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Freedom, Narrative, and Happiness

Freedom starts in its opening chapter with a look at the Berglund family from an ''outsider perspective,'' that of the neighbors in a gentrified suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota; and from there it turns to the four insider perspectives of three Berglund family members and that of Richard Katz. The main plot, titled ''2004,'' and beginning on page 189, is told from three (male) perspectives, starting with that of Richard (the best, and only, friend of Walter and love–lover of Patty), followed by Joey (son of Patty and Walter, brother of Jessica, and love–lover and later husband of Connie), and ends with the perspective of Walter (best, and only, friend of Richard, husband of Patty, and father of Joey and Jessica). These three characters are given space to voice their perspectives on the emerging events and their relational entanglements at two occasions (following this sequence in two cycles), whereas Patty's memoir (in which she presents a sense of herself as daughter, as love–lover and later wife of Walter, as mother to Joey and Jessica, and as lover of Richard) frames the two cycles of the three male perspectives titled ''2004.'' This memoir is staged in two parts: the first (fronting ''2004'' and titled ''Mistakes Were Made'') is written at the request of her therapist around the time the family moved to Washington, DC, at the beginning of 2002, the second (following ''2004'' and titled ''Mistakes Were Made [Conclusion] A Sort of Letter to Her Reader'') takes place six years after the two cycles have come to completion, which brings it close to 2010 (the year *Freedom* was published). In the final chapter, titled ''Canterbridge Estates Lake'' (in reference to the place that used to be called Nameless Lake[1]), Patty's husband, Walter, once more is given voice to offer his perspective on what results in some kind of happy ending: the salvage of the family. Thus, and in purely structural terms, apart from the neighbors' perspective at the very beginning of *Freedom*, each protagonist comes to the fore at two occasions, except for Walter, who is heard and/or read as having the last word at the end of each cycle of male perspectives—and following his wife Patty's concluding part of her autobiography, he wraps the different strands together at the very end of the novel.

In my commentary, I focus on Patty's autobiography, which bears little resemblance to the kinds of narrative interviews that my social science colleagues typically work with. In terms of its literary style, it is no different from her three male counterparts' perspectives, in that it carries the handwriting of the author of *Freedom*. Nevertheless, Patty stands out as an interesting character for several reasons: She receives more space to present her perspective—more than her husband, Walter (though he is heard at three occasions, Patty only at two). She is fleshed out in terms of her family genealogy, and she

[1]Nameless Lake was where Walter originally discovered his passion (and care) for nature and birds, where Patty and Richard tested out their passion for each other, and where Richard found his passion to compose his highly successful collection of musical pieces, released as *Nameless Lake*. When Walter returned after Lalitha's death, after two loves of his life had been lost, it had become Canterbridge Estates Lake, associating an inhabited and civilized place of ownership and profit orientation, where he had to protect his only passion left, birds, by trapping cats; and the novel ends by turning the originally nameless place into a biotope, fenced in, to keep cats out—in memory and honor of Lalitha. My friend, the German cultural critic Norbert Focken, reminded me that the word for *cat* in German, *Katze*, sounds similar to the word in English, and is similar to the spelling for Richard's last name (Katz), which opens the door to all kinds of additional interpretations.

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is fully developed in her role as daughter (of Joyce) and as parent (to Joey and Jessica) and in her relationship as lover to her husband and to Richard (and from their perspective, how they loved her). Most relevant, though, in comparison to how Franzen develops the other three protagonists, Patty is characterized as having been drastically transformed, and as we would expect from an ''autobiography,'' she is positioned to the reader as more openly reflecting on this process of her transformation. It is for these reasons that I bring to bear some tools of small-story analysis to *Freedom* in the hope of illuminating aspects of identity analysis with regard to the family of the Berglunds (for an elaboration on this type of narrative approach to identity analysis, see Bamberg, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2007).

Before I try to do this, let me step back with two caveats and a brief explication of what we small-story analysts do, particularly in light of the fact that social scientists are not ranking high on the ''Liking Scale'' of literati but also in the hope of clearing some wood: First, *Freedom* is fiction. And this means that readers, reviewers, and commentators have a choice: they can focus on the characters (which is the most common strategy, particularly for readers), the author (which is more likely for reviewers or literary critics), or the narrator (i.e., the perspectives from which the characters are presented). The latter choice of focus is typical for literary scholars (and critics) as an attempt to pay tribute to the idea that we as readers (and critics) have access to the characters only in the way they are designed (in a very particular way) by the author—most likely for a purpose: Maybe the author is trying to tell (teach) the reader something, and the perspective from which characters are presented may not represent the way the author sees the world. The particular perspective from which Patty is presented is what I work with and try to provide insight into, irrespective of what the author may have intended or whether he agrees with me. The second caveat is that I am able to do this only in a rather preliminary and superficial way, one that barely lays open the procedures of small-story analysis, let alone does full justice to the way Patty is developed (and developing) over the 200 pages for her perspective on things, events that happened in her life (particularly in the more recent years that led up to where she's at), and her views on her relationships with family (parents, lovers, and her children).

Working with narratives through small-story analysis builds on the assumption that narratives play an important role in the identity formation of institutional and personal continuities. In its function to position a sense of self in relation to culturally shared values and existing normative discourses, narrative discourse claims a special status for the business of identity construction (Bamberg, in press). In narratives, speakers typically make claims about characters, and they make the claims (that are said to have held for a there and then) relevant to a here and now of the speaking moment. In other words, whenever speakers rely on narrative resources, they connect spatiotemporal coordinates from some past (or an imagined future) with a different time–space zone (usually the here and now).

In making past characters relevant for the moment of speaking, we face a number of interesting identity dilemmas (Bamberg, 2010, 2011c; Bamberg et al., 2011). First, there is the dilemma of how to handle the two directions of fit between world and the person. For instance, when describing a reprehensible action in which I have been involved, do I take the perspective that I made a mistake for which I take responsibility, or do I present the perspective of self-as-undergoer (or victim) from which what happened was due to circumstances that were forced on to me? A stance along the dimension of high versus low agency forms the basis for the assignment of blame and responsibility but also probably what has been learned from mistakes. Second, to what extent do I mark myself as different from others, and to what degree do I claim to be the same? Integrating and differentiating a sense of who I am vis-à-vis others (in particular vis-à-vis parents) is a particularly difficult and interestingly revealing process when it comes to the construction of family relationships. Third, relating past and present, we can highlight either change or, in contrast, how we have remained the same. The dilemma of how to present the journey from a sense of who we used to be (as children or adolescents) to who we have turned into is extremely relevant when it comes to dealing with issues of uselessness and loss, growing up and gaining maturity, and how we ultimately gain a sense of who we are. Working from these identity dilemmas, I turn to two small

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stories from Patty's autobiographical excerpts and—briefly and only to the extent possible in this short commentary—demonstrate what a narrative perspective can contribute to the analysis of identity constructions in this novel for the purpose of illuminating the somewhat larger conceptual frame of family.

Patty started her autobiography (''at her therapist's suggestion,'' p. 27) with her first memory of doing a team sport; and she adds that it was the first and only time that she recalls her mother watching. In a very detailed recollection of what had transpired during the game, Patty positioned herself as ''the only good player on the field'' and the other girls as ''sweet, less skilled, squealing, uncoordinated:'' as people she ''can't cooperate with.'' On the way home, a dialogue ensues between her and her mom, of which Patty hears her mother characterizing her as ''aggressive'' and ''competitive,'' culminating in her mother's question–request: ''Wouldn't it be more fun to all work together to cooperatively build something?'' (p. 30).

The second small story (pp. 528–530) is taken from the second part of her autobiography, toward its end, after Patty's father had died and after she had successfully negotiated a dispute over the heritage among her siblings. Patty, on the way back to her mother's place, reflected on her mother's life and realized that all along her mother had been a person with purpose: ''having done good in the world—and thereby saving herself'' and ''escaping her family's problems.'' In addition, Patty also realized reflectively that she (Patty) was ''lucky to have had a mother like Joyce'' and that Joyce had been ''lucky to have a daughter like Patty.'' It seems that these two self-revelations sum up the transformation from the Patty who used to radically differentiate herself from her mother (and by extension, from her whole family) to the Patty who seemingly is at peace with her family (even her father) and herself; although, at that point, there still was ''one big thing she didn't understand,'' and she asked her mother: ''Why did you never go to any of my basketball games?'' In the dialogue that ensued on page 529, Patty expressed her conviction that her mother, if she had watched her playing and had seen how she ''was totally succeeding,'' would have felt not only ''happy'' (as in happy for someone else) but also ''good about herself'' (in her identity as Patty's mother). Patty's mother, in turn, admits, ''We made mistakes as parents''; and she subsequently shared a past event from her memory (pp. 259–260) to demonstrate that all her encouragement, support, and belief in her other daughter, Abigail (Patty was the eldest), resulted in the kind of suffering as a mother that is similar to the suffering resulting from the mistakes that Patty made: Abigail, so Patty is told, consistently punished her mother by failing in what she was attempting to accomplish; Abigail accused her mother of stealing her daughter's potential success by ''taking it from her,'' wanting to claim it to be her success—and that's why she (Abigail) ultimately failed with her life. And Patty's mother concludes her ruminations of her mother role: ''I just have to try not to think too much about certain things, or else they'll break my heart'' (p. 530).

Both stories share a similar though different thread. In both stories one person gives advice to another on how to be happy. However, the agents have reversed their roles, and the stories lay out roads to happiness differently: Although the mother instructed her daughter in the first story to avoid competition and seek cooperation, the daughter in the second story advised her mother to see people in terms of what they are good at—to take them for who they are and to see the positive in them. Taking these two threads as woven into the fabric of *Freedom*, the question arises as to how Patty came to change from the person who makes mistakes and indulges in self-pitying to one who is less self-focused and more accepting and open minded vis-à-vis others. Was it that her writing (at her therapist's suggestion) enabled her to more clearly distill the mistakes that ''were made''? Was it the reflection on those mistakes that helped learning and avoiding making (more) mistakes? And although the header of her autobiography uses the same passive phrase (''Mistakes were made'') that is traced to Ronald Reagan's 1986 coming out on the Iran-Contra weapons-for-hostages deal, it doesn't necessarily imply taking responsibility or implementing changes to the better; rather, it suggests a kind of thoughtless or shallow action that can be avoided by simply giving them more thinking, by reflecting a little more deeply.

Thus, although Patty positions herself toward the end of her transformation as more agentive—having moved from the recipient end to herself being able to give advice as an active agent on how to resolve her mother's and siblings' competitiveness and self-pity—it remains

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unclear as to how she acquired or gained this position of a new agency. However, there is another difference in positioning between the two small stories, one that concerns how Patty differentiates and integrates herself with regard to others. Patty positions herself as ‘‘competitive’’ (if not ‘‘aggressive’’) on the field, and as different from, if not ‘‘outside’’ of, the rest of her family—which may be considered grounds for having distanced herself from this family for almost all her life—but her new position in the second small story is one in which her membership has been redeemed. She has become once again and now *is* one of them; she presents herself as ‘‘unflattering,’’ ‘‘weird,’’ and ‘‘ineffectual’’ just like her siblings (p. 528), and she sees herself as ‘‘having made probably more mistakes as a mother’’ (p. 529) than her mother but in essence, as ‘‘good for each other.’’ And although Patty still sees herself as competitive and potentially divulging in self-pity, this new position is very different from the one she took (or was described as taking) in her earlier memories, as unraveled in small stories in the part of her autobiography that she had (‘‘composed at her therapist's suggestion,’’ p. 27).

Nevertheless, the question remains unanswered as to how she became the person who is depicted in the second part of her autobiography and the person who is found (and taken back in) by her husband, Walter, at the doorsteps of his lake house at Canterbridge Estates Lake. Asking what may have caused her transformation may be the wrong question to ask, but one still wonders what may have facilitated the changes and transformation that the reader—and in the fictional world, her parents and her siblings, and her children and (finally) her husband—confronts in terms of Patty's character development. Of course, this kind of question is not typically asked regarding fictional characters. It's the way they were drawn up; and all we may be left with is a discussion about whether the way they developed (or did not—as for the other female characters of *Freedom*) is believably reliable. However, in the attempt to navigate what we as readers bring to the interpretation of characters as interpretive repertoires, and what the author and/or narrator may have employed as rhetorical plot configurations, let me make the following compromise.

First, to explore the grounds for what facilitated Patty's character development, we may start with the question of how Patty (although we may ask this for anyone else in this novel) became the dissatisfied and disappointed character as who she was depicted: full of unhappiness and sarcasm, sufficiently depressed, driven by her sense of uselessness and self-pity, and ultimately lonely. It appears as if the characters in this novel in concert were attempting to trace their suffering back to injustices and slights they received in childhood and adolescence—where the family is constructed as the center of collecting experiences and forming a sense of self, of who-we-are, of how to live and how to become happy; where mistakes were made; and where mothers are torn between too little mother-love (as in the case of Patty and her mother, and in the case of Walter's grandfather, who reportedly emigrated from Sweden because his mother didn't love him enough) and too much mother-love (as in the case of Patty and her son Joey, and as we overhear, between Patty's mother and her daughter Abigail); and where not finding the right measure of mother love (as in *moderate* and *cool*; see Stearns, 1994) becomes yet another, though quite fertile, facilitator for individual suffering in characters' struggles.

But how did Patty overcome and free herself from the misery that (her) family ties presumably caused? How was she able to ultimately find happiness in a kinder and better life, something that she had been striving for since her earliest memories, the happiest of possible lives in which she ultimately could become the good wife and the good mother—a striving that piles up the pressure and has the potential of facilitating even more misery? It appears as if the medicine for overcoming her misery were a good cocktail of suffering and reflection, coupled with a turn to agency in the form of a more agentive sense of self: Patty had to fall so deeply in her suffering and personally experience the superlative of low (‘‘the lowest ever,’’ p. 508) to pull herself to how she is depicted in her final memories toward the end of the book. And to be able to pull herself, she had to be given the right amount of self-reflection—so she would recognize her mistakes as what led to her lowest of low points—and consequently she had to be bestowed with a new form of agency so she could pull herself out of this low into a new sense of happier self. Whether all this was due to the narrative means she employed (as she claimed to Walter: ‘‘it was a therapy project,’’ p. 461) or whether her narrative was

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just the expression of her transformation remains open to speculation. (Although an elaboration of the therapist as narrative character would have potentially come at the cost of Patty's developing agency, it nevertheless is interesting that he or she finds absolutely no mention elsewhere in *Freedom*—something I, as reader, actually am grateful for.)

Let me conclude with two brief, though critical, reflections on the role of suffering and the power of narrative. I should stress that I usually work with nonfiction—with ''real'' narratives from real people—small stories, the way they are embedded in conversations between people in vivo and in situ. In addition, my kind of small-story analysis is not confined to what people say but builds on the emotional-interactional practices that are embodied in the situated occasioning of these stories, and I work in a finer-grained, microanalytic fashion—if possible drawing on bodily and affective performative cues—than this contribution displays. Working with two small stories plucked from Patty's autobiography, I have tried to show how small-story analysis can be applied to fictional work in a similar vein, thus helping reveal insights into identity formation practices and their underpinnings. This was the aim when I originally took on the task of bringing small-story analysis to Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. However, there is another strand in our work with small stories—a more critical strand, one that in my opinion is worthwhile to follow up on in more detail, although this project is beyond the scope of this review.

Francine du Plessix Gray speculated in a *Boston Globe* interview on the empowering attraction of the memoir (Bolik, 2006):

> Novels keep us at distance. I get the sufferings and tribulations of childhood much more immediately from McCarthy's autobiography than I do from a novel about the problems of growing up. A memoir is less mediated, and more like a patient/doctor relationship: The writer is on the couch talking: you, the doctor, are reading with passion and interest, and listening, as good doctors must listen, and at the same time putting it through the mill—as any good doctor would—of your own consciousness, memory, and experience. (p. B3)

Building on this quote, it appears that we as readers bring to our readings of characters like Patty a wealth of therapeutic theology and desire, a system of beliefs that, according to Illouz (2008), is the result of an alliance between self-help industry and modern psychology. In this ideology the narrative of how to become a good person and lead a happy life (as in the good wife and the good mother) requires the ethos of self-reliance in the face of suffering. This narrative strongly suggests a plotline that starts off from the individual experience of the lowest low point (which simultaneously is coupled with the experience of extreme loneliness) before the next stage can kick in, in the form of a more adequate reflection of what is wrong (resulting in an account of what mistakes were made). It appears that these two stages of deepest suffering and subsequent reflection have become plotlike prerequisites that make the redirection of one's personal agency from an undergoer or victim to a person who authoritatively takes charge, claims responsibility for her wrongdoing (mistakes), and becoming a moral agent, a more plausible and believable narrative. And it appears that happiness and life fulfillment without this self-reflective claim to a new and higher form of agency are unthinkable and unattainable. Ironically, although this master narrative has been successfully embraced in the theology of suffering and is continuously recycled in ''the church of Oprah Winfrey'' (Oppenheimer, 2011, p. A15), it also seems to have affected and become quite successfully woven into the fabric of Franzen's *Freedom*.

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MICHAEL BAMBERG
Clark University

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