Requena-Pelegrí, Teresa. "Narratives of Parkinson's dementia and masculinities: Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*." *Ageing Masculinities, Alzheimer's and Dementia Narratives*. Ed. Heike Hartung, Rüdiger Kunow and Matthew Sweney. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 163–178. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350230637.ch-009>>.

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Narratives of Parkinson's dementia and masculinities: Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*

Teresa Requena-Pelegri

Recent research in social and cultural gerontology has paid growing attention to intersectionality as an effective theoretical tool to move beyond the observation of difference to an analysis of the social relations of inequality that shape the transition into old age (Calasanti and King 2015, 193; Calasanti and King 2020, 9).¹

In this chapter, I analyse the ways in which masculinities, old age, and dementia intersect in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), which features as one of its protagonists, Alfred Lambert, an old man with Parkinson's Disease (PD). To that effect, I draw on Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities (CSMM)² and on notions of embodiment and privilege in order to explore the ways in which Alfred Lambert's normative masculine identity as representative of his embodiment of male privilege is transformed by ageing and disease, conditions that place him in a position of vulnerability. I argue that Alfred undergoes a progressive experience of redefinition of his privileged position as a man through the experiences of ageing and PD, which both constitute visible markers on his body. His new nuanced experience of his up-to-then uncontested privilege on account of his gender becomes qualified by ageing and the progression of PD. Thus, I begin by discussing the intersectional

¹ Parts of this essay were previously published in 'Negotiating a Masculine Bloc: Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*.' *Revista Canaria de Estudios ingleses*, 66, April 2013, 99–109.

² The use of the notion of 'Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities' follows Jeff Hearn's definition, i.e. that masculinities are indeed 'critical, are diverse, ontologically, epistemologically, and politically' (2019, 54).

approach to masculinities, ageing, and disease, to later analyse the ways in which these notions are inextricably related to the construction of privilege and embodiment. After this initial section, I analyse *The Corrections* from the point of view elaborated on in the first section. I argue that the representation of Alfred's identity in the text offers a portrayal of the intersections that conform human experience. As a result, the experience of vulnerability derived from age and condition results in a moderate redefinition of male entitlement, thus becoming one of the 'corrections' that the novel explores.

1. Embodying privilege: The intersectional approach to masculinity, old age and dementia

A defining feature of the intersectional approach to age studies fosters an analysis of the specific relations of inequality between groups, thus it does not study groups separately but rather focuses on relating groups 'in terms of institutionalized activities that maintain inequality' (Calasanti and King 2015, 193). To that effect, an examination of the individual and collective differences in relation to age, class, and ethnicity with an intersectional perspective result in views that 'solidify, contest or deconstruct difference' (Hearn and Wray 2015, 206). The incorporation of an intersectional approach entails the realization that it may be not enough to 'add gender to existing frameworks: women are not only women, men are not only men. Instead the challenge is to theorize the interconnections of age, gender(s), sexualities, ethnicities, and other social divisions, and their location in time, place and culture' (Hearn and Wray 2015, 206). From this perspective, intersectionality is in sync with the theorization of age relations, which studies age as a complex amalgam of social relations and may be defined as 'the system of inequality, based on age, which privileges the not-old at the expense of the old' (Calasanti et al. 2006, 13, 17). As these formulations reveal, the notion of privilege and discrimination is part of the structural paradigm of oppression. In Pease's words, 'we cannot understand oppression unless we understand privilege' (ix). Thus, the theoretical articulation of privilege has placed Western dominance, class elitism, white, patriarchal, heterosexual or able-bodied privileges under scrutiny and has contributed to the critique of dominance (Pease 2010, 3). Focusing on those

who benefit most from existing social divisions and inequalities and thus emphasizing the structural basis of discrimination, the study of privilege lays bare, among other things, the sense of entitlement that members of privileged groups usually have as to the privileges they enjoy (Pease 2010, 3, 15). In particular, male privilege sustains itself on Connell's concept of 'the patriarchal dividend', that is the advantages that men, as a group, gain from maintaining an unequal gender order, and hence the notion of privileges as being 'unearned', as coming with a 'backpack' of advantages since privilege does not demand the intent of individuals (McIntosh 1989; Pease 2010). Benefits such as money, authority, respect, safety, housing, institutional power or control over one's life are some of the aspects Connell identifies and, as equality grows, the patriarchal dividend is reduced (Connell 2009, 142).

Relevant to my discussion in this chapter is the analysis of privilege in relation to masculinities, age, and disease. The focus on the intersectional approach to these sites reveals the multifaceted position Alfred Lambert, an ageing man with dementia, may occupy in negotiating a position of privilege legitimated by his gender while at the same time experiencing discrimination on the basis of age and disease. In the novel, Alfred constitutes an example of the complex quality of privilege.

Of particular relevance in this network of intertwined subject positions is embodiment, defined as 'our experiences in our bodies as we move through the social and physical world' (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko qtd. in Hurd 2021, 187). Indeed, it becomes difficult to study ageing, gender and disease as separate processes from that of embodiment since all them entail bodily phenomena (Wehrle 2020). As Pease contends:

Oppression and privilege are not simply manifested in terms of differential access to resources, they are also embodied. (...) It is important to become aware of how marginality and privilege are experienced in the body because if the body is a site for *doing* privilege, it has implications for how we *undo* it.

2010, 149

Questions of embodiment have been largely absent from Age Studies (Gullette 2017; Wehrle 2020). This is especially interesting since the visible transformation of the body in the ageing process seems inescapable. However, 'in the study of aging we often lose sight of the lived body' thus diminishing its

material presence, tangibility, and visibility (Featherstone and Wernick 1995, 1). A similar opinion has been expressed by Gullette, who has exposed the invisibility of age in embodiment theory:

Embodiment theory ... increasingly differentiated bodies by gender, race and ethnicity, class, sexualities, and ability, and by their compound intersections. Even so, 'the somatic turn' mostly assumed a body without an age – even when discussing topics that have clear (to me) age-related components: e.g., demography, life-course structures, agency, social stratification, phenomenology, shaming, abjection, subordination, compound stereotypes, care-giving, or rights. Age is a universal intersection, but respected books in body studies may lack any index entry for age, and texts can survey the development of embodiment discourse without even listing age as an etcetera.

Gullette 2017

The absence Gullette refers to has also been present in the study of masculinities and old age despite the fact that the embodiment of masculinity has constituted an ongoing focus of analysis in critical studies in men and masculinities (CSMM). As Connell and Messerschmidt have underscored, hegemonic masculinity is related to particular ways of representing men's bodies, since 'bodies are involved more actively, more intimately, and more intricately in social processes than theory has usually allowed. Bodies participate in social action by delineating courses of social conduct, the body is a participant in generating social practice' (2017, 851). Thus, embodiment is an essential aspect in the construction of gender identity. As Connell has reasoned, the masculine body constitutes the key element in the construction of different masculinities: 'masculinity is, in most cases, thought to proceed from men's bodies ... the body seems to drive and direct action (e.g., men are naturally more aggressive than women) ... or the body sets limits to action (e.g., men naturally do not take care of infants)' (1995, 45). In the case of normative masculinities, the male body has been specifically constructed as physically perfect and whole (Connell 1986, 1995).

The construction of the normative ideal of masculinity based on bodily perfection, health, and youth translate into socially situated forms of dominance, which is another reason that can be put forward in explaining the invisibility of age in discussions of masculinities. As Bartholomaeus and

Tarrant have noted, 'hegemonic masculinity valorises youth or focuses on a middle-age group often perceived to be universal to all ages (or at least the most important)' (2016, 354). The flip side of such valorization is that images of older men continue to be largely constructed in opposition to youthful energy and physicality, an aspect that co-exists with the common 'ghettoization of old age' (Gilleard 2005, 157). As Calasanti et al. argue, old people may feel they have to develop strategies to preserve their 'youthfulness' in light of the physical changes that occur as they age (2006, 16). Such focus on youthfulness also has intersecting consequences in relation to the construction of masculinities and health, since the valorization of youth entails the subsequent detachment of older men from the attributes such as power, control, sports, or the occupational world, typically characterized as belonging to youth. This is the reason why old age continues to be mostly related to a perceived loss of masculinity (Spector-Mersel 2006, 75).

The construction of a normative model of masculinity upon the imperatives of perfection, youth, and health situates the bodies of older men with dementia in a nuanced and contested site of privilege. On the one hand, ageing men may continue to hold on to dominant and unearned positions of privilege derived from the patriarchal dividend while on the other, they occupy a social position of invisibility and discrimination based on ageism and the stigma of disease.

As different scholars have noted, the experience of dementia and its intersections with gender, class or ethnicity still constitute a small amount of the research carried out in dementia studies (Sandberg 2018, 2; Hulko 2009). Sandberg, for instance, argues that this 'dearth of theoretical and empirical work on gender and dementia is surprising since feminist gerontology is a significant strand within social and cultural gerontology, and gender and ageing issues (...) have been discussed by scholars for several decades' (Sandberg 2018, 3).

Different paradigms or narratives have been put forward in cultural and social gerontology that resist the reading of the ageing male body in terms of an inexorable decline. In particular, that of 'successful ageing' seems to have attracted wide notoriety in its refuting of the myth that steep decline was intrinsic to old age by building a notion of success that entailed 'high levels of mental and physical function; avoidance of disease and disability; and engagement through paid or unpaid productive activities' (Rowe and Kahn

qtd. in Calasanti and King 2020, 2). This model has been questioned for its reliance 'on personal responsibility to control aging through health and lifestyle choices' (Calasanti and King 2020, 2). As such, the successful ageing model fosters the problems that affect old people as concerns that are essentially personal, thus undermining the effect of age relations that needs to be addressed at the collective or institutional level (Calasanti and King 2020, 2). A derived aspect in the critique to successful ageing is the fact that it is a narrative that continues to maintain a relational quality of ageing male bodies to young bodies, in that the assumption is that 'old people can minimize their difference from youth so long as they age successfully' (Calasanti and King 2020, 4).

A different approach that eschews a successful ageing narrative is the one promoted by later life embodiment research, which has explored the ways that bodily changes derived from disability and illness impact old people's everyday lives and sense of self (Hurd 2021, 187). Typically, the body gains centre stage attention, culminating into what has been termed a 'biographical disruption', the recognition that the worlds of pain, suffering or perhaps death are not distant possibilities or a plight that affects only others and not oneself (Bury qtd. in Hurd 2021, 187). Central to this literature is the focus on the way that the onset of health issues such as pain, functional losses, or life expectancy associated with chronic illnesses, as well as the social consequences of being ill 'threaten, if not displace, previously held assumptions about one's body, self-concept, future plans and possibilities, and relationships with others' (Bury qtd. in Hurd 2021, 187–8).

The limitations of the successful ageing model with its focus on the possibilities of getting closer to high levels of physical function are further unveiled when age and dementia intersect, since the possibilities of getting dementia increase with ageing, and as a result, people may be doubly stigmatized in dementia: 'people with dementia are likely to experience the stigma that is specifically associated with the disease as well as the broader stigma of ageism' (Evans 2018, 264). For one thing, the weak evidence for the effectiveness of treatments that may ameliorate the symptoms, together with a growing awareness of dementia and its effects – such as ailing memory – has resulted in growing fears about getting dementia (Evans 2018, 264). For another, the physical transformations constitute a central signifier of loss of bodily functions. From this perspective, it may be difficult to find any positive

attributes commonly associated with dementia (Evans 2018, 272) which in turn clearly eliminates the possibility of a successful ageing narrative, but also makes it difficult to challenge the naturalization of age-based decline at the heart of ageism.

2. Intersectional exploration of gender privilege, age and disease: Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* and 'My Father's Brain'

Jonathan Franzen has narrated his experience with his father's dementia in the essay 'My Father's Brain' and the novel *The Corrections*. While the essay constitutes Franzen's own coming to terms with his father's illness, the novel features at its centre a white, middle-class ageing man with PD as one of its main characters, Albert Lambert.³

The Corrections is set in the fictional Midwestern town of St. Jude and pictures Alfred and Enid Lambert, who live on their own in their old age in the house they have shared with their children. The Lamberts are a white, middle-class family whose mother, Enid Lambert, has one central design that is announced early on: to celebrate one last Christmas family reunion in their hometown of St. Jude. As the narration unfolds, there is an impending sense of urgency in Enid's wish, based on her fears about Alfred's PD. The story will thus provide an insight into the personal strain that each member of the family undergoes until at the end, they do actually reunite. As the opening description of the setting suggests – 'trees restless, temperatures falling, the whole northern religion of things coming to an end' (*The Corrections* 3) – the signs of seasonal transformation constitute a symbolic rendering of the effects Alfred Lambert's developing PD have on himself and the family.

The fact that the novel takes place in the Midwest adds a local and conservative background to the action in the novel. As Poole has argued in his

³ As Rutter and Hermeston contend, Alfred 'is referred to throughout the novel as having Parkinson's Disease (p. 64, p. 122, p. 428) and there is also some reference to "depression" or "clinical depression" by family members (p. 179). There are also some implications he may have early Alzheimer's Disease (p. 465). Late in the novel (p. 564) Alfred receives a confirmed medical diagnosis of parkinsonism, dementia, depression and neuropathy of the legs and urinary tract and subsequently dies' 2019, (3).

approach to what he deems Franzen's Midwestern poetics, 'there steadfastly remains a common, nationwide understanding that this is a homogeneous, coherent region: the American heartland' as a signifier for the United States as a nation (2008, 265). Furthermore, the Midwest is the place where what Poole considers 'two ancient American myths' co-exist. Namely, the ideal of the farmer and agrarianism on the one hand, and the old-fashioned and reactionary quality of the region on the other (2008, 269). It is this latter quality which will be central to the construction of privileged identity based on patriarchal gender roles. In particular, Enid constitutes the novel's determined spokesperson for the values of the Midwest, as 'she founds her insistence for remaining in the Midwestern suburbia on the predictability of things, on the reliance of daily routine' (Poole 2008, 277), which contrasts with her son Gary's opinion, who hates the region for its sadness (*The Corrections* 203).

The opening chapter pictures Alfred and Enid's domestic life, he is now a retired man and both of them seem to be haunted by a fretfulness that is difficult to dispel: 'ringing throughout the house was an alarm bell that no one but Alfred and Enid could hear directly. It was the alarm bell of anxiety' (*The Corrections* 3). Such ever-present anxiety translates into Enid's frantically clipping of coupons and her bundling them in a rubber band while stacking them in an all-purpose drawer that keeps them there beyond their expiry date, until the dates become 'historical' (*The Corrections* 4). It also makes her hide a letter from Alfred's former company, the Axon Corporation, because there are aspects about a patent he developed that she and her children are managing and she does not want Alfred to know about. Another reason for Enid's unease is her attempts at decoding Alfred's behaviour, which she reads as essentially erratic. Thus, Alfred sleeps for a long time during the day; he spends long hours painting their love seat but after a month Enid realizes he has only finished painting the legs (*The Corrections* 5). There also appears to be a smell of urine in his workshop – 'perhaps it was only the smell of gasoline and of the dampness of the workshop that smelled like urine (but could not possibly be urine)' (*The Corrections* 6); Alfred also struggles with words – 'every sentence became an adventure in the woods' (*The Corrections* 12) – and is diagnosed with mild hearing impairment by a specialist (*The Corrections* 13). All these symptoms point at the invisibility of the early stages of PD, an aspect that Franzen

explores in his essay and that he specifically relates to his own refusal to see: 'I think I was inclined to interpolate across my father's silences and mental absences and to persist in seeing him as the same old wholly whole Earl Franzen' ('My Father's Brain' 15). The changes Alfred is experiencing begin to modify the position he has enjoyed in his life up to then; he is increasingly becoming the recipient of care as a result of his vulnerability instead of being the economic provider of the family.

This opening chapter also provides an interesting rewriting of the process of gender naturalization of male privilege that has operated in the Lambert's home up to then. If we take the process of naturalization to mean 'the framing of problems that result from social processes as merely "the way things are"' (Calasanti and King 2020, 2), we can argue that the gender dynamics exemplified by Enid and Alfred in their marriage reproduce a traditional Midwestern white middle-class patriarchal structure in which Alfred has played the role of the breadwinner while Enid has been a housewife and mother. Part of her role as a mother has been to maintain a tight control of what she perceives as her children's needs and to offer unilateral solutions. In the case of her daughter, Enid focuses on the possibility of finding a suitable husband who will embody the traditional masculine role of breadwinner with very specific features:

a young man with a neat haircut of the kind you saw in ads for menswear, a really super young fellow who had an upbeat attitude and was polite to older people and didn't believe in premarital sex, and who had a job that contributed to society (...) and who came from a loving, stable, traditional family and wanted to start a loving, stable, traditional family of his own. Unless Enid was very much deceived by appearances, young men of this caliber continued, even as the twentieth century drew to a close, to be *the norm* in suburban St. Jude.

The Corrections 135, emphasis mine

Enid's role as wife will transform as the novel progresses, moving out from a family fiction of harmony she has constructed for herself to the eventual possibilities for personal realization that materialize after Alfred's death in the last passages of the text. This aspect is also noted in 'My Father's Brain', in which Franzen explores how the effects of living with dementia affect the gender roles between his parents:

He, who had always insisted on being the boss in the marriage, the maker of decisions, the adult protector of the childlike wife, now couldn't help behaving like the child. Now the unseemly outbursts were his, not my mother's. Now she ferried him around town the way she'd once ferried me and my brothers. Task by task, she took charge of their life. And so, although my father's 'long illness' was a crushing strain and disappointment to her, it was also an opportunity to grow slowly into an autonomy she'd never been allowed to: to settle some old scores.

'My Father's' Brain 25

In the novel, Enid's tension between the performance of a submissive wife and the resistance to such a role surfaces early on and finds its culmination at the end of the novel, after Alfred's death. While we learn that 'Enid's world was like a lawn in which the bluegrass grew so thick that evil was simply choked out: a miracle of niceness' (*The Corrections* 135), her thoughts will be revealed to be oppositional and full of anger from the first chapter, resisting to conform to the demands Alfred has put on her in their life as a married couple. Thus, Enid is now 'a guerrilla' who lives 'a refugee existence' against Alfred, her 'ostensible foe' (*The Corrections* 6–7). Her sense of victory over Alfred's dominance will surface in the last chapter in a win-or-lose logic – 'she had to tell him, while she still had time, how wrong he'd been and how right she'd been' (*The Corrections* 653). It is such realization at the end of the story that endows her with a renewed hope for the near future: 'she felt that nothing could kill her hope now, nothing. She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life' (*The Corrections* 653).

For Alfred, the fact that his identity in the present is framed around ageing and PD with a related severe transformation of his bodily functions forces a redefinition of the gendered and able-bodied privilege that has operated in his life up to then. Thus, as the derived effects of PD in his life post-retirement slowly become more visible, the increasing change in Alfred's bodily functions reveal a vulnerability that triggers a redefinition of gender assumptions. Specifically, this operates in relation to his past masculine identity based on physical violence, emotional detachment, and authority, aspects that have placed him in a position of dominance over his wife and his three children. Hence, his role as the Lambert patriarch is shown to be no longer sustainable, he is the diminishing 'governing force' that witnesses his ascendancy being

shrunk: 'unfortunately, Enid lacked the temperament to manage such a house, and Alfred lacked the neurological wherewithal. Alfred's cries of rage on discovering evidence of guerrilla actions (...) were the cries of a government that could no longer govern' (*The Corrections* 7). Such realization results in a struggle to reproduce his male privilege in the face of lessened power. A fundamental signifier in this development are the alterations in Alfred's body.

Alfred's body is one of the clearest sites on which this struggle to maintain his unearned past privilege is enacted, as the tension that arises among the different intersections of privileged and non-privileged sites becomes more visible as the narration unfolds. Alfred's struggle with what he terms 'the betrayals' of his body becomes more and more visible, the tremors in his hands or his difficulty in swallowing. The meaning these transformations have for Alfred is intertwined with his internalized ageism – he reads them as 'childish' – and a loss of male privilege that includes giving orders, possessing or enforcing discipline and obedience:

His affliction offended his sense of ownership. These shaking hands belonged to nobody but him, and yet they refused to obey him. They were like bad children. Unreasoning two-year-olds in a tantrum of selfish misery. The more sternly he gave orders, the less they listened and the more miserable and out of control they got. He'd always been vulnerable to a child's recalcitrance and refusal to behave like an adult. Irresponsibility and undiscipline were the bane of his existence, and it was another instance of that Devil's logic that his own untimely affliction should consist of his body's refusal to obey him.

The Corrections 77

As this passage shows, Alfred's loss of entitlement plays out in both his lack of control over his body, in his age, and in the qualities he feels he has lost as a man, combining thus to form an intersecting position of vulnerability. Alfred's interpretation of his loss of control over his body as a childish aspect, as representing the refusal to obey and submit to discipline, reveals Alfred's perspective on the ways that social relations are structured. The above-quoted passage stands in opposition to Alfred's openly racist comments at several points in the early part of the novel as when he expresses his racist views about African Americans – "the blacks" would be the ruination of this country, "the blacks" were incapable of coexisting with whites, they expected the government

to take care of them, they didn't know the meaning of hard work, what they lacked above all was *discipline*' (26, emphasis mine). Interestingly, his white privilege is also established upon the notion of discipline he has identified before as being an integral part of his character and thus becoming one of the foundations for his position of dominance.

Alfred's struggle to retain control and self-control over his body will progressively give way to a gradual realization of the increasing vulnerability he feels. This aspect reaches its peak in the chapter entitled 'At Sea,' Franzen's brilliant send-up of a sea cruise. In it, Alfred and Enid embark on the *Gunnar Myrdal* in a much-anticipated cruise around Nova Scotia. While at sea, the miseries of their married years together become evident. Ironically, their past sexual routine reveals the extent to which Alfred's dominant masculinity has been dependent on Enid's conscious performance of her expected gendered sexual role as a passive woman:

To exert attraction, Enid had to be a still, unbloody carcass. Her stillness and self-containment, the slow sips of air she took, her purely vulnerable objecthood, made him pounce. And feeling his padded paw on her ribs and his meat-seeking breath on her neck she went limp, as if with prey's instinctive resignation ('Let's get this dying over with'), although in truth her passivity was calculated, because she knew passivity inflamed him.

The Corrections 279

It is also in this chapter that we learn what it means for Alfred to feel 'like a man' (*The Corrections* 283). When the narrator accounts for Alfred's past as a railroad engineer, we discover his ethics of work, essentially structured around long working hours in opposition to 'a new effeminate generation for whom "easygoing" was a compliment' (*The Corrections* 281). Alfred is thus featured as a tough professional, the persistent breadwinner who works long hours in order to provide for his family: 'no man worked harder than he, no man made a quieter motel neighbor, no man was more of a man' (*The Corrections* 283). Alfred's work ethics remain in the past because his present is, once more, guided by transformation; he struggles with incontinence, and the chapter ends with Alfred falling into water and Enid coming to realize 'the falling object as your husband of forty-seven years' (*The Corrections* 289), the utmost emblem of Alfred's inability to control his body.

Imminent change in Alfred's life is plainly perceived by one of his sons, Chip, whose own identity is initially structured around the figures of his parents, whom he defines as 'killers' when they visit him in New York in their endeavour to exert an obvious control over their son (*The Corrections* 17). Chip's life, clothes, and 'tall, gym-built' body are filtered through his parents' 'disappointed eyes' (*The Corrections* 18). Although they cast accusing glances, Chip is also aware that despite Alfred's PD and age, his father's violent and domineering behaviour lingers long:

Though stooped in the neck now, Alfred was still an imposing figure. His hair was white and thick and sleek, like a polar bear's, and the powerful long muscles of his shoulders, which Chip remembered laboring in the spanking of a child, usually Chip himself, still filled the gray tweed shoulders of his sport coat. (. . .) For a moment it seemed to Chip that his father had become a likable old stranger; but he knew Alfred, underneath, to be a shouter and a punisher.

The Corrections 19, 25

Equally for Gary, the problems he experiences in his marriage to Caroline reproduce the power and gender dynamics he witnessed in his parents, realizing the verbal abuse his father had exerted on his mother; he had been 'a shouter' (*The Corrections* 184). Gary recalls his immobility, his failure to intercede on her mother's behalf while his own sons now play a very different role, they are Catherine's 'allies' in the house (*The Corrections* 184).

Alfred's coming to terms with his condition reaches a climax in the chapter 'One Last Christmas'. In it, Alfred is in the basement with prescription drugs, an enema kit, and a shotgun on the table (*The Corrections* 531). By comparing what he perceives as his now obsolete body with the string of Christmas lights he tries unsuccessfully to light, he reaches the conclusion that 'it was hell to get old' (*The Corrections* 534) and seriously considers suicide as an option. However, Alfred will face up to his condition; he reconsiders what he terms 'the wisdom of surviving' after his ship incident and being hauled out of the water, dried off and wrapped up, 'like a child' (*The Corrections* 534). He also considers suicide, an action he dismisses because he cannot bear to think to be found as a 'finite carcass in a sea of blood and bone chips and gray matter' (*The Corrections* 537). Alfred's awareness of his near death is thus hardened by his realizing that he has to be taken care of.

In contrast, and true to her ever-present capacity for transforming reality, Enid chooses not to publicly accept Alfred's near death and feels shame upon the incidents on the ship 'her shame was crippling and atrocious. It mattered to her now, as it hadn't a week earlier, that a thousand happy travelers on the *Gunnar Myrdal* had witnessed how peculiar she and Alfred were' (*The Corrections* 538). Thus, she decides to start personally handwriting her hundred Christmas cards, in which she includes a short note which reads: 'Loved our cruise to see the autumn color in New England and maritime Canada. Al took an unexpected "swim" in the Gulf of St. Lawrence but is feeling "ship-shape" again!' (*The Corrections* 542). Her attitude contrasts sharply with Chip's, whose life is meant to be a fundamental correction of his father's. Chip's final correction constitutes a negotiation of his identity in the same way that Alfred's is also the end result of a process of transformation we have witnessed in the course of the novel. Thus, refusing to see himself through his father's eyes, he manages to commit himself to Alfred in the final stages of his disease. As Hawkins argues, 'by loving his father, Chip proves that he need not be mired in his father's utilitarianism or in the expressive individualism to which Chip has adhered for much of his life' (2010, 82). Chip understands the pain behind his father's suffering and chooses to stand by him, revealing his capacity for empathy. Despite the hostility that has permeated his relationship with his parents, Chip's masculinity is structured compassion for his father as well as the rejection of the features he has learned to read in his father's life.

3. Conclusion

An analysis of the operation of male privilege in *The Corrections* reveals the ways in which it is qualified and modified by the intersecting parameters of age and disease. As I have argued, Alfred's sense of entitlement derived from the benefits he has gained from the patriarchal dividend during his life, undergoes a process of reconfiguration that has at its foundation the processes of ageing and disease. As a result, the normative masculinity he has performed during his life based on violence, aggressiveness or his sense of entitlement becomes qualified in the later stages of his life by the intersectional positions derived from age and disease. Such reconsideration is concomitant

with Alfred's sense of loss at the transformation – a correction – that is made especially visible through the changes that occur in his body. His dismay at the inability to control his bodily functions is symbolic of the parallel loss of authority and exertion of discipline over his family, aspects he has felt all his life he was entitled to. Ultimately, a coming to terms with his vulnerability is forced upon Alfred and thus, *The Corrections* offer in the character of Alfred a complex representation of different identity positions that intersect in old age.

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