



THE AMERICAN FAMILY SAGA  
IN JEFFREY EUGENIDES'  
*MIDDLESEX* AND  
JONATHAN FRANZEN'S  
*FREEDOM*

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The literary family saga follows the trials and tribulations of family members across generations, often from multiple points of view, offering, in Robert O. Stephens' words, "a microcosm of its times" (Stephens 4). This genre reveals changes in identity, political beliefs, social roles and familial roles within "a consanguine family through history measured in generations, at least three" (Stephens 4).<sup>1</sup> Two recent family saga novels—*Middlesex* (2002) and *Freedom* (2010)—explore how the social construction of gender is crucial to the development of family dynamics, character identity and sexuality, each demonstrating in different ways how gender is much "more complex than merely masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual" (Meyer). Further, these novels examine the intersections of, and conflicts between, familial roles, individual identity, political beliefs, and social roles. Although family sagas have existed for centuries in other cultures, only recently has the family become a prominent topic in American literature, as Ashworth explains: "It is only in the century post-Freud, when family dynamics have been deemed worthy of serious interest, and we

accept more than ever that upbringing is a significant factor in forming and destroying character, that the family has been seen organically, and can be the subject of the novel” (Ashworth).

The diversity among modern American families is so great that a comprehensive analysis of the modern American family would be a project of mammoth proportions. The 2010 United States census defines family as

a householder and one or more other persons living in the same household who are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption” and classifies families as “either a ‘married-couple family’ or ‘other family’ according to the sex of the householder and the presence of relative. (“Households,” U.S. Census Bureau, 2010)

However, late twentieth and early twenty-first century America is made up of many types of families—from the textbook definition of a nuclear family to extended family households to same-sex couples (Teachman, Tedrow, Crowder 1234). This essay focuses on two American family sagas from the early twenty-first century, *Middlesex* by Jeffery Eugenides and *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen, both chosen for the diversity of gender constructions and sexual identities of their characters as well as for the “traditional” nature of their focal families. *Middlesex* follows a family of immigrants over three generations, as they assimilate into American culture, while *Freedom* depicts a nuclear family as well as the influences of one generation on another. The construction of gender in these novels reveals much about American gender ideology as well as how family dynamics shape individual identity and one’s interaction with the outside world.

Within a family saga, the family unit should be analyzed organically, as if it is a character in its own right. The family provides each member with an identity and a set of expectations and roles that may not exist outside of the parameters of the family and which set the tone for intra-family interactions. The Berglunds of *Freedom*, with two children and a pair of het-

erosexual parents, fit the definition of the “nuclear family”—a unit that includes one working father, a stay-at-home mom, and two to three children under the same roof (Westheimer 36). The Berglunds are an isolated family unit, with Walter and Patty’s childhood family members (siblings, cousins, parents, grandparents) having limited impact on the rearing of their children. This lends the family structure additional significance because it is the only family model that the young Berglund children know. There is a clear separation in *Freedom* between the protagonists’ childhood families and their adult families, as if the first must be mentioned in order to understand Walter and Patty’s backgrounds but should not be conflated with their “real” family—the one they create together as adults. Their parents are not to be included in the organic, protagonistic family unit that *Freedom* follows, but instead as related, precursive organisms. After the one family event that they attend as a married couple, they agree upon this: “Patty, at LaGuardia Airport, sobbing, said to Walter: ‘I hate my family!’ And Walter valiantly replied: ‘We’ll make our own family!’” (Franzen 124). Like any dynamic character, this family evolves over time.

Additionally, despite the feminist proclivities of Walter, the head of the Berglund household, the Berglund family has an undeniably patriarchal structure, in which Patty’s main role is to bear and rear children, what Adrienne Rich terms “the institution of motherhood.” Rich distinguishes between “the *experience of motherhood* as being the relationship of a woman to her reproductive self and to her children . . . [and] the *institution of motherhood* as a patriarchal structure of norms, laws, economic organization, and power that oppressed women” (qtd. in Uta “Motherhood”). Throughout Patty’s narrative, titled “Mistakes Were Made,” the Berglund unit follows a standard, if sometimes dysfunctional, nuclear pattern. Walter and Patty split responsibilities (usually along traditional gender roles, with Patty as the caregiver and Walter as the authoritarian), and their children fulfill typical roles: Joey consistently acts out and Jessica is a model child. The Berglund family becomes

more stratified as conflict hits, when the children are grown and Walter and Patty are confronted with the realities of their relationship (Franzen 460). This stratification, however, is also a direct result of the isolated nature of the nuclear family—without external influences, conflict between family members influences the health of the family unit more than if it were externally reinforced.

Extremely dependent upon extended relations, Eugenides' Stephanides family in *Middlesex*, is headed by Eleutherios (Lefty) and Desdemona, who grow up in rural Greece before immigrating to the United States. In many small villages of Greek Asia Minor during the early 1920s, men and women had clearly defined gender roles, men operating in the public sphere and women in charge in the domestic, private, sphere. Additionally, the extended family unit was considered one of the most important aspects of the average person's social sphere (Buck Sutton). Lefty and Desdemona depend on the help of family to immigrate to the United States; their cousin, Sourmelina (Lina), and her husband allow them into their home because they are family (Eugenides 87). When Lefty and Desdemona flee their village, they don't even think to ask their cousin if they can move in; they just assume that it will be allowed (Eugenides 42). The family unit in *Middlesex* exists across generations and includes the entire Stephanides clan, their distant relatives, and even family friends who are not blood-relations at all, such as Dr. Philobesian. Although each segment consisting of two parents and a child or set of children within the Stephanides family might at first be mistaken for a nuclear family, this family unit is in reality an extended family, exhibiting what Stanton calls, "a body with structure and continuity" (Stanton 1995, qtd. in Adamopoulos 170). Cal Stephanides, the main protagonist and narrator of *Middlesex*, belongs to the youngest generation of the family and yet is still closely enough tied to the members of this extended family to narrate their stories as well as (and as part of) her/his own. The novel opens with Cal's statement: "I was born twice: once, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January

of 1960; and then again as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974" (Eugenides 3). Cal puts herself/himself in the shoes of grandmother, grandfather, parents, and even aunts and uncles, such as when Cal narrates the young lives of Lefty and Desdemona and when Cal intuits the motivations of Zizmo and Father Mike (Eugenides 118, 505). This larger, extended family unit creates a reinforced support system, complete with additional adult figures from whom to seek aid that is lacking in the simple nuclear family. The environment created therein involves a larger sense of community and a more developed sense of responsibility. Cal witnesses how her/his parents take care of their parents, even as they fend for her/him and her/his brother, implying later in life, the same responsibility may fall on Cal and her/his brother.

Even though the related families in *Freedom* do not operate in supportive positions as different units of an extended family, the main protagonists' childhood families do play a role in the development of their identities. Walter and Patty Berglund serve as the authority and parental figures in the main family of the novel; however, their childhood roles are obviously different and show how expectations within the American family for each family member are strongly influenced by, although not exclusively based upon, gender. Walter and Patty, as members of childhood nuclear families and then an adult one, are not guided by the same idea of continuity by which *Middlesex's* characters are guided. One must consider Walter and Patty's subordinate childhood roles before examining them as role models to their own children.

Patty Bergson (née Emerson) grew up in a wealthy, nuclear family, structured differently from her adult family only in that contact with her father's extended relatives was frequent. This past experience is significant in the course of Patty's development, since reunions with her extended family never fail to make Patty feel uncomfortable and out of place, sexually harassed, and even ashamed of her relatives (Franzen 33-34). While the extended family of *Middlesex* creates a sense

of community, the Emerson extended family is oppressive, sexist, and shaming. Patty's father, a less offensive extension of his own childhood family, offers hardly any support as a "lawyer and amateur humorist" who rarely takes anything seriously, even his own children (Franzen 31). Patty fits neither into her childhood family nor into the traditional gender role for young women in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Self-described as a "hulking B-student family jock," Patty does not fit her parents' model of an ideal daughter and so is generally ignored as a young adult (Franzen 38). She, unlike her two younger sisters, is not perceived by her parents as creative enough to merit attention, and she is perceived as too "masculine" for her traditionally feminine mother (Franzen 38). Brownmiller describes how "[T]he feminine principle is composed of vulnerability, the need for protection, the formalities of compliance and the avoidance of conflict—in short, an appeal of dependence and good will" (Brownmiller 16). Everything about Patty's nature, as a teenager and then as an adult, conflicts with this "feminine principle." Dominated by a competitive drive and conditioned by her parents' apathy, young Patty does not show vulnerability even when it would be appropriate, such as when she is badly hurt. Her very stature defies the need for protection; at 5'9, she's taller than her sisters and nearly the same height as her brother. Patty operates as the masculine figure among the Emerson children during her young life (her brother is mentioned only once, at the very beginning of her memoirs, and is never given a name). Her mother succinctly sums up how very masculine Patty is when she comes for the first and last time to see Patty play sports:

In the family station wagon, in an even more quavering voice than usual, her mother asked her if she had to be quite so . . . *aggressive* . . . And her mother said . . . "I guess I'm not a sports fan, but I don't see the fun in defeating a person just for the sake of defeating them. Wouldn't it be much more fun to all work together to cooperatively build something?" (Franzen, his emphasis, 30)

Here, Joyce Emerson delineates what Patty should be as an ideal daughter—passive and cooperative—and what she actually is—aggressive and competitive. Her refusal to attend any of Patty’s sporting events after this shows a refusal to accept her daughter’s deviations from the expected gender role of womanly behavior; instead, Joyce seems to stop viewing Patty as a girl at all.

Joyce so conditions herself into thinking of her daughter in masculine terms that, when Patty is raped, she cannot comprehend how it happened: “What I don’t understand . . . is how such an outstanding athlete as you are . . . You have to tell me. I’m your mother.” Hearing herself say this, Joyce looked embarrassed. She seemed to realize how peculiar it was to have to remind Patty who her mother was” (Franzen 40). This exchange once more reinforces how Patty’s mother has ceased to view her in terms of a female gender role—but it also shows that Joyce as a mother has ceased to connect emotionally to Patty. Not only is her reaction unsympathetic, it also self-consciously acknowledges that Joyce no longer has the right to demand information in the name of maternal authority. While Patty has failed to fulfill her role as a submissive daughter, Joyce also has failed to fulfill her familial role as an attentive, devoted mother. It is Patty’s father, Ray Emerson, who thinks to ask Patty why she didn’t scream for help—a question for which Patty doesn’t have an answer (Franzen 46). After all, the vulnerability and dependence of the “feminine principle” (Brownmiller) require that a woman ask for help—but Patty as a teenager is so used to presenting a masculine image of “toughness, stoicism, and strength” in response to her failure as her parents’ ideal daughter that it doesn’t occur even to her to ask for aid (Pollack, xx). Perhaps influenced by her mother’s treatment of her as masculine, Patty herself internalizes the masculine gender role in response to failing at the more traditional feminine role.

In her marriage and family, Patty reverses roles as she performs the traditionally feminine persona of career housewife and mother. This role reversal is caused by two factors: first, and ironically, it is directed by the same competitive edge that

caused Patty to appear so aggressive (and thus masculine) to her mother in her younger years, and second, it is spurred by the loss of identity that occurs when she injures herself in college. Patty's competitive urge in this instance is two-pronged: she wants to prove to her childhood family that she can succeed and be something they never let her be—womanly. “And the way to win—her obvious best shot at defeating her sisters and her mother—was to marry the nicest guy in Minnesota, live in a bigger and better and more interesting house than anybody else in her family, pop out the babies, and do everything as a parent that Joyce hadn't” (Franzen 119). By choosing to flout 1970s feminism and undertake the task of a housewife, Patty sees herself as the loving and devoted mother that Joyce never had time to be (at least for Patty). She also wants to prove to her family that her so-called “masculine” personality traits, such as aggression and a competitive nature, do not prevent her from attaining womanhood. Since Joyce was a strong proponent of finding “impressive careers” for her daughters, Patty, by choosing to live for her family, is directly spiting Joyce (Franzen 95). Patty's competitive nature, when unhidden, forces her into a masculine gender role; when concealed, however, it makes her perfectly feminine: “But the chief attraction (and the central paradox, as well) is the competitive edge that femininity seems to promise . . . this competitive edge is ironic, at best, for one works at femininity by accepting restrictions, by limiting one's sights” (Brownmiller 15). To achieve the complete female gender role that Patty aspires to as an adult, she must hide her competitive edge and dull her own sense of ambition and foresight—but these restrictions are not greater than those she accepted as a child, when she chose to live for sports and not care about anything else (Franzen 35).

Patty's second reason for adopting a feminine role in her adult family can be traced directly to her college identity as a jock.

Patty went out to Minnesota in July for special jock summer camp followed by special, early, jocks-only fresh-



man orientation, and then she lived in a jock dorm, made exclusively jock friends . . . and was careful never to sign up for a class without plenty of other jocks to sit with and (time permitting) study with. (Franzen 49)

Because she completely immerses herself in “Jock World” throughout college, when her career as a collegiate athlete is ended by a knee injury, Patty is left without an identity of her own. Marrying Walter and becoming an excellent wife and mother gives Patty a role to fill and a team to play on when she leaves college (Franzen 119). Patty herself speculates that it may have been wiser to have taken some time to “develop a career and a more solid post-athletic identity” before pursuing motherhood (Franzen 119). Patty’s lack of self-sustaining identity, however, makes her the perfect housewife. It is much easier to put the needs of her family and husband before her own if she never acknowledges, even to herself, that she has other needs.

There are, of course, two parents in the Berglund nuclear family, and Walter’s history is just as important to the development of the Berglund unit as Patty’s is. Walter, also the product of a nuclear family, was the second of three boys of poor, uneducated parents. His father, instead of abusing Walter’s mother like his own father had abused his mother, heaped emotional abuse onto young Walter (Franzen 448). Unlike Patty, Walter’s feelings for his family are not driven by competition, but by resentment.

Walter himself, by uncomplainingly doing the nasty tasks his father set him, by refusing to cry or to whine to Dorothy, showed his father that he could beat him even at his own game . . . if Walter hadn’t been perpetually occupied with hating him, he might have pitied him. (Franzen 448)

Walter has no need to compete with his father or brothers because even in childhood, he had already beaten them (Franzen 124). In his unflinching resolve and restraint against

his father, he shows the same “masculine” qualities that young Patty displays—toughness, stoicism and strength.

The “brother” of Walter’s heart, Richard Katzman, is not related to him, but as previously noted, “family” is not necessarily limited to blood relatives. However, Walter’s affection for Richard is complicated by ambivalence about him as well: “And the eternally tormenting question for Walter, as the autobiographer sees it, was whether Richard was the little brother or the big brother, the fuckup or the hero, the beloved damaged friend or the dangerous rival” (Franzen 131). Walter lives in constant competition with Richard, a competition that is made all the harder because Richard is portrayed as an exemplar of hegemonic masculinity:

Hegemonic masculinity, particularly in Western industrial societies, is heterosexual, aggressive, and competitive. It involves physical strength; economic success; control; exclusive heterosexuality and the search for sexual conquests even if by force; athletic prowess; stoicism and suppression of emotions which convey vulnerability such as empathy, sadness, and the like; and the patrolling of other men’s masculinities (as well as women’s femininities). These are the characteristics encompassed in being a “real man”—the most honored type of man. (Lynch)

Walter sees in Richard everything masculine that he is not; even though Walter has his own fair share of masculine traits, he does not achieve the full range of them like Richard does. Richard is larger than Walter, stronger, more violent, and he constantly uses women for sexual pleasure. Even his music, which arguably shows him at his most vulnerable, is violent, sarcastic and raw (Franzen 72).

The other male with whom Walter has conflict, his son Joey, is a “person more in the mold of Richard Katz” than he is like Walter. Thus Joey achieves many of these hegemonic male traits and is a potential threat to Walter (Franzen 149). Walter fails at lifelong connection and competition with his own brothers but succeeds with Richard, although even that con-

nection is fraught with insecurity: “Walter couldn’t shake the old familiar feeling that Richard was trying to impose his Katzian vision of the world on him and, thereby, defeat him” (Franzen 305). Walter sees everything that Richard does as a challenge to him and, in a sense, Walter savors any victory he can win over Richard. Collegiate Patty is a clear example of this competition; by herself, she is someone that Walter is drawn to and admires, but once he realizes that he must compete with Richard for her, she becomes an even greater prize: “He took possession of the girl he wanted, the girl who could have gone with Richard but had chosen him instead” (Franzen 129). This, of course, makes the betrayal even deeper when Walter finds out that Richard and Patty had indeed engaged in sexual intercourse, during Patty’s marriage to Walter. “She’d never really loved him. She’d wanted what his evil friend had” (Franzen 460). Walter cannot even comprehend that Patty may have legitimately wanted both of them; for his universe to work, either Richard or Walter must always win in a given scenario, and the other must lose.

Walter’s lingering insecurities about Richard are accompanied by his resentment of his father well into adulthood, and this has a direct impact on the construction of his adult family. He resents his father not only for the way the man had treated him but also for how his father had “worked Dorothy [his mother] so hard at the motel” (Franzen 130). Walter’s desire not to repeat the mistakes of his father influences his role in his adult family, such as Walter rarely asking Patty to do any sort of unpleasant work while the children are still living with them, especially when their marriage is in its early years. Walter fills the traditional male gender role by working full-time and doling out punishment when needed, and Patty plays the part of the sweet and positive stay-at-home mother (Franzen 9). Despite the traditional roles, Walter is a devout feminist who loves Patty “in some wholly other way, some larger and more abstract but nevertheless essential way that was about a lifetime of responsibility; about being a good person” (Franzen 304). The supposed equality of the marriage is a lie, however.

Patty cedes emotional power to Walter through much of the relationship, as they both know that she needs Walter to love her, while Walter benefits from retaining an actual identity outside of his role of husband and father. As Phillips notes, it is not necessary for the man to give himself up completely to his family (Phillips 1). The unequal power dynamic is made clear after years of marriage, when Patty is miserable and depressed, and Walter bemoans the fact that he “let her stay home” and be a housewife (Franzen 328). This phrase belies the idea of equality, as if her decision to stay home was not her choice at all, but instead an allowance granted by Walter. Patty, as the best homemaker she can be, lets her desires and own sense of self take second place to the needs of her “team”—her family. She allows her family to be her universe and sacrifices the development of an adult identity in the process; instead, her housewife role becomes her identity. “‘Don’t you get it? I *have* no sake. I don’t believe in anything. I don’t have faith in anything. The team is all I’ve got’” (Franzen 329). This makes her feel incapable of making her own decisions, and furthermore, makes equality between them impossible. All she cares about as an adult are her “team”—her home and children—and, as she ages, about her conflicted feelings for her husband and his best friend (Franzen 8). Walter, playing the patriarch, sacrifices his career and environmental goals to provide for his family, but he never puts aside his identity the way Patty does (Franzen 124).

Franzen ironically dramatizes how Patty’s focus upon being the best traditional adult woman in the neighborhood may actually be what prevents her from *being* the best mother and housewife in the neighborhood. Despite her best intentions, the same distance that once existed between her young self and her own mother forms between herself and her daughter, Jessica: “Patty really had been a good parent; she’d succeeded in preparing her daughter for a happier and easier life than her own; but it was clear from the other families’ body language that she hadn’t been a great mom in the ways that counted most” (Franzen 183). Despite Patty’s drive to mother

better than her own mother, she replicates her mother's mistakes in her relationship with her daughter. This parallel continues in the way that she dotes on her other child, Joey—just as her mother doted on her more creative sisters instead of paying attention to her (Franzen 8). Patty and Walter's repetition of the mistakes and situations of their parents is a theme of the novel and can also be seen in the rocky relationship that exists between Walter and Joey, as it is so similar to the relationship that Walter maintained with his own father (Franzen 8).

The familial and gender roles in *Middlesex* are much more flexible than the less sharply polarized ones in *Freedom*. Desdemona and Lefty, for example, experience a sharp change in role expectation when they leave their home in rural Greece to head for the United States of America. When the story begins, Lefty and Desdemona live alone together as siblings in a small house in rural Greece, with none of the traditional gender segregation. They sleep in the same room, their privacy protected only by a curtain hung between their beds (Eugenides 24). They are together so much throughout their youth that an unusually close bond forms:

Desdemona had always loved her brother as only a sister growing up on a mountain could love a brother: he was the whole entertainment, her best friend and confidant, her co-discoverer of short cuts and monks' cells. Early on, the emotional sympathy she'd felt with Lefty had been so absolute that she'd sometimes forgotten they were separate people. (Eugenides 25)

The reader receives only a brief view of these characters as children, however, because Eugenides focuses on how the newly orphaned sister and brother balance their roles as siblings with their adult gender roles. Lefty, the younger sibling, is concerned mainly with two things: sex and gambling (Eugenides 26). Desdemona, on the other hand, is rigid in her morality, considers Lefty her personal responsibility, and barely acknowledges having a sex drive (Eugenides 26). Their relation-

ship is defined in terms of duty and sex. The duty Desdemona feels to provide for Lefty is partly the natural inclination of an older sibling to protect a younger sibling, particularly in absence of their parents, and partly motivated by a more direct obligation. Desdemona's mother's last words to her were, "Take care of Lefty. Promise me! Find him a wife!" (Eugenides 23). In rural Greece during this time period, marriage was considered essential to adulthood (Buck Sutton). After their parents' deaths, Desdemona and Lefty were suddenly without family to make and approve their matches, and so the task was left to Desdemona—although whether this burden was hers to carry because she was the family's only daughter or because she was the oldest child, is unclear. Sexuality always provided a tension in their brother-sister relationship, as something that Lefty embraced and seemed to understand while Desdemona did not. "Desdemona's body was still a stranger to its owner. At night, in their bedroom, she'd seen her sleeping brother press against his rope mattress as though angry with it . . . But none of this had made an impression" (Eugenides 26). Although incest between siblings is culturally taboo, it occurs as a natural progression in Desdemona and Lefty's relationship, which was already emotionally intimate. Desdemona's confusion concerning her own body and Lefty's obsession with sex, paired with the lack of moral guidance caused by the death of their parents, make their jump from siblings to lovers seem almost natural.

A difficult transition for Lefty and Desdemona occurs when they leave their home in Greece as brother and sister and arrive in the United States as husband and wife. The only person who knows the truth of their relationship is their cousin, Lina (Eugenides 85).

When they take the final step to become lovers instead of siblings, Lefty appears motivated by lust, while Desdemona rarely acknowledges to herself that she even feels lust; after the first wave of anxious desire for her brother that she feels while still living in their village, her willingness to have sex with Lefty seems driven by the need to keep him with her. Nevertheless,

Desdemona and Lefty's relationship cannot be discussed without considering sexual desire; after all, it is sex with each other that made them abnormal and incestuous. For Desdemona, sexual desire is intrinsically linked to shame. This shame existed even before she admitted to (and consummated) her lust for her brother. As a child, her mother told her that a woman needed to be pure to make good silk, and that a stain would show in the silk for every man after whom she lusted. "[A]s a young woman of twenty-one, she still couldn't entirely disbelieve her mother's morality tales, and examined the cocoon constellations for a sign of her own impurity (the dreams she'd been having!)" (Eugenides 22). Desdemona was taught by her mother at a young age that sex was not desired by "pure" women, an idea that was probably reinforced by her church. Desdemona's shame and confusion about sexual matters ironically contrast with her voluptuous physical appearance—her large breasts, curving hips and thick, womanly hair (Eugenides 24). Eugenides describes Desdemona's body as built to enjoy sex and to arouse desire in men; however, by nature and upbringing, she is instead extremely chaste and ashamed of sexual desire.

Ironically, Desdemona seems more ashamed of her sexuality than she is of the incestuous nature of her marriage—at least until she finds out the possible consequences of inbreeding. Convinced at first that birth defects and mutations are caused by fanciful ideas that occur during sex (for instance, she thinks of the minotaur while conceiving Zoe with Lefty and so believes that her child will be born with the head of a bull), when she is told the truth, she is even more horrified. "'Of course not,' said Dr. Philobosian. 'All this nonsense comes from the Dark Ages. We know now that most birth deformities result from the consanguinity of the parents . . . From families intermarrying'" (Eugenides 116). Once she fully realizes the consequences of her actions, Desdemona's initial shame is multiplied, becoming almost spiritual in nature. She refuses to continue having sex with Lefty, at first because she fears bearing a child with defects, and because she has no access to or

knowledge of birth control (Eugenides 129). Their relationship as a married couple changes in the United States and takes on an entirely different form than did their relationship as siblings in Greece, especially once Desdemona's physical ardor for Lefty begins to cool. "Lefty and Desdemona had enjoyed an unusually close and egalitarian marriage for its time. But as Lefty began to feel left out, he retaliated with tradition . . . He reinstated sex segregation in the house . . . He began to give orders" (Eugenides 130). Even as the sex factor leaves their relationship, they can never return to the brother-sibling relationship they once had, nor can they be as emotionally close. Sex made them romantic and the lack of sex cemented their marriage. The Stephanides' familial and gender roles evolve from mother-son, then lover to lover, then husband and wife in America. Once they have immigrated, their roles resemble those of the Berglunds, with Lefty as male head of household, authoritarian, and breadwinner, and Desdemona as the caregiver, child-bearer, and mother (Eugenides 133). The same apparent conformity is true for the roles played by their children and their spouses, and no social or biological hint of the Stephanides' sibling association surfaces until a few generations later, when it is manifested in the body of their granddaughter/grandson, Calliope/Cal Stephanides.

Cal, raised as a girl, realizes the effects of inbreeding when she learns at age fourteen from a specialist that she is a male pseudo-hermaphrodite. In other words, she has 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome, a genetic condition that gives her the appearance of a female even though she is actually genetically male (Eugenides 413). Cal's gender identity must be broken into two parts—Cal as a girl, who will be referred to as Callie during her female years, and Cal as a man.

For Desdemona, Callie represents a living symbol of her shame—the final result of the incest that Desdemona committed with Lefty. While Callie is never genetically or biologically a woman, he is raised strictly in the female gender role until the age of fourteen. This allows Callie to operate in a very unique position in the family; Callie shows very clearly how the



perceived gender of a child completely changes how he or she is treated by the other members of the family. Even before their child's birth, his parents were dreaming of how they would raise a young daughter. "My mother pictured a daughter as a counterinsurgent: a fellow lover of lapdogs, a seconder of proposals to attend the Ice Capades . . . my father had been seeing visions of an irresistibly sweet, dark-eyed little girl" (Eugenides 6). This demonstrates researchers' findings that parental expectations about a child's gender may influence their construction of gender as much as the child's natural inclination does; little girls get treated differently than little boys (Corrado 1). Gendered expectations can be seen clearly in the daydreams of Tessie and Milton, even before Callie is born. Raised as a girl, Callie acts like a girl throughout childhood, playing games with baby dolls and wearing dresses; she is "brought up as a girl and had no doubts about this" (Eugenides 226). As Callie reaches puberty, she displays insecurities that even further reinforce her persona in the female gender role. She begins to recognize society's idea of what a beautiful woman "should" look like—and compare that image unfavorably to herself. This comparison is not caused inherently by her intersexed condition but instead by the social conditioning that teaches young women to hate their bodies. "Many are ashamed to admit that such trivial concerns—to do with physical appearance, bodies, faces, hair, clothes—matter so much . . . in terms of how we feel about ourselves *physically*, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers" (Wolf 10). Callie hates her face, which is too masculine for traditional womanly beauty, her height and her flat chest, and she feels, based on American cultural standards for femininity, that she has too much facial hair, even though excessive facial hair is common among her Greek female relatives and accepted in their family and community (Eugenides 310). Despite this, Callie is so ashamed of her slow development that she pretends to have a period rather than admit to her mother that she hasn't begun menstruating yet (Eugenides 429). Callie's conviction throughout her youth and puberty that she is a

girl, despite obvious physical evidence to the contrary, supports the social construction of gender—how gender identity is learned in the family and society, and not simply acquired by the possession of the correct genitalia. Eugenides illustrates the theory that “gender is enacted according to social scripts that are taught and rehearsed until they become internalized by the actors. This leads to a ‘slide from gender as role into gender as the essence of the self’” (Trask 2). When applied to Callie, this theory shows that she becomes a girl after years of being trained as a girl and of viewing herself as a girl—and the fact that she is biologically a boy makes this process no less normal.

Although some of young Callie’s traits are arguably masculine—“I began to exude some kind of masculinity, in the way I tossed up and caught my eraser, for instance, or in the way I dive-bombed people’s desserts with my spoon”—the only obviously “masculine” trait that she displays before learning of her condition is her attraction to women (Eugenides 304). Even this, however, is not a quality reserved solely for men, as can easily be seen by Lina Stephanides, whose lesbianism is an open secret through most of her life (Eugenides 86).

Callie’s transition to Cal is in some ways harder on his family than it is on him. Cal has little trouble making the decision to portray himself as a man rather than to receive surgery ridding him of his penis. He has only one moment of second thought, when he is running away from home, about the choice to be a boy (Eugenides 442). In the end, however, he considers the change to be a liberation. “I was fleeing myself. I felt that I was saving myself just as definitively. I was fleeing without much money in my pocket and under the alias of a new gender . . . I was becoming a new person” (Eugenides 443). Cal’s decision to run away from home in order to find a new identity is both his salvation and his loss. If he stayed, it is likely that everyone in town would have gossiped about him and his family, and his parents and doctor would also likely have fought his decision to switch genders rather than undergo surgery (Eugenides 439). However, his leaving takes him

out of the extended family unit that generations of Stephanides had relied upon for support; his absence also leaves his immediate family members terrified and concerned. While he changes his identity, at the least, he also changes his role in his family from solid and predictable to a source of anxiety. By the time he decides to return (or is forced to by a police raid at the strip joint he works for), it is too late for his immediate family to regain its equilibrium—his father has already died and his uncle turned villain (Eugenides 511). The lack of final confrontation with his father, however, means that the essence of his family unit essentially remained intact: “Most important, Milton got out without ever seeing me again. That would not have been easy. I like to think that my father’s love for me was strong enough that he could have accepted me . . . with respect to my father I will always remain a girl” (Eugenides 512). Had Milton been forced to acknowledge Callie as Cal, there would have been an entirely different sort of emotional upheaval within the family unit. In some sense, Milton’s early demise, done in an attempt to save his daughter, helps to preserve Cal’s faith in his father’s love and to preserve Milton’s image of his daughter.

Sexuality plays an integral part in the dynamics between family members of both the Berglunds and the Stephanides. In *Freedom*, the very existence of sexuality causes strife between family members; throughout the course of the book, it is discussed mostly in terms of dominance and subordination. This is problematic for Walter and Patty because Walter, as a devout feminist who truly loves and respects his wife, refuses to physically dominate her. Therefore, Patty rarely craves or is satisfied by sex with her husband: “Walter tried everything he could think of to make sex better for her except the one thing that might have worked, which was to stop worrying about making it better for her and just bend her over the kitchen table some night and have at her from behind” (Franzen 140). The lack of desire in this situation leaves both partners unsatisfied; Walter, who is an extremely considerate lover, does not provide the animalistic brutality that Patty craves from a partner; bored by

Walter, Patty cannot validate his sexual efforts. The implications of Walter and Patty's sexual dynamic are that sexual satisfaction is achieved between men and women only through a power struggle. Importantly, Franzen has chosen not to portray any gay characters in *Freedom*, limiting his focus to heterosexual couples. Patty's need to relinquish power appears in the sexual satisfaction she receives from being "banged into ecstasy" against the wall by Richard, an experience that comes with no tender description or implied respect for her. Patty's need to cede power is further supported by the brutal, rape-like sex scene she enjoys with Walter later in their marriage (Franzen 169, 459). Even Walter himself indulges in brutal "impersonal" sex with Lalitha once he splits from Patty, and the experience is one of the first times that Walter experiences sex with an unreservedly willing partner (Franzen 465).

The tension in Walter and Patty's relationship caused by their unsatisfying sex life affects not only their interactions but also how Patty interacts with their children. Patty speculates that she doted on Joey throughout his young life rather than dwell on how sexually frustrated she is with her husband (Franzen 141). The friction between Patty and her son caused by sexuality, does not stop at her sex life but continues into Joey's life, when he begins to have sex with their young neighbor, Connie, a girl for whom Patty had previously displayed a certain level of affection. Patty is so unable to handle the reality of her son's sexuality that she doesn't describe it as a mutual relationship but instead claims that Connie "had been preying on Joey sexually" (Franzen 146). Even this, in a sense, displays a struggle of power—Patty does not want Joey to willingly engage in sex with someone else because it is a part of his life that she cannot be a part of, as well as a barb to her since she used her connection with her son to avoid her own sex life.

Sexuality for the Stephanides family is mysterious and kept quiet between generations. Aside from the initial warnings of Desdemona's mother that she should remain pure, conversation about sexuality is not broached between generations at all. Much of the sexual activity that occurs happens

under a guise. Therefore, Lefty and Desdemona must pretend to be strangers who meet on the boat coming to the United States; Milton and Tessie pretend they are merely playing with a clarinet; and the Obscure Object [a teenage girl Callie has a crush on] pretends to be asleep whenever she has sex with Callie (Eugenides 70, 172, 386). *Middlesex* offers a wider exploration of sexuality than does *Freedom*, through incestuous characters, homosexual characters, and intersexed characters. Where sex in *Freedom* is described in terms of power, sex in *Middlesex* is cloaked in shame and secrecy. This is perhaps fitting for a book that is narrated by a man whose very condition is considered unspeakable in American society (Eugenides 430).

The American family is constantly evolving and so is the American family saga novel. The make-up of a family can be just as important as the family members themselves, and the members play a crucial role in each others' development. Gender identity and sexuality play a necessary part in the formation of family dynamics and growth, while familial gender norms have dramatic effects on individual identity. Sometimes, the importance of the social construction of gender in a character's life cannot be recognized until it is removed, such as when Patty Berglund loses the trust of her husband through infidelity or when Cal Stephanides loses the safety of his female persona. Sexuality itself, even when not directly addressed, can guide the course of a family, as can its repression. Many factors contribute to the development of families such as those in *Middlesex* and *Freedom*, but gender, sexuality, and familial dynamics are perhaps the most important.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Famous American family saga novels include James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on a Mountain*; Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*; Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*; Alex Hailey's *Roots*; John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire*; Louis Sacher's *Holes*; and Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*. The classic American family saga film is *The God-*

*father*, adapted from Mario Puzo's novels. Other examples in world literature are Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*; Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*; Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Salmon Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*; and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*.

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