

Adoption as a Cause of Hamartia: A Critical Study of Franzen's *The Corrections*

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Abstract

*Hamartia, a highly contentious literary concept, signifies some underlying personality flaw(s), generally supposed to be hereditary, causing a tragic hero (in tragedies) to make an error of judgement leading to sufferings, and, in most cases, eventually, bringing about their downfall (Aristotle, tr. 1961). Hundreds of studies have been published over the centuries, from Shakespeare to the modern age, to study the role of hamartia in the downfall and destruction of tragic heroes. However recent studies in psychology indicate that adverse and unforeseen life events during early maturation, like adoption, may also cause personality flaws analogous to hamartia (Brodzinsky, 2011; Neil, 2012). Hence, this study investigates adoption as a cause of engendering hamartia (tragic flaw) in an adopted character (Billy Passafaro) in the novel, *The Corrections* (Franzen, 2001), by analysing and discussing some relevant dynamics from within the novel, including adversity of adoption, its calamitous psychosocial effects, and adoption as hamartia. This is done by the application of a triangulated mixed-method approach, providing theoretical insights, firstly, from related adoption studies, and secondly, psychosocial perspective; whereas, thirdly, for the validation of the first two approaches, the methodological implications of Yudofsky's (2005) Table 1-1 is used. The results reveal that adoption (1) may be an underlying cause to engender hamartia; (2) the adversity of adoption, if unaddressed, may result in lasting personality flaws affecting the victims in their early and late adulthoods; and (3) adoptees may experience more psychosocial complexities than their non-adopted counterparts. Hence, to diminish the adversity of adoptive hamartia, the adoptive parents must ensure a healthy and fulfilling home environment for their brought up.*

Keywords: *hamartia; tragic flaw; adoption; Franzen; The Corrections.*

Introduction

Hamartia, a flaw in character, forces behaviours that look inapt of tragic heroes and leads them to a catastrophic end (Aristotle, trans. 1961). As a hero's blemish, hamartia can be explained as a calamitous trait, "a marked imperfection or defect-irresolution, precipitancy, pride, credulousness, excessive simplicity, excessive susceptibility to sexual emotion and the like" (Bradley, 1904. pp. 34-35). Hamartia has

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been assumed to be essentially innate, but modern studies in psychology, as those of Brodzinsky (2011) and Neil (2012) reveal that adversative life events, like adoption, may also cause (similar) personality defects.

Adoption characterizes a distinct class of individuals having different sets of birth and rearing parents (Englander & Snell, 2012). Palacios and Brodzinsky (2010. p. 1) explore that “adoption ... is found in all historical eras (its regulation is engraved on the basalt slab of the Code of Hammurabi, from around 1750 BC) and all cultures.” This is evident by the historical and cultural extension, and literary pervasiveness of “adoption in mythology (Sargon in the culture of Mesopotamia, Moses in Hebrew culture, Oedipus in that of Greece, Romulus and Remus in that of Rome) and in literature (Perdita in Shakespeare, *Oliver Twist* in Dickens, Quasimodo in Victor Hugo)” (Palacios and Brodzinsky, 2010. p. 1). Such pervasive incidence of adoption rouses the imagination (Novy, 2004). Although adoption essentially aims at providing a family environment for cultivating normal maturation of the child, however, it intrinsically involves feelings of loss (Chobhthaigh & Duffy, 2018. p. 70) that may expose them to develop some psychological, emotional and behavioural problems.

Whereas much research has been conducted on adoption from the two perspectives of social-work (child wellbeing) and of developmental-psychology, it has not been undertaken from literary perspectives even though it has some historical and literary significances. In ancient Greek literature, for example, Oedipus (Sophocles, tr. 1917) has some indications of a hamartia which can be interpreted as being caused by his loss of biological parents. Oedipus’ tragedy is reported to have connections with the “folklore story telling how a boy once was exposed, in a peculiarly cruel way, by his wicked parents” Gilbert (2008. p. viii). He is that unfortunate tragic hero who is thrown away three days after his birth by his real parents as they believe an oracle’s prophecy about the new-born killing his father, and marrying his mother in his later life. He is, however, pitied by the servant who is given the task of eliminating him, and thus, instead of suffering that unfortunate murder, he is handed over to the shepherd of the neighbouring king Polybos (Sana, 2020).

The proposition that Oedipus develops a rash character due to detachment from his real parents gets reinforced when he once confides to Jocasta that, “long ago, when he was the prince of Corinth, he overheard someone ... that he was not the real son of the king and queen” (Gilbert, 2008, p. viii). Subsequently, Oedipus flees his adoptive home to search his real parents. Thus, Oedipus embarks himself “on the journey to his real paternal town Thebes ... [but was] confronted and harassed by a group of travelers ... at the very crossroads where Laius was killed” (Gilbert, 2008, p. viii). This way, he is led to kill his father, Laius, and then to marry his own mother, Jocasta, the queen of Thebes. One of the central concepts of modern psychoanalysis i.e. Oedipus complex (the unconscious and abnormally instinctive urge of a son towards his mother (Freud, 1913)) is

devised from the same episode. Oedipus complex has, thereafter, been analysed in literary criticism as hamartia of many well-known protagonists in classic and modern literature, like Hamlet (Shakespeare, 1954), and is also treated as a rampant real-life personality disorder in psychiatry.

Literature Review

Numerous studies in psychology indicate that separation from biological parents and, then, neglect and maltreatment in adoptive families may trigger lasting personality abnormalities akin to hamartia. Grenke (2012, p. 14) reports the findings of various adoption studies that “adopted children are more vulnerable to various emotional, behavioural and academic problems than their non-adopted peers,” and thus can be a cause for the higher referrals for medical intervention. This is evident from the fact that adoptees “make up about 5% of those children referred to outpatient mental health clinics and 10-15% of children in psychiatric treatment centers” (Grenke, 2012, p. 14). In this regard, Palacios & Brodzinsky (2010, p. 3) review that “adopted youth also were found to be younger at the time of first admission to a psychiatric center, more likely to have had a previous hospitalization, and to have longer stays in the hospital than non-adopted children and teenagers.” Thus, adoption begins taking its early toll on the young psyches of adoptees more persistently than non-adopted children (Dickson, et al., 1990 & Weiss, 1985).

Adoptees also suffer from early attachment problems which include “poor concentration, talking all the time, ignoring instructions, disruptive behaviour, trying to create chaos and mayhem, lying, stealing, secret lives, and suddenly deteriorating behaviour” Grenke (2012, p. 16). Such behaviours, like hamartia, mostly “start early ... are chronic and lifelong ... and-being manifested in many life areas-they continue into adulthood” (Maass, 2019, p. 1). Similar impact of adoption is also vehemently evident in the personality of Heathcliff (Bronte, 1974). Portrayed as “an orphan gypsy unloved since his birth, Heathcliff grows up to become a sadistic, cruel, vengeful and immoral man” (Adam, 2017, p. 60). Under the influence of adversative adoption, Heathcliff is overtaken by the powerful and aggressive urge and attraction towards Catherine which lead him to detest the entire Linton family and the desire to somehow destroy them (Adam, 2017, p. 61). So much so that the wicked “Heathcliff abuses Isabella, Edgar Linton's sister, by using her fascination with him as a tool of revenge towards the Lintons, he constantly and savagely attacks Linton, his own dying son, even his tenant, Mr. Lockwood, cannot escape his cruelty” (Adam, 2017, p. 61). Conversely, living with biological parents and “raised in a loving family and comfortable house, Edgar has become a well-respected, dignified gentleman in the neighbourhood” (Adam, 2017, p. 61). Thus, a comparison between Heathcliff, as an adopted child, and Edgar, living

with his biological parents, reinforces Heathcliff's flawed behaviour as being affected by adoption.

Method

Selected passages from the novel *The Corrections* (Franzen, 2001) are critically analysed, using the triangulated mixed-method approach. The triangulated approach comprises, firstly, the theoretical insights of related adoption studies from the perspectives of social-work (child wellbeing) and of developmental-psychology. For example, several adoption studies reveal that in their teens, the adopted children, particularly males, exhibit more behavioural problems and psychiatric complaints than those living with biological parents, and that adoptees' adaptability problems are verified to linger into adulthood (Van der Vegt et al. 2009; Juffer and van IJzendoorn, 2005 & 2007). Psychosocial perspective, as a second theoretical constituent, provides "the integrating framework ... [which] accounts for patterns of individual development that emerge from biopsychosocial process (Newman and Newman, 2018, p. 56)." Newman & Newman (2020, p.1) are fascinated with Erikson's (1982; 1950) developmental stages theory which approaches "issues of human growth and potential in the family because of its life span perspective." Thirdly, the methodological implications of Yudofsky's (2005, p. 4) Table 1-1 are employed to validate the findings of the first two theoretical approaches. Yodofsky's Table 1-1 asserts that fatal flaw exists if anyone of the these six statements is in affirmative: 1) the person having the flaw does not recognize it as a problem; 2) the person is not ready to change; 3) the complexity of the flaw makes it difficult to correct; 4) sometimes the flaw can lead to incurring physical damage to yourself, to your children, or to some other people; 5) its complexity can lead the person to the probable violation of law; and 6) due to the complexity there is likelihood that the individual with the flaw will lead others to the violation of law too. This triangulated mixed-method approach is applied sequentially for the analysis of selected text to reach at dependable conclusions.

Analysis and Discussion

This paper explores and examines the personality flaws of the character of Billy Passafaro, an adopted child, in the novel *The Corrections* (Franzen, 2001). His character is discussed and analysed by the application of triangulated mixed-method approach. First, Billy's personality flaws are analysed in light of different adoption studies, particularly, from the perspectives of social-work (child wellbeing) and of developmental-psychology. Next, the psychosocial perspective is used to examine the extent of complexities in his life at personal, family and socioeconomic levels. Finally, Yudofsky's (2005,

pp. 11-16) Table 1-1 and Fatal Flaw Scale are used to determine the existence of flaws in his personality, and that whether these qualify as hamartia. In light of these theoretical and methodological perspectives, a detailed discussion of related text is given below to gather some reliable findings.

Adversity of Adoption

The text of the novel *The Corrections* (Franzen, 2001) affords indications of the complicated biopsychosocial growth of Billy Passafaro as an adopted child. His story in the novel begins as the text renders that the couple Nick and Colleen were tested to be infertile. Hence, “they adopted a year-old boy, Billy, a few months before Colleen became pregnant with Robin” (Franzen, 2001, p. 342). The text also contains evidence of Billy’s early referrals to hospital for psychobiological problems “corresponding to abnormal EEG waveforms or troubled red nodules or black lacunae on his CAT scan” (Franzen, 2001, p. 342). Billy’s referral for psychiatric diagnosis as an adopted child is in line with the finding of Juffer and van IJzendoorn’s (2005, 2007) meta-analyses that adoptees are in higher ratio of being referred for mental problems than their non-adopted peers and indicate more conduct and internalizing and externalizing complications.

Billy’s complications might be rooted in his discriminatory and neglected adoption and, hence, adverse home environment as is suggested by his adoptive sister Robin’s early childhood recollections of comparatively privileged feelings. For example, she was sent to good schools and colleges and had a love marriage with a college friend, whereas Billy gradually lost track of his life. He also suffers neglect by his adoptive father Nick who glorified violence and anarchism in his presence. When Billy perforce emulates similar violence and anarchism, Nick is totally indifferent as he condemns every wrong in the world except those committed by Billy. Due to such an atmosphere of discrimination and neglect, the adopted Billy, unfortunately, develops conflictual and aggressive behaviours in his youth.

The impact of adoption is detailed by Paine et al. (2021, pp. 922-923) that “adopted children have an elevated risk for developing behavioural, or *externalizing*, problems (e.g., conduct and attention problems, and delinquent behavior) and emotional, or *internalizing*, problems (e.g., symptoms of anxiety and depression, and withdrawn behavior; that often persist into adulthood.” Billy’s developing externalizing problems, like delinquency, is attested by the text in such words that, apart from Robin, “eventually Billy had stolen once too often from everybody else” (Franzen, 2001, p. 350). He has also developed other personality defects as that of committing criminal acts. He gets arrested for “his second felony charge and Colleen threw him out of the house” (Franzen, 2001, p. 343). Thus, thrown out of everywhere, he embarks upon the world of crime in Philadelphia. This

way, Billy's acquired behavioural or externalizing problems lead him to criminal acts and, subsequently, to jail.

The influence of adversative adoption on Billy's behaviour is also manifested in his punishing treatment of his adoptive sisters, particularly, Robin who "knew him simply as a terror" (Franzen, 2001, pp. 342). For example, he chases Robin with dismembered insects, and with frogs dipped in chemical solutions, and tells her openly, "I hurt them because of you" (Franzen, 2001, p. 342). It does not stop here. Robin gets mad to know that Billy has heard of her husband's sudden riches and also about the company to which they owed it. After somehow receiving the information, Billy follows the vice-president of the company, Rick Flamburg, at the inauguration ceremony in the neighbourhood. When the formal function ends, sneaked into the gathering and swung a baseball stick and broke his head along with most parts of his face, teeth, jaws and collarbone. She has misgivings that "Rick Flamburg had paid the price" (Franzen, 2001, p. 351) for Billy's revengefulness against herself.

Robin believes that Billy detests her as the archetypal representative of the blissful usual existence that has been denied to him. This gives her the feeling that braining Rick Flamburg is actually an attack on her head. Robin's friend Denise rightly enquires about the episode that whether "there's a connection?" (Franzen, 2001, p. 404). Connecting the dots, Robin sums up the miseries incurred upon the entire family by Billy's disordered behaviour: "Rick Flamburg's disabled for life ... My brother [Billy] is in jail for the next ten or fifteen years ... [and] my father is on anti-psychotics" (Franzen, 2001, pp. 404-405). These evidences clearly establish the correlation between his discriminatory and neglected childhood due to adoption, and his corresponding revengeful, sadistic and delinquent behaviours in his later life which can be termed as his hamartia.

Psychosocial Complexities of Adoption

Adoption also leads to the development of certain mental disorders which, according Miller (2009, p. 139) include "internalizing disorders (anxiety and depression) ... and post-traumatic stress disorder. Unrecognized and untreated, these problems may cause lifelong disabilities." Billy's adulthood is also hindered by developing similar disruptive attitudes, relating to emotional or internalizing problems, such as hatred and revengefulness against his adoptive family. For example, he detests his adoptive sister Robin for he thinks that, as compared to her, he has been miserably neglected and mistreated by his adoptive parents.

Comparative studies of the interactive processes, in households with or without adoptees, also reinforce that the degree of child-parent tension is higher in households with adopted teenagers and that their

attachment to the family is noticed to be much weaker and, frequently, more aggressive (Rueter, et al., 2009). Maturation alterations in adoptees' outlooks and its related losses are assessed by Brodzinsky et al. (1986) as shifting from simplistic and optimistic, in the preschool stage, to moods of uncertainty, dejection, and even rage, in mid-childhood. These are also connected to their growing sense of adoption due to entering a new family but, at the same time, leaving one as well. Similarly, Billy's attachment to his adoptive family gradually disappears through his teens until, in his adulthood, his aggression against them remains no secret. Consequently, Robin avoids to enquire Billy about the reasons of his violent and cruel behaviour as she is convinced that his answer would be simply meant to upset her. Robin also concedes their unlike youthful upbringing, as she believes that Billy's anarchic behavior is owing to his discriminatory treatment. She believes that, unlike Billy's deprived childhood, Robin has received a brought up of instinctive fulfilment with her real parents. Hence, she has developed a disposition of affection, compassion, and sharing and caring, as compared to Billy's aggressive, sadistic and revengeful attitudes.

Robin also highlights Billy's better academic performance in his early school age and had developed orthographic and writing skills to write a sensible leave application even in his 4th grade. This suggests that Billy had been as bright in his childhood as Robin who, as a sister, feels the agony of his mysterious transformation down the line, "how it felt to be a smart girl and see your equally smart brother make himself more stupid by the year, as if specifically, to avoid becoming a person like you" (Franzen, 2001, pp. 346-347).

The adversity of adoption as causing long-term psychosocial complexities is also reinforced by analysts' emphasis on the role of healthy and fulfilling brought up in diminishing the adversity of adoption. For example, reviewing various adoption studies, Palacios and Brodzinsky (2010, p. 8) highlight "the protective role of positive rearing circumstances in the adoptive family: children with genetic risks growing up in well-functioning families are far less likely to develop the problems to which they are predisposed." Grenke (2012, p. 14) also evaluates that "researchers believe that if the underlying emotional issues are worked through as a family the outward behavioural problems can be diminished." Wesselmann (2013) also contends that in protective environments children develop solid and healthy interpersonal associations. Conversely, in unprotected surroundings, infants are expected to nurture attitudes of self-doubt, withdrawal and antagonism.

To sum up, this analysis has established, in literature also, a correlation between parental loss and Oedipus' hamartia of rashness and faulty decision-making (Sana, 2020), and between Heathcliff's adversative adoption in early childhood and, later, his becoming "a sadistic, cruel, vengeful and immoral man" (Adam, 2017, p. 60). Similar correlation is reinforced by Billy's adverse psychosocial

growth in his childhood due to adoption, and his acquiring the analogous hamartia of a conflictual, revengeful, sadistic and delinquent behaviours in his adult life. Comparing Billy's flawed personality with another character in the novel, namely Melissa (who gets a childhood of instinctive fulfilment with her biological parents) reveals similar deductions. Melissa herself tells her boyfriend Chip that her childhood had been exceptional, and that her parents had constantly been her best friends. So much so that her boyfriend Chip even taunts her for their family attachment. Hence, unlike Billy, Melissa is grown to a stable adulthood with "the lilt in her voice, the bounce in her step, the serenity of her amour proper!" (Franzen, 2001, p. 61) that even Chip envies. This verifies a greater parental role in kids' psychosocial and educational growth, especially, in the 3 primary stages i.e. infancy, toddlerhood and initial school stage (Newman & Newman, 1976. p. 1). Harmful influences of disconnected parenthood may surface in the very infancy and continue during teens through adulthood to middle-age (Darling, 2013, p. 1).

Adoption as Hamartia

The methodological framework of Yodofsky's (2005) Table 1-1 also confirms that Billy's flaws of personality and character qualify as hamartia. The table (cf. S: 3) is framed to determine that a "flaw exists if one or more of the ... [6 statements] is true" (Yodofsky, 2005. p. 4). For example, in line with statement, 1 of the table, Billy too does not recognize it as a problem as he is completely unaware of his complicated biopsychosocial growth due to the adversity of adoption. Hence, he is drifted to utter disaster through his adulthood as he physically attacks Flamburg, but "Billy was lucky ... that Rick Flamburg didn't die (Franzen, 2001, p. 345)." Again, consistent with statement, 2 of the table, Billy too is not ready to change as he persistently detests and punishes his adoptive-sisters, especially Robin and is not willing to change. He makes his stubbornness clear by telling her plainly that he will "never stop sneering at her, never address her as a peer, until she could prove to him that her life was as fucked-up and miserable as his" (Franzen, 2001, p. 350). Similarly, he wilfully justifies his deadly attack on Rick Flamburg in the court.

Moreover, in keeping with statement, 3 of the table, Billy's referrals to hospital for complex psychiatric problems (cf. S: 4.1, para-1) confirm that it is difficult for him to address his personality defects. Besides, in line with statement, 4 of the table, Billy's development of a conflictual and aggressive personality and his consequent revengefulness outlets itself on Rick Flamburg to whose company Robin and her husband owe their sudden windfall. Resultantly, Rick Flamburg is left totally incapacitated and permanently disabled. Billy's illegal activities also affirm statement, 5 of the table, as Billy too frequently takes law into his hands and, consequently, got repeatedly convicted for serious crimes. Finally, after his deadly assault on Flamburg, Robin confirms, "My

brother is in jail for the next ten or fifteen years” (Franzen, 2001, p. 404). Lastly, as per statement, 6 of the table, Billy too leads his adoptive father Nick to the violation of law as he approves most of his court arguments justifying his violence. Besides, Billy also leads to the violation of law Uncle Jimmy who had built a shrine in his house which Billy somehow debases in a tormenting way. Consequently, Uncle Jimmy swears to “shoot the desecrator of his shrine” (Franzen, 2001, p. 350). To sum up, this evaluation of Billy’s flawed behaviour in line with Yodofsky’s (2005) Table 1-1 affirms his evolving a tragic flaw of vindictiveness and sadism.

Furthermore, in line with psychosocial framework, adoption can also be termed as an unforeseen crisis as it may “impact individuals and families, such as parental divorce, death of a sibling, or unexpected job loss” Newman & Newman’s (2018, p. 65). During infancy, the fundamental procedure is *mutuality with the caregiver* (Newman & Newman’s, 1976, p. 1), which gets frustrated in the case of Billy as, losing his real family and entering an adoptive one, he undergoes a neglecting and discriminatory childhood. Consequently, he nurtures a conflictual and revengeful behaviour with his adoptive family and determines to punish his adoptive siblings, chiefly Robin. Erikson’s maturation timetable too supports the analysis of Billy as being consumed by *guilt* in the conflict between *initiative* vs. *guilt* as he, under the adversity of adoption, feels getting an inferior treatment from his adoptive parents.

Results obtained from the detailed discussion and analysis along the lines of the triangulated mixed method in this paper indicate that:

1. In most cases, adoption is an underlying factor during childhood and adolescence in engendering lasting personality abnormalities analogous to *hamartia* in literary criticism.
2. If unidentified and unaddressed, adversity of adoption, like *hamartia*, may cause enduring suffering for the victims and may lead them to behavioural or externalizing problems, like aggressive, sadistic, delinquent and criminal behaviours, and at last to a catastrophic end. Individuals with tragic flaws may also incur physical damage to self, family and others, may engage in illegal acts, and may also lead others to the probable violation of law.
3. Adopted children also indicate more psychosocial complexities, relating to emotional or internalizing problems, than non-adopted persons. For example, they are more susceptible to several affective, psychological and educational complexities which may linger into adulthood; the degree of child-parent tension is higher in households with adopted teenagers; and their attachment to the family is noticed to be much weaker and, frequently, marred by aggression.

4. To diminish the adversity of adoption, emphasis needs to be laid on the role of healthy and fulfilling brought up in adoptive families where children can develop solid and healthy interpersonal associations. A healthy home environment may ensure there is no or less likelihood of children developing attitudinal problems, self-doubt, withdrawal and antagonism which adoptees are expected to nurture in unprotected and detached surroundings. Moreover, harmful influences of disconnected parenthood may surface in the very infancy and early childhood and may continue during teens through adulthood to middle-age. This hints at a greater role of adoptive parents in the psychosocial and educational growth of their adopted children, especially, in the 3 primary stages, i.e., infancy, toddlerhood and initial school stage.

Conclusion

Results of this study reveal that unhealthy environment may also result in hamartia. Adopted children represents a distinct class menaced by numerous maturational complications which start early and linger into middle and old ages becoming a type of hamartia that may hamper their potential as healthy, functional individuals. The theoretical implications of adoption studies and the psychosocial perspective reveal that adversative adoption begins taking its early toll on the young psyches of adoptees more persistently than non-adopted individuals. Adoptees are also more prone to different affective, behavioural and educational problems. Similar to Oedipus (Sophocles, tr. 1917) and Heathcliff (Bronte, 1974), having indications of developing hamartia by getting separated from their biological parents, Billy's flaws of personality and character, due to adversative adoption, too, qualify as being a hamartia. Judging against Yudofsky's (2005) Table 1-1 for determining fatal flaws of individuals, Billy's adversative adoption can also be construed as a reason for the acquisition of his hamartia of conflictual, revengeful, sadistic and delinquent behaviours.

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