

(Anti)Feminisms in Jonathan Franzen's *Purity*

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Summary

In this paper the author analyses the attitudes towards feminisms in Jonathan Franzen's novel *Purity*. The analysis is based on a theoretical framework provided by Nancy Chodorow (*The Reproduction of Mothering*) and Elizabeth Grosz (*Volatile Bodies*). By examining the characters in chronological order according to the novel's timeline, the author finds (often problematic) notions of feminisms that nevertheless mature in each generation, culminating in the novel's youngest and most mature feminist character, Pip.

(Anti)Feminisms in Jonathan Franzen's *Purity*

Introduction

Jonathan Franzen has been celebrated as one of the United States' best and most successful contemporary authors. His third novel, *The Corrections* won both the 2001 National Book Award for Fiction, the 2002 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction and the 2001 Salon Book Award for Fiction; it was a finalist for the 2001 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, the 2002 PEN/Faulkner Award and the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. To review his fourth novel, *Freedom*, in 2010, *Time* magazine featured Franzen on the cover with the title "Jonathan Franzen: Great American Novelist" (Grossman n.p.). The cover photo joined Franzen to a list of previously canonized authors such as J.D. Salinger, Vladimir Nabokov, Toni Morrison, James Joyce and John Updike. In the same article, Grossman called *The Corrections* "the literary phenomenon of the decade." Sam Tanenhaus of the *New York Times* began his review of *Freedom* by calling both novels "masterpiece[s] of American fiction" (BR1). If these accolades have any merit, then what Jonathan Franzen writes has some value in understanding current American culture and the world that surrounds it.

In spite of the praise, or perhaps as a result of it, Franzen has also been no stranger to controversy. After publishing his first two novels, in 1996 Franzen wrote what has come to be known as his *Harper's* essay whose original title, "Perchance to Dream: In an Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels" communicates the crisis he described not only for himself as an author but for American novels as an art form. It was, according to Ty Hawkins, "a public and ambitious deliberation on whether such a future even exist[ed]" (61), but the literary world "widely" viewed it as "a whiney, self-serving lament" (Rebein 207). Five years later, with the publication of *The Corrections*, Franzen seemed to declare an end to both crises.

When *The Corrections* was chosen by American media mogul Oprah Winfrey for her Book Club, however, Franzen's name gained an incredible amount of cultural currency of the notorious variety. Describing the events as they unfolded in the *New York Times*, David Kirkpatrick reported that "after Mr. Franzen publicly disparaged Oprah Winfrey's literary taste ... most of the literary world took her side, deriding him as arrogant and ungrateful" (n.p.). Alluding to his unflattering public persona for the *Time* piece, Grossman wrote, "On the page, Franzen is graceful and funny and totally self-possessed ... But he is a terrible politician and singularly ungifted at what you might call brand management" (n.p.). It's important to highlight here that the controversies surrounding Franzen have, until now, had nothing to do with his own fiction, but rather with his public statements.

Since the *Harper's* essay and the Oprah affair, Franzen has continued to interact with the media and attract unwanted attention to his public persona, but no recent controversy seems as big or significant as the latest to do with his newest novel, *Purity*, published in September 2015.

Purity has been labeled an anti-feminist book, and proof that Franzen hates women. While some reviewers, especially in the mainstream media, have praised the book, many online writers have found it disappointing—if not insulting—from a feminist point of view. Laura Miller, writing for *Slate*, documents some of this activity in her review:

Jonathan Franzen's fifth novel, *Purity*, appears, like his previous one, *Freedom*, amid the media equivalent of the fog of war. There have been trumpeted interviews and fatuous raves, but also misleading headlines, Twitter diatribes, backlashes to the backlash and a deluge of emptily sassy online retorts aggregating all of the above (n.p.).

The amount of anger surrounding *Purity's* take on feminism is palpable. In this "fog of war," to use Miller's term, there have been many accusations thrown around but confusion reigns. Not coincidentally, I think, fog is a symbol that Franzen uses throughout *Purity*, clouding the atmosphere with the doubt and ambivalence that often

accompanies growth and discovery. As Franzen is a public intellectual with a high-profile and a clear degree of cultural influence, I believe the debate about *Purity* is an opportunity to examine what one of America's best and brightest has to say about feminism and try to determine where that fits (if at all) in the current conception of women's interests.

What has been lacking in this oftentimes caustic debate about Franzen's feminist credentials, or lack thereof, is a close reading of *Purity* itself. More is made about what Franzen has said in interviews or in his non-fiction writing than about his actual characters. While book reviewers and online writers like the ones cited above have glossed over the issue, my searches have revealed no academic papers on this subject to date.

In this paper I propose a close reading of *Purity* "with gender on the agenda." I propose to read *Purity* not only as a novel about the protagonist, Pip, but also as a novel about the progress and changes in (white, middle-American) women's attitudes toward feminisms¹.

By tracing the characters' attitudes and actions closely as they progress through the *Purity* narrative, we will see a set of psychological portraits that I believe follow Nancy Chodorow's narrative of sexual stereotype reproduction in *The Reproduction of Mothering*. This seemingly endless cycle that circumscribes women in the domestic sphere and limits their identities to reproductive functions could be used to paint Franzen's story as anti-feminist. Without an escape from that cycle, *Purity's* universe would be trapped in a pre-second wave feminism that is content to give out equality in-name-only and stop there. If Franzen's aim is to describe, in a realist style, current American attitudes, this would result in a failure by ignoring newer tendencies. There are indications, however, especially in the storylines of the "healthy" women characters—

¹ Following Linda Hutcheon in her article "Incredulity Toward Metanarrative: Negotiating Postmodernism and Feminisms" (notes), in an attempt at inclusivity, "I used the real, if awkward, plural here because there are as many feminisms as there are feminists and no clear cultural consensus in feminist thinking on narrative representation."

Leila and Pip—that may indicate a more advanced view of feminisms that breaks down the duality of gender, as well as others, that inhibit the advance of women’s interests. If Franzen’s novel is read as a partial satire of more conservative feminisms with a resolution that can only be found in new brands of feminisms, then perhaps it is less an attack on women than on outmoded ways of thinking through feminisms. I will attempt to show here that as Leila and Pip overcome their own individual, personal conflicts (both within themselves and without), they could be shown to be on a path towards Elizabeth Grosz’s more advanced conception of women and bodies as explained in her book *Volatile Bodies*. As Paul Ring states, “perhaps it’s in the polarizing opinions that *Purity* invites that [Franzen] has inadvertently hit the pitch this time” (n.p.).

In the following sections I will lay out the plot of *Purity* as it is written, explain the novel’s pro- and postleptic structure and use of perspective, symbols and relevant cultural references associated with the characters. I will then trace, through a chronological reading, the reproduction and acquisition of ideas about gender roles and bodies that culminate in the story’s youngest character and protagonist Pip. A final examination of Pip’s resulting beliefs and attitudes and the novel’s ending will determine if any judgement can be made about the feminist value of Franzen’s latest novel.

A Summary of the Plot & Structure of *Purity*

Purity is a *bildungsroman*, written in seven sections with alternating narrative voices. The protagonist, Pip, is not the only character who will experience formation, however. In fact, we will only meet Pip when she is a college graduate and in her early 20’s. On the other hand, the main antagonist of the novel, Andreas Wolf, will reminisce extensively about his childhood in his narrated sections and will also go through a series of events that form his adult persona. Other characters given narrative voices, like Tom Aberant and Leila Helou, will not expound as much on their childhoods, but will describe manners of thinking before and after certain experiences that are congruous to the *bildungsroman* style narrative.

The first section is entitled “Purity In Oakland” and is itself broken down into four sections labeled according to four days of the week, “Monday” through “Thursday.” It should be noted that time in this section is elliptical; at least four months pass from the beginning of “Monday” to “Tuesday.” The narrative voice in this section is Pip’s and the fact that neither the weekend, nor Friday—ostensibly the easiest day of the week—are available to Pip’s narration here as she begins her formation and finds herself in great difficulty, is no surprise.

Pip—full name Purity Tyler—lives in Oakland, California in a house of squatters (Franzen 38), works at a job she hates (7) and is perpetually concerned about her crushing \$130,000 student loan debt (7) . Pip has an unrequited crush on an older housemate—Stephen, who is married (12)—and what’s supposed to be a casual date with a local acquaintance her own age—Jason—turns into an embarrassing disaster (28). She’s a girl, in short, “with nothing but problems” (9).

Pip’s mother, whom she describes as “the massive block of granite at the center of her life” (5), lives alone, isolated, in a small mountain town where “the fog... revealed a bright world to which she preferred not to belong” (7). We learn that she has changed her name (and Pip’s) and concealed her existence from her ex-husband (Pip’s father). Pip, thinking that her financial troubles may be at least, to some degree, alleviated by a guilt-ridden, absent father decides to find him and the truth about her identity.

At the same time a mysterious German woman, Annagret, offers Pip a chance to work for The Sunlight Project (TSP) run by Andreas Wolf (16). The TSP is a hacktivist organization leaking documents of the rich and powerful in an effort to promote transparency and Wolf its charismatic leader. After exchanging some overtly sexual and flirting text messages with Wolf and, with the promise that Wolf can help her find her father, Pip decides to go to his secret compound in Bolivia.

In the second section, “The Republic of Bad Taste,” we get the background on our antagonist, Andreas Wolf. It is his voice that narrates this section which takes place during the tumultuous late 1980’s in East Berlin. Wolf’s father is a high-ranking member of the government and Communist Party, and his mother, Katya, is a well respected

teacher of English at the university (78, 104). When we meet Andreas Wolf, he has “severed all contact with his parents, but in return for this favor they protected him” (78). As an outcast of society, Wolf lives in a church basement where he spends his time counseling troubled young teens, almost exclusively young women, and is “paid for his service in teen pussy” (79). No doubt Andreas’s surname is symbolic of this sexually predatory behavior.

Just when Andreas seems to be sick of it all and bored with young flesh, an exceptional beauty named Annagret (the same who will later visit Pip) walks into the church in need of help. Upon meeting her, Wolf considers that it is the first time he is in love (at age 27) “unless you counted his mother” (89). The girl is in trouble because her mother is a functioning drug addict working as a nurse and her new step-father—and secret police asset—Horst, is now forcing himself sexually on Annagret using the mother’s secret as leverage (95).

While he deliberates how to help Annagret, we learn that Andreas has identified an inner “murderer” which he had discovered years before in the event that precipitated his separation from his parents. As a young adolescent he had been approached by a vagabond claiming to be his true father. While Wolf’s initial reaction was to “bash the dirtbag’s head in” (115). Torn by the doubt of his parentage, he falls out of love with his mother and begins writing poetry, all while excessively masturbating (118). One of his poems is published containing the (thinly) veiled message, “I dedicate the most glorious ejaculation to your socialism,” (124) and thus, Andreas is forced to leave his home or be institutionalized by the state and bring scandal upon his parents. Having been thwarted earlier, Andreas, decides to kill Horst and cover up the crime so that Annagret and her mother can live in peace and, more importantly, so that he can eventually be with her (97).

Wolf and Annagret manage to pull off the crime, but shortly after they do, the Berlin wall starts to come down, the government begins to disintegrate, and there is chaos in the streets (150). Frightened that there will be paperwork investigating the death of a Stasi operative, Wolf infiltrates a government building minutes before it is overrun by protestors. In the resulting tumult, Andreas Wolf’s career as a champion of transparency

is born when he is caught exiting the fray on live TV claiming, “This is a country of festering secrets and toxic lies. Only the strongest sunlight can disinfect it!” (167) In the very last line of the section, Andreas meets “the good American Tom Aberant” (168).

While Tom Aberant is a main character in the novel’s next section, “Too Much Information,” the narrative voice is that of Leila Helou, a Pulitzer-prize winning investigative journalist who grew up as a Lebanese-American Christian in San Antonio, Texas (172). When we meet Leila, she and Tom have been a couple, “for more than a decade” (175). Previously, Leila had “wrecked a marriage” (180) by having an affair with, and then marrying, her Harley Davidson-riding professor and novelist, Charles Blenheim (185). Charles’s writer’s block, hostility to having children with Leila and heavy drinking, eventually lead to a motorcycle accident that leaves him permanently paraplegic and dependent on Leila’s care (197). Around this time she meets Tom Aberant (190) and thus begins a love triangle where Leila shuttles openly between Charles and Tom.

Tom, also a journalist, had had a bad marriage that made him “commitment-shy” (195) as well as a self-proclaimed “connoisseur of guilt” (192). Tom’s marriage—to Anabel Laird, a millionaire scion to a family owned meat-packing conglomerate—had been so bad that Tom claims PTSD and panic attacks when it comes to commitment (196). Leila is angered by Tom’s refusal to have children with her, but eventually finds acceptance, “Her life with Tom was strange and ill-defined and permanently temporary but therefore all the more a life of true love, because it was freely chosen every day, every hour” (200).

As Leila’s section develops we discover that her assistant back at the office in Denver is none other than Pip Tyler (203). Leila is fond of Pip and “wanted to be a good feminist role model” (204), but as Pip insinuates her way into Tom and Leila’s life together, Leila begins to distrust Pip’s intentions and view her as a rival (212).

When the tension rises to unbearable levels, Leila confronts Tom about his relationship with Pip and the commitment paralysis he exhibits which she claims is due to his being “haunted” by Anabel (234). At this point Tom drops the novel’s biggest bomb: Pip “is Anabel’s daughter” (236). When Leila asks who the father is, Tom replies

with bomb number two, “I’ll spare you the details, but there’s no way it could be me. And yet I’m pretty sure it’s me” (237).

With part of the mystery of Pip’s parentage revealed, the next section “Moonglow Dairy” (239-315) tells of what happened to Pip between leaving Oakland and arriving in Denver. The section is written in Pip’s voice and takes place in Bolivia, at TSP’s hidden base of operations.

When she meets Wolf she recognizes him as a predator but finds that “she was unused to being commanded,” and “admit[s] it was kind of a relief” (258). Wolf’s first attempt at seduction is only partially successful with Pip (she refuses to have sex), so he escalates by confessing to Horst’s murder but Pip remains unconvinced; she “sensed that he was trying to do something to her by telling it. Something not right” (271). After she finds Wolf crying over the news that his mother has kidney cancer (281), there is a second attempt at seduction, this time with Pip’s urging, but it falls apart at the last minute. Pip’s “body responded to the offer; but it was icky to respond to him that way...” (287).

Finding herself ostracized by her colleagues (envious of her relationship to Wolf) and now distanced from Wolf himself, Pip looks for a way out (290). Wolf generously offers her one by arranging for her to get a job with the *Denver Independent*, where Tom Aberant is editor and publisher (293). While Pip finds that “her inability to trust him was in her marrow” (293), she also “had compassion for him, including his paranoia” (294) that Tom—who, Wolf claims, is the only other person (aside from Annagret) that knows about Horst’s murder—is going to come after him. Pip agrees to take the job and open an attachment that Wolf will send via email on one of the office computers (essentially becoming Wolf’s spy) (294).

Once in Denver Pip finds herself enjoying her work at the *Denver Independent* and very attached to her bosses. As a result, she becomes determined to “betray Andreas and tell Tom and Leila everything” (297) but before she can, Tom discovers her subterfuge and confronts her. She confesses about her previous contact with Andreas Wolf and apologizes to Tom explaining, “I guess I felt I owed him something” (311). It’s

all a “horrible dirty dream” (311) for Pip, but she still doesn’t know the truth about Tom, i.e. her parentage.

The fourth section “[le1o9n8a0rd]” is an account of Tom and Anabel’s marriage as told by Tom in a document that he had saved on his computer that Andreas Wolf has now hacked. It documents the oldest part of the history of Pip’s family and by revealing the information so late in the novel, Franzen fully exploits its dramatic value. The narrative voice is Tom’s and this effectively silences Anabel’s own voice, the effects of which will be more closely attended to in the following section of this paper.

The secret history that is “[le1o9n8a0rd]” begins by telling of a sexual affair Tom and Anabel had after divorcing. Tom writes that, “Past and future mingled in the land of Tom and Anabel” (323) which makes sense given that Tom, like Franzen, tells his story by jumping backwards and forwards in time. He closes the episode of their love making with “We’d been little more than children when we fell in love. Now everything was ashes, ashes” (328).

We learn that Tom’s grandmother Annelise, a German, had “sold herself” (333) after the war in order to raise her children, including Tom’s mother Clelia. After running away from home, Clelia runs into Tom’s father, Chuck Aberant of Denver, who is in town for a Communist front known as the “World Congress of the Association for International Understanding” (337). Clelia falls for Chuck instantly and goes back with him to America, but regrets her choice when Chuck mostly leaves her at home alone to care for Tom and his two daughters from a previous marriage (339). Tom grew up tending to his sick mother (colon problems) (341) much like Clelia had done Annelie (stomach problems) (328).

At university Tom became the editor of the school newspaper and met Anabel when she accosted him after his paper published an unflattering article about her denunciation of the underrepresentation of women on the faculty by having herself delivered naked, wrapped in butcher’s paper, to the Dean of the university with the label “Your meat” written on the package (342). Her reproach causes Tom to reflect on a feeling of being “inescapably implicated in the patriarchy” (347), a feeling he had first felt when his father

had confronted him for owning a pornographic magazine as a teenager. He also explains that at the time he was very attracted to women, but still a virgin, as his first (and only) attempt at intercourse had resulted in his awkwardly poking the anus of a high school girlfriend (347).

Anabel, according to Tom, describes her family as secretive and controlling (351). While she had previously idolized her father, she later learned that he'd been having extra-marital affairs that had left her mother with nothing to do but drink (351). Her mother chose to send Anabel away to protect her, earning her resentment. Her mother then drowned the same day that Tom's father had died (in a plane crash) (352).

Through a mutual acquaintance, Tom learns that Anabel had been "one of the wildest girls in the history" of her high school, and that "she's sort of messed up sexually from that. She was too young and she also got VD" (355). When she meets Tom she is "in the process of weaning [herself] from the family teat ... [because] the money has blood on it ... the blood from a river of meat" (357).

Once they begin their relationship, Tom writes that "she set about improving me that night. To be with her, I'd need better ambitions" (365). Tom adapts to Anabel's needs. Anabel can only achieve orgasm on "the three days when the moon was fullest," (373) each month. She proves to be extremely sensitive to smells, noise and dirt as well as their equality. At one point she insists Tom urinate while sitting since she has no other choice but to do so. Tom complies, when she can hear him, but "When she couldn't... I peed in her sink. The part of me that did this was the part that ultimately ruined us and saved me" (380). Tom's appeasement increases to the point that he even begins to ignore his increasingly ailing mother and then publicly embarrasses her when she comes to visit for his graduation. As Tom writes, "It's possible to describe this as an emasculation of me, but it was really more like a dissolution of the boundaries of our selves" (379).

After they are married, Anabel begins work on an ambitious film-project that quickly leads nowhere while Tom focuses most of his energy on keeping her happy (402). Their sex life declines, Anabel starts "starving herself and exercising three hours a day" and

then her periods simply stop. “All we did was talk and talk,” he writes; they could spend “several hours discussing an incorrect look I’d given her” (403). Anabel claims to want a child with Tom, but only after she finishes her film which is barely begun. Just as their relationship seems to reach a tipping point, Tom’s mother announces that she has cancer and it gives Tom an excuse to disengage himself from Anabel temporarily (410). He travels home to care for his mother and then accompanies her on a trip to her hometown of Jena, Germany to die (413).

After Tom’s mother passes away, the young journalist remains for a few days in Berlin to watch as history unfolds with the fall of the Berlin Wall (415). It’s here that he meets our antagonist, Andreas Wolf. Wolf tells Tom a manipulated version of Horst’s death (it was self-defense) and Tom is so moved that he agrees to help him move the body to avoid Wolf’s getting caught. “Helping Andreas seemed to me a way of atoning for my American advantages,” he writes (428). After they do the deed, they agree to meet up again the next day, but Tom doesn’t show. He explains, “I still had a hankering to see Andreas’s face and hear his voice—I have it even as I write this—but the sadness from which I’d been running was hitting me so hard that I could barely stand upright” (431).

Tom then returns to the account of his and Anabel’s love affair after divorcing. While on a date in a secluded cabin in the New Jersey woods, Anabel destroys Tom’s remaining condoms and they have violent anal sex. He writes, “My state of mind was that of a crack addict ... I wasn’t raping Anabel, but I might as well have been. Pleasure was low on the list of what either of us was after” (436). In between bouts of sex Anabel would hurry off to the bathroom, which we realize now was a way to collect Tom’s semen in order to inseminate herself (436). It’s the last contact Tom has with her. Shortly after that episode, he learns from the Laird family that Anabel has disappeared. In addition, her father has named Tom the trustee to her inheritance of over a billion dollars (442).

In the climactic, penultimate section “The Killer” we return to the Moonglow Dairy, but this time the narration is from Andreas Wolf’s point of view. It begins when Tom Aberant

has come to visit him but this triggers Andreas's memories of the time after Tom had stood him up in Germany and he recounts everything that has happened since (447).

He had spent years with Annagret only to feel increasingly "ashamed of being a killer. Ashamed of everything" (463). He'd rejected his biological father's gold-digging scheme when he'd approached him seeking sponsorship of a book about Wolf's sordid origins (477). He'd eventually left Europe for Bolivia under the financial backing of a Silicon Valley venture capitalist living in exile to avoid rape charges in the US. When his connection to the venture capitalist was found out, he felt "the Killer" inside him reappear after so many years lying dormant (482).

Andreas then read an interview with Leila Helou panning his efforts and equating him and other leakers to "savages" (493). Once he learned that Leila worked for Tom, his paranoia became directed at the one other person (besides Annagret) that "had glimpsed the Killer" (494). He methodically planned his revenge on Tom by using sophisticated face-recognition software to identify Tom's disappeared ex-wife (497). He then sent Annagret to recruit Tom's daughter to work at TSP (498). His original revenge included seducing Pip, but when she ultimately refused his advances he found that he was both in love with her and enraged at her. "He was both the Killer and the person enraged with the Killer for depriving him of love" (503). His Plan B was to have Pip infiltrate Tom's organization and hope that Tom might be seduced by her.

After Pip had left for Denver, Wolf's mother Katya arrived in Bolivia and the two reconciled (503). Tom then arrived, having discovered Pip's subterfuge, in an attempt to assure Wolf that his secret was safe and also to get Wolf to promise to keep the secret of Pip's parentage. It seems that the two men might reconcile, but instead Andreas forwards the secret history Tom had been guarding to Pip and then commits suicide in front of Tom by jumping off a cliff (513).

The final section of the novel, "The Rain Comes" is a kind of denouement that returns us to Pip's narrative voice and point of view. Back in San Francisco, working at a coffee bar, she meets up with her disastrous date Jason and reconciles (519). Just after learning of Wolf's suicide she finds the email he had sent to her and decides to read the

attached document (523). With the mystery of her identity finally solved, she flies to Kansas to meet with the Laird family lawyer to see if she can mediate on behalf of her mother for the inheritance money. She makes a deal that involves getting her mother to admit her true identity and sign some documents in return for access to the money (535).

In the final scene of the novel, Pip (accompanied by Jason and his dog) arrive at Anabel's house in the mountains. Anabel initially rejects any attempts at her making the deal, but is eventually persuaded by Pip. With her mother shakily on board with her plan, Pip then announces the arrival of Tom at the house and the two younger adults leave the two older adults to hash out their differences. The mystery of Pip's identity has been resolved and with it, Pip sees a positive future for herself (563).

In addition to the characters mentioned in the plot summary above, attention should also be paid to the meteorological symbols of sunlight, rain and fog which appear at key moments throughout the novel. Sunlight is normally a symbol denoting warmth and clarity, but in *Purity* it appears only rarely. Most notably it is the metaphor behind Wolf's hacktivist project, The Sunlight Project. Since Wolf is our antagonist, however, sunlight must therefore be coded negatively or at least as duplicitous within the novel's universe. In contrast, fog, which normally obscures and clouds, appears most often. It hides Pip's mother from the rest of the world (7), battles against the sun in the Moonglow Dairy (255), is a metaphor for Anabel's depression (399), obscures the night that Tom helps Wolf (430), in the form of an overcast sky it is the backdrop for Pip's confession to Tom (303) and in the form of dust represents pollution and climate change in Texas (171).

Rain, composed of water and a symbol of its purifying effects (also a contrast to the dry heat of the sun), appears in the novel at three very specific moments. Rain's first appearance is during the night of Wolf's killing of Horst. Preceding the murder, there is "drizzle" (133) which becomes a "mist" (139), "fog" (145) and shortly after "snow" (146). The combination of rain and fog, together with the darkness of night and the absence of moonlight, offers cover to the murderer. The weather changes, however, as the anxiety of getting caught begins to take hold of Wolf and suddenly the air of Berlin becomes "a

choking hydrochloric cloud" (148) to him. While rain and fog have helped obscure his misdeed, the resulting air is poisonous to him.

The second appearance of rain comes in the form of a thunderstorm in which the power and terrible noise of thunder and lightning overshadow the precipitation (432-6). Its appearance coincides with Pip's conception, which is hidden from Tom, thus linking Pip very closely to water.

Rain appears once more in the book's denouement when Pip resolves her inheritance with her mother and then leaves Tom and Anabel to try and resolve their own issues. While the section begins with fog in Oakland that seems "endless" to Pip as well as "a temporary sadness" (517), by the time she reaches her mother's house in the mountains, the heavy rain falling on the cabin's roof reminds her of her childhood: "She associated the sound with her mother's love ... as reliable as the rain in its season" (549). This affirmative sense-memory is constant as the novel closes. It is the "the sound of love drowning out the other sound" (563). While the result of rain for Andreas has been murderous and poisonous, the opposite can be said for Pip, who experiences rain as love.

Significantly, there is a special moment for Pip when water is once again a very positive influence. While at the Moonglow Dairy, Pip takes a late night swim by herself and experiences "a moment of happiness purer than any she'd ever felt," that makes her "feel grateful to her mother" (250). Bathing in water at once envelopes the body and cleanses. If we consider that shortly after the bathing scene Pip will meet Andreas and proceed to reject his sexual advances, the swim (the only in the novel) can be seen as a turning point for Pip in which she begins to take control of her own life. Pip is therefore closely associated to water in an affirmative, active and loving way. Andreas Wolf, on the other hand, is a representative of the sun and his connections to rain involve murder and poison.

What conclusions can we draw about feminisms represented in *Purity* from the plot? On face value we can make a good list of apparent anti-feminist elements: multiple mad women/mothers (Katya, Anabel, possibly Annelise); the silencing of female voices

(Anabel's, Katya's), violence toward women (Andreas's seductions, Horst's abuse of Annagret, Tom's "not quite" rape of Anabel), absent fathers (Dick Aberant, Wolf Sr., Charles), self-described feminists who depend on men (Leila, Anabel) and more. If these plot points are what make this novel, then perhaps their cumulative value outweighs any of the positives that we can find in closer analysis. I would argue, however, that *Purity*, like Jonathan Franzen's other novels, cannot be read merely at face value and does require further study because its characters are rich with detail and inner life. A more in-depth look is necessary before anything close to judgement can be made about its content.

An Analysis of Feminisms in *Purity*

Purity is not a history of feminisms, but through a close reading of the characters leading genealogically down to Pip, I believe there is a progression of feminist attitudes that can be shown to be advancing the interests of women. While Franzen arranges the narrative out of sequence in order to heighten the suspense of the drama, a chronological review of the characters and their attitudes will offer a better structure to analyze the advancing notions of feminisms in the text.

As tools for analysis I have chosen to base my observations on two books: Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* and Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*. Chodorow's analysis is based on an adaptation of Freudian psychoanalysis known as object-relations and it's an excellent model for looking at the familial drama that is *Purity*. Chodorow states, "Psychoanalytic theory remains the most coherent, convincing theory of personality development available for an understanding of fundamental aspects of the psychology of women in our society, in spite of its biases" (142). Grosz's text focuses on the "conceptual blind spot" (3) of the body which is an issue for more than one of our main characters as well as a defining element in most feminisms. While going far beyond Freud, Grosz also uses psychoanalytic theory as a starting point. She discusses the "crucial role played not only by the child's own corporeal sensations but also by the activities of those who tend and care for the child during its earliest years." A child's body, she writes, is "like a screen onto which the mother's—and culture's—desires,

wishes, fears, and hopes are projected and internalized” (75). In *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz strives to elaborate a transformation in the way bodies are conceptualized, moving away from fixed, molar and sexually binarized bodies towards something new, fluid and molecular for both men and women (202). In this section I aim to demonstrate that the characters in *Purity* will move from displaying the reproductive mothering contingent to a male-dominant society as described by Chodorow towards behaviors and attitudes more akin to the new, non-molar body that Grosz describes.

Let’s begin with the oldest generation of mothers: Annelise, Clelia and Katya. As Chodorow explains, women—by definition—mother and their mothering is reproduced across generations (3). In our male-dominant society where men are associated with the public sphere of work and women with the domestic sphere of home and child, the reproduction of mothering perpetuates sexual asymmetry (6-7). Women “produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother,” while producing sons “whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed” (7). Chodorow goes on to state that “women’s mothering is a central and defining feature of the social organization of gender and is implicated in the construction and reproduction of male dominance itself” (9). The first generation of parents in *Purity* follow the narrative expected by Chodorow since they live in an era prior to the second-wave feminism of the 60’s and 70’s: mothering “is informed by her relationship to her husband, her experience of financial dependence, her expectations of marital inequality, and her expectations about gender roles” (86). This first generation of women characters did not have very high expectations or positive experiences along these lines. Their children, as we shall see, will fare better but are still hampered by the environments (both psychical and physical) in which they were raised.

Annelise & Clelia

Tom’s grandmother Annelise’s stomach problems are described as holding her family’s apartment hostage (Franzen 328), but the real hostage turns out to be her eldest daughter Clelia (Tom’s mother). It’s Clelia who has to attend to her ailing mother while her brother Rudi and the other children can sleep. Rudi works but spends his money on alcohol and girlfriends, while Clelia’s paycheck from a bakery has to support her whole

household (329). Annelise feels no guilt for this situation since she had prostituted herself at a younger age in order to provide for her children (332). For Annelise duty to the family comes before pleasure and she cannot understand Clelia's resistance to this idea. Clelia is therefore forced to mother her siblings as well as her own mother.

Clelia seeks escape and perhaps financial independence by marrying Chuck Aberant but as a result she finds herself newly constrained. Chuck may be American, but his attitudes about childcare resemble Annelise's. Clelia is left at home as caregiver to Chuck's two young daughters while Chuck is often away on business. In her disappointment, she criticizes her step-daughters the same way her own mother had criticized her (340) and begins to pin her hopes and ambitions on her only son, Tom (341). In this way Clelia reproduces Annelise's mothering.

It's also important to note here that Annelise and her daughter Clelia both suffer from body issues. Clelia refers to Annelise's stomach as a separate entity (328) and later talks about her own body as if it were a faulty product she had bought (408). This kind of speech points to a Cartesian dualism between mind and body that, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, bolsters the binary opposition of male/female. The "dualistic understanding of the body is not unique to patriarchal philosophies but underlies some versions of feminist theory which see patriarchy as the system of universal male right to the appropriation of women's bodies" (3). Grosz rejects this version of feminisms as we'll see later in our discussion of Anabel.

Katya

Katya, Wolf's mother, had fled Germany in 1933 with her parents (Communist Party leaders) to England where they remained until the war's end. Katya was allowed to remain there to study, but her parents returned to East Germany only to be exiled to Rostock by the new government. Katya was left orphaned when her father hung himself and her mother died in a mental asylum after a nervous breakdown. Having studied in England and being the daughter of "martyrs" to the cause, Katya returns to Germany as an English professor and marries an economics professor at the university where she teaches (Franzen 105). As her husband moves up the government ladder to "chief state

economist,” (105) Katya has an extra-marital affair with a student that leads to Andreas’s birth.

The traumas of violently losing her parents, returning to the country that ostensibly killed them, finding herself in a marriage with an absent husband (whom she blames for her father’s suicide (155)), and then carrying a child that is not her husband’s but rather the result of an affair that could have led to her incarceration (and did for the biological father (114)) all have serious effects on Katya’s mothering abilities and, subsequently, on her son Andreas.

Wolf describes his childhood as chaos (123), but he also talks of having been in love with Katya and mesmerized by her (89, 104). Katya “permitted him everything” including sleeping with her, both when her husband was away or at home (105). She raised him bilingual, teaching him English with a special interest in Shakespeare and wordplay. Two incidents of Shakespearean wordplay are indicative of the nature of their early relationship. In the first, young Wolf is play-hitting his mother as she exclaims, “A hit, a palpable hit” from the final duel scene in *Hamlet*, after which both Hamlet and his (adulterous) mother will die. During the scene in *Purity*, Katya suddenly crumbles to the floor in a catatonic state that confuses and troubles young Andreas. After recovering, she reassures him by saying, “You didn’t do anything wrong ... You’re perfect. The world isn’t” (106). In the second instance, a precocious young Andreas overhears his mother’s colleague misuse the verb “lay” and shouts, “To say ‘lay’ when you mean ‘lie’ is a ‘lie!’” While not a Shakespeare quote, the sexual innuendo of “lay” and “lie” is a well-known element of Hamlet’s scenes with both Ophelia and his mother in Act 3, Scenes 2 and 4. Despite the intruding catatonia, the sexual innuendo can be regarded as innocent and harmless. In Chodorow’s account, the “attachment to the mother, and the growing ability to take her interests into account, is a prototype for later attachment to other objects experienced as separate. For many analysts, this is the most important aspect of relational development” (72). There’s no reason to interpret Andreas’s precocity and love for his mother as anything less than normal. He likes wordplay because she does.

The sexualized innuendo becomes something more, however, when we take into account that Katya exposed her genitals to Andreas at the age of seven (Franzen 65)

(and possibly even before that (117)). Chodorow agrees with Bribing's idea that, "the decline of the husband's presence in the home has resulted in a wife "as much in need of a husband as the son is of a father. This wife is likely to turn her affection and interest to the next obvious male—her son—and to become particularly seductive toward him" (104). She goes on to say that, "a mother, of a different gender from her son and deprived of adult emotional, social, and physical contact with men... may push her son out of his preoedipal relationship to her into an oedipally toned relationship defined by its sexuality and gender distinction" (107). Suddenly, the wordplay has a new layer of meaning colored by Katya's marital situation.

In addition, Andreas has memories of accidentally interrupting some of her sexual liaisons with other men eliciting fanciful excuses from Katya that only a small child would believe (Franzen 117). When he meets the man who claims to be his true father, Andreas relives those memories and suddenly turns against his mother and lashes out at her by first obsessively masturbating and later by publishing his scandal-provoking poem. In one of their arguments shortly before the poem is published Andreas makes repeated references to *Hamlet's* main themes of infidelity, madness and the female genitals (111).

We can see Katya trying to mother Andreas, to "protect" him and take care of him, but he has turned away from her. While this turning away is indicative of the Oedipal complex in which boys separate from their mother, Andreas's psychosis later on points to something more. In Grosz's review of the Lacanian mirror-stage, she writes about the desire for a "solid, stable identity" (43). Unfortunately, the "unified body image" is precarious and must be "continually renewed, not through the subject's conscious efforts but through its ability to conceive of itself as a subject and to separate itself from its objects and others to be able to undertake willful action. The dissolution or disintegration of the unified body schema," can lead to psychosis (44). When Andreas is forced to confront his mother's duplicity about his parentage, their "love affair" not only ends, but Andreas feels himself going mad (like Hamlet, but for real) and torn into psychical pieces by the violent break with his mother (until now, a part of him rather than other). Chodorow's narrative would seem to concur: "Where children do suffer is in *multiple*

parenting situations associated with sudden separation from their primary caretaker, *major family crisis or disruption in their life*, inadequate interaction with those caretakers..." (75, emphasis added).

From Annelise, Clelia and Katya, we now move down to the next generation of Andreas, Tom, Leila and Anabel. Though we meet them as adults, we will see how they are at once products of their childhood environment, following the Chodorow reproduction model, but also moving into more modern understandings of gender, sexuality and feminisms.

Andreas

Andreas Wolf's early childhood experiences with his mother Katya have been detailed above and what follows are a look at his own point of view and the results of his early education.

Andreas considers himself a product of both his motherland, East Germany, and his mother (Franzen 127). He blames his mother repeatedly and claims that all mothers are blameworthy because they have "three or four years to fuck with your head before your hippocampus began recording" (103). He also recognizes the cyclical element of mothering, "But your mother could always blame her own mother" (102). His hostility towards Katya and later psychosis fit Chodorow's narrative of the Oedipal complex, which is extremely intense in Andreas's case. While "sexual drives toward a child are common" and are repressed by parents, the child can sense them, but since they are feelings associated with guilt and conflict, they become overwhelming to the child (161). This relived Oedipal situation is reproduced in the child. In the case of Andreas, he must separate from his mother and enter the world of the father, or face castration. According to the Freudian account, the son's castration fears correspond to the father's own fear of punishment (Chodorow 162)—but, who is Andreas's father?

Andreas's first reaction to his biological father's revelation is a murderous fantasy and it causes him sexual arousal ("The idea was giving him a stiffy" (Franzen 115)). It's the moment he locates the birth of his inner Killer. Following on his earlier "Hamletizing" and highlighting the figures of his Oedipal situation, Andreas refers to this apparition as "the

ghost” and having spoken with him, he stops “enjoying conversations with his mother” (109). King Hamlet’s ghost, of course, orders Hamlet to kill his adoptive father, Claudius, and sets him against his mother, Gertrude.

Andreas’s biological father was labeled a criminal and sent to prison for fathering him; Andreas’s adoptive father was the man who sent him. This creates an extremely conflicted “turn to the father” for Andreas and he develops a fixation masturbating obsessively (118). Chodorow quotes Fairburn describing an “erotogenic zone in which the dramas of disturbed personal relationships are localized” (48). It’s clear that the sexualization of Andreas’s relationship with his mother and the trauma of his separation from her have led Andreas to a fixation with his own genitals.

When he is separated from his parents and living in the church basement, his obsession shifts to the genitals of the young girls he counsels, just like the ones his mother had exposed to him (Franzen 79). Chodorow claims this “fetishism is a result of conflict centering on issues of separation and individuation in the early years. It results from boundary confusion and a lack of sense of self firmly distinguished from his mother” (107). While Katya is not the instigator of Andreas’s separation from her, nor is that separation outside the expected Freudian narrative, the intrusion of “the ghost” and the knowledge that he brings confuse everything Andreas knows to be true about his mother (121).

He’s aware of the conflicted feelings he has for his mother. He feels, at twenty, like “still a wanting four-year-old,” (131) and remarks, “It was terrible how much he loved her” (155). This retreat to a preoedipal, pre-symbolic realm will lead him to his psychosis. When he kills Horst for Annagret, he feels as if he is killing his old self, the self tied to “the filth and sordid history” of his parents (i.e. his mother). He imagines he will be purified and humbled afterward (137). After the act he feels post-orgasmic, but finds none of the relief he had imagined previously (139).

His later womanizing derives from a search for his perfect woman, an idealized mother (Chodorow 133). His too-close relationship with Katya in childhood creates a

“resentment and dread of women,” and so he seeks “nonthreatening, undemanding, dependent, even infantile women” while at the church (Franzen 185).

When he meets Annagret, he discovers a love directed outward, to a non-mother, and describes it as “soul-crippling, stomach-turning, weirdly claustrophobic” (100), but he considers this love “purer” than the love he has for Katya (158). Having found a non-mother object for his desire, he then finds himself identifying with his adoptive father in their shared experience of Katya (163). His oedipal situation is resolved, but the psychosis of the experience lingers.

As the leader of TSP, Andreas talks about the secrets that he exposes. He believes that secrets consist of two motives, “the imperative to keep secrets, and the imperative to have them known,” and alludes to his own psychological drives, “Secrets are the way you know you have an inside. ... Sooner or later, the inside of you needs a witness” (275). But the medium he uses, the Internet, also comes to signify death to him, especially in the form of online pornography. He describes feeling trapped in an “annihilation of the distinction between private and public” (465), or in personal terms, between the inner psychological world and the outer physical one.

Just before his suicide there are three indicative moments. First, Katya visits him. Their first exchange at the airport is all we know of the meeting. Andreas embraces her and says, “I love you,” to which she responds, “You always have” (503). Once again, there is a return to the realm where psychosis resides. Next, Tom Aberant arrives and Andreas remarks that, “the Tom he remembered from Berlin had been softer and more forgiving, more motherly” (507). Equating Tom with a mother is interesting because Tom had been Andreas’s only experience of male friendship insofar as we know. Tom is therefore a surrogate father figure as well as a mother to Andreas. Finally, just moments before he jumps, Andreas experiences a deafness to human speech, a disconnect from his own body.

In *Volatile Bodies*, Callois’s notion of mimesis is explained as being a blurring between organism and environment, and psychosis is the human analogue (47). In his last moments, Andreas, having re-connected with his mother and his only male friend

and father figure, finally escapes the body in which he's been trapped with The Killer ever since his haunted Oedipal situation so many years before.

To describe Andreas as anything but misogynist would be unjust. He's a narcissist with unresolved issues for his mother that he projects onto all the women in his life. In this sense he's a fitting antagonist and foil to Pip. We should not look to Andreas for any affirmative progress or advance of feminist attitudes, but rather look to Pip in her contrast with him.

Tom

Tom's name is one consonant away from "aberrant" which signifies "deviating from the ordinary, usual, or normal type; exceptional; abnormal" ("Aberrant" n.p.). The name is indicative of his attitude to women and feminisms. While he does not represent the ideal feminist male, he is incredibly sensitive to his role as a member of the patriarchy and is determined to compensate for his privileged biology. Leila describes him as "a strange hybrid feminist, behaviorally beyond reproach but conceptually hostile." He tells her,

I get feminism as an equal-rights issue... What I don't get is the theory. Whether women are supposed to be exactly the same as men or different and better than men (Franzen 228).

By this description, we can locate Tom solidly on board with first-wave feminisms but confused by the second-wave of the sixties and seventies. If we consider Anabel's brand of feminisms as indicative of the second-wave, their relationship will be a telling indicator of the degree of Tom's conceptual hostility. But first, we should locate the source of his "irreproachable behavior."

First of all, Tom was close to his mother and helped take care of her while his father was often away on business. He describes her as "big-sisterly, gushing and hopeful" (341). We have no sign that they had an unhealthy, too-close relationship like Andreas and Katya's, even though Tom's father had died when Tom was young. Of his father, Tom remembers when he found one of his pornographic magazines and confronted him with it. Dick Aberant asks Tom to empathize with the woman in the magazine and

berates him for materially participating “in the degradation of a fellow human being” (345). While Dick’s attitude may stem more from his Communist politics than from feminisms, the attitude is relatively unexpected in a man of his generation and Tom takes it to heart. At first he tries to morally justify himself by imagining conversations with the women and by stealing (rather than paying for) more magazines. But Tom finds himself “ineluctably in the wrong,” having harmed others without having been harmed, simply by being male and excitable by pornographic images (346). Shortly after comes his aborted attempt at losing his virginity—the awkward anal poking (347)—and then Tom the “connoisseur of guilt” (192) is firmly established.

Tom seems on his way to being a man with a relatively healthy, if highly physical, attitude about women. He might even be on the way to meeting one of Elizabeth Grosz’s objectives, that of a new sexual ethics. She writes, “Sexual difference entails the existence of a sexual ethics, an ethics of the ongoing negotiations between beings whose differences, whose alterities, are left intact but with whom some kind of exchange is nonetheless possible” (192).

Unfortunately, Tom’s first and only sexual relationship is with Anabel Laird. Chodorow’s description is right on target: “When people have extreme needs for emotional support, and a few very intense relationships (whose sole basis is emotional connection, ungrounded in cooperative activity or institutionalized non-emotional roles) to provide these needs, these relationships are liable to be full of conflict” (213).

Is Tom’s description of Anabel and his relationship misogynist? As mentioned above, the choice to silence Anabel and let Tom tell the story is certainly not generous. Tom also seems to judge Anabel for (what he calls) her faulted logic while never being able to stop being attracted to her. They continue having sex after their divorce. Tom describes himself as being like a drug addict for Anabel. He expresses feelings of humiliation (Franzen 322) but an inability to stop. Is it worse to be a drug addict or to have twisted logic? Hearing it only from Tom’s perspective limits readers to the latter conclusion.

In *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz discusses the concept of a “Body Without Organs,” or BwO. The BwO is made up of “proliferations, connections, and linkages.” It’s a body that

produces, that flows and circulates (170-1). The drug addict's body, however, ceases to flow and is empty because the organs and circulation become "vitrified" and disconnected from others. When the BwO is full, in a healthy person, the concept is close to what Grosz is aiming for. Tom's Anabel addiction (and Anabel's hypochondria, as we will see below), works against him in his advance of feminisms.

In viewing his romantic success with Anabel as a vindication in his "protracted struggle with fear and feminist self-scrutiny" (Franzen 372), Tom exposes his other-centeredness. He defines himself by Anabel's feelings for him which will lead him into the unhealthy kind of relationship Chodorow describes above, as well as to twin empty BwO's. Vindication becomes capitulation when he's forced to choose between hurting his mother or Anabel. He recognizes that his life has "become a nightmare of exactly the female reproach I'd dedicated it to avoiding. To avoid it from my mother was to invite it from Anabel..." (397). Tom's oldest connection (to his mother) is cut, and the flows begin to slow. Only later when Clelia is dying does he find his way out.

It's only temporary, though. The real break comes when Anabel disappears, and even then it's possibly only physical. Leila describes Tom as "haunted" by Anabel even years later, and is convinced that the ghost of his ex-wife is the reason he won't have a baby with her (234).

An interesting question is Tom's attitude to Pip once he realizes that she is his daughter. Chodorow advocates for more equal parenting in her book, and Tom would seem to have a lot to make up for. His choice not to tell Pip out of respect for his ex-wife's secret follows the previous pattern of choosing Anabel over other connections in his life. First his mother, now his only child. In addition, when he travels to Bolivia to meet with Andreas Wolf, it's ostensibly to assure that Pip will never learn the truth about her parentage. It's a long way to go for this assurance, but clearly he still feels guilty toward, and responsible for, his ex-wife even in her absence. Why doesn't he feel responsible for Pip, who he likes and who desperately wants to find out the truth?

According to Grosz, women have become "the guardians" of both men and women's sexual fluids (197). Seminal fluid is regarded by men as a non-contaminant (unlike

menstrual blood, urine, or vomit) and more as a solid because of its creative agency. It is, nonetheless, a seepage or leak of men's bodies that they do not feel responsible for. Grosz states, "only when make take responsibility for and pleasure in the forms of seepage that are their own, when they cease to reduce it to its products, when they accept the sexual specificity, particularity, and limit that is their own, that they well respect women's bodily autonomy and sexual specificity as well" (202).

Clearly, Tom has failed to live up to Grosz's description. Furthermore, it's not clear that his behavior is "morally irreproachable" especially with regard to his daughter. While we'll never know what kind of feminist Tom could have been if he hadn't met Anabel, the Tom that we have is at best not bad, and at worst problematic.

Leila

Leila Helou's family continues the Chodorow narrative, but with a twist. Leila's mother dies when Leila is very young, but her aunt Marie comes over from "the old country" to take care of the mothering. Leila's father, a dentist with a busy practice and a placement at the dental school defers on household duties. Aunt Marie ("her father's crone cousin") is strict, stubborn, frightens Leila's friends and never lets Leila win at games (Franzen 184). Thus far the narrative holds up.

Leila's father, however, turns out to be something different. As a single-parent perhaps he feels more responsible for educating Leila and in certain (though limited) ways is a more active father than expected. Leila learns things from him that her Aunt Marie would never have condoned; sneaking back in for a second viewing of a movie, for example (184). Chodorow writes that only equal parenting can change the unequal reproduction cycle (214). And while the Helou household is not there yet, Leila's father expresses some "New World" and perhaps proto-feminist thinking when they discuss his daughter's future. Leila expresses her desire to become a journalist, and her father replies that since journalism was "a male business" Leila should go into it "to show what a Helou woman was capable of" (Franzen 184-5). Leila recognizes that her father is not a feminist, but that his message is. It's a step in the right direction, but not enough.

Leila finds herself right back in the Chodorow narrative and mothering role when she marries Charles. Despite becoming a prize-winning journalist (Franzen 188) and having no children of their own, Charles's writer's block and later paraplegia force Leila into caring for (mothering) him. She describes Charles as "the baby she'd got" (210) and even blames herself for his accident: "she'd allowed her husband's life to spin out of control" (198). Furthermore, despite her incredible success, she feels unfulfilled without her own child to mother, both with Charles (189) and later with Tom (199). Chodorow writes, "a woman's relation to a man *requires* on the level of psychic structure a third person, since it was established in a triangle" (201). A girl like Leila experiences the turn to her father during the Oedipal complex while always looking back at her mother (Chodorow 127). The girl's complex is a triangle that the boy, who cuts himself off from the mother more completely, does not experience. Therefore, "it seems psychologically logical to a woman to turn her marriage into a family" (202). When Charles rejects her wish for a baby she not only begins to love him less, but she also feels loyalty "to a baby in her that hadn't even been conceived yet. To a possibility" (Franzen 190). She resents Charles's accident for "costing her a year in fertility" (198). She refers to having kids as a "structural insatiability" (204) confirming Chodorow's account.

Leila's father's attitude towards feminisms and her own thus represent progress in the novel, but Leila's psychically inherited need to have a child keeps her somewhat limited.

Anabel

Anabel is perhaps the novel's most complicated character and certainly the one most often cited as anti-feminist. We must therefore look very closely at her thoughts and actions in order to understand her relationship to feminisms.

Anabel's family owns an "agribusiness conglomerate" that is "the country's second largest corporation" (Franzen 351). At the age of thirteen she is sent away to boarding school by her mother, to protect her as it turns out, from her parents' fraying marriage. She blames her father—whom she had previously idolized (351)—for killing her mother with neglect. Her mother drowned in the shallow end of the house pool with a blood alcohol level that "would have knocked a horse down" (352).

Anabel therefore becomes a victim, not only of the asymmetrical parenting Chodorow describes, but of being abandoned by her own mother (also a victim of the same). Not only was Mr. Laird away from the home, but her mother sent her away when she could no longer cope with her own life. Her rebelliousness in high school, becoming the wild girl and catching a STD (Franzen 355), matures into an uncompromising, radical attitude towards sexual equality. Both should be read as the consequences of losing her mother and place in the family to the patriarchal imbalance of their family life (represented by her father).

Anabel's character is indeed neurotic. In addition to the fact that she hides her and her daughter's identities later in life, we find other symptoms throughout the novel. Her daughter describes her as chronically depressed (4), as well as having phobias and irrational prohibitions (526), and as "super anything to do with sensitivity" (225). She won't eat sugar or the many substitutes available on the market because she is too sensitive to their tastes (4-5). "Smell is hell," is one of her catchphrases (225). She's afraid of birds (7). She suffers from hypochondria, telling Pip that she's in fear of having Graves' disease, hyperthyroidism, melanoma and Bells' Palsy (3) (thankfully, not all at once).

While her adolescent rebelliousness is not unlike that of Andreas Wolf's, her symptoms—physical sensitivity and hypochondria—point to a deeper set of problems that Chodorow's narrative cannot explain further than their abnormality. They point to issues of the body. For these we turn again to Elizabeth Grosz. In the opening of *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz writes that the body "has remained a conceptual blind spot in... contemporary feminist theory." She believes that there are currently many "uncritically adopted" assumptions regarding the role of the body that can "be regarded as complicit in the misogyny that characterizes Western reason" (3).

Grosz specifically calls out the Cartesian dualism of separate mind and body as an understanding sponsored both by "patriarchal philosophies" as well as underlying "some versions of feminist theory." These versions of women's bodies are "regarded as passive and reproductive but largely unproductive" (9). While Grosz understands that the body (as a subject) is formed from the "inside-out" and follows an adaptation of

Freudian personality development like Chodorow, she finds it lacking. She goes on to state that “psychoanalysis does not provide a way of transforming the structure of power relations between the two sexes,” (203) which is part of her aim. What’s missing for Grosz is an “outside-in” perspective that she explores in the second section of her book. Through an analysis of Nietzsche, Foucault and others, Grosz reveals the body as “a page or material surface...ready to receive, bear, and transmit meanings, messages or signs...creating out of the body text a palimpsest, a historical chronicle of prior and later traces” (117). The body has history written onto it through the senses and experience, not just the psychological history of childhood as experienced through the Id, Ego and Superego. The inside (mind) and the outside (body) can therefore never be definitively separated (30). She criticizes “traditional psychology and physiology” for presuming a fundamentally passive body that is, in fact, active since it “gives form and sense to its own component parts and to its relations with objects in the world” (89). These theoretical issues play themselves out in Anabel’s character.

A prime example of Anabel’s limited view of the female body as separate from the mind as well as passive and unproductive is her art. The film project she begins is composed of 32-square-centimeter “cuts” of her entire body. As Anabel explains it, the film is a way of reclaiming possession of her body, cut by cut, from the world of men and meat (Franzen 401-402). This film is a clear follow-up to her being delivered wrapped as meat to the dean of the college (342). What Anabel doesn’t seem aware of is that both projects equate a woman’s body with a passive object to be processed by others. A film of the surface of the body, furthermore, separates the outer from the inner quite graphically. If her art is any indication of her feminisms, then Anabel is problematic from a more forward thinking feminist perspective.

Anabel’s hypochondria, like Tom’s drug addiction discussed earlier, also indicates an empty BwO that is disconnected from the potential linkages around it. Grosz identifies hypochondria as an example of “the overlap and the interchange between the organic and the psychological bodies” and locates its source in body image (78).

Body image is important to Anabel. First, and most literally, she prefers not having one. She complains that bodies are “so visible” to Pip (Franzen 4) and this perhaps

indicates a level of discomfort with her own body related to what Grosz's describes as "a symptomatic expression of certain Western anxiety about and risking of the borders which Western society shares with its various others." (138). It is precisely the linkages and connections that can be created by her body that Anabel dislikes.

This same fear of connection may be understood as the cause of her physical sensitivities. Our senses are what connect our inner world to the outer world. When Anabel claims that "smell is hell," she is actually describing her entire world because, as Grosz—following Merleau-Ponty—explains, "the senses communicate with each other" and are "transposable" (99).

While Anabel's hypochondria post-dates her disappearance (insofar as we know), her physical sensitivity pre-dates her meeting Tom. A related issue she manifests at this time is her obsession with hygiene. She licks "the linoleum to prove to me how clean Anabel Laird kept a kitchen floor," Tom recounts (Franzen 367). She boasts to her father that "Tom's not like you. Tom is clean" (390). She keeps her bedroom off limits to visitors, even Tom, until she is ready. It's, "a dream of purity in strong monochrome moonlight" when finally revealed (375). This cleanliness fixation is parallel to hypochondria in that it's an anxiety about borders remaining sealed. The dirt and detritus of lived reality cannot be allowed to enter the hermetic environment that is Anabel's life.

To Anabel, Tom is clean and, therefore, unlike her father. Her father is dirty, however, not in the physical but in the moral sense. Anabel blames him for her mother's death and views him as wholly and comfortably integrated into the misogynist patriarchy. This outside-in movement of physical dirt to dirty morals becomes Anabel's greatest obsession, that of being morally irreproachable. In two vivid illustrations of this movement, Anabel sprays her father in the face with cat urine (388) and spits in her father's face at her wedding party (401). The use of abject bodily fluids to insult her immoral father points directly to the issue of body boundaries and moral boundaries being equal to Anabel.

Through Tom's retelling of their relationship, we have ample example of Anabel's irreproachable morality and how it forces Tom to change his personality to avoid

reproach and guilt. In addition, we have the testimony of a college friend that says Anabel's "moral absolutism" (443) had already begun severing her social links before even meeting Tom (354).

In a Foucauldian sense, her relationship with Tom becomes a new form of resistance to her father, the patriarchy and their uncleanness. "Power is able to gain a hold on bodies, pleasures, energies, through the construction and deployment of sexuality" (Grosz 154). Her greatest source of discomfort, the borders of her body, become the tool she will use to capture Tom, and she can allow herself this connection because Tom is "clean" and she will teach him to be cleaner.

As the relationship continues Tom continues to lose his self in Anabel. He describes "a dissolution of the boundaries of our selves" in which "his personality is reorganized" to defend himself from her reproach (Franzen 379). Tom has to make amends for "structural unfairness" by sitting when urinating or by censoring their copies of *The New Yorker* for any "potentially upsetting items" (403). In this way Tom becomes a part of Anabel's own body and assumes her boundaries (and defenses from dirt) as his own. As Merleau-Ponty shows in Grosz's book, a tool used by a body often becomes a part of that body. Like a prosthetic limb or a stick used to scratch a back: "The stick is no longer an object for me but has been absorbed or incorporated into my perceptual faculties or body parts" (91).

Her relationship with Tom is another example of where Anabel's approach to feminisms goes wrong. Her insistence that Tom become the same as her and her negation of the "irremediable distance" between them is identified by Grosz as the same error made by anti-feminist systems:

this irremediable distance, is what remains intolerable to masculinist regimes bent on the disavowal of difference and the insistence on sameness and identity: these regimes make the other over into a (lesser) version of the same. (208).

Anabel's mistake is that she uses the same tool of oppression with Tom because she is unable to accept him into her life as an equal partner. And so the relationship cannot

survive. As Chodorow says, "From the point of view of adult life... total merging and dependence are not so desirable. Merging brings the threat of loss of self or of being devoured as well as the benefit of omnipotence" (96). While Anabel has found a partner who becomes a part of her and therefore a way to keep her boundaries safe (a kind of omnipotence), the loss of self is too great for Tom to bear. When the relationship finally ends, Anabel loses not only her tool but also a part of herself and she must retreat from the battle of the sexes to her life of invisibility and hiding.

Before she goes, however, she will make Tom's body fulfill a requirement that she cannot perform on her own: she will secretly obtain his sperm to make a baby. Her subterfuge is justified, in her mind, as both a fulfillment of their marital contract (he owes her a debt) (Franzen 553), and in her felt need to be a mother. Grosz explains that "the pain caused to the debtor and the amount owed on the debt is the formula of the social contract. Any contract is thus ultimately founded on a kind of bodily collateral. ... the body can be made to pay, to guarantee" (133), and Deutsch points out in Chodorow's book that "a man may or may not be psychologically necessary or desirable to the mother-child exclusivity. When she is oriented to a man, a woman's fantasy of having children is "I want a child by him, *with him*"; when men are emotionally in the background, it is "I want a *child*" (203).

Anabel's absconding with her ex-husband's sperm may be read as an act of destabilization of the patriarchy, but along with Pip, I find this justification weak. While it's a way of declaring independence from, and the superfluity of, a male partner, as well as a rejection of "the demands and requirements of heterosexual monogamy and the social and sexual role culturally assigned to women" as identified by Grosz (157), is it morally irreproachable to keep these machinations secret from her daughter and sex partner? Is it fair to use semen that Tom presumed to be flushed down a toilet? Grosz also sees potential resistance in women's occupation of hysteria (157) and anorexia (40) as "a renunciation" of the ideals forced onto them by the patriarchy, but I doubt she, or anyone, would recommend them as useful strategies of feminisms.

Perhaps Anabel's plotting is related to her feelings about betrayal. Anabel describes life to Pip as "one long process of bodily betrayal" (Franzen 3). She feels betrayed by

her so-called Endeavor—which Pip describes as a kind of art of invisibility (6) and Tom describes as a spiritual cleansing (320)—at both the beginning and the end of the novel (4, 561). Divorce with Tom, who had become a part of her body and its closed off boundaries, is in this sense, perhaps her body’s greatest betrayal and enough to justify her actions. As she tells Pip at the end of the novel, “her father had been cruel and her husband crueler” (552). To Anabel the once clean Tom has become a figure even dirtier than her hated father. Revenge on him thus becomes her greatest victory.

As Anabel says, while imagining herself married to Tom, “Anabel Aberrant might not be so bad. Kind of my entire story in two words” (356). The intentional misspelling of Tom’s surname is defined as “deviating from the ordinary, usual, or normal type; exceptional; abnormal” (“Aberrant” n.p.). While she is an exceptional character, taking everything into account, we cannot judge her as successfully advancing the cause of feminisms because of her own self-destructive tendencies. While we cannot ignore Anabel’s having been victimized by her father and her resulting attempts to resist the patriarchy, her flawed, underlying conception of the body as closed-off and disconnected from those around her, both physically and morally, leads her down a troubled path. Along the way she incorporates Tom into her life and the result is pain for both. As a culmination of her personal philosophy, she names her only child Purity.

Pip

Finally, we arrive at Pip, the namesake and protagonist of the novel, where Tom and Anabel’s genealogies meet, and in whom Andreas Wolf, our antagonist, will meet his match. In many ways Pip is analogous to Wolf since both suffer through difficult mother-child relationships that involve secret parentage. The parallel is underscored by the scene in which Pip finds her mother sitting on the floor of the bathroom in a posture similar to that of Katya’s when Andreas’s notorious poem is published (Franzen 128, 550). The difference is that Pip’s childhood occurs in a loving, healthy environment and Anabel (despite all of her problems) proves to be good at mothering a daughter who will overcome her mother’s handicaps.

Pip has “inherited some of her mother’s body issues” (9). She looks in a mirror and does not see someone pretty (9). She considers herself “rich in cleanliness” (15) and there is a sense that this cleanliness may be as connected to morality as it is for Anabel (29) when Pip considers herself a “dirty girl” for desiring someone else’s husband (48). Unlike Anabel, however, she recognizes that her cleanliness is a “handicap” because it makes sex “logistically ungainly, a tasty fish with so many small bones” (15). If sex is an act that signifies connections to, both physical and psychical, to others, then Pip demonstrates an attitude that questions her mother’s closed-off conception of the body. In fact, she finds both her parents’ “weirdness about sex” to be “foreign,” “old-fashioned,” and “intolerably sad” (524).

Reflecting her mother’s carefully guarded boundaries and antipathy to the patriarchy, Pip is also distrustful of others (21), especially men. She recognizes that men “camouflage their objectifying desires with the language of feelings” (27) and that women’s so-called sexual powers are “just a lie told by men to make them feel better about having ALL the power” (65). The only person she does trust is her mother (10).

When Pip experiences distress, though, she seeks the invisibility that Anabel uses (52-53). But rather than play defense, and close herself off to others, Pip remains open to connections while playing offense to protect herself. This attacking style is labeled by others as “hostility” and is mentioned more than once (253, 262) but Pip seems to wear it as a badge of honor, “It’s who I am. It’s what I live and breathe” (262).

Another similarity to Anabel is Pip’s utilization of sex as a weapon. When deciding if going to Bolivia would necessarily mean being seduced by Andreas Wolf, Pip sees the bright side of seduction as “getting her revenge on Stephen,” her unrequited object of desire (60). During the seduction itself, she finds her reasons “dubious” but “in harmony” (277).

When Andreas tries to seduce Pip, there are interesting similarities in her reaction that resemble Tom’s initial experience of Anabel. Pip’s body responds to Andreas while her mind finds him “icky” (276, 287). She finds being commanded by Wolf a relief (258) and finds that Andreas has revealed previously unknown susceptibilities in her to

submission and obedience (266). Like her father who lost his self with Anabel, Pip finds herself without control (268) with Andreas. She describes her physical excitement for Andreas in the same terms as her father had saying it's like "walking to the gallows" and that "feelings of prey in the wolf's teeth were hard to distinguish from being in love" (284). Even their syntax shares a resemblance (284, 372).

But Pip shows a degree of control and awareness that Tom does not. While Tom allowed himself to become involved with Anabel to the point of merging with her identity and eventually hating her, Pip recognizes the dangerous path that Andreas offers her. She confronts him over the power asymmetry in their relationship (269), she senses that he is trying to manipulate her (271), her stomach is made sick by him (273), she actively resists his will (274), she recognizes the craziness inside him (286, 288) and finally, fully rejects his advances (288). Unlike her father, she is able to walk away from the sexual attraction and most tellingly, she knows to do it by listening to her own body (287). As she states early on, "How well aware the body was of what it wanted" (41).

Her refusal of Andreas Wolf is a large step in Pip's process of formation and maturity. The act is foreshadowed by two moments in Bolivia that occur before she meets with him. The first is her reaction to the aromas of the tropics. Rather than finding that "smell is hell" she experiences "an olfactory revelation" that she equates with the drug Ecstasy and going to Heaven (242). The second moment is her nighttime swim. She describes it as "a moment of happiness purer than any she'd ever felt" and she finds that it "made her feel grateful to her mother" who served as "an unshakeable foundation" in her life. Pip says she feels blessed (250). In these two moments we see at once a rejection of her mother's limitations (represented by over-sensitivity) and embrace of her mother's presence in her life. Pip demonstrates a degree of control (activeness, production) over her life and her body that neither of her parents had achieved.

Pip's difference is also seen in Leila's description of her in Denver. She describes her "full-chested, creamy-skinned, regularly menstruating twenty-four-year-old ... braless... bare feet... damp hair..." presence as "the spillage of Pip" (224). Pip's body is therefore spilling, leaking and breaking boundaries in a way that Leila finds threatening. Pip does not desire Tom and in fact expresses a fondness for his relationship with Leila (209,

225), so Leila's envy and resentment are unfounded except in terms of how Pip relates to others. Her openness to connections and her developing lack of self-consciousness about her body indicate an attitude in Pip's character that Leila cannot understand nor recognize.

Pip's view of other women is also revealing. She sees her mother as childlike (34), emotionally handicapped and lacking a support network (209), as well as too needy of her love (68, 73, 540). Her stated ambition is to not end up like Anabel (40). Instead, she sees Leila as a positive role-model, who she describes as both sisterly and motherly without being suffocating (295). She finds Leila to be a true adult and in contrast sees Andreas as "a child-man, obsessed with spilling secrets" and a childish moral absolutism (308). That Andreas and Anabel share moral absolutism is all the more reason for Pip to reject it.

Unlike her parents', Pip's life is defined by the connections that she makes. Wherever she goes she seems to connect with others: at the house in Oakland, in Bolivia (263, 254), in Denver to Tom and Leila, and even in Kansas to Tom's step-sister, Cynthia. This last encounter is notable because Cynthia exists outside of Pip's story and has zero understanding of Anabel's actions: "Your mother made you for her own selfish purposes ... *I'm* angry at the selfishness of that. I'm angry that she's the kind of 'feminist' who gives feminism a bad name" (538-39). Pip's point of view and defense, however, is that her mother loved her. She comprehends her mother's need to be loved and forgives her, "Her mother had needed to give love and receive it ... Was that so monstrous? Wasn't it more like miraculously resourceful?" (540). Pip does not cut herself off from her parents as Cynthia implies she has the right to do. Instead she confronts each of them (557, 558) and forces them to at least try to reconcile.

Pip can be identified as a full BwO: a non-fixed, flowing, molecular presence that makes linkages wherever possible. In her connections to others, in her understanding bodies and in her rejection to her mother's brand of closed-off, sealed purity in thought and action, Pip is a more complete feminist than any other character in the novel.

Conclusion

In this paper we've seen how the superficial plot, structure and choice of voices in Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* can be read as anti-feminist. However, by closely examining the individual characters' attitudes towards women and feminisms, I hope to have demonstrated a narrative that reflects the evolving feminisms in the real world of (white, middle-class) America.

The older generation of characters—Annelise, Clelia, Dick Aberant, Mr. Helou—is marked by their restrictions inside a wholly male-dominant society that reproduces mothering and its results without very little chance of escape from that cycle. The middle generation of Tom, Anabel and Leila show, to varying degrees, how those cycles can be broken and stepped out of. Andreas Wolf and Katya's as well as Tom and Anabel's relationships demonstrate, with striking drama, what can go wrong when relationships are founded on misconceptions and the needs of only one individual.

It is in Pip, a member of the youngest generation, where all the previous bloodlines and lines of thought intersect. Pip, whose name alludes to Dickens' *Great Expectations*, does point toward a future of more progressive feminisms. She rejects the assumptions of the universal male and the patriarchy as well as her parents' flawed brands of resistance to the same. She rejects her mother's name for her, Purity, in the sense that she sees fluidity and flowing connections to others as superior to being closed-off, clean and irreproachable. In Pip, we have a woman who, it is fair to believe, will push for greater equality in any parental partnership she engages in, as prescribed by Nancy Chodorow; as well as a woman who understands her body outside of the previously imposed mind/body, nature/culture, subject/object and interior/exterior binaries that Elizabeth Grosz identifies.

If this deeper narrative of developing feminisms is correctly understood and valued, I believe it's potentially more valuable to feminisms (and in fact, useful) than superficial readings of the novel would have us believe.

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