development. From the standpoint of the writer, narrative structure and chronology are crucial for establishing coherence, pacing, and thematic resonance in the story. By adjusting the story's temporal flow, authors can heighten suspense, disclose character motivations, and delve into intricate themes of identity, memory, and causation. (Booth, 1961)

Lodge once highlighted that “the structure of a narrative is like the framework of girders that holds up a modern high-rise building: you can’t see it, but it determines the edifice’s shape and character. The effects of a novel’s structure, however, are experienced not in space but over time-often quite long.” (1992, p.216)

Multiple Perspectives:

A story is told from the perspectives of several characters in a technique called multiple perspectives, which is also referred to as multi-narrative or multi-perspective narrative. Every character provides an own perspective distinct perspective on the story's events, enabling readers to see the storyline develop from many perspectives and comprehend the complexity of the character’s thoughts,

feelings, and reasons. This method can improve the story's richness and intricacy, offering a more thorough comprehension of the themes and conflicts.(Chatman, 1978).

Multiple points of view

It allows readers to witness events, circumstances, and emotions from the views of multiple people. This strategy gives the story complexity by illuminating the motivations, ideas, and experiences of different characters (Herman, 2009).“The choice of the point (s) of view from which the story is told is arguably the most important single decision that the novelist has to make, for it fundamentally affects the way readers will respond, emotionally and morally, to the fictional characters and their actions.” Said David Lodge (1992, p.26). The viewpoints of several individuals in “Freedom”, including Patty, Walter, and their kids, Joey and Jessica, alternate throughout the book. Readers are able to observe the identical occurrences from both Patty's and Walter's perspectives, for example, which offers insight into their divergent feelings and points of view. As readers are given multiple interpretations and perspectives, it can also lead to a more sophisticated and nuanced comprehension of the story's events. (Franzen, 2010).

Flashforwards and Flashbacks:

Franzen used flashbacks to elucidate the characters' pasts, including Patty's turbulent relationship with her parents and Walter's time spent in college. These flashbacks contribute to a deeper comprehension of the motivations and experiences of the characters. Some flash-forwards that allude to upcoming occasions or the results of characters' choices. For instance, there are indications

of the tensions in Joey and Patty's relationship early on in the book, and they are further developed as the story goes on. (Franzen, 2010).

Unreliable narrator:

A narratological approach known as "unreliable narration" occurs when readers doubt the narrator's veracity or honesty, which makes them doubt the correctness or comprehensiveness of the story being delivered. This method frequently uses narrators who are not trustworthy because of things like personal prejudices. Booth (1961) explains that narrators can vary, including overt narrators who directly address the reader and covert narrators who remain hidden within the narrative. Unreliable narrators, influenced by personal biases, limited understanding, or intentional deceit, add complexity and ambiguity to the narrative, encouraging readers to critically assess the information and explore different interpretations of the text (pp. 149-163). Patty's narration in "Freedom" might occasionally be regarded as unreliable particularly when it comes to her own intentions and emotions. For example, she might not always be truthful with herself or others about her genuine desires or regrets, which could result in instances of denial or self-deception. (Franzen, 2010).

Narrative framing:

The literary device known as "narrative framing" places a story inside a bigger narrative framework or structure. By establishing a framework or context for the primary narrative, this framing mechanism offers readers more levels of interpretation and meaning. It frequently entails the addition of a supporting story that surrounds or encompasses the main narrative, influencing how the reader

interprets the text's themes, characters, and events. (Genette, 1980). In "Freedom", the novel is framed by the larger narrative of the Berglunds Family's adventures and hardships against the backdrop of modern American society frames the novel "freedom." Because of this framing, Franzen had to tackle more general subjects like politics, the environment, and the intricacies of family interactions in a particular cultural setting. (Franzen, 2010).

Interconnected storylines:

A narrative with several interwoven plotlines or story arcs that influence and are influenced by one another is known as an interconnected storyline. These plots may occur in several places, with various individuals, or during various eras, but they always converge and blend to form a coherent whole throughout the story. This approach makes it possible to explore intricate connections, themes, and concepts because happenings in one storyline may have implications or parallels in another.(Chatman, 1978). "Freedom" The work skillfully integrates multiple narratives and supporting characters, including Patty's prior career as a college basketball player, Joey's engagement with the conservative political movement, and Walter's environmental advocacy. These interwoven stories demonstrate the ways in which people's lives intersect and have an impact on one another, illuminating the complexity of interpersonal connections and society as a whole.(Franzen, 2010).

Review of other Literature

1.3 Review of Literature on Jonathan Franzen's "Freedom"

Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* has elicited a broad spectrum of critical interpretations, each offering distinct insights into the novel's thematic intricacies and stylistic nuances. This literature review examines the perspectives of González (2015), Zinkel (2012), Dr. Hanaa Ismael Saad Abdul Munim (2024), and Innocente (2019). These analyses provide a multifaceted understanding of *Freedom*, revealing the richness of its narrative and the complexity of its engagement with contemporary issues.

González's (2015) study, titled "Eastern and Western Promises in Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*," delves deeply into the novel's use of American landscapes, arguing that these spaces are more than mere settings—they serve as intricate symbols reflecting the characters' internal conflicts and desires. González posits that the urban and rural environments in *Freedom* are meticulously crafted to mirror the contradictions and complexities of the American Dream. He draws compelling parallels between Franzen's work and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, noting that both novels use spatial symbolism to critique the often unattainable ideals associated with the American Dream.

González's analysis highlights how Franzen uses physical spaces—such as the sprawling suburbs and the untouched wilderness—as metaphors for the characters' psychological states. For instance, the novel's portrayal of suburban life is laden with imagery that evokes feelings of entrapment and disillusionment, symbolizing the characters' struggle with the very dream they are supposed to be living. In contrast, the rural landscapes are depicted as spaces of potential freedom and

escape, yet they too are fraught with their own set of challenges and limitations. González's focus on these spatial elements reveals how Franzen critiques the notion of the American Dream by exposing the often-overlooked tensions between aspiration and reality. Obviously, this thematic exploration underscores the novel's engagement with broader societal issues, making it a significant contribution to the discourse on American literature and its reflection of national ideals.

Moreover, González examines how Franzen's characters navigate these symbolic spaces, suggesting that their movements between urban and rural settings represent deeper psychological journeys. He argues that the characters' struggles with identity, ambition, and fulfillment are mirrored in their interactions with these environments. The urban spaces, with their relentless pace and materialistic culture, often exacerbate the characters' feelings of inadequacy and frustration, while the rural settings, although seemingly idyllic, confront them with the harsh realities of isolation and existential doubt. This duality in the portrayal of space reflects the novel's broader thematic concern with the contradictions inherent in the pursuit of happiness and self-realization in contemporary America.

Similarly, González also explores how Franzen's use of space interacts with the novel's narrative structure, suggesting that the shifts between different settings correspond to shifts in the narrative's focus and tone. The sprawling, interconnected nature of the suburban landscape, for instance, mirrors the complexity and interrelatedness of the characters' lives, while the more isolated, self-contained rural scenes provide moments of introspection and self-discovery. González argues that this spatial symbolism not only enhances the novel's thematic

depth but also contributes to its narrative coherence, providing a framework within which the characters' personal and collective journeys unfold.

In contrast to González's focus on thematic and spatial symbolism, Zinkel (2012) offers a critique that is primarily concerned with the novel's narrative structure and its susceptibility to the pressures of fame and commoditization. In her work, "Jonathan Franzen and the Future of the Novel: Embracing Change to Hold Onto Tradition," Zinkel examines how Franzen's rising fame and the subsequent commercialization of *Freedom* have impacted the authenticity of the narrative. She argues that these external pressures have led to a self-conscious narrative, one that at times feels contrived and lacks the spontaneity and organic flow that characterized Franzen's earlier works.

Zinkel's analysis is rooted in the belief that the commercialization of literature can have a profound effect on its artistic integrity. She suggests that Franzen's awareness of his public persona and the expectations placed upon him as a bestselling author have resulted in a novel that is overly polished and calculated. This, she argues, detracts from the novel's narrative coherence and the authenticity of its characters, making it difficult for readers to fully immerse themselves in the story. Zinkel contrasts this with the raw, unfiltered narrative style of Franzen's previous works, which she believes allowed for a more genuine and relatable exploration of complex themes.

Furthermore, Zinkel critiques the way in which the novel's commercial success has influenced its thematic content. She argues that the pressures to appeal to a broad

audience have led Franzen to prioritize certain themes and narrative devices over others. For instance, she points to the way in which the novel's exploration of environmental issues sometimes feels tacked on, as if included more for its topical relevance than for its organic integration into the narrative. This, she argues, is indicative of a broader trend in contemporary literature, where market demands and the need for critical acclaim can overshadow the author's original artistic vision.

Zinkel's analysis also touches upon the broader implications of fame on an author's creative process. She suggests that the weight of public expectation can lead to a form of creative paralysis, where the fear of failure or criticism stifles innovation and risks. In this context, Franzen's narrative choices in *Freedom* can be seen as a response to these pressures, as he seeks to balance his artistic ambitions with the demands of a commercialized literary landscape. Zinkel contrasts this with González's exploration of spatial symbolism, arguing that while González focuses on the external environments of the novel, her own critique delves into the internal challenges that shape the narrative itself.

Similarly, Dr. Hanaa Ismael Saad Abdul Munim's (2024) paper, "On the Human Being and Being Human in Jonathan Franzen's *Strong Motion and Freedom*," offers a distinct yet complementary perspective on *Freedom*, focusing on the novel's engagement with ecological and philosophical themes. Dr. Abdul Munim's analysis is situated within the framework of ecocriticism, a critical approach that examines the relationship between literature and the environment. She argues that *Freedom*

serves as a poignant critique of the environmental degradation and human disconnection that result from global capitalism and its exploitative practices.

Dr. Abdul Munim's critique is deeply informed by the broader context of contemporary ecological thought, particularly the ways in which literature can serve as a vehicle for environmental awareness and advocacy. She suggests that Franzen's depiction of the natural world in *Freedom* is not merely a backdrop for the characters' dramas but is integral to the novel's exploration of the consequences of unchecked capitalist expansion. The novel's portrayal of the tension between environmental preservation and economic development is, in her view, a reflection of the broader philosophical questions that define our current ecological crisis.

In contrast to Zinkel's focus on the commoditization of the novel's narrative, Dr. Abdul Munim's analysis highlights the commoditization of nature itself, as depicted in *Freedom*. She argues that Franzen's characters are often caught in a web of conflicting desires—on the one hand, they seek to preserve the natural world and its inherent beauty; on the other, they are complicit in the very systems that threaten to destroy it. This duality is evident in the novel's exploration of the characters' relationships with the environment, which are marked by both reverence and exploitation. Dr. Abdul Munim posits that this tension reflects the broader ecological and philosophical challenges of our time, particularly the struggle to reconcile human needs and desires with the imperative to protect the natural world. Moreover, Dr. Abdul Munim explores how Franzen uses these ecological themes to engage with deeper philosophical questions about the nature of freedom and the human condition. She suggests that the novel's title, *Freedom*, is itself a

commentary on the paradoxical nature of freedom in a capitalist society—where the pursuit of personal liberty often comes at the expense of collective well-being and environmental sustainability. Dr. Abdul Munim contrasts this with González’s thematic exploration, noting that while González focuses on the symbolic use of space to critique the American Dream, her own analysis expands this critique to include the broader ecological implications of that dream. By examining the ways in which Franzen’s characters navigate these complex ethical and philosophical landscapes, Dr. Abdul Munim provides a holistic understanding of the novel’s engagement with both personal and global issues.

Innocente’s (2019) analysis of *Freedom* offers yet another layer of complexity, focusing on the novel’s exploration of the concept of freedom itself and its implications for individual identity and social relationships. In her dissertation, Innocente argues that Franzen presents freedom as a multifaceted and problematic concept, one that is both a fundamental right and a source of profound alienation and dissatisfaction.

Innocente’s critique is grounded in the idea that freedom, as depicted in Franzen’s novel, is often distorted by the very societal structures that are meant to uphold it. She suggests that the characters in *Freedom* experience a form of freedom that is inextricably linked to the consumerist and individualistic ethos of modern society. This, she argues, leads to a paradox where the pursuit of personal freedom results in deeper feelings of isolation and disconnection from others. Innocente’s analysis highlights how the novel’s portrayal of freedom is intertwined with broader

critiques of modernity, particularly the ways in which contemporary society has redefined and, in some cases, undermined the true meaning of freedom

Furthermore, Innocente examines how Franzen's characters grapple with the consequences of this distorted freedom. She argues that the novel reveals the emptiness that can accompany a life driven by the pursuit of individualistic ideals at the expense of communal bonds and authentic connections. The characters' struggles to reconcile their desires for personal autonomy with their need for meaningful relationships underscore the novel's critical stance on the concept of freedom in a modern, hyper-consumerist society. Innocente suggests that the novel portrays freedom not as an unqualified good, but as a double-edged sword that can lead to alienation and a sense of purposelessness.

Innocente also explores the novel's ending, where the characters find a form of redemption through reconnection with others. She interprets this as Franzen's commentary on the need for social bonds and community in overcoming the alienation fostered by modern interpretations of freedom. However, she notes that this reconnection is limited, focusing primarily on familial relationships rather than broader societal reconciliation. This, Innocente argues, reflects a larger trend in contemporary literature, where the potential for social change is often seen as secondary to personal redemption. In this light, *Freedom* can be viewed as a critique of the limitations of personal freedom in achieving true fulfillment, suggesting that without a sense of community and shared purpose, individual freedom may ultimately be hollow.

Additionally, Innocente positions *Freedom* within the context of post-postmodernism, a literary movement characterized by a return to more earnest, emotionally engaged storytelling in response to the irony and detachment of postmodernism. She argues that Franzen's novel exemplifies this shift by addressing the complexities of contemporary life with a sense of seriousness and moral concern. *Freedom*, according to Innocente, represents an attempt to navigate the challenges of modernity by reasserting the importance of emotional connections and ethical considerations in a fragmented and often isolating world.

Innocente's analysis thus complements the perspectives of González, Zinkel, and Dr. Abdul Munim by adding a psychological and sociocultural dimension to the discussion.

Chapter II: Introduction to Ecocriticism and its Concepts

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how American fiction has engaged with environmental issues through the lens of ecocriticism. It begins with an overview of how literature began to incorporate environmental themes, particularly as ecological awareness grew throughout the 20th century. The chapter then traces the development of ecocriticism, focusing on the key ideas and thinkers who have shaped this field.

That said, the chapter examines various approaches within ecocriticism, each offering a different perspective on how literature interacts with the environment. These approaches help to broaden the understanding of the ways in which American fiction can reflect and influence ecological thought.

The chapter concludes by discussing the impact of these ecocritical perspectives on the interpretation of American fiction. This section highlights how ecocriticism has changed how we read literature, encouraging a deeper consideration of the environment in literary analysis.

2.1.1 An introduction to Ecocriticism :

In the early to mid-20th century, before the environmental movement gained widespread traction, the world of literature and cultural studies often overlooked the significance of nature and the environment. Stories were consumed for entertainment, with little consideration for their portrayal of the natural world. In the latter half of the 20th century, a growing awareness of environmental issues began to spread through societies worldwide. The depletion of natural resources, pollution, and the degradation of ecosystems prompted individuals to reevaluate their relationship with the environment. Garrett Hardin's "The Tragedy of the Commons," talked about how when everyone has access to a shared resource, like a pasture, people often act in their own self-interest without considering the long-term effects on the environment. This leads to overuse and depletion of resources, which can cause serious environmental problems. One big issue he discussed is pollution; When people use resources without limits, they often end up polluting the environment, and factories might release harmful chemicals into the air and water, which can make people sick and harm plants and animals. Meanwhile, pollution from cars and trucks can also contribute to smog and climate change. Another problem is overfishing and overhunting, when there are no regulations on how many fish or animals can be caught, people often take more than the ecosystem can handle. This can lead to the decline or extinction of certain species, disrupting the balance of the ecosystem.

Moreover, deforestation is another environmental problem Hardin mentioned. When forests are cut down for timber or to make room for agriculture or development, it destroys habitats for wildlife and reduces the amount of oxygen produced by trees. Deforestation also contributes to climate change by releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Additionally, Hardin discussed the issue of overpopulation, when there are too many people using resources; it puts strain on the environment and can lead to scarcity of resources like food and water. Also, overpopulation contributes to pollution and habitat destruction as people need more space to live and work.

With the emergence of these environmental dilemmas writers have adopted Ecocriticism as an important shift in literary discourse which eventually led to the emergence of Ecocriticism as a literary theory changing our perspective about nature and that is through books, and poems and other works to reflect and influence our connection with the natural world. Ecocriticism is a type of literary theory that looks at how environmental issues are portrayed, understood, and valued in literature. Ecocriticism is a way of studying literature and other cultural works to understand how they relate to nature and the environment. Instead of just focusing on characters and plots, ecocritics look at how nature is portrayed and what it means; it's like looking at a painting and noticing the details in the trees and the blue skies not just the people in it. In literature, nature is more than just a setting; it assumes the role of a character, possessing its personality and significance. Writers skillfully depict landscapes, animals, and ecosystems in a

manner that immerses readers in the narrative. Take, for instance, Jack London's "The Call of the Wild," where the untamed wilderness of the Yukon Territory profoundly influences the fate of both human and animal characters (London, 1903).

Furthermore, authors often draw parallels between nature and human life to explore profound concepts. Through this comparison, they offer insights into our interconnectedness with the natural world. Henry David Thoreau's "Walden," for example, portrays nature as a symbol of simplicity, independence, and inner peace, prompting readers to reflect on their own values and existence (Thoreau, 1854).

Moreover, literature frequently serves as a platform for addressing environmental concerns and promoting activism. Writers tackle issues such as deforestation, pollution, habitat destruction, and climate change, urging readers to reevaluate their relationship with nature and take action to preserve it. Rachel Carson's seminal work, "Silent Spring," is a poignant example. This book exposed the dangers of pesticides, galvanizing widespread environmental awareness and policy changes (Carson, 1962). Ecocriticism grew out of concerns about environmental issues, people started to realize that literature and culture play a big role in shaping how we think about nature. This approach to studying literature and culture helps us see how everything is connected since it's about how we understand and interact with the world around us. So, Ecocriticism is meanwhile a lens that helps us see the big picture and think more deeply about our place in nature. As a branch of literary criticism, eco-criticism examines the interconnectedness of literature and the natural world along with the human himself. Key figures in ecocriticism,

including Lawrence Buell, Rachel Carson, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Greg Garrard, have contributed essential insights that shape the field's main principles and approaches. William Rueckert originally used the term ecocriticism in his 1978 critical essay "Literature and Ecology. The word "eco" comes from the word "oikos" which means "household", while the word "logy" comes from "logos" meaning logical discourse.

According to Rueckert, ecocriticism applies ecology or ecological principles to the study of literature, while Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism "as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist's praxis" (Rueckert, 1978, pp. 71-86).

Lawrence Buell, a prominent figure in ecocriticism, underscores the importance of nature as a central character in literature. He emphasizes how literature reflects and influences human interactions with the natural world.

Ecocriticism, according to Buell (1995), involves the examination of literary works through an ecological lens, focusing on how literature reflects and influences human interactions with the natural world. It encompasses the study of texts that depict environmental concerns, ecologies, landscapes, and the interconnectedness of humans and their surroundings. Buell emphasizes the importance of understanding literature as a cultural artifact that both shapes and is shaped by environmental attitudes and behaviors.

Rachel Carson, a pioneering environmentalist and author of "Silent Spring," brings attention to the detrimental effects of human actions on the environment.

Her work remains a catalyst for raising environmental awareness and fostering a sense of ecological responsibility. Carson's insights into the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the impacts of pollution resonate within ecocriticism, prompting scholars to consider the ethical dimensions of human-nature relationships. As Carson famously stated, "The more we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction." Another prominent figure in ecocriticism, Cheryl Glotfelty, defines ecocriticism as a multidisciplinary field that explores the intricate relationship between literature and the physical environment. This approach involves analyzing how literary texts represent nature, environmental issues, and human-nature interactions. Ecocritics examine how literature reflects societal attitudes towards the environment and contributes to environmental awareness and activism. Glotfelty highlights the role of literature in fostering a deeper understanding of ecological interconnectedness and promoting environmental stewardship. (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996).

Garrard (2005), conceptualizes ecocriticism as a scholarly endeavor that combines literary analysis with environmental advocacy. He defines it as the study of the dynamic interplay between literature and the environment, conducted with a commitment to environmental activism and sustainability. Ecocritics examines how literary texts engage with ecological themes, challenge anthropocentric perspectives, and promote environmental awareness and ethical responsibility. Garrard underscores the transformative potential of ecocriticism in inspiring positive change and fostering ecological literacy in both academic and public spheres.

In an era of environmental degradation, ecocriticism is a response to the need for a humanistic understanding of our relationship with the natural world. Moreover, environmental disasters are mostly caused by humanity's detachment from the natural world. According to Cheryl Glotfelty, Ecocriticism seeks to understand how literature can both reflect and shape our perceptions of the environment and how these perceptions influence our attitudes and actions towards the natural world. It also emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing environmental issues in literary works.

In postcolonial Ecocriticism, Huggan and Tiffin (2007) emphasize the importance of understanding colonialism has shaped our relationship with the environment, often leading to environmental degradation, exploitation of natural resources, and ecological injustice. They argue that colonial powers often viewed nature as a resource to be exploited for economic gain, without consideration for the long-term consequences on local ecosystems and indigenous communities. They state that postcolonial ecocriticism seeks to challenge dominant narratives of conquest and exploitation by centering the voices and perspectives of marginalized communities, including indigenous peoples, whose traditional knowledge and ways of life are often deeply intertwined with the natural world.

Accordingly, postcolonial ecocriticism preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, and capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world (Huggan and Tiffin 2007).

Jonathan Bate, in his book "The Song of the Earth," delves into the interconnectedness of colonialism and deforestation, arguing that throughout history, these two phenomena have often occurred hand in hand. In his exploration of Romantic literature, particularly in "Romantic Ecology," Bate reevaluates the poetry of William Wordsworth within the context of the English pastoral tradition. He contends that Wordsworth's verses serve as an early exploration of ecological themes, positioning Wordsworth as a pioneer in what would later be termed ecocriticism. Bate's analysis not only sheds light on the environmental consciousness embedded in Wordsworth's work but also underscores the political dimensions of poetry.

In contrast, Raymond Williams' "Country and the City" presents a vivid dichotomy between rural and urban lifestyles. Within this framework, Williams portrays the countryside not as a simplistic idyllic retreat, but rather as a space deeply intertwined with modernity and yet plagued by a sense of isolation and loneliness. Through Williams' lens, the countryside becomes a complex site where notions of tradition and progress intersect. Meanwhile, Lawrence Coupe's "The Green Studies Readers" offers a comprehensive compilation of critical texts exploring the intricate relationship between ecology, culture, and literature. In examining various literary works through an environmental lens, Coupe's anthology serves as a valuable resource for scholars and researchers interested in the burgeoning field of Green Literature. With its vast array of sources, the book

provides ample material for further study and analysis in this evolving interdisciplinary field. (Bate, 1999; Coupe, 2000; Williams, 1973).

2.2 The Emergence of Ecocriticism in American fiction

In American Fiction, ecocriticism has played a crucial role in developing narrative of stories that reflect on environmental concerns shedding light on ecological awareness and the human's impact on earth. The emergence of ecocriticism as a literary theory is deeply rooted in the environmental movements that swept across the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. This pivotal era witnessed a surge in environmental activism, spurred by growing concerns over pollution, deforestation, habitat destruction, and other ecological issues. During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States experienced a wave of environmental movements that brought widespread attention to pressing ecological issues.

Events such as the publication of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" in 1962, which exposed the harmful effects of pesticides on the environment, and the first Earth Day in 1970, which mobilized millions of people to advocate for environmental protection, played significant roles in galvanizing public support for environmental causes. These movements challenged prevailing attitudes towards nature and sparked a growing realization of the interconnectedness between human well-being and environmental health. Carson (1962). Against this backdrop of heightened environmental awareness and activism, Ecocriticism emerged as a response to the need for a deeper exploration of the relationship between literature and the environment. Scholars and writers began to recognize the potential of literature as

a means of reflecting, interpreting, and engaging with environmental concerns. Ecocriticism provided a framework for analyzing literary texts through an ecological lens, highlighting literature reflects and shapes attitudes towards nature and the environment. Garrard(2004).

Additionally, the environmental turn in literary and cultural studies emerged as a self-conscious movement a Little more than a dozen years ago. After Rueckert's essay, ecocriticism grew and changed a lot. It became not just about nature in general, but also about how nature and people's lives are connected and it didn't stop there. Ecocriticism branched out into different areas like ecofeminism emerging as a response to the recognition of parallel oppressions experienced by women and the environment, often at the hands of patriarchal and capitalist systems. At its core, ecofeminism challenges the domination and exploitation of both women and nature, highlighting the interconnectedness of gender-based oppression and environmental degradation. Ecofeminists argue that the values traditionally associated with femininity, such as nurturing, interconnectedness, and cooperation, align more closely with sustainable and harmonious relationships with the natural world.

One key aspect of ecofeminism is its critique of dualisms and hierarchies that underpin systems of oppression. These include binaries such as nature/culture, human/animal, and masculine/feminine, which serve to justify the exploitation and subordination of both women and the environment. Ecofeminists advocate for a more holistic and relational worldview that recognizes the intrinsic value of all beings and ecosystems. Ecofeminism also addresses how women, particularly those

in marginalized communities, are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and climate change (Mies & Shiva, 1993)

Another branch of Ecocriticism is Ecopoetry which is a genre of poetry that explores themes related to nature. What unites Ecopoetry is its engagement with ecological themes and its aim to inspire readers to connect more deeply with the natural world and to consider their role in shaping the environment. One characteristic of Ecopoetry is its use of vivid imagery and sensory language to evoke the sights, sounds, and sensations of the natural world. Poets often draw on their observations of landscapes, ecosystems, and wildlife to craft rich and immersive poetic experiences that invite readers to imagine themselves in nature. Additionally, Ecopoetry frequently incorporates themes of environmental activism and social justice. Poets may use their work to raise awareness about pressing ecological issues, such as climate change, pollution, deforestation, and species extinction. Through their poems, they may call attention to the urgent need for conservation efforts, sustainable living practices, and collective action to protect the Earth's ecosystems and biodiversity. Ecopoetry also celebrates the resilience and beauty of nature, offering moments of solace, wonder, and awe in the face of environmental challenges. Poets may find inspiration in the cycles of the seasons, the rhythms of the natural world, and the interconnectedness of all living beings, conveying a sense of reverence and gratitude for the Earth's gifts. (McDonnell & Symmons Roberts, 2007)

Another important part of ecocriticism is environmental justice. It is simply about showing how pollution and other environmental problems affect some communities

more than others, and how those communities fight back to protect their rights and their health. Environmental justice often shows up in stories about communities facing environmental challenges. These stories might focus on neighborhoods near industrial plants or toxic waste sites, where people have to deal with pollution in their air, water, and soil every day. They might also explore how environmental problems intersect with other social issues, like poverty, racism, and inequality. One famous example of literature that addresses environmental justice is “The Lorax” by Dr. Seuss. In this children's book, the Once-ler's greed leads to the destruction of the Truffula trees and the pollution of the environment, causing harm to the creatures that depend on the trees for survival. (Seuss, 1971). Another branch of Ecocriticism is postcolonial Ecocriticism, according to Huggan and Tiffin (1996), postcolonial ecocriticism explores the intersections between postcolonial studies and Ecocriticism examining how colonialism has shaped our relationship with the environment and contributed to environmental degradation. In their seminal work Huggan and Tiffin emphasize the need to challenge dominant narratives of conquest and exploitation by centering the voices and perspectives of indigenous people whose traditional knowledge and ways of life are deeply intertwined with the natural world. Huggan and Tiffin's approach to postcolonial ecocriticism underscores the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness between colonialism ecology and literature.

Eco-marxism represents another branch of Ecocriticism, which examines the connection between industrialization, capitalism, and environmental degradation by fusing ecological concerns with Marxist analysis. It criticizes capitalism's

unrelenting drive for growth and profit, which frequently comes at the price of social justice and ecological sustainability. Eco-Marxists contend that capitalism's logic results in both the exploitation of labor and the Exploitation of Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis" by Chris Williams is one piece of writing that addresses eco-marxism. In this book, Williams examines how capitalist systems uphold social injustice and environmental degradation while promoting socialist responses to ecological emergencies. He talks about how industries' greed for profit pushes them to use natural resources without thinking about how sustainable they will be in the long run, which leads to pollution, habitat destruction, and climate change. Silvia Federici's work, especially "Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation," is another example. Federici looks at the historical connections between colonialism, capitalism, and the enslavement of women and the natural world. She contends that the pursuit of profit and power by capitalism has resulted in the exploitation of women's labor and the commodification of nature, thereby sustaining oppressive systems and ecological destruction.

So, ecocriticism has come a long way from just talking about nature in stories it is now about how stories can help us understand and fix problems with the environment.

Buell (2005), states that environmental criticism is as yet a rising discourse, it is one with extremely old roots. In some form, "the idea of nature" has been a predominant worrying concern for researchers and intellectual historians since these fields came into being. Lawrence Buell delved into the intricate relationship

between literature and the natural environment, illustrating its evolutions across different historical epochs: The first epoch, which was the colonial epoch; the second epoch, which was the Romantic period; and the third epoch, was the contemporary epoch. In the colonial era, nature is less a social development than a bunch of experimental and theological givens. Nature is not that field made for intellectual or aesthetic reflection as a powerhouse obstruction. The romantic period delivered probably the most significant reflections on the human relationship with nature in American literary history. Writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman articulated a perception of nature as a source of profound moral knowledge, emphasizing the interconnectedness of every living being. In the contemporary period, Buell observes a complex interplay between environmental concerns and literary expression, calling for an urgent ecological rescue due to degradation and climate change. People like Rachel Carson and Wendell Berry emerge as beacons of environmental advocacy by utilizing literature as a platform to transmit the message and call for action.

According to Huggan (2004) when we look at how postcolonialism and ecocriticism connect, we see some interesting things; they can help each other understand issues like how colonial history still affects people today and how environmental problems are linked to social inequalities. But sometimes, they clash. Some ecocritics think too much focus on saving nature ignores the needs of people, especially those who are already struggling. On the other hand, postcolonialism often puts human concerns first without considering the environment. (Huggan, 2004; Nixon, 2005). On the one hand, ecocriticism comes

from literature studies and how people see nature in writing, but it often puts nature's needs ahead of people's needs. Postcolonialism, on the other hand, usually only thinks about people and ignores nature. (Huggan, 2004; Nixon, 2005).

Animal studies, which are different from ecocriticism, look at how humans relate to animals. They come from fields like philosophy and religion, not just literature studies like ecocriticism does. (Huggan, 2004; Nixon, 2005). In short, while postcolonialism and ecocriticism can learn from each other, they also have their differences. Ecocriticism often focuses more on nature than on people, while postcolonialism tends to prioritize human issues. Animal studies, a separate field, look at human-animal relationships from various academic perspectives (Huggan, 2004; Nixon, 2005). Ecocriticism, a field that focuses on environmental consciousness, shifts the emphasis from human ego to ecological awareness. It highlights the importance of recognizing nature's rights and the interconnectedness of all living beings, aiming to address the environmental crisis caused by human actions (Buell, 2005).

According to Lawrence Buell, ecocriticism has seen two waves of development. The first wave focused on nature writing and wilderness fiction, aiming to preserve the biotic community and celebrate nature while criticizing those who harm it (Buell, 2005; Coupe, 2000). This wave aimed at caring for the Earth and raising awareness about the impact of human culture on nature.

The second wave of ecocriticism, also known as revisionist ecocriticism, shifted its focus to environmental justice issues. It expanded its scope to include urban

landscapes and marginalized communities, exposing injustices and advocating for social change (Buell, 2005). This wave seeks to uncover the remnants of nature in cities and address eco-injustices against vulnerable populations.

Ecology comes in two forms: shallow and deep. Shallow ecology is human-centered, believing that nature exists solely to serve humanity, with humans considering themselves superior to all other creatures. It promotes the systematic use of natural resources like coal, gas, and oil for sustainable development (Buell, 2005).

In contrast, deep ecology challenges this view, advocating for the preservation of nature in its original state without human interference. It recognizes the intrinsic value of all organisms and emphasizes that no one species should dominate over others, aiming to maintain a balanced ecosystem (Buell, 2005).

Ecocritics analyze nature writing texts not only to interpret them but also to use them as a lens through which to examine environmental principles and ethical considerations (Buell, 2005; Coupe, 2000). By exploring the connections between literature and the environment, ecocriticism aims to foster a deeper understanding of humanity's relationship with nature and promote environmental stewardship.

2.3 Key ecocritical concepts and approaches of ‘Freedom’ by Jonathan Franzen

In Jonathan Franzen's "Freedom," various ecological concepts are skillfully woven into the narrative. Franzen employs vivid descriptions of the natural world in chapter three using nature description as a method in ecocriticism. This approach involves analyzing how authors depict the natural world within their literary works. By examining the language, imagery, and symbolism used to describe nature, ecocritics can uncover underlying themes, attitudes, and perspectives regarding the environment. Several scholars have explored the significance of nature description in literature, providing valuable insights into its role within the field of ecocriticism. For example, Lawrence Buell, in his seminal work "The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture," examines how American authors, particularly Henry David Thoreau, utilize nature description to convey environmental values and shape cultural attitudes towards nature (Buell, 1995). Buell argues that nature description serves as a means of environmental advocacy, fostering a deeper appreciation for the natural world and inspiring readers to engage with environmental issues. Moreover, Scott Slovic, in "Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez," also explores contemporary American nature writing and its use of nature description to cultivate ecological awareness and environmental consciousness (Slovic, 1992). Slovic contends that nature description serves as a means of reconnecting readers to the

land and fostering a sense of ecological responsibility, urging them to become more attentive and responsive to environmental issues.

In "Freedom", ecological imagination is evident throughout the novel; Franzen's use of ecological imagination reflects a broader literary method employed by authors to convey environmental concerns within their works, like in chapter 3 where he vividly describes the destructive practice of mountaintop removal mining in Appalachia. Through detailed imagery and emotive language, he also portrays the devastation wrought upon the landscape and its inhabitants, highlighting the environmental costs of human exploitation (Franzen, 2010, p. 45). For instance, in Chapter 4, the characters' interactions with the natural world reflect their relationships with the environment and their differing attitudes towards ecological issues. In Henry David Thoreau's "Walden," Thoreau immerses readers in the natural world through detailed descriptions of the Walden Pond environment, inviting them to contemplate humanity's relationship with nature (Thoreau, 1854). Similarly, in Barbara Kingsolver's "Prodigal Summer," nature descriptions play a central role in depicting the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the delicate balance of life within a rural Appalachian community (Kingsolver, 2000).

In Jonathan Franzen's book "Freedom," environmental ethics is used to navigate the Characters' relationship with the natural world. Franzen wants readers to consider ethical questions surrounding environmental conservation, resource exploitation, and human impact on ecosystems. For example, Walter's conservation

efforts reflect a sense of environmental stewardship and moral responsibility towards preserving the natural world (Franzen, 2010, Chapter 7). Similarly, the novel explores themes of environmental justice, highlighting the ethical implications of environmental degradation and the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. Environmental ethics is a recurring theme in literature, where authors use ethical principles to address environmental issues and advocate for sustainable practices. In "The Lorax" by Dr. Seuss, for instance, the titular character embodies environmental ethics by speaking for the trees and advocating for their protection against exploitation (Seuss, 1971). Similarly, in J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings," the concept of stewardship is central to the ethical framework of the story, as characters grapple with the responsibility of caring for the natural world and safeguarding it from destruction (Tolkien, 1954).

Ecofeminism is a recurring theme in literature, where authors use it to explore gender dynamics and environmental issues. It is used in "Freedom" particularly in Chapter 8, Patty's experiences as a woman navigating patriarchal power structures parallel broader themes of exploitation and domination, reflecting ecofeminist concerns about the interconnectedness of gender and environmental oppression. For example, Patty's struggles with identity and agency mirror society's exploitation of nature for profit and control, illustrating the parallels between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the environment. This concept was used in In "The Color Purple" by Alice Walker, for instance, the protagonist Celie's connection to nature serves as a source of empowerment and resistance against

patriarchal oppression (Walker, 1982). Similarly, in Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale," the exploitation of women's bodies parallels the exploitation of nature, highlighting the interconnectedness of gender subjugation and environmental degradation (Atwood, 1985).

Environmental justice is a concept that addresses the disproportionate distribution of environmental benefits and burdens among different communities, particularly marginalized and low-income groups. It advocates for fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in environmental decision-making, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Environmental justice seeks to rectify environmental injustices and promote equitable access to clean air, water, and natural resources for all. (United States Environmental Protection Agency, n.d.).

In "Freedom" by Jonathan Franzen, environmental justice is subtly addressed throughout the narrative, notably in Chapter 11. The novel highlights the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, particularly socioeconomic disparities and racial discrimination. For example, the depiction of pollution disproportionately affecting disadvantaged communities underscores the interconnectedness between social inequality and environmental degradation. Authors use this method to examine issues of social inequality and environmental degradation. In "The Grapes of Wrath" by John Steinbeck, for instance, the novel explores the plight of migrant workers and their struggles for environmental justice

amidst the Dust Bowl and economic hardship (Steinbeck, 1939). Similarly, in Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower," the protagonist grapples with environmental injustices in a dystopian future where marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by ecological collapse and societal breakdown (Butler, 1993).

Environmental symbolism is when elements of nature, like plants, animals, or landscapes, are used in a story to represent deeper meanings or ideas. It's like using nature as a symbol to convey a message or theme in a book or poem. For example, a tree might symbolize growth or resilience, while a polluted river could symbolize environmental degradation or societal decay. Environmental symbolism helps authors convey complex ideas or emotions in a way that readers can understand and relate to (Fry, 2009). In "Freedom" by Jonathan Franzen, nature symbols and metaphors are used to convey deeper meanings. For instance, birds represent freedom and a connection to nature. Patty's interest in birds shows her desire to break free from the constraints of her suburban life (Franzen, 2010, Chapter 2). Also, environmental problems like pollution symbolize societal decay and moral decline (Franzen, 2010, Chapter 15).

Through these symbols, Franzen makes us think about how human actions affect nature and society. In other works of literature, environmental symbolism is also utilized to convey deeper themes and messages. For example, in "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the green light at the end of Daisy Buchanan's dock symbolizes Gatsby's unattainable dreams and the elusive nature of the American

Dream (Fitzgerald, 1925). Additionally, in "The Road" by Cormac McCarthy, the barren, post-apocalyptic landscape serves as a symbol of hopelessness and the fragility of humanity in the face of environmental devastation (McCarthy, 2006).

Chapter III: Textual Analysis and Ecological Themes

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the Berglund family, central to Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. The chapter begins by portraying the Berglund family, offering insights into their personal lives and how these reflect broader societal issues. Following the family's introduction, the chapter delves into key ecological themes present in *Freedom*, examining how these themes are expressed through the lives and choices of the Berglund family. This exploration is deepened through the analysis of two specific characters, who serve as embodiments of the novel's environmental concerns. Next, the chapter analyzes a significant passage from the novel, demonstrating how Franzen uses this moment to intertwine personal and ecological narratives. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the narrative and ecological techniques Franzen employs in *Freedom*. This final section connects the earlier analysis of characters, themes, and specific passages to a broader understanding of how Franzen's narrative strategies reinforce the novel's ecological message.

Freedom is a novel written by the American author Jonathan Franzen, published in 2010 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. The book garnered widespread praise from critics and was recognized as one of the top books of 2010 by multiple publications. Some reviewers even referred to it as the "Great American Novel". In literature authors often use nature as a backdrop to explore human experiences, and this exploration is not just about describing trees and rivers; it's about delving into deeper themes like our connection to the environment and the consequences of our actions. This approach to literature is known as ecocriticism. Ecocritics look at how books reflect and influence our understanding of environmental issues, like how everything in nature is connected or how our behavior affects the planet. In "Freedom" by Jonathan Franzen, these ideas are front and center. The book is not just a story about people; it is a story about people and the world they live in, through the characters and the situations they find themselves in. (Garrard, 2004; Buell, 1995). The Berglunds are a seemingly perfect family living in St. Paul, Minnesota. Patty Berglund, the mother, used to play college basketball and now focuses on being a perfect wife and mother. Her husband, Walter, is an environmental lawyer known for his strong principles and commitment to ecology. They have two children: Joey and Jessica.

At first, Patty and Walter's relationship appears strong and loving. However, tensions start to emerge. Walter is very dedicated to his work, which strains their family life. Patty, who has given up her own career ambitions for the family, begins to feel unfulfilled. Their son, Joey, becomes increasingly rebellious and clashes with his father. Joey's relationship with Connie, a girl from the neighborhood, adds

to the family's troubles. Their daughter, Jessica, is a diligent student who often feels overshadowed by the family's conflicts (Franzen, 2010).

As time goes on, the Berglunds' perfect image starts to crumble. Patty becomes unhappy and falls for Richard Katz, Walter's best friend and a musician. This affair creates a rift in her marriage and strains her relationship with Walter and Richard. Walter, in turn, immerses himself in a controversial project that conflicts with his environmental values. The project, funded by a coal company, aims to create a bird sanctuary but involves mountaintop removal mining. This dilemma affects Walter's professional life and adds to his personal problems. Joey's rebellion peaks when he moves in with Connie's family drops out of college, and gets involved in risky ventures. His relationship with Connie becomes strained as he struggles with his goals. Jessica continues to excel academically but feels increasingly isolated. She tries to keep the family together but finds it increasingly difficult. (Franzen, 2010). Eventually, the Berglund family starts to fall apart. Patty's affair is discovered, leading to a confrontation with Walter. Walter feels deeply betrayed by both Patty and Richard. Patty, overwhelmed with guilt, tries to make amends but finds it hard to fix things. Walter's career also suffers as the environmental project's true costs come to light. He faces criticism from both environmentalists and the public, leading him to question his choices. Joey's business ventures fail, leaving him in a tough spot. He begins to see the consequences of his rebellion and its impact on his family. His relationship with Connie deteriorates as they both deal with their issues. Jessica, despite her efforts, can no longer hold the family together. She sees her parents' marriage fall apart and her brother's struggles, making her

achievements seem less significant. She starts focusing more on her future. (Franzen, 2010).

Despite the chaos, the Berglunds eventually find a way to move forward. Patty and Walter decide to give their marriage another chance and relocate to Washington, D.C., for a fresh start. Patty works on rebuilding her relationship with Walter and finding her identity. Walter, disillusioned with his previous career, returns to his passion for environmental conservation, focusing on smaller projects that match his values. This helps him reconnect with his ideals and find peace. Joey learns from his mistakes, reconciles with his family, marries Connie, and works towards a stable future. He realizes the importance of balancing ambition with family. Jessica, now an adult, pursues a career aligned with her values and finds her path. While she remains close to her family, she establishes her identity apart from the family dynamics. Her resilience and determination highlight her strength. (Franzen, 2010).

3.2 Ecological themes: Human Impact on Nature, the Cost of Wilderness Loss

In *Freedom*, Jonathan Franzen encourages readers to reflect on the delicate balance between humanity and the environment, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of ecological themes that permeate the narrative. These themes shed light on pressing issues such as environmental degradation, human influence on nature, and the loss of wilderness. The novel delves into the consequences of environmental degradation in passages like,

We're going to add another three billion by 2050. In other words, we're going to add the quantity of the world's entire population when you and I are putting our pennies in UNICEF boxes. Any little things we might do now to try to save some nature and preserve some kind of quality of life are going to get overwhelmed by the sheer numbers because people can change their consumption habits—it takes time and effort, but it can be done—but if the population keeps increasing, nothing else we do is going to matter. And yet nobody is talking about the problem publicly. It's the elephant in the room, and it's killing us. (Franzen, 234)

In this passage, Franzen illustrates that environmental degradation can be exacerbated by overpopulation, emphasizing the impact of rapid population growth on the environment. As noted by Eve Tavor Bannet (2013), Franzen's portrayal of these ecological issues is intricately tied to the plot and character development. Bannet argues that the novel's environmental concerns are not merely a backdrop but are central to the narrative, with the characters' personal struggles often mirroring larger environmental crises.

Another theme explored in the novel is the human impact on nature. Franzen vividly depicts the extent of this impact through the portrayal of looming mass extinction and ecosystem collapse, as seen in the statement, "We're facing the biggest mass extinction since at least the Cretaceous-Tertiary" (Franzen, 358). Here, Franzen emphasizes the severity of the situation, highlighting the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the catastrophic consequences of human activities. The loss of wilderness is further depicted through Walter's observation that the land is disappearing rapidly:

The land here had betrayed itself, its gnarly topography and wealth of extractable resources discouraging the egalitarianism of Jefferson's yeoman farmers, fostering instead the concentration of surface and mineral rights in

the hands of the out-of-state wealthy, and consigning the poor natives and imported workers to the margins: to logging, to working in the mines, to scraping out pre- and then, later, post-industrial existences on scraps of leftover land which, stirred by the same urge to couple as had now gripped Walter and Lalitha, they'd overfilled with tightly spaced generations of too-large families. (Franzen, 358)

According to Heather Houser (2014), Franzen captures the interconnectedness of personal and ecological well-being, showing how the environmental crises portrayed in the novel are reflective of deeper societal issues. Houser discusses how Franzen's narrative connects human and ecological health, emphasizing the catastrophic effects of human activity on nature.

Moreover, Rob Nixon (2011) introduces the concept of "slow violence," which applies to *Freedom* by highlighting how the novel portrays the gradual but devastating impact of environmental degradation and the loss of wilderness. Nixon's analysis reinforces the idea that Franzen's depiction of environmental harm, including pollution and deforestation, is a powerful commentary on the negative consequences of modern civilization's actions on the natural world. Nixon asserts that these portrayals in the narrative effectively raise awareness about the urgent necessity to tackle environmental issues and promote ecological responsibility.

Lastly, Buell (2011) adds to this by noting that Franzen's detailed descriptions of vanishing landscapes serve as poignant reminders of what is at stake. These portrayals highlight the precariousness of wilderness areas and the irreversible consequences of unchecked development, underscoring the broader theme of humanity's harmful impact on nature.

3.3 Human Impact on Nature: in the Lives of Walter and Einar Berglund

Franzen highlights the contradictions within individuals and society's relationship with nature. In the case of Walter Berglund, his stance against mountaintop removal and his involvement in bird conservation add layers to his character's exploration of human impact on nature. He expresses deep concern about environmental degradation. While working in the coal industry, notorious for its destructive impact on nature, Walter grapples with the practice of mountaintop removal, as depicted in passages like:

Mountaintop removal as currently practiced was ecologically deplorable—ridgetop rock blasted away to expose the underlying seams of coal, surrounding valleys filled with rubble, biologically rich streams obliterated. Walter, however, believed that properly managed reclamation efforts could mitigate far more of the damage than people realized; and the great advantage of fully mined-out land was that nobody would rip it open again. (Franzen, 2010, p. 225)

This contradiction in Walter's character reflects broader societal tensions between economic progress and environmental preservation. Despite his personal values and concerns about environmental degradation, Walter is compelled to participate in the coal industry for financial stability, illustrating the complex moral dilemmas individuals face when navigating competing interests.

Houser (2014) discusses Walter Berglund's character in *Freedom* and his complex relationship with environmental activism. Houser highlights how Walter's involvement in both the coal industry and bird conservation projects embodies the tension between economic needs and environmental ethics. This analysis aligns

directly with the depiction of Walter's moral struggle, as he seeks to reconcile his environmental ideals with the practical demands of his life.

In contrast, Einar Berglund's reckless behavior further illustrates human impact on nature. As shown in passages like:

If some pinhead dared to try to pass him on a two-lane road, he floored the accelerator to keep pace and then decelerated to prevent the would-be passer from getting back in line, taking special pleasure when there was danger of a collision with an oncoming truck. If another driver cut him off or refused him the right of way, he pursued the offending car and tried to force it off the road, so that he could jump out and shout curses at its driver. (The personality susceptible to the dream of limitless freedom is a personality also prone, should the dream ever sour, to misanthropy and rage.) Einar was seventy-eight when an extremely poor driving decision forced him to choose between a head-on crash and a deep ditch by the side of Route. (Franzen, 2010, p. 437)

Einar's reckless driving not only endangers human lives but also symbolizes broader destructive behaviors contributing to environmental harm. His actions serve as a metaphor for how individual irresponsibility can have far-reaching consequences, both socially and environmentally.

Clark (2015), examines Freedom in the context of ecological themes, particularly focusing on how individual actions, like Einar's recklessness, symbolize broader societal neglect of environmental responsibilities. Clark's discussion helps to frame Einar's behavior as part of a larger critique of human attitudes toward nature in the Anthropocene.

3.4. Loss of wilderness Illustrated in a Passage

The ecological concerns are illustrated in passages such as in the chapter "The Nice Man's Anger":

The problem of Forster Hollow, Vin Haven had found the perfect sixty-five thousand acres for the core reserve. The surface rights of ninety-eight percent of it were in the hands of just three corporations, two of them faceless and economically rational holding companies, the third wholly owned by a family named Forster which had fled the state more than a century ago and was now comfortably dissipating itself in coastal affluence. All three companies were managing the land for certified forestry and had no reason not to sell it to the Trust at a fair market rate. (Franzen, 312)

The ecological issue here is that a large portion of land is controlled by just a few corporations and one wealthy family, the Forsters. These entities are mainly interested in using the land for forestry, likely for profit. McKibben (2010) highlights the problems associated with corporate control over land and its impact on environmental conservation. McKibben argues that corporate interests often prioritize profit over ecological health, which can undermine conservation efforts. Franzen's depiction of corporate influence on land management reflects McKibben's concerns about how economic priorities can hinder effective environmental protection.

3.4 Ecological Concepts in Freedom: Environmental Justice, Ecofeminism, Symbolism, Environmental Ethics

Franzen uses ecological concepts like Environmental Justice, as embodied in passages such as in the chapter "Mountain Removal":

The Endangered Species Act, with potentially deleterious effects on their freedom to cut down forests and blow up mountains. Vin believed that they could be persuaded to help the warbler, to keep the bird off the Threatened

list and garner some much-needed good press, as long as they were allowed to continue extracting coal. And this was how Walter had landed the job as executive director of the Trust. In Minnesota, working for the Nature Conservancy, he'd forged good relationships with mining interests, and he was unusually open to constructive engagement with the coal people. 'Mr. Haven interviewed half a dozen other candidates before Walter,' Lalitha said. 'Some of them stood up and walked out on him, right in the middle of the interviews. They were so closed-minded and afraid of being criticized! Nobody else but Walter could see the potential for somebody who was willing to take a big risk and not care so much about conventional wisdom.' Walter grimaced at this compliment, but he was clearly pleased by it. 'Those people all had better jobs than I did. They had more to lose. (Franzen, 224).

In this passage, the characters Walter Berglund and Lalitha encounter resistance from the manager as they work towards environmental justice, finding ways to protect nature while considering the economic needs of communities, such as those involved in coal extraction. Eckersley(2004), delves into how literature addresses environmental justice. Specifically, Franzen's novel scrutinizes the disproportionate effects of environmental damage on marginalized groups. Through Walter Berglund, Franzen underscores the ethical ramifications of environmental policies, emphasizing the necessity for fair solutions that take into account the welfare of all societal groups, rather than just the wealthy. Furthermore, Franzen critiques systemic inequalities that exacerbate environmental issues.

Ecofeminism is another theme highlighted through the female character Lalitha. Her immersion in nature, self-sufficiency in outdoor pursuits, and shared commitment to environmental conservation reflect ecofeminist principles. Lalitha's engagement with traditionally male-dominated activities and her strong connection to the environment challenge societal norms. As Gaard(1997), argues ecofeminism

links the exploitation of women and the environment, emphasizing the intersectionality of feminist and environmental ideologies.

Additionally, environmental symbolism is used in the chapter “The Nice Man’s Anger”:

West Virginia was the nation's own banana republic, its Congo, its Guyana, its Honduras. The roads were reasonably picturesque in summer, but now, with the leaves still down, you could see all the scabby rock-littered pastures, the spindly canopies of young second growth, the gouged hillsides and mining-damaged streams, the spavined barns and paintless houses, the trailer homes hip-deep in plastic and metallic trash, the torn-up dirt tracks leading nowhere. (Franzen, 358)

This passage uses environmental symbolism, comparing West Virginia to regions known for exploitation and environmental damage. Stein (2004) argues that symbolic representations of landscapes reveal underlying social and environmental injustices. The depiction of damaged environments in Franzen’s novel critiques not only environmental degradation but also social issues of neglect and exploitation. The descriptions of “scabby rock-littered pastures” and “mining-damaged streams” serve as metaphors for broader social and economic exploitation.

Environmental Ethics is another concept showcased in Freedom through Walter Berglund: “I took the job in the first place,” Walter said, “because I couldn't sleep at night. I couldn't stand what was happening to the country. Clinton had done less than zero for the environment. Net fucking negative. Clinton just wanted everybody to party to Fleetwood Mac. ‘Don't stop thinking about tomorrow?’ Bullshit. Not thinking about tomorrow was exactly what he did environmentally.” (Franzen, 231)

This passage highlights environmental ethics through Walter’s critique of political actions contributing to environmental degradation. His concern for the

environment is evident in his decision to take a job related to conservation and his critique of political neglect. Rolston (2012) argues that humanity has a moral obligation to protect the natural world, extending ethical considerations beyond human interests to include all living beings and ecosystems. Walter Berglund embodies these principles of environmental ethics as described by Rolston.

3.5 Flashbacks, Unreliable Narrators, and Narrative Framing: Narrative Techniques

Through the use of flashbacks, the narrative delves into Einar's past, revealing his upbringing in rural Sweden and the complex relationship he had with his mother.

Walter's father, Gene, was the youngest child of a difficult Swede named Einar Berglund who had immigrated at the turn of the twentieth century. There had been a lot not to like about rural Sweden—compulsory military service, Lutheran pastors meddling in the lives of their parishioners, a social hierarchy that all but precluded upward mobility—but what had actually driven Einar to America, according to the story that Dorothy told Walter, was a problem with his mother. Einar had been the oldest of eight children, the princeling of his family on its farm in south Östergötland. His mother, who was perhaps not the first woman to be unsatisfied in her marriage to a Berglund, had favored her firstborn outrageously, dressing him in finer clothes than his siblings were given, feeding him the cream from the others' milk, and excusing him from farm chores so that he could devote himself to his education and his grooming. ("The vainest man I ever met," Dorothy said.) The maternal sun had shone on Einar for twenty years, but then, by mistake, his mother had a late baby, a son, and fell for him the way she'd once fallen for Einar; and Einar never forgave her for it. Unable to stand not being the favored one, he sailed for America on his twenty-second birthday. (Franzen, p.471)

Bal (1997) argues that flashbacks are crucial for providing background information that explains a character's present actions and attitudes. Meanwhile, by revealing

key events from the past, flashbacks enrich the narrative and add layers of meaning to the characters' experiences. In this case, Franzen's flashback into Einar's early life in Sweden and his troubled relationship with his mother offers a detailed portrayal of his emotional landscape and the factors that led him to seek a new life in America. Furthermore, Franzen's use of a third-person omniscient narrator allows readers to access the inner thoughts and feelings of various characters, including Einar and his descendants. Through this technique, readers gain insight into Einar's internal conflicts and the societal pressures he faced, enhancing their understanding of his complex personality.

Moreover, an unreliable narrator is portrayed in the novel through Patty Berglund, who exhibits behaviors and thoughts that show her unreliability in the story.

She shook her head. 'There's something wrong with me. I love all my other friends, but I feel like there's always a wall between us. Like they're all one kind of person and I'm another kind of person. More competitive and selfish. Less good, basically. Somehow I always end up feeling like I'm pretending when I'm around them. I don't have to pretend anything with Eliza. I can just be myself and still be better than her. I mean, I'm not dumb. I can see she's a fucked-up person. But some part of me loves being around her. (Franzen, p. 79)

In this passage from *Freedom*, Patty's thoughts show her struggles with insecurity and her complicated relationship with her friend Eliza. She feels disconnected from her other friends and sees herself as different from them, feeling less confident and more selfish. Patty finds comfort in being herself around Eliza, but also feels a sense of superiority over her. This reveals Patty's complex character and how her perspective may not always be reliable, as she grapples with her biases and insecurities. Booth (1961) explains that an unreliable narrator is one whose

credibility has been seriously compromised, often revealing their biases, insecurities, or misunderstandings. In the case of Patty Berglund, her internal monologue demonstrates her self-doubt and conflicted feelings towards her social relationships, which cast doubt on the objectivity and reliability of her narrative. Patty's admission of feeling "more competitive and selfish" and her perception of a "wall" between herself and her friends highlight her subjective view of reality, influenced by her personal insecurities. This aligns with Booth's theory, which posits that an unreliable narrator often provides a distorted view of events and relationships, prompting readers to question the veracity of their account.

Narrative framing is another technique demonstrated in the novel.

I don't know what Daddy and I did,' she said. 'I guess we did something. That three of our four children are not quite ready to... not quite ready to, well. Fully support themselves. I suppose I—oh, I don't know. But if Abigail asks me one

more time about selling Granddad's house... And, I guess, I suppose, I deserve it, in a way. I suppose, in my own way, I'm somewhat responsible.' 'You just have to stand up to her,' Patty said. 'You have a right not to be tortured by her.' 'What I don't understand is how you turned out to be so different, so independent,' Joyce said. 'You certainly don't seem to have these kinds of problems. I mean, I know you have problems. But you seem... stronger, somehow.' No exaggeration: this was among the top-ten most gratifying moments of Patty's life. 'Walter was a great provider,' she demurred. 'Just a great man. That helped.' 'And your kids...? Are they...?' 'They're like Walter. (Franzen, p. 550)

The concept of narrative framing is well-articulated by Gerard Genette in his work on narrative discourse. Genette (1980) explains that narrative framing involves the use of a story within a story, or dialogue and reflections within a broader narrative structure, to provide deeper context and enhance the reader's understanding of characters and themes. In this case, Patty's conversation with Joyce frames her

reflections on parenting, independence, and familial responsibilities. Therefore, Franzen effectively reveals Patty's internal struggles and her perceptions of her role within the family by employing this technique.

An Interconnected storyline is a central technique used in *Freedom*. One of the passages that exemplifies it is:

To help save the cerulean warbler, Walter said, the Trust was aiming to create a hundred-square-mile roadless tract—Haven's Hundred was its working nickname in Wyoming County, West Virginia, surrounded by a larger "buffer zone" open to hunting and motorized recreation. To be able to afford both the surface and mineral rights to such a large single parcel, the Trust would first have to permit coal extraction on nearly a third of it, via mountaintop removal. This was the prospect that had scared off the other applicants. Mountaintop removal as currently practiced was ecologically deplorable ridgetop rock blasted away to expose. (Franzen, p. 224)

Chatman (1978) emphasizes that interconnected storylines involve multiple narrative threads that are woven together to create a cohesive and complex narrative structure. In *Freedom*, Franzen uses this technique to illustrate how different elements such as environmental conservation, economic pressures, and local community needs are interrelated.

3.6 The Interplay Between Narratology and Ecocriticism in Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*

Narratology, the study of narrative structure and technique, provides valuable insights into how a story is constructed and presented. Seymour Chatman (1978) describes the concept of narrative as involving both the story (the content) and the discourse (the expression). Franzen employs interconnected storylines, where the lives of the Berglund family and their interactions reveal complex ecological themes. This technique aligns with Chatman's idea that the way stories are told can

highlight underlying themes and connections. In *Freedom*, Franzen weaves together multiple narrative threads, including those of Walter, Patty, and their son Joey. Each character's storyline reflects different aspects of personal and societal choices, illustrating the impact on the environment. Walter's environmental activism and the conflicts he faces underscore the tension between human ambition and ecological preservation. Presenting these interconnected narratives allows Franzen to show how individual actions contribute to larger environmental issues, thus enhancing the ecological themes through narrative structure (Chatman, 1978). Ecocriticism examines the representation of nature and environmental issues in literature, focusing on how these elements influence and reflect human experiences. Combining ecocriticism with narratology allows for a comprehensive analysis of how environmental themes are embedded within the narrative structure. In *Freedom*, Franzen's narrative techniques, such as shifting perspectives and detailed character development, highlight ecological concerns. The third-person omniscient narration provides a broad view of the characters' lives and their ecological impacts, while the use of personal letters and diary entries offers intimate insights into their motivations and conflicts. This multifaceted narrative approach enriches the ecological interpretation, illustrating the complexity of human-nature relationships (Garrard, 2012; Buell, 1995).

These narratological concepts intersect with ecological themes, as illustrated in the passage, "Think about how crowded the exurbs are already, think about the traffic and the sprawl and the environmental degradation" (Franzen, 2010, p. 233). This discussion about overpopulation and the reluctance to address it in national

conversations reflects how the narrative frames societal issues within the broader context of environmental challenges and sustainability. According to Ursula K. Heise (2008), Franzen's exploration of environmental issues through narrative structure reveals the complex interplay between personal choices and broader environmental consequences, demonstrating how literature can critique societal norms and provoke deeper environmental consciousness. Similarly, Timothy Clark (2011) emphasizes the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of ecological and social issues in literature, noting that Franzen's approach underscores the necessity of viewing environmental concerns as inherently tied to human behavior and societal structures.

Franzen's use of interconnected storylines serves as another example of how narratology and ecocriticism intersect. Illustrating the interconnectedness of human lives with the environment, Franzen demonstrates how personal choices and societal dynamics impact the natural world. For example, the relationships among characters and their environmental decisions highlight the broader implications of individual actions. This narrative technique offers a deeper understanding of both the characters' experiences and the environmental context in which they unfold (Heise, 2008; Clark, 2011).

The way the story is told in *Freedom* and the environmental themes it explores work together to provide a comprehensive understanding of the characters and their world. Franzen's use of different narrators and non-linear timelines allows readers to see events from multiple perspectives, enhancing our comprehension of the characters' thoughts and feelings. For instance, Walter Berglund's chapters reveal

his struggles with environmental activism and its significance, while also exploring how past environmental issues continue to influence the present (Clark, 2011). Conversely, the environmental themes help us understand the characters and their choices. Patty's guilt about her family's impact on the environment and her attempts to change their habits illustrate how personal decisions affect the broader world. Additionally, the novel's depiction of environmental damage, such as mountaintop removal mining, highlights the far-reaching consequences of human actions (Heise, 2008).

Examining *Freedom* through both narratology and ecocriticism provides a richer understanding of the characters and their environment. This dual analysis reveals how individual and societal choices influence both the environment and interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion

While in America, freedom allows people to speak their minds; for Franzen's characters, it leads to pain and selfishness. The Berglunds make reckless choices, demonstrating self-centeredness, a trait portrayed by Franzen. Despite embodying the American ideal of freedom, they remain unhappy. "Freedom" is not just a theme in the novel but a key character, revealing the dangers of unchecked liberty. As Mitchell (2011) argues, Franzen uses the concept of freedom to explore the pitfalls of excessive individualism and its impact on personal relationships and societal dynamics.

The Cerulean warbler (a small migratory songbird) remains a symbol of freedom and becomes entangled in Walter's quest to preserve it. This symbolism reflects how personal and political lines blur, showing the chaos of too many choices. As discussed by Birkerts (2010), Franzen uses ecological concerns, such as the plight of the Cerulean warbler, to illustrate the intersection of individual choices and broader environmental implications.

Patty, denied freedom in her youth, struggles with endless choices. Richard, a musician, abuses his freedom, prioritizing pleasure over responsibility and his friendships. Even the characters, without purpose, feel trapped by guilt, lust, and cynicism. Walter's isolation, intended to protect him, becomes a self-made prison until he reunites with Patty and rebuilds their relationship. Franzen illustrates that suffering often results from our choices rather than external circumstances (Franzen, 2010). As Birkerts (2010) notes, the novel reflects on how the quest for

freedom can lead to profound personal and moral dilemmas. Franzen's narrative emphasizes that suffering is a result of human choices rather than external forces. The novel draws a comparison between human freedom and the illusion of freedom experienced by birds, which remain free only when humans allow them. This metaphor serves to highlight the broader theme of freedom as a double-edged sword. Through the perspectives of characters like Patty, Franzen suggests that while humans have the capacity to make choices, the consequences of those choices can entrap them. The chapter illustrates how this thematic concern develops throughout the novel, presenting a cautionary message: we must exercise our freedom with care, as irresponsible decisions lead to unintended consequences. In this way, the novel advocates for a mindful approach to our autonomy, encouraging readers to reflect on the implications of their actions.

General conclusion

This dissertation has provided a comprehensive examination of the relationship between ecocriticism and narrative theory within the context of American fiction. The initial chapters laid the foundation through an exploration of the historical evolution of American literary traditions, demonstrating how these have shaped the narrative techniques that contemporary authors use to engage with ecological themes. As the analysis progressed, it became evident that narrative strategies such as focalization, unreliable narration, and the use of multiple perspectives play a crucial role in framing environmental issues in literature. The case study of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* was central to this exploration, highlighting how the novel's narrative structure and techniques are instrumental in conveying the complexities of modern ecological debates. This dissertation argues that *Freedom* not only reflects these debates but also critiques the socio-political systems that contribute to environmental degradation, making it a significant text in the study of ecocriticism.

The contributions of this study are manifold. It offers a new perspective on how narrative techniques can be harnessed to enhance the portrayal of ecological themes, thus bridging a gap between literary theory and environmental studies. Focusing on Franzen's *Freedom*, this dissertation sheds light on the ways contemporary American fiction addresses the challenges of the Anthropocene, a term that captures the profound impact of human activity on the planet. The research also enriches the understanding of how literature can serve as a powerful

medium for environmental advocacy, influencing readers' perceptions of ecological issues and encouraging greater environmental consciousness.

However, this study is not without its limitations. One of the main limitations is its focus on a single novel, which, while providing an in-depth analysis, may not capture the full diversity of narrative approaches to ecological themes in American fiction. A broader selection of texts could have offered a more comprehensive view of how different authors address environmental issues. Additionally, the dissertation primarily engages with established narrative theories, potentially overlooking newer or alternative approaches that could yield fresh insights. The specific focus on American literature may also limit the applicability of the findings to other literary traditions. Furthermore, given the vast and interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism, the study could only address a portion of the field, leaving other significant areas for future exploration.

In light of these limitations, several recommendations for further research have emerged. Future studies could expand the scope of inquiry to include a wider range of literary works that address ecological themes, encompassing texts from different cultural and literary traditions. This comparative approach could reveal how various cultures engage with environmental issues through literature. Moreover, there is potential to explore the role of emerging narrative techniques, such as digital storytelling and interactive narratives, in conveying ecological concerns. Another promising area for further research is the intersection of ecocriticism with other critical theories, such as postcolonialism or gender studies, to examine how environmental issues intersect with social justice. Finally, future research could

investigate the impact of literature on readers' environmental attitudes and behaviors, providing empirical evidence of the power of narrative to inspire ecological awareness and action.

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