

Thematic Study of Selfishness, Love, and Desire in Jonathan Franzen's Crossroads

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Abstract:

Jonathan Franzen's *Crossroads* intricately explores the complex emotional and moral struggles within the Hildebrandt family in the early 1970s. This paper examines themes of selfishness, love, and desire, showcasing their nuanced portrayal in the narrative. The analysis highlights how Franzen presents selfishness through the character's internal conflicts and motivations, love as both a binding and divisive force, and desire as a catalyst for actions and consequences. By comparing these themes with those in works like *Anna Karenina*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Madame Bovary*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and *Giovanni's Room*, the paper underscores the universal nature of these human experiences. Franzen's narrative offers a reflective insight into the complexities of human behavior, inviting readers to consider the moral and emotional dimensions of their own lives.

Keywords: Selfishness, Love, Desire, Emotions, Desires and Struggles.

Introduction

Through the interconnected stories of Russ, Marion, Clem, Becky, and Perry Hildebrandt, Franzen explores themes of selfishness, love, and desire. This paper examines how these themes are intricately woven into the narrative, reflecting the multifaceted nature of human behavior and relationships.

Selfishness

The theme of selfishness permeates *Crossroads*, depicted through the actions and inner conflicts of the Hildebrandt family members. Franzen portrays selfishness not as a one-dimensional vice but as a nuanced aspect of human nature. Each character's selfish actions reveal their vulnerabilities and motivations, challenging the reader to consider the relativity of selfishness.

Russ Hildebrandt, the associate minister, is a prime example of this complexity. His attraction to Frances Cottrell leads him to rationalize morally questionable actions, such as arranging to spend time alone with her under the guise of church activities. His justification for these actions—blaming his unhappiness on his wife, Marion—highlights his internal struggle between duty and desire. This rationalization reveals the depth of his selfishness, as he prioritizes his own desires over his familial and moral obligations. As Russ reflects, "He was bad enough to desire a woman who wasn't his wife, but he was also bad at being bad" (Franzen, p. 11).

Similarly, Perry's decision to sell drugs to buy Christmas presents for his family showcases his struggle with selfishness. Perry's internal conflict is evident when he comforts Becky, knowing that his kindness is motivated by a desire to avoid being exposed for his drug use. Franzen uses Perry's imagined speech on the impossibility of truly selfless acts to underscore the pervasive nature of selfishness: "Suppose that the actor is helpless not to calculate the ancillary selfish advantages accruing from his charitable act...Is his goodness not thereby fully compromised?" (Franzen, p. 242). This speech raises questions about whether any good deed can be free from selfish motives, reflecting Perry's—and by extension, humanity's—struggle with the concept of pure altruism.

Becky's inheritance dilemma further illustrates the relativity of selfishness. Her reluctance to share the money with her brothers is driven by her sense of entitlement, given her relationship with Shirley. However, her internal debate over the moral implications of keeping the money reveals her complex motivations. Franzen suggests that while Becky's desire to keep the money may seem selfish, her reasoning is not entirely devoid of legitimacy. Becky muses, "Maybe she wasn't legally bound to follow the letter of the will, but wasn't she morally bound to honor the spirit? Wouldn't it be an insult to Shirley's memory to submit to her father's wishes?" (Franzen, pp. 61-62). This exploration of Becky's internal conflict emphasizes the multifaceted nature of selfishness and challenges the reader to consider the moral gray areas in human behavior.

The exploration of selfishness in *Crossroads* can be compared with its depiction in other literary works. For instance, in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the protagonist Anna's affair with Vronsky is driven by a selfish desire for passion and escape from her unsatisfying marriage. Tolstoy writes, "All the variety, all the charm, all the beauty of life is made up of light and shadow" (Tolstoy, p. 768), highlighting the complexity and consequences of selfish desires. Anna's actions lead to her social ostracism and eventual tragic end, illustrating the destructive potential of selfishness.

Similarly, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby's pursuit of wealth and status to win back Daisy Buchanan is inherently selfish. Gatsby's dream is "incorruptible" yet fundamentally flawed, as it is based on a selfish desire to recapture a romanticized past (Fitzgerald, p. 154). This desire ultimately leads to Gatsby's downfall, demonstrating how selfish pursuits can result in personal ruin.

In both *Anna Karenina* and *The Great Gatsby*, as in *Crossroads*, selfishness is depicted as a complex and often destructive force, driven by personal desires and resulting in

significant consequences for the characters and those around them. Franzen, Tolstoy, and Fitzgerald all challenge readers to consider the moral intricacies of selfish actions and their impact on human relationships.

Love

Franzen's exploration of love in *Crossroads* is deeply intertwined with the familial dynamics of the Hildebrandt family. The novel portrays love as both a source of connection and conflict, illustrating the complexities of sustaining love over time and across different relationships.

Marion and Russ's marriage exemplifies the evolution of love within a marital context. Initially, their relationship is marked by companionship and mutual support, but over the years, various life challenges create distance between them. Russ's attraction to other women and his desire to emulate Ambrose's popularity with the youth reflect his dissatisfaction with his marriage. His realization that Marion no longer excites him underscores the strain on their relationship: "Russ saw his wife and her perpetual bad attitude and dumpy appearance as a deadweight" (Franzen, p. 228). Marion, on the other hand, grapples with feelings of entrapment and guilt over her past, which further complicates her ability to connect with Russ: "Marion feels guilty and trapped in her marriage" (Franzen, p. 135). Their strained relationship highlights the challenges of maintaining love and intimacy amidst personal struggles and changing circumstances.

The sibling relationship between Becky and Clem serves as a counterpoint to the complexities of marital love. Their bond, characterized by mutual support and understanding, represents a purer form of love. Despite occasional worries about the nature of their closeness, they rely on each other for emotional sustenance. Clem's letters to Becky while he is away in Lima underscore the depth of their connection and his realization of the

significance of their relationship. Clem reflects, "She'd meant too much to him...the terms of their arrangement had been clear: he would do anything for her, and she would let him" (Franzen, p. 571). This sibling bond illustrates the potential for selfless love and highlights the importance of familial support in navigating life's challenges.

The exploration of love in *Crossroads* can be compared with its depiction in other literary works. In Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, love is portrayed as both redemptive and destructive. Anna's love for Vronsky leads to her social downfall and eventual demise, while Levin's love for Kitty offers a more stable and fulfilling relationship. Tolstoy writes, "He stepped down, trying not to look long at her, as if she were the sun, yet he saw her, like the sun, even without looking" (Tolstoy, p. 472), illustrating the profound impact of love on the characters' lives.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, love is depicted as a complex and often unattainable ideal. Gatsby's love for Daisy is marked by his relentless pursuit of a romanticized past, leading to his ultimate downfall. Fitzgerald captures this with the line, "He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way" (Fitzgerald, p. 101). This portrayal of love highlights the tension between idealism and reality, much like the struggles faced by the Hildebrandt family in *Crossroads*.

In both *Anna Karenina* and *The Great Gatsby*, as in *Crossroads*, love is depicted as a powerful and often complicated force that shapes the characters' lives and relationships. Franzen, Tolstoy, and Fitzgerald all explore the multifaceted nature of love, revealing its potential to both uplift and devastate.

Desire

Desire acts as a driving force for the characters in *Crossroads*, propelling the narrative forward and creating conflict. Franzen portrays desire as an inherent aspect of human nature, often at odds with the characters' moral beliefs and societal expectations. The characters' desires for extramarital affairs, drugs, and personal freedom underscore their struggles with guilt and shame.

Russ's desire for Frances exemplifies the tension between desire and morality. His internal conflict, as described by the narrator, reveals his awareness of the moral implications of his actions: "He was bad enough to desire a woman who wasn't his wife, but he was also bad at being bad... on his bad days he was unable not to do things he would later regret" (Franzen, p. 11). Yet, his inability to resist his desires highlights the power of human cravings. This tension is mirrored in the other characters' experiences with desire. Marion's longing to reunite with her former lover, Clem's desire to escape the constraints of college, and Becky's yearning for independence all illustrate the characters' struggles to reconcile their desires with their sense of duty and morality.

Franzen uses these desires to create narrative tension and to explore the consequences of acting on them. The characters' actions, driven by their desires, often lead to unintended and far-reaching consequences, affecting not only their own lives but also the lives of those around them. For instance, Clem's decision to drop out of college and join the Vietnam War is driven by his desire for freedom, but it leads to guilt and a strained relationship with his family: "Clem tells his father about going to Vietnam, and races home" (Franzen, p. 135). This exploration of desire underscores the complexity of human motivations and the often unpredictable nature of pursuing one's longings.

The theme of desire in *Crossroads* can be compared to its portrayal in other literary works. In Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, desire drives Emma Bovary to seek fulfillment

outside her marriage, leading to her ultimate downfall. Flaubert writes, "She wanted to die, but she also wanted to live in Paris" (Flaubert, p. 156), capturing Emma's conflicting desires and the tragic consequences of her actions.

In D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, desire is depicted as a natural and liberating force. Constance Chatterley's affair with Mellors is driven by her desire for emotional and physical fulfillment, challenging societal norms. Lawrence describes their connection: "She was free in her fire, burning from her desire into his, unquenchable, transcending their limits" (Lawrence, p. 189). This portrayal contrasts with the guilt and shame associated with desire in *Crossroads*, highlighting different perspectives on human longing.

In James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, desire is a central theme that shapes the protagonist's identity and relationships. David's desire for Giovanni conflicts with societal expectations and his own internalized shame: "I had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me" (Baldwin, p. 88). Baldwin's exploration of desire reflects the internal and external conflicts faced by individuals grappling with their longings.

In each of these novels, as in *Crossroads*, desire acts as a catalyst for character development and narrative progression. Franzen, Flaubert, Lawrence, and Baldwin all examine the multifaceted nature of desire, revealing its capacity to both drive and complicate human lives.

Conclusion

In *Crossroads*, Jonathan Franzen masterfully weaves the themes of selfishness, love, and desire into the fabric of the Hildebrandt family's story. Through their struggles and conflicts, Franzen illuminates the multifaceted nature of human behavior, challenging readers to

consider the relativity of selfishness, the complexities of love, and the powerful influence of desire. The novel's exploration of these themes offers a poignant reflection on the human condition, inviting readers to contemplate the intricate interplay of moral and emotional forces in their own lives.

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