SuperSummary™

The Corrections

Jonathan Franzen

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Summary

The Corrections is a 2001 novel by Jonathan Franzen that won the National Book Award. Franzen is the author of several essay collections and novels, including the novels *Freedom*, *Purity*, and *Crossroads*. He has received many awards for his work, including the Whiting Award in 1988 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1996.

The main action of the novel takes place during the turn of the 21st century, a time of great financial prosperity in the United States. The "corrections" of the novel's title refer to the anticipated corrections of the boom market, which turn out to be less dramatic than expected. These corrections also refer to the various ways in which the Lambert children try to improve on their own upbringing.

This guide references the 2001 HarperCollins edition of the text.

Plot Summary

The Corrections centers on the Lamberts, a dysfunctional Midwestern family. Alfred, a retired engineer, is the family patriarch and has developed Parkinson's and dementia. Enid is Alfred's homemaker wife, and the couple have three children: Gary, Chip, and Denise. Each of these children has rejected their Midwestern upbringing in different ways. Gary, the oldest child, has become an affluent Philadelphia banker and a father of three himself; his materialism and parental permissiveness is a rebuke to his father's financial and emotional stinginess. Chip, the middle child, is a failed academic and aging bohemian who is struggling to make a living in New York City. Denise, the youngest, is a successful Philadelphia chef who is confused about her sexuality and unable to sustain a relationship.

Alfred, who has a chemistry lab in his basement, has produced a patent that the Axon Corporation is eager to buy from him. They have offered him $5,000, a price that Alfred accepts but that Enid and Gary both find suspiciously low. Enid tells Alfred that she has sent Alfred's letter of agreement back to the Axon Corporation, but in fact she has stowed it away while she consults with Gary. Gary researches the Axon Corporation and discovers that they are financing the Corecktall treatment, an experimental new brain therapy in which Alfred's

patent plays a part. Seeing an opportunity both to care for and to “correct” his father, Gary buys several shares in the Axon Corporation and also enlists Denise to sign Alfred up as a trial patient for Corecktall therapy.

Enid, in denial about the extent of Alfred’s frailty, believes that his problems spring only from depression and a reluctance to do his exercises. She takes Alfred on a cruise, during which Alfred’s condition deteriorates. Their trip is cut short when Alfred falls from the boat’s high deck into the ocean, a fall he survives. At the same time, Chip has left behind a floundering life in New York City for a dubious business venture in Vilnius, Lithuania. He has joined forces with Gitanas Misevičius, the country’s former deputy prime minister, who is now engaged in defrauding American investors. Denise has opened a fancy new restaurant in Philadelphia but is distracted by her affair with Robin Passafaro, the wife of her financial backer. Gary is engaged in an underground war with his wife and two older sons, none of whom want to visit Enid and Alfred for Christmas at their home in St. Jude, Missouri.

These present-day scenes are interspersed with scenes from Enid and Alfred’s courtship and early marriage. We learn that Enid and Alfred have often had a difficult marriage and that Alfred has always been a distant husband and father. Both Enid and Alfred survived upbringings of Midwestern privation, which have, however, formed them in different ways: Enid is resilient and adventurous, financially and otherwise, while Alfred is thriftier and more cautious. We also learn about Denise’s affair, as a teenager, with Don Armour, a middle-aged clerical worker at her father’s railroad company. This affair will have consequences that Denise discovers only as a grown woman: Don Armour is responsible for her father’s retirement from the company, having confronted Alfred with evidence of the affair.

Enid is consumed with hosting all her children and grandchildren in St. Jude for Christmas, a goal that she very nearly achieves. Gary arrives, but without his wife or children, having lost his underground battle with them. Denise arrives as well, having been fired from her high-profile restaurant job once her affair with Robin Passafaro comes to light. Chip arrives, most dramatically, on the day after Christmas. His job in Lithuania has collapsed along with the country as a whole, beset by looting, violence, and a contested presidential election. All the children find their father in a precarious emotional and physical state, having lost his will to live after the cruise-ship accident. They must navigate both his and Enid’s aging.

It is ultimately Chip, Alfred's favorite child, who convinces Alfred to go to a nursing home. Here Chip meets, falls in love with, and eventually marries Alison Schulman, Alfred's doctor at the nursing home. He moves to Chicago to be with her and transforms from an absent and irresponsible son to a thoughtful caretaker. Denise takes a new restaurant job in Brooklyn and hosts Enid there for a long weekend, a visit Enid enjoys. While Gary changes the least of her children, Enid finds herself more tolerant of his quirks. She becomes venturesome and more open-minded in general in the absence of her disapproving husband; when Alfred eventually dies at the nursing home, she has a sense of hopefulness as well as sadness.

Background

Biographical Context: Franzen's Upbringing and The Corrections

The Corrections was not Jonathan Franzen's first novel, but it was his breakthrough work, netting him both a wide readership and critical praise. Franzen has frequently written and spoken about his desire to produce work that is sweeping and ambitious but also readable and entertaining. He believes that a writer has an obligation to their readers to not produce work that is overly obscure or difficult. At the same time, Franzen's influences are highbrow and literary, even experimental. He has mentioned Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon as influences, both writers of *systems novels*: novels that attempt to explicate underground sweeping forces in modern life. Franzen is also influenced by European writers and intellectuals, such as the Austrian writer Karl Kraus, about whom he has written a book (*The Kraus Project*, published in 2013).

The Corrections addresses chemistry, engineering, and finance at length, much like the systems novels of Franzen's forebears. At the same time, the central material in *The Corrections* is domestic and autobiographical. Franzen himself grew up in the Midwest, and Alfred and Enid are arguably exaggerated versions of his own parents. His father, like Alfred, was an engineer, while his mother, like Enid, was a homemaker; in a 2010 interview with *The Paris Review*, Franzen spoke of his mother as being overbearingly concerned, as Enid is, with appearances and propriety. While none of the Lambert children bear a direct resemblance to Franzen, he has expressed a loving and ambivalent relationship toward his place of birth that is similar to theirs.

Of all the Lambert children, it is perhaps Chip who outwardly resembles Franzen the most. Chip is, as Alfred says, "an intellectual," but a frustrated, thwarted one (550). For much of the novel, he is unable to find any solace, material or otherwise, in his intellect and learning. He feels such a pressure to succeed and to sell himself, and is so adrift in the American late-capitalist landscape, that he can only lampoon his intellect. He tries and fails repeatedly to sell a turgid and pretentious screenplay, then falls into a more lucrative but much more precarious position: defrauding American investors as a Lithuanian resident. In his new position, Chip at first feels a strange relief, not only that of escaping his country and

circumstances but also that of openly being a confidence man. Compared to the contortions he has put himself through in trying to vulgarize his intellect, his new position feels surprisingly straightforward and honest.

Chip's floundering is a comic dramatization of the difficulty of being a serious person in an unserious world. Toward the end of his Lithuanian adventure, he has a sudden realization about his screenplay: He understands that it is "a thriller where he should have written farce" (534). This understanding marks the beginning of a new maturity for Chip; while we never learn what becomes of his screenplay, he does move back to the Midwest, marry, and become a more responsible son. Chip's journeys out in the world can be seen as analogous to those of Franzen as a writer; *The Corrections* is a serious but farcical novel, one that touches on Franzen's Midwestern upbringing and comes after earlier thriller-centric works that were less warmly received.

Chapter Summaries & Analyses

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary: "St. Jude"

The novel opens in St. Jude, Missouri, at the home of Enid and Alfred Lambert. Alfred Lambert is a retired railroad engineer, and Enid is his homemaker wife. The two live in a large house that Enid tries to keep impeccably tidy, even while Alfred insists on his messy solitary projects. He has the remains of a chemistry lab in the basement and keeps painting and repainting furniture.

Enid is in the habit of hiding the mail from Alfred in an effort to keep the house clean and also to control the family finances. The couple have recently received a registered letter from the Axon Corporation, which she is anxious to locate: "[B]ecause there were aspects of the Axon situation that Enid knew about and hoped that Alfred didn't, she'd quickly stashed the letter somewhere within fifteen feet of the front door" (4). The two are planning a trip to New York City, to see their children Chip and Denise; afterward, they are to go on a cruise to Quebec.

Alfred is increasingly experiencing age-related cognitive decline along with Parkinson's symptoms, although he remains a forceful patriarch. Enid must take care of him while trying not to antagonize him. She allows him his indulgences, such as an ugly but comfortable blue lounge chair. Since this chair does not go with her decor, she insists that he put it in the basement: "The chair was a monument and a symbol and could not be parted from Alfred […] And so in the house of the Lamberts, as in St. Jude, as in the country as a whole, life came to be lived underground" (10).

Chapter 1 Analysis

This book begins and ends with short chapters set in St. Jude, Missouri. These chapters are like bookends, framing the much longer chapters in between them. Both bookending chapters are told from Enid's point of view. Enid is a character who is often underestimated by other members of the Lambert family; at the same time, she looms large for her children. Chip, the middle child, thinks of his mother at one point that "she was so much personality and so little anything else that even staring straight at her he had no idea what she really looked like" (18).

Because Enid is such an overbearing mother, her children have little idea of how mysterious she really is; the opening and closing chapters focus on the internal life that she keeps hidden from her children and, to an extent, even from herself.

Hiding and evasion are themes in this opening chapter. Enid is hiding a letter from the Axon Corporation; we do not yet understand the significance of this letter, which serves to create suspense. She keeps hiding the letter in different places, as if it were a much larger and more conspicuous object, showing how large the letter looms in her own mind. More broadly, Enid feels a need to keep the house impeccably tidy and to hide all mail and clutter from her husband: "By day, she ferried material from depot to depot, often just a step ahead of the governing force" (5). Her impulse is both a controlling and a fearful one; she wishes to take care of the bills that come in the mail but also to hide the more frivolous mail from her husband to avoid his "wrath" (6).

All of Enid's evasive tactics spring from a larger denial: that of her own and her husband's old age. Enid cannot always remember where she has last hidden the mail—nor what this mail consists of—making her elaborate "guerilla" maneuvers an increasing challenge (5). She fears her husband's censoriousness and anger, while avoiding all the evidence of her husband's increasing senility. Noting the disorder and squalor of Alfred's basement workshop, she searches for a benign explanation: "She felt a shortness of breath then, but 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). She fled upstairs to look for the letter from Axon" (5).

The tone in this chapter is both comical and serious, setting the tone for the novel. The comparison of an elderly middle-class woman hiding the mail from her husband to a guerilla practicing secret warfare against a government is an exaggerated, humorous one; at the same time, there is a serious desperation behind all of Enid's petty maneuvers. Likewise, Alfred is twice described in the chapter as "shaking his head at the complexity of it all," evoking a comically bemused and grumpy husband (4). Yet the truth is that Alfred is not merely bemused but increasingly disoriented, being in the early throes of Parkinson's.

The backdrop of the chapter is also an ominous one; there are clouds gathering over St. Jude, and there is an implied mood of national unease and avoidance: "You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen" (1). This line refers specifically to the cold front gathering over St. Jude, but also evokes a less tangible atmosphere of instability and dread. There is the

dread of old age and death, and the dread of an impending market crash; these two anxieties will be intertwined in the plot thread about the Axon Corporation, highlighting the theme of **The Precarity of the Boom Economy**.

Chapters 2-3

Chapter 2 Summary: "The Failure"

This chapter centers on Chip Lambert. Chip lives in New York City and is hosting his parents for the weekend; Denise, his sister, who is a successful chef in Philadelphia, is also visiting. Chip is a onetime professor of cultural studies who now works as a legal proofreader and writes occasional unpaid articles for the "*Warren Street Journal: A Monthly of the Transgressive Arts*" (17). He has also completed a screenplay, which he is attempting to sell.

Chip's reception of his parents is awkward. Enid insists on believing that the *Warren Street Journal* is the *Wall Street Journal* and keeps asking Chip to show them his office. Alfred remains an intimidating presence to Chip, even in his vulnerable old age. When the three arrive at Chip's apartment, they are greeted by Chip's girlfriend, Julia. Julia is in the process of leaving Chip and was clearly not expecting them so soon. When Chip attempts to stop her—leaving his parents to wait in his apartment—she tells him that she is offended by the sexism of his screenplay.

She leaves in a taxi in the rain; at the same time, Denise arrives. Chip asks Denise to look after their parents while he goes after Julia. There is then a flashback to Chip's earlier career as a professor. The failure to which the chapter's title alludes is Chip's expulsion from the school referred to as D—— College, on the grounds of "fraud, breach of contract, kidnap, Title IX sexual harassment, serving liquor to a student under the legal drinking age, and possession and sale of a controlled substance" (29). The instrument of Chip's downfall is a worldly and manipulative student named Melissa. Melissa seduces Chip, talks him into a road trip, and plies him with an aphrodisiac drug called Mexican A. She then leaves him in a motel to meet up with her parents, whom she refers to as her "best friends" (49).

The chapter continues to shift between past and present. In the present moment, Denise hosts and cooks for the senior Lamberts in Chip's apartment. We learn that Chip owes Denise $20,000 from various loans she has given him. From her tense conversation with her mother, we also learn about her early failed marriage to Emile, a middle-aged Jewish Montreal chef. While Enid had disapproved of the marriage, she disapproved even more of the divorce. She

now suspects that Denise is involved with a married man, which Denise neither confirms nor denies; she only asks Enid if Enid got this information from Gary. Enid also confesses to Denise that the Axon Corporation has offered to buy one of Alfred's patents and that she has kept a copy of their offer against Alfred's wishes.

These scenes are interspersed with Chip's backstory. After being fired from his job at D—— College, Chip moved to New York City. He became involved with Julia through Eden Procuro, her producer boss, who expressed interest in his script. Julia's estranged husband is Gitanas Misevičius, the deputy prime minister of Lithuania. After abandoning Denise and his parents, Chip goes in search of Eden; he has become convinced that if he makes one change to his screenplay, Eden will buy it. He eventually finds Eden in her Tribeca office, where she is hosting Gitanas, as well as her small daughter. Her daughter is coloring pictures on what Chip eventually realizes is a copy of his script. However, Gitanas has a lucrative offer for him. He asks Chip to move to Vilnius, Lithuania, with him, where he will help Gitanas "sell a country" to prospective American investors (114).

The chapter ends with Chip on a plane with Gitanas to Lithuania. Denise has meanwhile left the apartment with their parents, to see them off on their latest cruise; they are going on a Pleasurelines "Luxury Fall Color Cruise" to and from Quebec (18).

Chapter 3 Summary: "The More He Thought About It, the Angrier He Got"

This chapter centers on Gary Lambert, the oldest of the Lambert children. Gary lives in Chestnut Hill, a prosperous neighborhood outside of Philadelphia, with his wife, Caroline, and their three sons, Aaron, Caleb, and Jonah. Gary is a senior vice president at a bank, while Caroline, who is independently wealthy, works part time as a pro bono lawyer.

Gary and Caroline's marriage is strained. Caroline resents Enid and her request that the family come to St. Jude for Christmas; Gary believes that Caroline has exaggerated a back injury to avoid talking to Enid on the phone. The two also have different ideas about child-rearing. Caroline is more permissive and lobbies for their middle son, Caleb, to install a surveillance system in the family kitchen. Gary has more traditional Midwestern ideas about bringing up children and worries that his sons are being spoiled. Gary also suspects Caroline of telling their children that he is clinically depressed as a way of gaining control in the marriage.

Gary fights many aspects of his Midwestern upbringing and is frustrated with his parents' conservatism and stubbornness. He believes that they should move out of their house in St. Jude, as the house will soon be too old to sell at a good price. He is also infuriated by his father's decision to sell his patent to the Axon Corporation at a low price, which he sees as typical of his father's outmoded Midwestern modesty. He resolves to buy 5,000 shares of the Axon Corporation's new Corecktall product, which is still in development and which his father's patent has helped to create. Corecktall is a neurological treatment designed to cure everything from depression to Parkinson's.

Gary is only able to buy 500 shares of the product, which is becoming increasingly publicized. He and Denise attend an Axon Corporation shareholders' meeting introducing the Corecktall product. Denise is skeptical about the product but believes that it might help Alfred; Gary's purpose is to obtain his 5,000 shares. The two approach the Axon CEO, who rebuffs Gary while telling Denise that Alfred is welcome to try the product.

Gary's underground battle with Caroline comes to a head when she calls him one day at work, telling him that she is frightened by a possible burglar casing out their house. Her fear and vulnerability stir his desire for her, and he comes home early only to find Caroline watching television with Caleb. Feeling rebuffed as well as pressured to avoid any appearance of depression, Gary decides to cook dinner; he also drinks three vodka tonics. Over dinner, which is half-burned and almost inedible, he drunkenly confronts Aaron about whether Caroline has told him that his father is depressed. Aaron is unable to lie, and Gary explodes at his family.

Gary then storms off to trim a hedge, determined to appear happy and productive. His drunkenness causes him to injure his hand, which he attempts to conceal from his family. He passes a sleepless night in bed with Caroline, his ineptly-bandaged hand hidden from her. In the morning he decides to remain in bed while his family has breakfast and gets ready for school: "His radical new plan was to do absolutely nothing" (233). When Caroline later confronts him, he tells her that she does not have to go to St. Jude for Christmas and admits to her that he is depressed. The two have sex, but their intimacy is interrupted by a phone call from Enid, who is on the cruise ship with Alfred: "For one guilty instant […] Gary believed that she was calling because she knew that he'd betrayed her" (238).

Chapters 2-3 Analysis

The focus in these two chapters is on Chip and Gary, the two oldest children. Enid and Albert are seen mostly through their eyes, as is Denise, the youngest child and only daughter. Denise is largely a mystery in these chapters, and the enigma of her private identity is a quiet source of suspense in the novel. She is an outwardly successful character who seems guarded around her family; from her efforts to fend off her mother's questions about her love life, we get the sense that she is hiding some darkness.

Neither Chip nor Gary have easy private lives either. The two brothers are foils to one another, heightening one another's opposing qualities by dramatic contrast. Gary is outwardly conventional, a prosperous banker as well as a father and husband; Chip is "alternative" (489), a New York City bohemian intellectual who wears leather trousers and an earring. The brothers' contrasting personas arise from a similar need to improve on their Midwestern childhoods and "correct" the failings of their parents; they both consciously pursue **East Coast Versus Midwestern Values**. Gary is consumed by his father's caution and thriftiness, both financial and emotional. In his instances of indulgence toward his own three sons and his efforts to acquire shares from the Axon Corporation, he is trying to be both a gentler parent than his father and a more aggressive businessperson. Chip is more embarrassed by his father's lack of hipness, warning one girlfriend that his parents are "the squarest people in America" (23). (This same girlfriend's observation that Chip is more like his father than he realizes foreshadows Chip's eventual transformation into a loving and dutiful son.)

Both Chip's and Gary's struggles take place against a background of exaggerated wealth and prosperity. Gary lives in a sheltered Philadelphia suburb, where every house has a sophisticated burglar-alarm system; Chip lives in a New York City of high-powered film producers and upscale delis. It is in one of these delis (called The Nightmare of Consumption) that Chip first hears about the Corecktall treatment that the Axon Corporation is funding. While he is unaware (as is the reader at this stage) of this treatment's connection to his own family, the scene shows that Chip's and Gary's worlds are less divergent than they think. The only difference is that Chip's downtown New York milieu affects a disdain toward capitalist values while secretly embracing them; this is seen in the arch store title Nightmare of Consumption, for example. Gary's wealthy Philadelphia milieu is more straightforward and honest in its adherence to these values.

Chip is broke and jobless, while Gary is a bank vice president, yet Gary is no more at ease in

his surroundings than Chip is. His material security only makes him feel guilty and inadequate for not being happier and more fulfilled. He is obsessed with the idea that he might be "clinically depressed" (138), a term which he also throws at his father. The specter of clinical depression looms large in Gary's family as a malady to fend off at all costs; Caroline reads manuals about it and secretly tells her two oldest sons that Gary is suffering from it. Clinical depression implies a lack of interest in living and engaging with the world, and Gary has built his life around constructing a happy and productive adult identity. In his stoic refusal to admit to any sort of sadness at all, Gary ultimately falls apart in front of his family; his drunken efforts to save face at the end of Chapter 3 are clumsy and comical.

Both Gary and Chip ultimately "surrender" to their environments in different ways and experience some relief in doing so (254). While Gary has some private qualms about admitting his depression to Caroline and conceding that she doesn't need to spend Christmas in St. Jude, it brings about a new mood of marital intimacy: "An irony, of course, was that as soon as he'd surrendered—possibly as soon as he'd confessed to his depression [...] he not only no longer felt depressed, he felt euphoric" (234). Chip likewise experiences a new feeling of closeness and connection once he has escaped New York City and is on a plane to Lithuania with Gitanas, his new accomplice and friend. He feels an almost brotherly closeness to Gitanas, who physically resembles him. Compared to the polished and disingenuous characters with whom Chip has been dealing, Gitanas is honest about his plans and motivations. He tells Chip his life story almost upon meeting him, and he makes Chip aware of a world beyond New York City: Chip "felt himself awakening to a rich and varied world to which he'd been dead for who knew how long. Years" (110).

Chip's journey to Lithuania is one precarious journey in these two chapters; Alfred and Enid's Pleasurelines cruise is another. Although the one is a desperate flight and the other is a leisurely boat tour, both voyages are undertaken in a similar spirit of denial and avoidance. Chip is trying to escape his debts and responsibilities, while Alfred and Enid are trying to outrun their old age and frailty. These two endeavors seem equally doomed, and it is not a surprise when Gary receives a phone call from his mother on the cruise ship at the end of Chapter 3.

Chapters 4-5

Chapter 4 Summary: "At Sea"

This chapter focuses on Alfred and Enid Lambert and their often difficult marriage. It opens with Alfred on the cruise, unable to sleep. Nights are when he experiences the strongest symptoms of Parkinson's and dementia, and he is unnerved by the darkness and unknowability of the ocean at night: "By night [...], the mind went forth and dove down through the yielding—the violently lonely—nothingness on which the heavy steel ship traveled, and in every moving swell you saw a travesty of grids, you saw how truly and forever lost a man would be six fathoms under" (239).

The chapter then shifts back in time to Alfred and Enid's courtship and early marriage. We learn that Enid grew up in a St. Jude boardinghouse with a single mother and that she did the accounting for the business, having a talent for math. She was drawn to the young Alfred's handsomeness and saw him as a reassuring provider. However, the two have profoundly different natures. Alfred is dour and rigid, while Enid is expressive and venturesome. Alfred's own upbringing of scarcity has made him financially cautious, while Enid is more drawn to bold and potentially risky investments.

On the night before an eleven-day trip that Alfred takes to assess the Erie Belt railroad line, Enid and Alfred have an argument about investing. Alfred is so angered by the argument that he departs without saying goodbye and does not contact Enid while he is gone. He examines the Erie Belt railway line, which is shabby and poorly kept up. Over the course of the trip, he is infuriated by all of the flirtatious and attractive women he encounters, suggesting the extent of his sexual repression.

Upon returning to St. Jude, Alfred encounters Chuck Meisner, the Lamberts' banker neighbor. He gives Chuck the insider tip that the Erie Belt line will eventually be taken over by the larger Midway railway line; this tip will eventually make the Meisner family rich, furthering Enid's resentment toward her husband. When Alfred arrives home, he sees that Enid (who is pregnant with Denise at this point) has failed to put away some jam jars that are at the foot of the basement stairs. He is so enraged by this transgression that he goes down to the basement, where Enid is doing laundry, puts the jam jars in a trash bin, and smashes them to bits with a hammer.

Enid is in turn so angered by Alfred's cold outburst that she makes a "Dinner of Revenge" (249). This is a dinner of liver, bacon, and rutabaga. Gary gets through this dinner, but Chip—who is more sensitive and less diplomatic than his older brother—has a more difficult time. Enid offers pineapple for dessert as an enticement for Chip to finish his dinner; Alfred finds this insufficient and tells Chip that he will buy him a sweeter dessert instead. None of this bargaining works, and Chip is left staring at his dinner plate while the rest of the family scatters—Alfred shuts himself up in his chemistry lab while Gary plays and Enid does more laundry. The scene is a portrait of **Familial Dysfunction** and loneliness: "Maybe the futile light in a house with three people separately absorbed in the basement and only one upstairs, a little boy staring at a plate of cold food, was like the mind of a depressed person" (267).

Alfred finds himself hoping that Enid will interrupt and comfort him, even while he has turned his back on her and on his children: "Interesting how eager he'd been to be alone, how hatefully clear he'd made this to everyone around him, and now, having finally closeted himself, he sat hoping that someone would come and disturb him" (263). In the lab, he begins to discover what will eventually become his patent—a new way for material to yield to electricity: "He was seeking a material that could, in effect, electroplate itself. He was growing crystals in unusual materials in the presence of electric currents" (269).

Alfred is the last to leave the basement and go to bed. He discovers Chip asleep at the dinner table before his uneaten dinner. He picks Chip up and takes him to his bedroom, putting on his pajamas and settling him into his bed. He then goes to bed himself. He is furious with Enid for what he sees as her passive-aggressive negligence toward their son and tries to avoid waking her up. However, Enid is already awake, and the two of them have an argument. Enid asks Alfred why he is so unhappy, and Alfred tells her that he will go "to the grave" before he tells her (276). Enid is devastated by this disclosure: "This was a bad husband she had landed, a bad, bad, bad husband who would never give her what she needed" (276).

The chapter then returns to the scene of the cruise boat. Alfred is floundering, and Enid is floundering equally in her efforts to take care of him while also enjoying the cruise. Alfred is beset by humiliating frailties, such as an inability to control his bodily functions; he is also increasingly prone to hallucinations. He imagines feces escaping from his adult diaper and mocking him; he also keeps believing that he is back in St. Jude and must get ready for work. Attempting to find support, Enid turns to the boat doctor, who gives her a medication called

Aslan. It is an antidepressant that has not yet been approved by the FDA, and the doctor appears to be a shill and a fraud. Nevertheless, the drug improves Enid's mood and ability to cope.

Enid also befriends Sylvia, a fellow traveler on the boat. Sylvia is a wealthy, sheltered woman who has suffered a great tragedy: the murder of her daughter and only child, which her husband refuses to discuss or even acknowledge. Although Sylvia tells Enid at length about her trauma, Enid is unable to confide in Sylvia. She is put off and intimidated by Sylvia's moneyed sophistication and "intellectual" air (302), as well as by the extent of her trauma.

While Enid and Sylvia attend a boat lecture on investments, Alfred wanders around on the boat's top deck. He is in desperate need of a bathroom and is increasingly losing his grip on reality. While Enid is listening to the lecturer explain that the financial market is on the verge of crashing, she sees Alfred's form falling past the window toward the sea: "[I]f you happened to be gazing directly at the window in question and you happened as well to be feeling unprecedentedly calm, four-tenths of a second was more than enough time to identify the falling object as your husband of forty-seven years" (335).

Chapter 5 Summary: "The Generator"

This chapter focuses on Denise, the youngest of the Lambert children and the only daughter. It begins with a history of Robin Passafaro, the woman who will eventually become Denise's lover. Robin is married to a wealthy man, Brian Callahan, but comes from a lower-middle-class background. Her father is a Trotskyist high school teacher, and her mother died when she was young. As a young girl, Robin was terrorized by Billy, her violent adopted brother. Billy eventually commits a crime that sends him to prison: He assaults the vice president of the W—— Corporation, a company that is supplying computers to poor Philadelphia schools.

The W—— Corporation is also the source of Brian Callahan's wealth; his stock options in the company have made him a multimillionaire. Robin suspects that Billy's attack on the W—— Corporation vice president was an indirect attack on her, and she is altogether uncomfortable with her new wealth. She is principled and socially awkward, while Brian is more worldly and ambitious. Denise is drawn to Robin's spirit and person but also to Brian's suavity and social power.

Denise comes into the couple's orbit when Brian decides to financially back a new

Philadelphia restaurant for her. The restaurant, set in an old factory building, is called the Generator. Before the restaurant's opening, Brian sends Denise on a two-month-long culinary trip to Europe. He then joins her in Paris, without Robin or their two daughters. Robin has been hostile to Denise, clearly seeing her as a rival. Denise expects and wants Brian to seduce her in Paris, but when the two of them do eventually become intimate, Denise calls off the encounter. She has been overcome with visions of Robin, which seem partially desirous and partially guilt-induced.

Denise has already had one female lover, for whom she left her husband, Emile; however, the relationship did not last long, and Denise remains uncertain of her sexuality. As a young woman, she had a pattern of relationships with older men; she is excited by these men's desire for her without necessarily being attracted to them or enjoying the sex. The first of these older men was Don Armour, a clerical worker at her father's railroad company. A flashback depicts how Denise met Don as a teenager, working at the clerical department for the summer. Don seduces Denise by being surly to her and invoking his inferior social status. He is a Vietnam vet and believes that he is about to lose his job at the railroad; at the time, the company is on the verge of being taken over by the Wroth brothers, two brash Arkansan executives who believe in efficiency and downsizing.

Once she has returned from France, Denise sets about wooing Robin. She visits her at the Garden Project, the inner-city organization that Robin has founded to interest underprivileged teenagers in gardening. She takes an interest in Robin's work and tells Robin that she is gay, which lowers Robin's guard. Robin begins to warm to Denise and to confide in her about her loneliness in her marriage. She draws Denise into her family life, and Denise forms an attachment to her daughters, Sinéad and Erin. Brian is meanwhile increasingly absent, having involved himself in other high-profile projects. Robin eventually makes romantic overtures to Denise, and the two begin an affair.

Denise's work suffers from the affair, which is all-consuming. However, when Denise discovers evidence indicating that Brian and Robin are still intimate, she backs off from Robin and throws herself into her work. The restaurant becomes a great success, and Denise is profiled in the *New York Times* and invited onto television shows. Her new celebrity status puts her back in Brian's orbit, and the two begin to spend more time together. One night, over the course of a celebrity-studded dinner, Brian tells Denise that he and Robin are separating. Denise and Brian then go home to Denise's apartment, where they consummate their

relationship. The next morning Robin—who has come over to tell Denise that she wants to reconcile—discovers Brian in Denise's bed. She flies into a rage and confronts Brian, and the two leave, Brian first telling Denise that she is fired.

During this confrontation, Denise also receives a phone call from Gary, telling her about Alfred's accident on the cruise ship. Gary tells her that Alfred has survived the accident with some serious injuries. The chapter then shifts to a series of emails between Denise and Chip, who is in Vilnius, Lithuania. Denise berates Chip for abandoning her with their parents in New York City, informs Chip about Alfred's accident, and implores him to come home to St. Jude. Chip refuses to come home and is evasive about his life in Lithuania. He eventually stops responding to Denise's emails at all.

The end of the chapter focuses on Chip in Lithuania. Chip has initially enjoyed his new life and new job in the country. He lives rent free in an abandoned villa, which once belonged to Gitanas's political party, and is thus able to maintain a lavish lifestyle. His job of hoodwinking American investors is a profitable one, and he and Gitanas eventually become wealthy enough to attract the attention of local warlords. Gitanas acquires bodyguards and buys a cell-phone tower, which then collapses and attracts the ire of protestors. The country is also going through a contested election, and the landscape is generally volatile. Gitanas tells Chip that he should leave and sends him to the airport with one of his bodyguards.

Chip finds the airport mobbed with passengers attempting to leave the country; meanwhile, flights are increasingly being canceled. He hopes to bribe a flight attendant with the large amount of cash that Gitanas has given him. On an impulse, he calls Enid in St. Jude, telling her that he will be able to come home for Christmas. While he is standing in line for a flight on Finnair, the lights in the airport abruptly go out and all cellular phones lose their power.

Chapters 4-5 Analysis

"At Sea," the title of Chapter 4, refers literally to the senior Lamberts' cruise trip. But it also refers metaphorically to Alfred's worsening condition, the loneliness of Enid and Alfred's marriage, and the dysfunction of the Lambert children's upbringing. There is a sense in which the Lamberts have always been at sea, even when they were all at home in St. Jude, Missouri. While we have previously understood St. Jude to be a staid and conventional place—one that mainly embarrasses the Lambert children—we now understand it to be just as dark and complicated as the wider world.

It is in these chapters that we first get Denise's full backstory. It is significant that Denise's coming of age and disillusionment occur not once she has moved away from St. Jude but while she is still at home as a teenager. Moreover, her affair with Don Armour takes place almost under her father's nose, while she is working for a summer in the clerical department of her father's railroad company. This short affair will have long-ranging consequences not only for Denise but for Alfred and the Lambert family. For Denise, it will set a pattern of affairs with older men, whose desire and social power are reassuring to her and blind her, for a time, to her attraction to women. The affair is also, as we will later learn, what causes Alfred to retire from the railroad company, and **Familial Dysfunction** is an important theme in the novel.

As the youngest child and the only girl in the family, Denise has different allegiances than her two older brothers. She has always had more sympathy for her father than for her mother and feels a classic female anxiety about turning into her mother. It is her father who has the greater public identity, and Denise wants to live a big public life rather than a confined domestic one. At the same time, Denise's attraction to restaurant kitchens stems in part from a desire to create a more loving and accepting family environment than the one in which she grew up:

> A good [kitchen] crew was like an elective family in which everyone in the little hot world of the kitchen stood on equal footing, and every cook had weirdnesses concealed in her past or in his character, and even in the midst of the most sweaty togetherness each family member enjoyed privacy and autonomy: she loved this (376).

This interdependent yet freewheeling environment is the inverse of Denise's lonely childhood household, which is compared to "the mind of a depressed person" (267).

These chapters provide a fuller portrait of Alfred Lambert, both as a distant father and as an ailing man. While up until now he has been seen mostly from the outside, through the eyes of his adult children, we have access in these chapters to his internal life; we also see him in flashbacks as a relatively young man. This gives us a fuller sense of why he is such a forbidding figure to his family, and it is one reason why these chapters mark a new, darker turn in the book.

While there is still comedy in these chapters, it is comedy that is right on the edge of tragedy. The episode of Alfred having hallucinations about feces escaping from his adult diaper and mocking him, for example, is farcical but also dark; the toilet humor illustrates how helpless and ashamed of his helplessness he is. Likewise, the other guests at Alfred and Enid's cruise-ship dinner table are a hybrid of comedic and tragic. These include the frivolous Swedish Söderblads and the pedantic Norwegian Nygrens, who are all comic characters in different ways (and whose sparring at the dinner table provides comic relief). These characters serve to offset the character of Sylvia Roth, whose story is not funny at all.

Sylvia is a minor character with a full backstory that reflects on the stories of the major characters. She is a wealthy, educated woman whose wealth has not shielded her from tragedy: that of the murder of her daughter. Nor has her high-minded Quaker background shielded her from a new fascination with guns, pornography, and a desire to avenge her daughter's killing. Enid is initially drawn to Sylvia because of her intelligence and honesty but is ultimately put off by her as well. This is not only because of the darkness of Sylvia's story but also because Enid senses something oblivious and privileged in Sylvia's demeanor: "[S]uddenly she reminded Enid of Katherine Hepburn. In Hepburn's eyes there had been a blank unconsciousness of privilege that made a once-poor woman like Enid want to kick her patrician shins with the hardest-toed pumps at her disposal" (308).

The estranging effects of capitalism is another source of darkness (and dark comedy) in these chapters. It is significant that Alfred's fall from the boat occurs while Enid and Sylvia are attending an investment lecture about the possibility of a market crash. Sylvia, who is less affected by market fluctuations than Enid—and who is preoccupied by her own tragedy—dismisses the lecturer as superficial. However, Enid understands the lecturer to be really "talking about death" and to be preying on the fears of his elderly audience (334). Enid's new mood-enhancing drug prescribed by the opportunistic, money-minded doctor gives her a delayed response to the sight of her husband falling past the window. For a moment, she gets her response backward and imagines Alfred to be the literal embodiment of the falling market:

> For an instant it seemed to Enid as if Jim Crolius were doing a technical market analysis of the kind that her broker in St. Jude had told her never to pay attention to. Discounting the minimal effects of wind drag at low velocities [...] and assuming a 6-

> foot-long object, and also assuming for simplicity's sake a constant velocity over the interval, derive a figure of approximately four-tenths of a second of full or partial visibility (335).

The effect of this long associative passage is that the reader only gradually understands, just as Enid does, that the falling figure is Alfred. Her slow understanding of the situation mirrors her long period of denial of Alfred's failing health up to this point.

Alfred's thoughts as he falls into the ocean are of his children, and Chapter 5 ends with Chip in Lithuania, trying to make his way back home. Chip has realized that as frightening as Lithuania has become to him, the prospect of going home to St. Jude for Christmas is even more frightening; he then, on an impulse, phones Enid in St. Jude. It is only in life-threatening circumstances that Alfred and Chip face the extent of their dependency on their families; they are alike in this way, and their similar natures may be one reason why Chip is Alfred's favorite child.

Chapters 6-7

Chapter 6 Summary: "One Last Christmas"

This chapter takes place at Albert and Enid's house in St. Jude over the Christmas holiday. Enid is delighted that Chip has plans to visit, although her other two children counsel her not to get her hopes up. Enid busies herself with holiday preparations, while Alfred hides out in the basement. Alfred is recuperating from his near-fatal accident and regrets his will to live, which has left him dependent and incapacitated. He has brought out a hunting gun, with the vague intent of using it on himself.

Gary is the first of the Lambert children to arrive. He arrives alone, although he has told Enid that Jonah will be coming with him. He tells Enid, falsely, that Jonah has a fever. In fact, Jonah has been manipulated into staying home by Caroline, who has plied him with a new video game. Gary has kept other secrets from his parents as well. Enid had hoped to obtain a fresh supply of Aslan from her neighbor Bea Meisner, who has a daughter and a pharmacist son-in-law in Austria. However, Gary intercepts Bea with her gifts, is made suspicious by the package of Aslan, and decides to keep it from Enid. Gary also has not told his parents that he has made a lot of money by investing in the Axon Corporation.

Enid asks Gary to do household chores, including buying and installing a shower stool and handrail for his father, who insists on taking baths. Gary begrudges these chores, viewing Enid as delusional and his father as a hopeless case. When he spies the hunting gun in the basement, he decides to leave it there: “It was one thing to intervene on behalf of Enid’s safety and confiscate her drugs; there was life and hope and pleasure worth saving in Enid. The old man, however, was kaput” (492).

Denise is closer to Alfred than Gary is and is shaken by the old man’s weakened state. When Enid asks Denise to help her father do restorative exercises, Denise discovers the extent of Alfred’s mental confusion: He does not understand Denise’s simple instructions. From a forgetful remark that Alfred makes, Denise also discovers the far-reaching consequences of her long-ago affair with Don Armour. Don Armour had apparently confronted her father with evidence of the affair, causing Alfred to retire from the company before it was taken over by the Wroth brothers.

While cleaning out some cupboards, Denise further discovers the registered letter from the Axon Corporation, which Enid never sent. When she confronts her mother with the letter, Enid is evasive, and Alfred is strangely unresponsive. Denise begins to understand that Alfred is in no shape to move to Philadelphia and stay with Denise while trying the Corecktall therapy, as had been the plan.

It is ultimately Chip who facilitates Alfred’s entry into a nursing home. Chip arrives at the Lambert household on the morning after Christmas, just before Gary is due to leave. Chip has had an arduous and frightening trip home. When he left the airport in Lithuania, he was picked up by Gitanas and his remaining two bodyguards, who were on their way out of the country. Their van was then overtaken by local gangsters posing as policemen. They drove the van into a ditch, then made Chip disrobe and robbed him of most of his money. After Gitanas loaned him some clothes, Chip made his way to the Polish border on foot, bribing the border officials with his remaining money; from there, he reached a working airport.

Alfred is delighted to see Chip, who is both his favorite child and his biggest disappointment. Chip is in a blank, traumatized state from his recent travels: “He felt as if his consciousness had been shorn of identifying marks and transplanted, metempsychotically, into the body of a steady son, a trustworthy brother” (542). He is also shocked by the difference between Lithuania and the American Midwest. Chip’s plan is to stay for just three days in St. Jude and

then to return to New York City, find a job, and begin to pay back the $20,000 that he owes Denise. However, Denise tells Chip that she wants to forgive the debt. Chip resists this gesture at first, as his plan to pay back Denise had been one way of structuring his life.

The final section of this chapter is from Alfred's point of view. He has been put in a nursing home and is besieged by racist and paranoid thoughts about one of the Black attendants. He is soothed, however, by Chip's presence: "Chip was an intellectual and had ways of talking sense to these people" (550). He also likes his new doctor, a young woman named Dr. Schulman, and notices Chip noticing her as well. At the chapter's end, Alfred begs Chip to put him out of his misery; Chip, however, refuses to do so.

Chapter 7 Summary: "The Corrections"

This short final chapter is from Enid's point of view. Alfred has been put in a nursing home, and Enid feels happier and less judgmental in his absence. She is more forgiving of her three children and the various life choices they have made. She accepts Chip's new relationship with Dr. Alison Schulman, which has him moving to Chicago, fathering twins with her out of wedlock, and then marrying her only when she is seven months pregnant. Enid even finds herself enjoying the traditional Jewish ceremony:

> If she'd been sitting beside Alfred, the crowd bearing down on her would surely have seen the sour look on her face and turned away, would surely not have lifted her and her chair off the ground and carried her around the room while the klezmer music played, and she surely would not have loved it (564).

Enid has intuited Denise's gayness, and when Bea Meisner makes an anti-gay remark during a bridge game, she decides to cut her off as a friend. She has visited Denise at her new home in Brooklyn and enjoyed herself there. She also enjoyed a post-Christmas visit from Gary and Jonah, although Gary remains stingy and bossy. His insistence that Enid pay back the four dollars that he spent on Alfred's shower equipment is in sharp contrast to the generosity that Denise shows in forgiving Chip his $20,000 debt.

Enid is less forgiving of Alfred, who is miserable in the nursing home. She finds herself continually losing patience with Alfred's nursing-home comportment. Her anger with Alfred's lapses as a patient conceals her greater anger with Alfred's lapses as a father and husband:

"She'd felt Wrong all her life, and now she had a chance to tell him how Wrong he was" (565). When Alfred finally dies, she experiences a sense of hope and relief.

The "corrections" of the chapter's title refers partially to the correction of the financial market. This correction is less dramatic than many had anticipated:

> [It] was not an overnight bursting of a bubble but a much more gentle letdown, a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets, a contraction too gradual to generate headlines and too predictable to seriously hurt anybody but fools and the working poor (561).

Chapters 6-7 Analysis

These last two chapters in the book focus on St. Jude and homecoming. The Lambert children's relationships to home are resolved in different ways, as is the issue of Alfred and his illness. Although the book has been suspenseful and dramatic up until now, its ending is quiet and domestic. Many of the larger sources of suspense in the book—for example, the plot thread about the experimental brain therapy—are quietly set aside. Denise realizes that her father is in no shape to move to Philadelphia and try the Corecktall therapy, a realization that brings her both relief and sadness. Enid's registered letter from the Axon Corporation is discovered, but the discovery annoys more than angers her family. Gary, meanwhile, continues to profit from his shares in the Axon Corporation and keeps his new source of wealth a secret from the other Lamberts. (Although the intuitive Enid suspects that Gary is hiding something.)

The sense is that these larger dramas have been distractions for the characters, as well as for the reader. They have been ways for the characters to avoid a drama that is literally and figuratively closer to home: that of Alfred's aging and dying. Even the eventual stock-market corrections, another source of underground drama throughout the novel, turn out to be much milder than anticipated. There is an implicit connection between this "gentle letdown" of the market and the gentle ways in which the Lambert family finally resolve their difficulties, or in some cases do not resolve them (561). A family's getting along often necessitates staying quiet about conflict, and Enid learns to accept Gary's materialism and selfishness and not to take the bait when he badgers her about paying him back a four-dollar loan. She also learns

not to pry into Denise's private life, suspecting that she might not like what she discovers; at the same time, her decision to drop her friend Bea Meisner for making an anti-gay remark shows a half-conscious acceptance of her daughter's sexuality.

Enid also realizes that she was never going to change her husband's nature, and it is her acceptance of this central truth that allows her to be more accepting in other ways. Alfred's move into a nursing home is an adjustment for the entire family and different from the neurological treatment in that it marks a realistic awareness of his condition rather than an attempted quick-fix solution to it. Although Alfred is not happy with his move to the nursing home, the measured and realistic thinking behind the move is also his own style of reasoning. As an engineer and an amateur scientist, Alfred is wary of quick fixes, partly because they are wasteful but also because they are disrespectful. He respects the concrete physical world—as opposed to the more evanescent world of the financial market—and respects careful craftmanship and hard work. This is seen in his frustration with poorly constructed Christmas lights at the beginning of Chapter 6 and his later happiness in that same chapter about fixing a drill: "Alfred's eyes were fixed on the drill now, his face bright with the possibility of solving a problem" (493).

Alfred also finds a deeper solace in fixing objects, as a man whose mind and body is failing him. It gives him a sense of control and mastery that he is generally losing—and knows himself to be losing. Another source of solace to Alfred is the arrival of Chip, his middle son. Alfred's tender feelings for Chip are made overt in Chapter 6, as if his physical frailty has made him less able to suppress these feelings. Although Chip has been consumed throughout the book with not living up to his father's expectations, Alfred seems in this chapter to put Chip on a special pedestal. He thinks of Chip as his "intellectual son," and seems to expect him to solve problems that he cannot even quite articulate: "It was possible that Chip, if he came, could answer the very important question. And the question was: The question was:" (464).

Chip does solve the problem of Alfred, in the sense that he helps to put him in a nursing home. Chip also becomes a more responsible son in general, moving back to the Midwest and taking over many caretaking duties from Gary. Unlike Gary, Chip does not seem to be motivated by a desire for control or a sense of superiority; he seems to want only to help and even accedes to Enid's wish to stay in her large and unmanageable house. Chip has seen the extent of his father's frailty, and his motivations in caring for his parents are charitable rather than financial. He understands that not every human exchange is a transactional one and

that not all rewards are material. He has perhaps been led to this viewpoint by his disillusioning experience in Lithuania and also by Denise's decision to forgive him the $20,000 he owes her. Chip is initially panicked, rather than relieved, by Denise's generosity: Paying his debt had seemed to him like one way of structuring his life as well as of becoming completely independent from his family. However, he comes to realize that such independence is not desirable and that human bonds are more solid than financial ones—a Midwestern value he did not appreciate before.

Character Analysis

Alfred Lambert

Alfred Lambert is the father of the Lambert family. While he is kept mysterious as a character, his aging and illness are at the center of the novel. His family must decide how to handle his Parkinson's symptoms, and they argue with one another over how to do so. Some family members, such as Enid, minimize his symptoms, while other family members, such as Gary, are intent on getting him into a more manageable setting. But no one in Alfred's family quite faces the reality of his dying or is able to fully see him.

Alfred is a product of the Depression era and the American Midwest, and he symbolizes certain values that are no longer in fashion at the turn of the millennium. He is thrifty, is loyal to his former coworkers, and has a former engineer's respect for intelligent design and concrete objects. He is also unemotive, casually racist and sexist, and often cold to his family. His children are intimidated by his undeniable force and intelligence while also finding him embarrassing and out of touch, highlighting the tension of **Midwestern Versus East Coast Values**.

Alfred does not undergo a character arc throughout the novel; rather, we gradually discover his interior life. While his surface is gruff and imposing, his interior is flailing and helpless; the more his condition worsens, the more he clings to familiar rituals like getting ready for work in the mornings. Unable to fix himself, he derives comfort from fixing things. He also feels a grudging tenderness toward his children, particularly toward Chip; he is increasingly unable to hide his tenderness as he ages.

Enid Lambert

Enid Lambert's primary identity has been as a wife and mother. She is often a source of irritation to her family, who fails to see her loneliness and frustration. Enid is a foil to Alfred, her optimism and emotionality contrasting with his remoteness and resignation. She is often hurt by her husband but cannot admit the extent of her hurt and disappointment, as she comes from a generation that equates such an admission with failure. Instead, she channels her feelings into keeping up appearances, keeping busy, and trying to corral her children home for the holidays.

Enid is more open-minded and less conventional than she realizes, and unlike her husband, she does undergo a character arc. She finds herself newly accepting of her children once Alfred has been moved into a nursing home, and she realizes that her former intolerance and primness were a result of Alfred's inhibiting presence. She is unable to forgive Alfred, even once he has died, but does find some relief in accepting the extent of his stubbornness. This is also a backhanded way of accepting herself and realizing that his behavior was not her fault.

Chip Lambert

Chip Lambert is the middle child in the Lambert family—and also the black sheep, particularly in his adherence to East Coast values. He is aware and ashamed of it. His shame expresses itself in an inability to face his family and in increasingly reckless, escapist behavior, culminating in his disastrous getaway to Lithuania.

Chip is a foil to Gary, his older brother, who is outwardly conventional and responsible. While Gary is a banker and a family man, Chip is perennially single and unemployed; while Gary is dutiful toward his parents, Chip avoids them. Yet Gary's respectable surface is also a means of holding his parents at bay, and he is finally unable to face the reality of his father's dying. It is Chip, at this moment, who takes over as the responsible caretaker.

Chip's character transformation is abrupt and mysterious and can be interpreted in several ways. The book implies both that his misadventures in Lithuania have frightened him to the extent that the staid Midwest is reassuring to him, making him want only to retreat to his family home, and that these misadventures have prepared him for the unknown and the frightening, so that he is better equipped to face his father's dying than his more sheltered siblings.

Gary Lambert

Gary Lambert is the oldest of the Lambert children and is in many ways a typical oldest child. Of his siblings, he has chosen a life that most resembles that of his parents: He is the only one to have married and had children of his own, and he is the vice president of a bank, just as his father was the vice president of a railroad company. At the same time that Gary emulates his father, however, he tries to improve upon and better him. He is materialistic where his father is thrifty, an indulgent parent where his father was a strict one.

Gary changes the least of all of the Lambert children; like his father, he is stubborn. He clings to his banker's profession as a way of understanding the world and dealing with both of his families. He uses financial language to interpret his own feelings and equates paying off debts with being on good terms; his emotional life is greatly informed by the precarity of the boom economy. It is an outwardly correct posture and one that the world rewards. However, it leaves him poorly equipped to deal with emotional complexity or the demands of his aging parents and is a facet of **The Precarity of the Boom Economy**.

Gary presents a different challenge for Enid than do Chip and Denise. She grows closer to Chip and Denise at the novel's end, having accepted their unconventional lives; Chip and Denise, in turn, are less guarded around their mother. Gary, however, uses his conventionality as a shield, and Enid must learn to accept his stubbornness and guardedness.

Denise Lambert

Denise Lambert is an accomplished, successful character who hides a core of strangeness and alienation. Beneath her ambition and intelligence, she is uncertain of what she wants or who she is. She is attracted to both men and women, and her affairs with both sexes have an illicit, transgressive quality. She is drawn to people who are married, and her own attempts at settled domestic partnership always fail.

Denise's character arc has less to do with discovering her true self than with accepting her restless and changeable nature. She is reluctant to define herself as anything, even as gay; although her attraction to women seems deeper than her attraction to men, she is single at the novel's end, and there is a suggestion that she will remain so. When she tries to understand herself and her life, she can only conclude that she is adept at disguises and costumes:

> When she put on a white blouse, an antique gray suit, red lipstick, and a black pillbox hat with a little black veil, then she recognized herself. When she put on a sleeveless white T-shirt and boy's jeans and tied her hair back so tightly that her head ached [...] she recognized herself as a living person and was breathless with the happiness of living (500).

This playfulness and love of shapeshifting are themselves transgressive qualities. At the same time, they serve Denise well in the larger culture. The Lambert children are all trying to navigate a rootless cultural moment: one where presentation is everything and attachments and loyalty count for little. Denise is very good at appearances and finds her stability more in her public, professional identity than in her private one.

Themes

The Precarity of the Boom Economy

The main action of *The Corrections* is set during the turn of the millennium. This is a time of great financial prosperity—at least for many—in the United States. Materialism is rampant, and hucksterism and get-rich-quick schemes abound. All of the Lamberts must navigate this heady new climate, which is at odds with the more rooted and conservative climate of the American Midwest.

Alfred Lambert wants little to do with market fads or technical innovations; however, they intrude in his life in the form of Axon Corporation, which wants to buy his patent. As Gary discovers, this patent is a key ingredient in a new neurological treatment that claims to be a quick-fix cure for everything from depression to Alzheimer's, making it doubly relevant to Alfred. While it is still being approved, the treatment attracts the attention of many high-profile investors; Chip hears about the treatment from a financier acquaintance at an upscale New York City deli, unaware of the treatment's connection to his family: "'The idea,' Doug said, 'is your basic gut cerebral rehab. Leave the shell and roof, replace the walls and plumbing. Design away that useless dining nook. Put a modern circuit breaker in'" (96).

Doug's description seems like a callous and frightening one, implicitly comparing a person to a broken-down house. Yet it is of a piece with the dehumanizing language that other characters use in this book. Gary, who is a banker, often imagines his own emotional state in terms of the financial market: "Declines led advances in key indices of paranoia [...] and his seasonally adjusted assessment of life's futility and brevity was consistent with the overall robustness of his mental economy" (137–38). Gary keeps a vigilant eye on his emotional state because he is terrified of being "clinically depressed" (138)—or being diagnosed as such by his wife. Caroline herself reads nothing but parenting and mental-health manuals and encourages her teenage sons' addictions to computers and video games.

This focus on technology and self-optimization does not make Gary's family happy, nor is Chip able to find his footing in his wealthy New York City surroundings. Gary is successful and wealthy himself, while Chip is jobless and broke. Yet both characters experience a similar brand of estrangement, coming from a capitalism-induced pressure to make themselves simpler and more efficient than they are.

Midwestern Versus East Coast Values

All of the Lambert children wish to escape their Midwestern upbringing and are embarrassed by it in different ways. As a banker, Gary is embarrassed by his father's cautiousness and parsimony, which he sees as "timid" and behind the times (187). Chip, as a bohemian intellectual, is embarrassed by his parents' conservative and even backward views regarding women and minorities. Denise is a successful chef, and the elaborate and sophisticated menus that she prepares are a way of improving on her mother's bland cuisine, like "the 'salad' of water chestnuts and green peas and cheddar-cheese cubes in a thick mayonnaise sauce which Enid made for festive occasions" (22).

All of the Lambert children are nevertheless unable to shake certain aspects of their upbringing and are drawn toward home in spite of themselves. Gary has inherited his mother's anxiety about appearances and respectability and also derives genuine comfort from traditional family life. He finds himself disapproving of how materially spoiled his children are and thinks nostalgically about his own simple boyhood pastimes.

In a similar way, Chip finds himself put off by Melissa, the student with whom he has an affair; her closeness to her parents seems unhealthy to him and contrasts with his own strained and dutiful relation to his parents. Denise's attraction to Robin Passafaro springs in part from Robin's earnestness and lack of fashionableness, both of which remind her of Midwestern people: "[T]he word she wanted to apply to Robin Passafaro, who had lived in urban Philly all her life, was 'midwestern'" (401).

The same quality about the Midwest that drives the Lambert children away is also what they find themselves missing as exiled East Coast adults. This is a quality of stability and unchangingness, as well as a lack of susceptibility to fads and trends. In his description of the Midwestern landscape, Franzen suggests that this quality is rooted in the region's geography:

> The light in the wood-framed windows, though gray, had a prairie optimism; there wasn't a sea within six hundred miles to trouble the atmosphere. And the posture of the older oak trees reaching toward the sky had a jut, a wildness and entitlement, predating permanent settlement: memories of an unfenced world were written in the cursive of their branches (536).

Familial Dysfunction

The Lambert family is both a traditional and a dysfunctional one. Alfred Lambert is a conventional distant patriarch, while Enid Lambert is a conventional stay-at-home wife; Alfred is more focused on his job than on his children, while Enid is overbearingly concerned with them. There is little talk of feelings in the family, and much talk of following rules. Even as adults, the Lambert children feel a stifling pressure to keep up with their old neighbors back in St. Jude.

This familial environment is not merely smothering to the Lambert children but lonely and destabilizing. The orderliness and conventionality of the family does not compensate for a lack of warmth and closeness. The Lambert household seems like a sterile one compared to the noisier, rowdier households of the neighbors; while they may keep up with their neighbors materially, they cannot imitate their joyous family lives. Each member of the Lambert family is in their own orbit, even while they are stuck in a rigid familial routine: “From the street, if you paid attention, you could see the light in the windows dimming as Gary’s train or Enid’s iron or Alfred’s experiments drained power off the grid. But how lifeless the house looked otherwise” (267).

Much of the Lambert family’s dysfunction springs from an attempt to imitate an imaginary perfect nuclear family. It is only when the family members begin to acknowledge their imperfections, and their lack of adherence to this model, that they also begin to communicate. Once the family structure breaks down with the gradual loss of its patriarch figure, it becomes less brittle and more open to the outside world; at the same time, Enid stops comparing her own children so much to her neighbors’ children. Enid has always envied her neighbor Bea Meisner for her wealth and seeming happiness; however, when Bea makes an anti-gay remark during a bridge game, Enid decides to drop her as a friend. This is because Enid suspects that Denise is gay; she is therefore putting family loyalty over appearances, a rebellious but loving act.

Symbols & Motifs

The Pleasurelines Cruise Ship

The Pleasurelines cruise that the senior Lamberts take is meant to be a diversion, but it is one on which they are trapped. The cruise ship is full of senior citizens, all of whom have different ways of coping with their old age. On one extreme end, there are the Söderblads, a Swedish couple who focus only on frivolity and pleasure. On the other end, there is Sylvia Roth, a tough-minded woman who prides herself on facing the central tragedy of her life—the murder of her daughter—head on.

The fact that the boat is traveling north, toward the Arctic, gives a literal and metaphorical darkness to the setting. The boat is meant to symbolize both death and the denial of death: a relentless progression toward the cold and dark and the ways in which people distract themselves from this movement. Although Alfred's condition deteriorates during this cruise, he retains a sense of perspective that the more seemingly-alert passengers lack. While "alone on top of the world"—standing on the boat's top deck, from which he will shortly fall—he registers the remoteness and impersonality of the northern landscape: "In the forests that stretched west to the limits of visibility, as in the purposeless rushing of the clouds, as in the air's supernal clarity, there was nothing local. Odd to glimpse infinity precisely in a finite curve, eternity precisely in the seasonal" (330).

Financial Markets

The Corrections takes place during a financial boom market, and its title has a clear double meaning. It refers both to the financial market correcting itself—that is, crashing after a boom—and to the Lambert family's constant attempts to correct one another, either by example or by direct interference.

The novel suggests that in the case of both finance and family, there is only so much correction that is possible. Tellingly, the forays of the Lamberts into financial markets involve significant uncertainty, with each child making a risky gamble: Denise on a restaurant (as well as on Chip, with the loans she provides him), Gary on an experimental therapy, and Chip on selling a country as a product. The booming economy creates a sense of anxiety and instability that is ultimately worse than the market corrections, which turn out—after much doomful prophesying—to be mild. Likewise, Enid realizes in the book's last chapter that "[a]ll

of her corrections had been for naught. He was as stubborn as the day she'd met him" (566). This realization brings Enid some relief, as well as regret; it restores her to herself and her human limits.

The Brain

The brain is evoked literally in this novel, in a neurological treatment that is about to be put on the market. Alfred Lambert, whose own mind is failing him, has developed a patent that helped to create this treatment. The treatment claims to be able to fix the brain quickly and in myriad ways; in an investors meeting that Denise and Gary Lambert attend, the scientist behind the treatment gives a video presentation of how it works. While this presentation is full of impressive-sounding jargon, it is also clumsy and silly. The scientist himself ("Earl 'Curly' Eberle") is an unimposing figure, and the presentation has him traveling around a brain model in a wheelchair (185).

The brain appears elsewhere in the novel in a more metaphorical way. The Lamberts' household is compared to "the mind of a depressed person" (267), with its few scattered lights and lack of activity. In this same section, the omniscient narrator theorizes that "[t]he waking mind was like the light in a house [...] Consciousness was to brain as family was to house" (267). The brain here is closer to a source of light than to the "sashimi"-like brain that surrounds Dr. Eberle (185); it is something that cannot be diagrammed or quantified.

The Lambert children must cope with their father's increasing senility; they must also cope with his limitations as a parent and the resulting **Familial Dysfunction** throughout their childhoods. Ultimately, Alfred does not take the neurological treatment; this is because his children have realized the extent of his senility, and the treatment suddenly seems brutal and far-fetched. It focuses on his brain but not on his consciousness, and shows the limitations of the marketplace and scientific data in resolving messy human problems.

Important Quotes

1. “And so in the house of the Lamberts, as in St. Jude, as in the country as a whole, life came to be lived underground.”
(Chapter 1, Page 10)

This line refers to Alfred’s hiding out in the basement of his house and also to Enid’s hiding the Axon Corporation letter from him. It also refers to a more general sort of evasiveness and denial, that of the American mood during the boom-market years. It is a time of great wealth and plenitude but also of anxiety and guilt; people sense that the source of this national abundance is ugly, and that consequences will eventually catch up with them.

2. “[Denise] was the one who’d instructed Chip to invite his parents to stop and have lunch in New York today. She’d sounded like the World Bank dictating terms to a Latin debtor state, because, unfortunately, Chip owed her money.”
(Chapter 2, Page 30)

Denise is more successful and financially prosperous than Chip, which gives her a position of seniority, even though she is the youngest Lambert sibling. The passage shows the degree to which financial and sociopolitical concerns can color intimate family life. Chip’s lack of financial security gives him a significantly less-powerful position in the family’s hierarchy.

3. “Chip had grown up listening to his father pontificate on the topics of Men’s Work and Women’s Work and the importance of maintaining the distinction; in a spirit of correction, he stuck with Toni for nearly a decade.”
(Chapter 2, Page 33)

Chip is particularly embarrassed by his father’s social and cultural conservatism. His vow to be more progressive than Alfred leads him to stay with a partner with whom he is ill-matched for too long. It is a poor criterion for choosing romantic partners and one that ultimately shows the power that Chip’s father still wields over him.

4. “He couldn’t figure out if [Melissa] was immensely well-adjusted or seriously messed up.”
(Chapter 2, Page 67)

Melissa, the student with whom Chip has an affair, is very much a creature of her moment; it is for this reason that Chip both envies and is put off by her. She comes from a fractured and nontraditional family, while he comes from a traditional one; she is also unconflicted about capitalism and the joys of making money. Chip likes to think of himself as progressive and youthful, but Melissa challenges this self-conception.

5. "In order to salvage his artistic and intellectual ambitions, he added a long theoretical opening monologue. But this monologue was so unreadable that every time he turned on his computer he had to go and tinker with it."
(Chapter 2, Page 90)

Chip is unable to finish his screenplay because his entire livelihood—and dignity—depends on it. He wants to sell the screenplay for a decent sum of money, but he also wants to write a serious intellectual work. The fact that these are two irreconcilable ambitions causes him to continually second-guess himself.

6. "'*The implications are disturbing, but there's no stopping this powerful new technology*.' That could be the motto for our age, don't you think?'"
(Chapter 2, Page 97)

Doug, a financier acquaintance of Chip's, is speaking about the new neurological treatment that Chip's father has had an unwitting hand in creating. Doug has slight ethical qualms about the treatment but is mostly on the side of technology and money, which he seems to regard as uncontrollable forces. In this way, he is even more of his age than he realizes.

7. "The North Atlantic night was dark and lonely, but here, on the plane, were lights in the sky. Here was sociability. It was good to be awake and to feel awakeness all around him."
(Chapter 2, Page 136)

Chip feels newly sheltered and refreshed on the plane to Lithuania. This is partly because he has escaped his unpromising circumstances in New York City, including the large amount of money that he owes his sister. It is also because there is a relief for him in escaping to a poor struggling country, where his own struggles seem minor. Taking this risk makes him feel more solid and real to himself.

8. "His resentment of his wife, Caroline, was moderate and well-contained."

(Chapter 3, Page 137)

As a banker, Gary is in the habit of applying market terminology to his own feelings. This habit does not help him at all to communicate with his family, showing the distance between rational-sounding language and rational behavior. Gary's interior monologues show the degree to which jargon can enter into and mold our thoughts.

9. "[Caroline's] real life centered on the boys. She called them her best friends."
(Chapter 3, Page 139)

Caroline, Gary's wife, refers to her sons as her "best friends," just as Melissa refers to her parents as her "best friends" in Chapter 2. Gary and Chip both have qualms about this lack of parental boundaries, showing that they are both more traditional than they realize. They view parents as disciplinarians rather than peers.

10. "He would have slit his own throat if the boy needed blood; his love was immense in that way: and yet he wondered if it was only love he wanted now or whether he was also coalition-building."
(Chapter 3, Page 160)

Families in this novel are sites of intimacy and comfort but also of underground power struggles. Gary both adores his youngest son, Jonah, and needs him as a bulwark against his wife and his two oldest sons, who he feels are allied against him. His inability to view his family without perceiving a hierarchical power structure reflects his traditional Midwestern upbringing.

11. "Even in a rising market, the house was beginning to lose value, and Gary thought: We've got to sell this fucker *now*, we can't lose another *day*."
(Chapter 3, Page 172)

Gary is channeling his panic over his parents' mortality into a need to sell their inefficient old home. His attention to the crumbling house is detailed and careful, while his attention to his parents' aging is impatient and brusque.

12. "'It's because you're depressed, Dad. You are clinically depressed.' 'And so are you.'"
(Chapter 3, Page 174)

Gary uses the term "clinically depressed" as a blanket condemnation. He sees it as both a moral failing and a condition to be treated, and he throws the term at his father as a way of managing and undermining him. However, Alfred feels no generational shame about being told that he is depressed, and he only reminds Gary that they are more alike than Gary realizes.

13. "He saw an opportunity to make some money and avenge Axon's screwing of his father and, more generally, be *bold* where Alfred had been *timid*."
(Chapter 3, Page 187)

Gary wants to get wealthy off of the new neurological treatment partly so that he can provide for his aging parents. At the same time, he wants to compete with his father and to show that he is a better provider than Alfred. His frail father is still a powerful adversary in his mind.

14. "It was unfair that the world could be so inconsiderate to a man who was so considerate to the world."
(Chapter 4, Page 244)

Alfred's values are values of modesty and rectitude; he is also "considerate to the world" in the sense that he respects durable, well-made objects, such as railroad tracks and Christmas lights. He is offended by people who do not have his sense of propriety and equally offended by thoughtless shoddy design. He is conservative—and is also, in his way, a conservationist.

15. "Elective ignorance was a great survival skill, perhaps the greatest."
(Chapter 4, Page 265)

This line refers specifically to Chip, as a boy, finding ways to entertain himself while he is left alone at the dinner table. It evokes the Lambert family's larger denial about its own fractures. It also hints at a still larger mood of national denial about the possibility of a devastating market correction.

16. "Maybe the futile light in a house with three people separately absorbed in the basement and only one upstairs, a little boy staring at a plate of cold food, was like the mind of a depressed person."
(Chapter 4, Page 267)

The Lambert household is often a lonely one, with each family member off in their own separate orbit. The comparison of the family to a depressed mind, in which parts that should be interconnective are not communicating, shows the particular intimacy of this loneliness. This image is one of several instances in which the brain is evoked as an organ to be studied.

17. "She wondered: How could people respond to these images if images didn't secretly enjoy the same status as real things? Not that images were so powerful, but that the world was so weak."
(Chapter 4, Page 303)

Sylvia Roth, whose daughter has been tortured and murdered, is describing her first time looking at pornography. She has done so in an effort to understand the motives behind her daughter's death. Her observation about images being as powerful as real things is the inverse of Alfred Lambert's respect for concrete objects, yet the two of them share a similar distress over the state of the world.

18. "Death, Enid thought. He was talking about death. And all the people clapping were so *old*."
(Chapter 4, Page 334)

Enid is listening to a lecturer talk about the stock market, invoking its inevitable crash. She is on a cruise trip full of senior citizens, and her thoughts about death foreshadow her husband's fall from the boat deck. These thoughts also demonstrate Enid's deep perceptiveness and honesty, which she often keeps hidden from others in the name of convention and appearances.

19. "'Anyhow,' her father said, 'now you've had a taste of life in the real world.'"
(Chapter 5, Page 374)

Alfred's comment to Denise is more pertinent than he realizes. He believes that her horizons have been broadened by her summer internship at his railroad company; in fact, she has experienced great disillusionment through her affair with Don Armour, one of the workers at the company. Alfred's line is therefore both truthful and ironical.

20. "Her affair was like a dream life unfolding in that locked and soundproofed chamber of her brain where, growing up in St. Jude, she'd learned to hide desires."

(Chapter 5, Page 412)

Denise has learned early on how to compartmentalize and keep secrets, preparing her for her affair with Robin Passafaro. This line shows how Denise's repressed St. Jude upbringing has stuck with her, even while she has always been restless and independent. This also highlights her similarity to Enid; the two women never truly recognize their shared propensity for secret-keeping, which is a way to insulate their true selves from a cold and disappointing world.

21. "Chip was struck by the broad similarities between black-market Lithuania and free-market America."
(Chapter 5, Page 440)

Chip sees in Lithuania a mirror image of the America that he has just left. Lithuania is an openly-corrupt country while America is a capitalist one, but in both countries there is a similar gap between the poor and the wealthy. At first, Chip finds a relief in these underground similarities, which suggest to him that his own country is more corrupt than he had realized.

22. "With his shyness and his formality and his tyrannical rages he protected his interior so ferociously that if you loved him, as she did, you learned that you could do him no greater kindness than to respect his privacy."
(Chapter 6, Page 522)

Denise understands her father partly because she is like him and shares his need for privacy. She is also beginning to see her father as an individual, rather than just an authority figure. In his vulnerable old age, she has to consider what he might need from her.

23. "Chip could see it clearly now, behind the cold front of Gary's wordless departure: his brother was afraid."
(Chapter 6, Page 543)

Chip sees beyond Gary's officious demeanor with their parents and understands that he cannot face their aging. This realization marks Chip's transformation into a more attentive and responsible son himself. His experience in Lithuania has made him aware of the frailties and evasions of others, beneath their bossy prosperous facades; his brush with real-world danger has made him more psychologically astute.

24. “The correction, when it finally came, was not an overnight bursting of a bubble but a much more gentle letdown, a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets, a contraction too gradual to generate headlines and too predictable to seriously hurt anybody but fools and the working poor.”
(Chapter 7, Page 561)

The market correction has been an undercurrent throughout the novel: the anxiety that the boom market might crash, which echoes and amplifies the Lambert family's anxiety about Alfred's age and frailty. Yet in the end the corrections are much milder than anticipated, just as the Lambert family finds a simple, gentle solution for handling Alfred's illness. Rather than sell his house or subject him to an experimental neurological treatment, they simply put him in a nursing home.

25. “All of her corrections had been for naught. He was as stubborn as the day she'd met him.”
(Chapter 7, Page 566)

Enid realizes at the novel's end, and just before her husband's death, that she was never going to change Alfred. This realization, like the market corrections that have just taken place, brings her some relief. It makes her realize that his failings were not her fault, which in turn allows her some acceptance of herself.

Essay Topics

1. *The Corrections* takes place during the turn of the millennium, a period that seems quite distant from today. What is familiar to you in its portrait of America and the national mood? What is strange? Do you think that the book anticipates our present moment at all? In what ways?

2. The novel's title refers to the corrections of the financial market. What other corrections, or attempted corrections, take place in the novel? To what degree do these corrections work?

3. Chip, the Lamberts' middle son, escapes to Lithuania on a whim. He experiences a sense of relief and even happiness in doing so, at least at the beginning. Where do you think that his feeling comes from? What about Lithuania—a corrupt, war-torn country—is attractive to him? In what way is his new job as a confidence man a continuation of his previous career projects?

4. Gary, the Lamberts' oldest son, is preoccupied with the idea of clinical depression; he constantly monitors himself for symptoms of it, to the point where he very nearly drives himself crazy. What do you think he sees as so shameful about being clinically depressed (or simply sad, or disappointed)? What does his anxiety say about the time and place he lives in?

5. On the Pleasurelines cruise boat, Enid strikes up a complicated friendship with Sylvia Roth, a woman who has suffered a terrible loss. Sylvia is a minor character whose story is nevertheless a major set piece in the "At Sea" chapter. How does her story reflect on Enid's situation and story? How does her story reflect the novel's larger concerns and setting?

6. Alfred Lambert is a difficult father and husband. He is also very much out of step with his moment, and there is a sense that he was old-fashioned even as a young man. What are some elements of his character and approach to the world that make him so outmoded? In what ways is he an admirable man, as well as a difficult one, to his children?

7. Chip realizes, while fleeing Lithuania, that the screenplay on which he has been laboring is not a drama but a comedy. The screenplay has always, of course, been unintentionally funny to the reader. What about Chip's surroundings and circumstances has made him suddenly aware of the screenplay's comic potential?

8. Denise is a restless, independent character. She thrives professionally as an adult while being unable to sustain a relationship. What about her Midwestern upbringing do you think has shaped this trajectory? How have her relationships with Don Armour and her father informed her sense of worth and self as an adult?

9. Of all the Lambert children, it is perhaps Chip who changes the most. He goes from being an irresponsible and largely absent son to a reliable caretaker of his aging parents. What do you think prompts this change in him? Does the novel provide any evidence that he always had these capabilities latent in him?

10. The title of the chapter "At Sea," like the novel's title, is both literal and metaphorical. It refers literally to the cruise that the senior Lamberts are taking but also, figuratively, to different states of bewilderment and loneliness. In what ways are the different characters on the boat emotionally, as well as literally, at sea?