

“Analysis of Tragic Realism in *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen”

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Abstract:

This research analyzes tragic realism in contemporary American society as depicted in Jonathan Franzen’s novel *Freedom* (2010). Drawing on John Orr’s theoretical framework of tragic realism and Paul Kirkland’s philosophical analysis of Nietzsche’s concept of the tragic, this study examines how Franzen presents an unembellished portrayal of post-9/11 American life without romanticization or idealization. The analysis focuses particularly on the tension between personal freedom and social responsibility as experienced by the novel’s central characters, such as Patty and Walter Berglund and their friend Richard Katz. Using qualitative textual analysis, this research demonstrates that Franzen employs tragic realism to expose the moral ambiguities, emotional failures, and inevitable suffering that arise when individuals pursue personal freedom while navigating social obligations. The study reveals how the novel’s non-linear narrative structure, morally complex characterization, and unflinching representation of middle-class American life exemplify the key features of tragic realism: the rejection of easy resolutions, the acknowledgement of unavoidable human suffering, and the realistic depiction of social and political forces that shape individual destinies. This research contributes to contemporary American fiction scholarship by demonstrating how *Freedom* continues the tradition of tragic realism in twenty-first-century literature while addressing the specific anxieties and moral dilemmas of post-9/11 American society. The findings suggest that tragic realism remains a vital literary mode for representing the complexities of modern human experience, particularly the fraught relationship between individual liberty and collective responsibility.

Keywords: Contemporary American fiction, *Freedom*, Jonathan Franzen, Personal freedom, post-9/11 literature, social responsibility, Tragic realism

Introduction:

In contemporary American literature, few works examine the complexities of human experience as deeply as Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010). Published nearly a decade after the September 11 attacks, the novel powerfully embodies tragic realism within the context of post-9/11 America, presenting what Franzen himself describes as an unflinching exploration of “the

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contradictions of modern life” without easy resolutions (Franzen, 1996, p. 42). This study analyzes how Franzen employs tragic realism. This literary mode combines realistic social critique with the acknowledgement of unavoidable human suffering, to portray the tension between personal freedom and social responsibility in contemporary American society.

Following John Orr’s framework in *Tragic Realism and Modern Society*, this research demonstrates that *Freedom* exemplifies the genre’s key features: morally ambiguous characters, the rejection of idealization, and the realistic depiction of forces that constrain individual agency (Orr, 1989, pp. 12-15). The novel’s unembellished portrayal of the Berglund family’s struggles reflects broader national anxieties about freedom, responsibility, and moral choice in the aftermath of September 11. Set against major historical events from the late 1970s to the early 2010s, the narrative explores how personal desires collide with social obligations, producing tragic consequences that resist simple resolution.

Franzen first gained major recognition with *The Corrections* (2001), but *Freedom* firmly established him as a leading voice in modern American literature (Burn, 2008, pp. 3-5). The novel centers on the Berglund family, particularly Patty and Walter, whose seemingly ideal suburban life gradually unravels. Through a non-linear narrative, Franzen reveals the characters’ inner conflicts, past traumas, and complicated relationships, including Patty’s connection with musician Richard Katz. While initially embodying the American dream, the Berglunds confront moral dilemmas, emotional failures, and conflicting desires for autonomy. Beyond family drama, *Freedom* examines broader themes of security, war, individual rights, and the meaning of personal liberty in contemporary America. The novel ultimately invites readers to reflect on love, responsibility, and the true cost of freedom.

Through close textual analysis informed by tragic realism theory, this study addresses two central research questions:

- i. How does tragic realism shape the characters of the novel?
- ii. How does the novel represent the tragic relationship between personal freedom and social responsibility?

This dissertation proceeds in five main sections. Following this introduction, the literature review examines the theoretical foundations of tragic realism, tracing its development from classical tragedy through modern American fiction. The methodology section outlines the qualitative textual analysis approach employed in this study. The analysis section examines how tragic realism manifests in *Freedom* through characterization, narrative structure, and thematic concerns, with particular attention to the tension between freedom and responsibility. The conclusion synthesizes findings and considers the significance of tragic realism in contemporary American literature.

Tragic Realism - Theoretical Foundations:

Tragic realism is a distinctive mode in literature that combines realistic depiction with the inevitability of human suffering. Rejecting idealization, it presents flawed, morally complex characters facing unavoidable hardships (Orr, 1989, pp. 12-15; Williams, 1966, p. 87). As Orr argues in his foundational study *Tragic Realism and Modern Society*, this genre is “a literary affront to the rational solution to human problems” (p. 23). In liberal-capitalist societies, the ideological techniques of moderation and consensus are used to patch over class differences and

inequalities, while in state-socialist countries, the rational solution to human problems becomes the prerogative of dictatorial bureaucracies. Orr observes that “the culture of rationality atrophies tragic fiction” (1989, p. 24), making it both more subversive and rarer in contemporary literature.

Kirkland’s examination of tragic realism’s philosophical foundations in Nietzsche’s work reveals its emphasis on accepting life’s inherent contradictions. Kirkland notes that Nietzsche’s concept “embraces the fundamental contradictions of human existence while maintaining engagement with political and social realities” (2010, p. 68). This philosophical grounding informs the genre’s resistance to easy resolutions and its commitment to portraying suffering as an inescapable aspect of human life. The tragic realist vision, as Eagleton suggests, acknowledges that “human beings are caught between their limitless desires and their limited capacities,” resulting in inevitable conflict and disappointment (2003, p. 12).

Key features of tragic realism include emphasis on conflict between personal desire and social obligation, morally ambiguous characters rather than clear heroes or villains, focus on fate, suffering, and unintended consequences, and realistic portrayal of emotional and ethical struggles (Steiner, 1996, pp. 128-130). This genre acknowledges that external forces and human limitations often shape destiny. By exposing vulnerability and moral uncertainty, tragic realism offers a profound reflection on the human condition.

Historical Development of Tragic Realism:

In the eighteenth century, the changing attitude toward humanity’s place in society came to be viewed with an essentially democratic spirit. This mood was expressed in the plays, novels, and poems of writers such as Lillo, Richardson, Godwin, and Wordsworth, who presented a tragic vision of the mundane life of the common person, a tragic mode that was later advanced by Ibsen, Hauptmann, Strindberg, and Arthur Miller (Orr, 1989, pp. 45-48; Williams, 1966, pp. 102-105). Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, authors from Britain, Ireland, Russia, and the United States, for example, James Joyce, George Orwell, and C.S. Lewis played a pivotal role in advancing the literary realism movement to unprecedented levels. Against the backdrop of these two centuries, characterized by wars, political unrest, societal disruptions, and economic instabilities, writers discovered numerous authentic experiences to incorporate into their narratives (Levin, 1951, pp. 195-197).

The development of tragic realism coincided with the rise of the novel as the dominant literary form. As Szondi argues, the novel’s capacity for sustained psychological exploration and social critique made it the ideal vehicle for tragic realism (2002, pp. 78-80). Unlike classical tragedy, which focused on the downfall of elevated figures, tragic realism in the novel concerned itself with ordinary people caught in circumstances beyond their control, their suffering rendered meaningful not by cosmic significance but by its authentic representation of human limitation.

Tragic Realism in Post-9/11 American Fiction

The events of September 11, 2001, profoundly shaped American literature, creating what Gray calls “a literature of trauma” that seeks to represent the ruptures in American consciousness produced by the attacks (2011, pp. 15-18). Versluys argues that post-9/11 fiction is characterized by “an attempt to work through collective trauma while resisting easy consolations or nationalist narratives” (Versluys, 2009, p. 45). This resistance to consolation aligns closely with tragic realism’s refusal of idealization and its commitment to representing suffering without redemption.

Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), while not directly depicting September 11, exemplifies what Keniston and Quinn identify as the "indirect approach" to post-9/11 fictions that explore the anxieties, moral compromises, and disillusionment of the era without foregrounding the attacks themselves (2018, pp. 8-10). The novel's focus on freedom and its costs reflects what Randall describes as "the central paradox of post-9/11 American life: the simultaneous expansion and contraction of personal liberty in the name of national security" (2011, p. 92).

Jonathan Franzen and Contemporary American Realism

Franzen's literary philosophy, articulated most fully in his 1996 essay "Perchance to Dream," positions him as an heir to the realist tradition while acknowledging the challenges facing the novel in an image-dominated culture. He argues that the novel must compete with visual media yet offers unique opportunities for exploring moral complexity: "The novel is a place where complex issues can be worked through in a more sustained and nuanced way than is possible in other forms of discourse" (p. 42). This vision directly informs his approach in *Freedom*, where he creates what he describes as "flawed, recognizable people rather than heroes or villains" (2017).

Critical reception of Franzen's work has positioned him within several overlapping traditions. Burn identifies Franzen as representing "a return to social realism after the postmodern turn," arguing that his novels combine nineteenth-century realist concerns with contemporary narrative techniques (2008, pp. 15-18). Kelly describes this as "beginning with postmodernism" by using postmodern strategies in the service of fundamentally realist goals (2011, pp. 391-395). Giles, however, cautions against reading Franzen as simply rejecting postmodernism, suggesting instead that his work represents "a synthesis of realist social critique and postmodern irony" (2007, pp. 328-330).

Tanenhaus, in his influential New York Times review, praised *Freedom* as "a masterpiece of American fiction" that captures "the anxieties of our age with unprecedented clarity and compassion" (Tanenhaus, 2010). The novel's commercial and critical success established Franzen as what Mullins calls "the voice of contemporary American social conscience" (2016, p. 178). This position has made him a central figure in debates about the role of the novel in contemporary culture and the possibility of tragic realism in an era sceptical of grand narratives (Konstantinou, 2016, pp. 145-150).

The relationship between freedom and responsibility in contemporary American life provides the thematic center for Franzen's tragic vision. As Hungerford argues, post-1960s American fiction increasingly grapples with "the tension between individual autonomy and communal obligation" in a society that privileges the former while requiring the latter (2010, p. 212). *Freedom* exemplifies this tension, demonstrating how personal liberty often conflicts with social responsibility, producing tragic outcomes that resist resolution.

Research Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine tragic realism in Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. The primary source is Franzen's novel *Freedom* (2010), supplemented by his essays, especially "Perchance to Dream" (1996) and selections from *How to Be Alone* (2002), and interviews that articulate his literary philosophy. The analytical framework draws on John Orr's theory of tragic realism in modern fiction (1989), Paul Kirkland's analysis of tragic realism's philosophical (2010) foundations in Nietzsche's thought, and Raymond

Williams's seminal work *Modern Tragedy* (1966), which provides historical context for understanding tragic modes in contemporary literature.

The methodology involves close reading of the novel's narrative structure, characterization, and thematic patterns, with particular attention to representations of freedom and responsibility. Specific passages illustrating tragic realism's key features particularly moral ambiguity, unavoidable suffering, and the collision between individual desire and social obligation, are analyzed in depth. The study employs what Rebein identifies as the "contextual method" of literary analysis, situating the text within its historical moment (post-9/11 America) while examining its engagement with longer literary traditions (2001, pp. 12-15).

Secondary sources including critical essays on Franzen's work (Burn, 2008; Kelly, 2011; Giles, 2007; Tanenhaus, 2010), scholarship on post-9/11 American fiction (Gray, 2011; Versluys, 2009; Keniston and Quinn, 2018), and theoretical works on tragic realism (Eagleton, 2003; Steiner, 1996; Szondi, 2002) contextualize the analysis and support the interpretation. This triangulated approach that combines textual analysis, theoretical framework, and critical context enables a comprehensive examination of how *Freedom* embodies tragic realism in representing contemporary American society.

The analysis focuses on three primary areas: (1) characterization, examining how Patty, Walter, and Richard Katz embody tragic realism's emphasis on flawed, morally complex individuals; (2) narrative structure, analyzing how the novel's non-linear chronology and multiple perspectives resist simple moral judgments; and (3) thematic exploration of freedom and responsibility, demonstrating how the novel presents these values as fundamentally in tension rather than harmoniously balanced. Throughout, the study maintains attention to how Franzen's tragic realism specifically addresses post-9/11 American anxieties about security, freedom, and moral certainty.

Discussions:

Tragic Realism as a Genre in *Freedom*: Tragic realism in *Freedom* manifests through several interconnected features that distinguish it from both traditional realism and classical tragedy. First, the novel presents morally ambiguous characters whose choices resist simple ethical categorization. As Orr argues, tragic realism "refuses the comfort of clear villains and innocent victims," instead showing how "good intentions produce unintended harm" (1989, p.156). This pattern recurs throughout *Freedom*: Walter's environmental activism becomes entangled with corporate interests; Patty's pursuit of authentic self-expression damages those she loves; Richard's commitment to personal freedom results in emotional isolation.

Second, the novel employs a narrative structure that reinforces its tragic vision. The non-linear chronology, i.e., beginning with neighbours' gossipy observations, moving to Patty's autobiographical "Mistakes Were Made," then shifting to Walter's perspective and Richard's viewpoint. prevents readers from settling into a single interpretive frame. This structural choice embodies what Burn identifies as Franzen's "perspectival realism," which acknowledges that "reality is always mediated through limited, subjective viewpoints" without abandoning the possibility of truth (2008, pp. 125-128). The result is a form of realism that, as Kelly notes, "takes both the constraints of social reality and the irreducibility of individual consciousness" (2011, p. 405) seriously.

Third, *Freedom* exemplifies tragic realism's commitment to representing suffering without redemption or transcendence. Unlike melodrama, which resolves suffering through the punishment

of villains or the reward of virtue, tragic realism presents suffering as often meaningless, the result of circumstances, timing, and the incompatibility of legitimate needs. Patty's unhappiness stems not from clear moral failure but from the impossibility of reconciling her desires for both security (Walter) and passion (Richard). Walter's disillusionment results not from naïveté but from the gap between his ideals and the compromises required to implement them. This refusal of consolation aligns Freedom with Steiner's definition of modern tragedy as literature that "offers no resolution, only recognition" (1996, p. 354).

Freedom and Responsibility: Conceptual Framework: Freedom and responsibility are fundamental values of human existence, yet their relationship remains contested across philosophical traditions. Freedom is the capacity to choose and act according to one's own will without external coercion. Responsibility is the obligation to account for one's actions and their consequences for oneself and others. As Franzen's title ironically suggests, freedom is never simple liberation but always entails constraints, obligations, and unintended consequences.

Philosophers have long debated whether freedom and responsibility are complementary or contradictory. Existentialist thinkers like Sartre argue that radical freedom entails absolute responsibility: because we are "condemned to be free," we bear full responsibility for our choices and their consequences (1992, pp. 556-557). However, communitarian philosophers counter that excessive emphasis on individual freedom undermines the social bonds necessary for meaningful human life. Franzen's novel navigates this tension without resolving it, presenting freedom and responsibility as both necessary and mutually limiting.

In *Freedom*, this tension plays out across three levels: personal (the characters' internal conflicts between desire and duty), interpersonal (their relationships with family and friends), and social (their engagement with broader political and environmental issues). The novel demonstrates that freedom without responsibility produces narcissism and destruction, while responsibility without freedom produces resentment and self-abnegation. The tragic dimension emerges from the characters' inability to find a stable balance between these competing values.

Personal Freedom in Freedom:

Patty Berglund: Patty exercises her freedom through choices that define her identity: her college basketball career, her marriage to Walter, her affair with Richard, her role as suburban mother, and her authorship of "Mistakes Were Made." Each choice represents an assertion of autonomy, yet each also produces unintended consequences that constrain future freedom. Her decision to marry Walter provides security but eventually feels like entrapment; her affair with Richard offers passion but destroys her family's stability; her memoir attempts self-understanding but exposes painful truths without providing resolution.

Patty's tragic dimension lies in her awareness of her own complicity in her unhappiness. Unlike a victim, she recognizes that her suffering results partly from her own choices. Her memoir's title, "Mistakes Were Made", employs the passive voice ironically, acknowledging agency while deflecting responsibility. This grammatical evasion captures the core tension in Patty's character: she wants both the freedom to choose and exemption from responsibility for consequences. The novel suggests this desire is both universal and impossible to fulfil.

Franzen presents Patty's pursuit of freedom as historically and culturally specific. She came of age during second-wave feminism, which promised women unprecedented autonomy in career, sexuality, and self-definition. Yet as the novel demonstrates, structural changes in gender

relations do not automatically produce individual happiness. Patty's freedom to choose her own path coexists with continued gender expectations, economic constraints, and psychological patterns established in childhood. Her story illustrates what Gray identifies as "the post-9/11 realization that proclaimed freedoms often mask continued limitations" (2011, p. 156).

Walter Berglund: Walter embodies the conflict between idealistic freedom and pragmatic responsibility. His environmental activism represents freedom in its most elevated sense, a commitment to principles beyond self-interest. Yet implementing these principles requires compromises that undermine their purity. His partnership with Vin Haven, an extractive industry corporation, exemplifies this tragic bind: to save habitat for the cerulean warbler, he must collaborate with those whose broader activities contribute to environmental destruction.

Walter's personal life mirrors this pattern. His love for Patty begins as a free choice but becomes an obligation he cannot abandon even when the relationship brings suffering. His relationship with Lalitha offers renewed passion and shared purpose, yet this freedom requires betraying his marriage and, implicitly, his values about commitment and fidelity. The novel presents these conflicts without judgment, suggesting that Walter's failures stem not from moral weakness but from the inherent incompatibility of the values he holds.

Franzen's portrayal of Walter draws on what Eagleton identifies as "the tragic contradiction between individual conscience and social action" (2003, p. 67). Walter's conscience demands environmental protection, yet effective action requires engaging with a political and economic system that operates by different principles. This creates what Mullins calls "the paradox of virtuous complicity", doing right requires doing wrong (2016, p. 189). Walter's tragedy lies not in the corruption of his ideals but in the recognition that his ideals cannot be realized in pure form.

Richard Katz: Richard represents radical personal freedom that involves rejection of conventional commitment, sustained individualism, and artistic autonomy. His character embodies what Konstantinou identifies as the "cool" persona in contemporary American fiction: emotionally detached, ironically distanced, committed primarily to preserving individual freedom from entangling obligations (2016, pp. 78-82). Richard's success as a musician depends on this autonomy; his art requires freedom from the compromises that constrain Walter and Patty.

Yet the novel reveals the costs of Richard's radical freedom. His emotional isolation produces loneliness disguised as independence. His affair with Patty, his oldest friend's wife, represents freedom from conventional morality but destroys a lifelong friendship and contributes to family breakdown. His later fame and commercial success feel hollow because they require precisely the compromises, he spent decades resisting. Richard's tragedy is realizing that absolute freedom produces not fulfilment but emptiness.

Franzen's treatment of Richard draws on and complicates the American literary tradition of the autonomous individual, from Emerson's self-reliant man to Kerouac's road rebels. As Giles argues, Franzen "interrogates rather than celebrates American individualism," showing how "the pursuit of absolute freedom paradoxically produces isolation and meaninglessness" (2007, p. 334). Richard's character suggests that some degree of commitment and obligation is necessary not just for ethical reasons but for meaningful selfhood.

Social Responsibility in Freedom:

Patty Berglund: Patty fulfils social responsibility through supporting Walter’s environmental work, raising her children, and maintaining family stability. Her devotion to creating a nurturing home contributes positively to her family and, indirectly, to the environmental causes Walter champions. Yet this responsibility often feels like constraint rather than choice, suggesting the problem with responsibility understood purely as obligation: it produces resentment rather than fulfillment.

The novel also explores Patty’s relationship to national identity and civic responsibility. Her patriotism, particularly her support for the Iraq War, positions her within a specific political and cultural context. Franzen presents this patriotism ambivalently, as he neither entirely endorses nor dismisses it, as part of Patty’s search for meaning beyond her personal unhappiness. This treatment reflects what Keniston and Quinn identify as post-9/11 fiction’s exploration of “how national trauma reshapes individual identity and moral responsibility” (2018, p. 45).

Patty’s ultimate failure of responsibility, her affair and its aftermath, demonstrates the novel’s tragic vision. She does not simply choose selfishness over duty; rather, she discovers that the self cannot be sustained through duty alone, that responsibility without freedom produces a kind of death-in-life. Yet her attempt to claim freedom destroys the very relationships that gave her life meaning. This bind, in terms of excessive responsibility and excessive freedom produce suffering, defines the novel’s tragic core.

Walter Berglund: Walter demonstrates responsibility through environmental activism, family support, and civic commitment. His conservation work represents responsibility in its most expansive sense: an obligation to future generations and non-human nature. Yet the novel demonstrates how even this elevated responsibility produces unintended harm. His obsession with saving the cerulean warbler contributes to neglect of his family; his partnership with Vin Haven enables corporate greenwashing; his affair with Lalitha represents personal irresponsibility justified by shared commitment to responsible ends.

Franzen’s treatment of Walter’s environmental work reflects contemporary debates about individual responsibility for collective problems like climate change. As Versluys notes, post-9/11 fiction often explores “the inadequacy of individual action to address systemic crises” (Versluys, 2009, p. 178). Walter’s project ultimately fails not because of his personal shortcomings but because individual virtue cannot overcome structural economic and political forces. This recognition produces Walter’s breakdown as the devastating realization that his life’s work may have accomplished nothing.

The novel’s title gains particular resonance through Walter’s story. His “freedom” to pursue environmental causes depends on economic privilege; his responsibility to address environmental destruction exceeds any individual’s capacity to fulfil. The gap between the scope of responsibility and the scale of effective action produces what Randall identifies as “post-9/11 paralysis”, awareness of enormous problems combined with recognition of individual powerlessness (2011, p. 156).

Richard Katz: Richard’s relationship to social responsibility is more ambivalent. He assists Walter’s environmental project, demonstrating loyalty to friendship even at personal cost. Yet his emotional detachment and his affair with Patty reveal the limits of his responsibility. Richard represents what Hungerford calls “postmodern disconnection”, awareness of social bonds combined with refusal to be fully bound by them (2010, p. 256).

The novel suggests Richard's irresponsibility stems partly from his working-class background and artistic identity, both of which position him outside the middle-class morality that constrains Walter and Patty. His lack of material ambition frees him from certain responsibilities but also limits his capacity to effect change. Richard's character raises questions about whether responsibility should be equally distributed or whether it correlates with power and privilege, whether those with less should be expected to bear equal responsibility for collective problems.

Richard's trajectory suggests that complete freedom from responsibility is neither possible nor desirable. His late-career fame forces responsibility upon him; his ageing body makes him dependent on others; his relationship with Patty requires acknowledgement that his actions have consequences. Yet unlike Walter, Richard never fully embraces responsibility, maintaining an ironic distance that both protects and isolates him. The novel presents this not as moral failure but as another tragic bind: Richard cannot fully commit without betraying his authentic self, yet without commitment, his life lacks depth and meaning.

The Tragic Relationship Between Freedom and Responsibility: Freedom presents freedom and responsibility not as balanced values but as fundamentally in tension, each requiring partial sacrifice of the other. The novel suggests three key insights about this relationship:

First, personal freedom pursued without regard for responsibility produces destructive narcissism. Patty's affair, Richard's emotional detachment, and Walter's late-career breakdown all illustrate how individual desire, unchecked by concern for consequences, harms both self and others. Yet the novel avoids simple moralism, showing how the characters' "selfishness" often stems from legitimate needs unmet within the constraints of responsibility.

Second, responsibility accepted without freedom produces resentment and self-destruction. Patty's years as a dedicated mother and wife lead not to fulfilment but to rage; Walter's environmental commitment produces burnout and depression; Richard's brief acceptance of conventional responsibility feels like betrayal of self. The novel suggests that human flourishing requires both freedom and responsibility, yet shows these requirements often conflict.

Third, the social and political context shapes the possibilities for balancing freedom and responsibility. The novel's post-9/11 setting, including its wars, environmental crises, economic inequality, and political polarization, creates conditions where individual choices seem simultaneously urgent and ineffective. As Gray argues, Freedom captures "the distinctive anxiety of the post-9/11 decade: the sense that individual agency matters desperately yet accomplishes little" (2011, p. 203).

This tragic vision distinguishes Freedom from both conservative and progressive narratives about freedom and responsibility. Against conservative emphasis on personal responsibility and individual freedom, the novel shows how structural forces constrain choice. Against progressive emphasis on systemic change, the novel shows how individuals still bear responsibility for their choices within those constraints. The result is what Burn calls "tragic realism's refusal of consolation from any political direction" (Burn, 2008, p. 198).

Conclusion:

This study has examined tragic realism in contemporary American society as depicted in Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. Following John Orr's framework for understanding tragic realism (1989) as a genre that combines realistic social critique with acknowledgement of unavoidable human suffering, it has demonstrated how *Freedom* presents an unembellished portrayal of human

life in post-9/11 America. The analysis has shown that Franzen's work aligns with Paul Kirkland's analysis of tragic realism's philosophical foundations, which emphasize acceptance of life's inherent contradictions while maintaining engagement with social and political realities (2010).

The study defined tragic realism as a literary mode that rejects idealization, presents morally complex characters, and acknowledges the role of external forces in shaping human destiny. Tracing this mode's development from eighteenth-century democratization of tragedy through twentieth-century modernism to contemporary American fiction, the research positioned *Freedom* within a long tradition while demonstrating its specific engagement with post-9/11 anxieties about freedom, security, and moral certainty.

Through close textual analysis, this study demonstrated how tragic realism manifests in *Freedom* through three key dimensions. First, characterization: Patty, Walter, and Richard embody the moral ambiguity central to tragic realism, pursuing legitimate needs that conflict with equally legitimate obligations. Second, narrative structure: the novel's non-linear chronology and multiple perspectives resist simple moral judgments, instead showing how circumstances, timing, and incompatible values produce suffering that no one intends. Third, thematic exploration: the tension between freedom and responsibility provides the novel's tragic core, demonstrating how both values are necessary yet fundamentally in tension.

The analysis of freedom and responsibility revealed that *Freedom* presents these values not as harmoniously balanced but as producing inevitable conflict. Personal freedom pursued without responsibility produces destructive narcissism; responsibility accepted without freedom produces resentment and self-abnegation. The novel suggests this bind cannot be resolved but only recognized and negotiated. This tragic vision distinguishes *Freedom* from both conservative narratives emphasizing personal responsibility and progressive narratives emphasizing systemic change, instead showing how individuals bear responsibility for choices made within constraining structures.

Franzen's stated commitment to presenting reality "without sugar-coating, romanticizing, or embellishing" manifests throughout the novel's treatment of freedom and responsibility (2017). His refusal of easy resolutions, his creation of morally complex rather than heroic characters, and his unflinching depiction of how good intentions produce harm all exemplify tragic realism's core features. By offering a nuanced and critical vision of contemporary American life, *Freedom* contributes to the ongoing tradition of tragic realism in American literature while addressing the specific conditions of the post-9/11 era.

This research contributes to scholarship on contemporary American fiction in several ways. First, it demonstrates the continued relevance of tragic realism as an analytical framework for twenty-first-century literature, confirming Orr's observation that such works remain "more subversive than ever before" despite being "rarer" in contemporary fiction. Second, it adds to a critical understanding of Franzen's work by situating *Freedom* within literary traditions of tragic realism while examining its engagement with specifically post-9/11 American concerns. Third, it illuminates the complex relationship between freedom and responsibility in contemporary American culture, showing how literature can explore ethical tensions that resist political resolution.

The findings suggest several directions for future research. Comparative analysis of tragic realism across contemporary American novelists such as Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Lethem, and Marilynne Robinson could illuminate how different writers employ this mode to address contemporary concerns. Historical comparison between *Freedom* and earlier examples of American tragic realism, such as Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* or Richard Wright's

Native Son, could reveal how the mode adapts to changing social conditions. Finally, examination of how tragic realism functions differently across national literatures could illuminate its specific relationship to American anxieties about individual freedom and collective responsibility.

Ultimately, this study argues that Freedom exemplifies tragic realism by portraying the fragile, conflicted nature of modern human relationships and the tragic tension between individual liberty and collective obligation. In an era marked by political polarization, environmental crisis, economic inequality, and ongoing debates about the proper relationship between freedom and responsibility, Franzen's novel offers no solutions but rather a clear-eyed recognition of the dilemmas that define contemporary American life. This recognition, tragic in its refusal of consolation, remains vital for understanding both American literature and American society in the twenty-first century.

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