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KATEDRA ANGLISTIKY A AMERIKANISTIKY

SUBURBS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

A STUDY OF THREE SELECTED SUBURBAN NOVELS

(Bakalářská práce)

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*Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla
úplný seznam citované a použité literatury.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Although the term “suburbs” does not echo the same connotations in the Czech Republic as it does in the United States, its importance slowly grows as the so-called “satellite towns” start to emerge around the small towns and villages, as well as at the edges of greater urban settlements. In my opinion the topic of suburban life interests many people all over the world, including the Czech Republic. This term begins to find its place in Czech culture, just like it has in the United States. The suburbs have become an inseparable and significant part of American culture and that is also why they have been reflected in American literature as well.

For my bachelor thesis I have chosen three suburban novels to analyze. There are many literature works that deal with the topic of suburbia, and my choice was not easy. Of course, I did not want to choose the books for my analysis randomly. Finally I came to a conclusion – I have chosen three books that although written by different authors are in a specific, even chronological order.

I have chosen *Rabbit, Run* by John Updike that represents the young age and the suburbs in 1950s. The following book in my analysis is *The Sportswriter* written by Richard Ford. *The Sportswriter* reflects the era of 1980s and in retrospective also the time of 1960s and 1970s. It brings a portrait of another stage of life – after Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* where the main character is a young male at the begging of his marriage, it is a middle-aged divorcee who plays the main role in Richard Ford’s book. The last book to be analyzed in this work is Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*. The book by Jonathan Franzen describes mainly the time of 1990s up to year 2000 and the main characters are an old couple who have been living in suburbia for their whole life, and their three adult children.

This bachelor thesis deals with the life in suburbs reflected in American literature and represented by the three chosen books. I focus on the last five decades of 20th century and at the same time I examine the literary representation of the life in suburbs in three different stages – young adulthood, middle age and old age.

Firstly, I will deal with the term suburbs. I will focus on the terminology and the historical background. I will also include the brief introduction to the genre of suburban novel, and some of the main authors.

The thesis will include four parts, three of them dealing with each one of the books mentioned above and one including the comparison of the suburban novel as represented in the three novels. At the beginning of each novel analysis there will be a brief introduction to the author and the analyzed book. Besides authors' biography, I will also mention the core bibliography of each.

To make the analyses more clear, I will divide them into smaller parts which will be similar in each of the three analyses. I will focus on three main points: the plot; the way how are the suburbs represented in the given book; and the main protagonists. I intend to use quotations to support my arguments.

In the last part of this thesis I will make a comparison of the three books. Aim of this thesis is an analysis of the three novels focusing on the portrait of suburbs and suburban life and a comparison of the development of the suburban novel as well as tracing the change in the representation of the suburbs through the five decades of the second half of the 20th century.

2. SUBURBS – THE TERMINOLOGY

While talking about suburbs, it is necessary to state the time period and part of the world being discussed. The word suburb has many different meanings all over the world and through the history. The etymology of the word “suburb” dates back to Ancient Rome, where the Latin word “suburbium” labeled the parts of the city where the poor people lived. During the centuries the word has expanded into other languages and has changed its meaning in some of them. The English word suburb is derived from French and refers simply to a residential area on the outskirts of a city, either as a part of the city or as an autonomy.

2.1 American suburbs

As stated above, the term suburbs is not universal, there are great differences all over the world in terms of what do the suburbs look like; who lives there and what those residential areas actually represent. In some countries the suburban areas are distressed regions with a number of social and criminal problems. Due to such differences I feel an urge to make clear that in this thesis I am dealing only with the kind of suburbs typical for the Northern America nowadays, particularly the United States (there are some slight distinctions between the American and Canadian suburbs).

The suburbs in the United States usually have a low population density (although higher than the rural areas) and they tend to emerge around the cities, although they can also be an autonomic municipality of its own. The term has difficulties with its definition even in the United States, because some areas labeled as suburbs do not look much like the ideal image of detached houses and neat yards. On the other hand the areas that do look like suburbs can be sometimes marked as urban.

To make this clear I would like to use the definition of the term from the book *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* written by an American journalist and critic of American society Joel Garreau, who states that “a neighborhood is

functionally suburban, regardless of its location within a metro area, if it is predominantly residential, well off, and marked by single-family homes.”¹

In my opinion this definition is quite appropriate and I would like to emphasize that my thesis focuses on suburbs that could be defined by the quotation above.

2.2 Brief history of American suburbia

The suburbs in the United States started to grow in number already in the 19th century, as the transportation system evolved. Originally many of the first suburbs emerged along the railroads or trolley roads (so-called streetcar suburbs). However, many of the suburbs also developed without any previous planning.

At the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, the suburbanization was not principally the experience of a middle- and upper- class. Out of the city, without the restrictions of the municipality, the working class could afford to build their own homes, which had caused a growth of unplanned suburbs, inhabited mainly by the blue-collar workers.

A specific feature concerning this type of suburbs is that most of the houses were owner-built and that is also why they are very distinct in their character. The owners and creators of the suburbs gave up municipal services, as well as the comfort of the cities in order to gain ownership. However, as the Great Depression broke out, inhabitants of those unplanned suburbs were forced by the urge of seeking jobs to move back to the cities, and thus to sold their houses, usually to white collar workers, for a price corresponding to the poor quality of the market.²

The main boom of suburbs started off after the World War II together with an economic growth and the investments in the development of infrastructure that followed. Father of the first mass-produced housing and modern type of suburbia was William Levitt, after whom the suburb Levittown on Long Island, New York is

¹Garreau, Joël. *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*. 1991. <<http://www.garreau.com/main.cfm?action=chapters&id=25>>

² Burley, David G. *A Suburban Tragedy*. Published on H-Canada (February, 1997) <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=841>>

named. This suburb with detached single-family houses which had been built in the post World War II era has become an archetype of the American suburbia.

An interesting shift came in 1950 which was the first year ever in the United States when there were more inhabitants living in the suburbs than anywhere else. People were moving out from the cities not only thanks to the possibility of quite easy commuting but also because of the fact many of the buildings in the city centers became used as offices for business companies. This trend of suburbanization was later labeled as “urban exodus” or also a “white flight” because most of the people who settled in the suburbs were middle-class whites. However some companies and shop owners moved their business to suburbs too, to reach the great number of people who had left for suburban life. Numerous shopping malls grew in the suburban areas.

Not only the landscape had changed together with the growth of suburbs, but also the architecture and domestic furnishings brought brand new style. This style has, according to the book *American century*, become at the recent turn of the century “the object of an extraordinary revival and nostalgia.”³ The author of the book, Lisa Phillips, claims that “suburban patterns of life established after World War II are now being redeployed by late twentieth-century city planners.”⁴

The idea of a typical suburbanite (an inhabitant of suburbia) tends to be rather stereotypical – the modal dwellers of suburbia are usually imagined as white middle-class working and family-oriented people. However the society of those residential areas is not necessarily homogenous, and there are various minorities living as well, although even those share some similarities such as relatively equal income in some particular areas or specific parts of suburbia. This thesis focuses on the novels dealing only with the white middle-class suburbanites, which is also a topic most often found in the American suburban novel.

2.3 Suburban novel and well-known authors

There is a significant suburban literary tradition in the United States. The suburban life has an inseparable place in the twentieth- century American fiction.

³ Phillips, Lisa. *The American Century*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2000), 27.

⁴ *The American Century*, 27.

What is being discussed the most in the suburban novels is the criticism of suburban life and the society that dwells in the suburbs.

There is “the tendency in twentieth-century literary treatments of the American suburb to convert the rights and privileges of living there into spiritual, cultural, and political problems of displacement, in which being white and middle class is imagined to have as much or more to do with subjugation as with social dominance.”⁵

The fundamental feature of most of the suburban novels is the great contrast of the attitude of those living in the suburbs to the idea of “home”. The owners of a typical suburban house are in most of the novels white middle-class characters who instead of enjoying the life in an American-dream-house are deprived by the feeling of “homelessness”, that leads them to the state of depression and creates an urgent feeling to run away or to seek new home (I will later illustrate this in the analyses).

The authors who devoted their works to the suburbia are many. Sinclair Lewis is supposed to be one of the first ones who focused on the middle-class life and thus the suburban society which he criticized. He is the author of famous novel *Babbitt* (1922) which had later inspired John Updike. Also Sloan Wilson with his famous novel *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955) turned the public attention to the life in suburbs. An icon of suburban novel was John Cheever, novelist and short-story writer, who was sometimes even called “the Chekhov of the suburbs” and who, together with John Updike, is considered as “putative fathers of a suburban literary tradition.”⁶ The approach to suburbs was not always realistic in literary fiction. A well-known novel perfectly depicting and at the same time satirizing the suburbs and its inhabitants is the thriller with the science-fiction features *The Stepford Wives* (1972) by Ira Levin. The bottom line is the list of the suburban novel authors would be more than long and it would include also famous names such as Richard Yates, Frederick Barthelme, James M. Cain and of course also the recent authors such as Richard Ford, Rick Moody, Jonathan Franzen and many others.

More space and attention is necessary to analyze the topic of suburbs in American literature completely. That is also the reason why I have chosen only a

⁵ Jurca, Catherine. *White Diaspora*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

⁶ Jurca, 161.

fragmental piece of this broad theme. The reason of my choice has been already stated in the Introduction.

3. JOHN UPDIKE

John Updike was a successful American novelist, short story writer, poet and an art and literary critic. He twice won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, published more than forty books – novels, short story collection, poetry but also children's books. In his works, Updike focuses on the morals of an individual, such as responsibility and guilt, but also on the current life values, interpersonal relationships and (vulgar) materialism.

3.1 Biography

John Updike was born in Reading, Pennsylvania on 18 March 1932 as an only child. His father was a high-school teacher and his mother later became a free-lance writer, the family belonged to the lower middle class. He grew up in the small town of Shillington, Pennsylvania, from where he acquired a sense of place that has continued to yield richly detailed memories. To Updike, art was “a method of riding a thin pencil line out of Shillington, out of time altogether, into an infinity of unseen and even unborn hearts.”⁷ Most of his works are traditionally associated with the regions of the Northeast of the United States.

Updike got married in 1953 and graduated summa cum laude from Harvard University which he attended on a full scholarship (and where he was a president of campus humor magazine) in 1954. After his graduation Updike spent a year studying art at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford, England, where his first wife Mary E. Pennington was staying with him and where their first child was born. The couple had later had three more children.

Since 1955, after he came back to the United States, Updike started to work for *The New York* magazine. It was in the same magazine where his first stories appeared and to which Updike contributed for his whole life. Later on, in 1957 Updike and his family moved from New York to Ipswich, Massachusetts.

⁷ Protchard, William H. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979), 2173.

Updike got divorced in 1974 and remarried three years later. His second wife Martha Ruggles Bernhard lived with Updike until his death. John Updike died of lung cancer on 27 January 2009 at age of seventy-six.

Updike was a consciously religious writer, whose beliefs were strongly influenced by Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard and Swiss theologian Karl Barth. He was one of the few serious writers who managed to gain popular success as well as the academic claim. No matter how much contemporary his works are, he was “in many respects a throwback to the nineteenth-century novelists of manners”.⁸

3.2 Bibliography

The whole list of John Updike’s works is very extensive. The range of his work was very broad, and I do not think it is necessary to include a full list of his published works in this thesis. However, since this thesis contains an analysis of one of Updike’s novels, I believe it is appropriate to mention some of Updike’s most well-known novels in his following bibliography.

Updike published his first novel *The Poorhouse Farm* in 1959. It was a futuristic story inspired by Updike’s early readings of Orwell and Huxley. One year later, his second successful novel was published - *Rabbit, Run* (later to be analyzed in this thesis). The story of a former high school basketball star who, nostalgic for a lost past, finds himself continually on the run from the demands of adult responsibility inspired Updike to continue in the story of the main character of the novel Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom.

He wrote three more sequels: *Rabbit Redux* that was published in 1971 and comes back to Rabbit at his middle age; *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) which brings Rabbit into upper-middle-class prosperity; *Rabbit at Rest* published in 1990 that follows Rabbit to the end of his days. The whole series also includes one novella, *Rabbit Remembered*, published in 2001 in Updike’s collection of short stories *Licks of Love*.

⁸ Lauter, Paul. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, (The United States: D. C. Heath and Company, 1994), 2171.

Updike had often connected his stories to classical mythology, which becomes obvious in his third novel *The Centaur* (1963). However it is quite clear that the main subject of Updike's works had always been the marriage. Since the mid-1960s most of his short stories as well as novels deal with the problems of married life, adultery and the loss of traditional religious values. These topics are carried out in *Of the Farm* (1965), *Couples* (1968), *A Month of Sundays* (1975) and *Marry Me* (1976).

A quite different topic occurs in his 1978 political novel *The Coup* about a violent imaginary system in Africa, which he wrote after travelling the "black continent". A playful novel *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) became highly popular and was later made into a film starring Jack Nicholson. This book was followed by a sequel *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008), which was also Updike's last novel. Some of his other novels are for example *Roger's Vision* (1986) – an update of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* "told from the point of view of the novel's most malevolent character"⁹ which together with *A Month of Sundays* and *S.* (1988) creates Updike's so-called *Scarlett Letter Trilogy*.

Updike's novels published in 1990s were significantly experimental and the genres varied a lot. His *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992) represents the historical fiction, *Brazil* (1994) features elements of magical realism, and *Toward the End of Time* (1997) is a science-fiction novel. Other of Updike's literary experiments are *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), *Seek my Face* (2002) and *Terrorist* (2006). A more conventional novel written by Updike in the middle of 1990s is *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996).

⁹ Hilfer, Tony. *American Fiction Since 1940* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1992), 175.

4. RABBIT, RUN – THE ANALYSIS

Rabbit, Run, as has already been stated, was published in 1960 as Updike's second novel and the first of his "Rabbit" series, later followed by three other novels and one novella. Like in most of his books, also in *Rabbit, Run* Updike perfectly manages to portray an era, in this case the time of America in 1950s. In many respects, it is "an epitome of the 1950s American novel".¹⁰ This Updike's novel was written at the edge between two generations, when the values were changing rapidly. On the background of the time that brought out numerous social, political and other changes, Updike renders a story of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom who is trying to escape from a rut of marriage, small suburban life and unfulfilled dreams.

4.1 The plot

The story takes place in Mt. Judge, the imaginary suburb of the city of Brewer, Pennsylvania. Mt. Judge is one of the two main settings in Updike's prose and the inspiration came from his own experience of living in small town Shillington, a suburb of Reading, Pennsylvania.

The novel begins with Rabbit caught in the monotonous and unsatisfying part of his life. He is twenty-six, eight years from school where he used to be a popular basketball player; after two years of marriage, with a little son and wife who has a serious drinking problem despite the fact that she is pregnant. Rabbit's wife, Janice, does not attract him anymore and her "pregnancy infuriates him with its look of stubborn lumpiness".¹¹ He has an inferior job that does not offer any kind of self-expression – he works as a demonstrator of MagiPeel peeler and feels meshed in a 'net' that keeps tightening around him.

Rabbit seeks to escape from the monotonous rut his life has turned into. His job and hopeless marriage made him feel claustrophobic and that led him to the desire to run away from his responsibilities towards the freedom.

"It just felt like the whole business was fetching and hauling, all the time trying to hold this mess together she [his wife Janice] was making all the time. I

¹⁰ Hilfer, 173.

¹¹ Updike, John. *Rabbit, Run* (London: Penguin Group, 2006), 7.

don't know it seemed like I was glued in with a lot of busted toys and empty glasses and television going and meals late and no way of getting out. Then all of sudden it hit me how easy it was to get out, just walk out [...].”¹²

Rabbit decides to leave his family and town behind. He comes to this decision suddenly. “I never thought of leaving her [his wife] until the minute I did it.”¹³ The manner of his runaway is little ironically illustrated in the following quotation from a dialogue between Rabbit and Eccles, who is a reverend of Janice's parents' church: “Eccles asks, ‘What did she do that made you leave?’”

‘She asked me to buy her a pack of cigarettes.’”¹⁴

In his car, he heads south, however not only he gets lost on his way but he also realizes this escape does not satisfy him. Since his way to south did not have the impact Rabbit had expected. On his first way for the reach of freedom, he becomes aware it is not only the responsibility he is running away from. It is the tightness of the system, the fact his life has been caught in and bounded by invisible walls. “The farther he drives the more he feels some great confused system [...] is reaching for him.”¹⁵

Disappointed by his unsatisfying way south Rabbit comes back to Mt. Judge but instead of going home, pays an unusual visit to his former basketball coach Marty Tothero. The coach later that evening introduces Rabbit to his “girlfriend” Margaret and her friend and colleague Ruth Leonard.

Ruth makes her living as a prostitute, but she quits her “profession” as Rabbit soon starts to live with her. Rabbit has quit his job as a salesman and becomes a gardener at an old lady's garden. He has not visited home one single time since the day he left. The only connection that keeps him aware of how the things are going with his family is reverend Eccles, who not only tries to put Rabbit on the “right way” but also befriends Rabbit and the two start to go golfing together from time to time, where they discuss Rabbit's situation.

After couple of months Rabbit has spent with Ruth, they go out to have a drink. However, the evening turns out ugly and the couple has an argument about Ruth's sexual history. Rabbit makes Ruth to perform fellatio on him to make up for

¹² *Rabbit, Run*, 95.

¹³ *Rabbit, Run*, 66.

¹⁴ *Rabbit, Run*, 94.

¹⁵ *Rabbit, Run*, 27.

the way she behaved that evening. The same night, Rabbits receives a phone call from Eccles that his wife Janice is in labor. It happens shortly after he makes Ruth to satisfy him orally and Rabbit leaves Ruth as suddenly and thoughtlessly as he has left his wife before. Ruth is at this time also pregnant with Rabbit but is not willing to tell him.

Rabbit rushes into the hospital to meet his wife. There he also meets with her mother who obviously is not particularly happy to see him. His wife gives birth to a baby daughter Rebecca and Rabbit restores the relationship with his family. They move back to their apartment and he Rabbit starts working for his father-in-law as a car salesman. After short time of living back together, Rabbit meets Eccles's wife Lucy with whom he has been flirting before. However the flirt does not end up with any success and Rabbit starts to feel an urgent sexual desire again. He comes home hoping his wife will be willing to have sex, however Janice who has not recover from giving the birth yet refuses his sexual demand. Rabbit encourages his wife to drink a glass of whisky hoping this will make her more submissive but he is wrong and Janice rebuffs him.

Again, he leaves his wife and tries to find Ruth, however she is not at her place and Rabbit spends the night at a hotel. After this another Rabbit's flight, his wife Janice continues drinking. In one of the most horrific scenes in modern fiction Janice drowns their baby daughter Rebecca. Rabbit is told about the terrible accident over the phone by Eccles. After finding out what has happened Rabbit comes back once again to reconcile with his wife and family. Nevertheless, at their daughter's funeral Rabbit concludes from the silent accusation that all the others are heaping the guilt on him, which makes him furious and he leaves again, running from the graveyard, up the mountain through the forest.

However, there is still one of Rabbit's flights left. As he runs away from his daughter's funeral, he goes to Ruth's place again and this time he finds her there. He finds out she is pregnant and they talk about what to do next. Ruth wants him to either forget about her or to divorce his wife. Rabbit suggests he will go and buy some food and leaves Ruth's apartment. However, instead of going to the store, he ends up running away again.

Although the novel has a repetitive pattern, it does not bore the reader, each escape is as sudden, surprising and incomprehensible as the first one. The topic of the flight brings a moral dilemma.

For Updike running away is no solution. *Rabbit, Run* was published at the time when running and “being on the road” was a topic of American literature. It is not another literary “runaways” for freedom. It is “more a response to than an illustration of the escape theme in American writing.”¹⁶ As Updike stated, his novel says “Yes, but.” “Yes” to our desire and inner voice, “but” for the disastrous consequences. In the 1950s beatniks were proclaiming the travelling as a solution to the ill state of society and humanity; however Updike was trying to say: Yes, there is certainly that, but then there are all those other people who seem to get hurt. However, the paradox is that the title of the novel is still in the imperative mode.

4.2 The portrait of suburb

The suburb as described in Updike’s novel is not a particularly the proper kind of a neat residential area with perfect lawns and yards. The image of the city of Brewer and its suburb, the town called Mt. Judge, more reminds of a lower-middle-class blue collar suburb, which the reader can also observe from the description of its inhabitants, who are not very well-off.

Rabbit and his family do not even live in a house; they live in an apartment in a frame double house. The house itself is depicted as unwelcoming and rather unpleasant place. “There is that smell which is always the same but that he can never identify; sometimes it seems cabbage cooking, sometimes the furnace's rusty breath, sometimes something soft decaying in the walls.”¹⁷

However, the suburb is probably not homogenous, because some of the family houses, such as reverend’s home, are described as very nice places. Furthermore, there is also a golf course in Mt. Judge which indicates a better-off neighborhood as well. “Number 61 is a big brick place with white wood trim, a little porch imitating a Greek temple, and a slate roof that shines like the scales of a big fish.”¹⁸

The suburb Mt. Judge is situated on east side of the eponymous mountain and its boarder meets with the edge of Brewer along the highway. What is very distinctive for Updike’s imaginary setting is the color. Rabbit calls Brewer “that

¹⁶ Hilfer, 174.

¹⁷ *Rabbit, Run*, 8.

¹⁸ *Rabbit, Run*, 100.

flower-pot city.”¹⁹ Brewer, according to Rabbit, is a red city, where everything is the same color, where even the red bricks are painted red.

4.3 Characters and their relationships

Besides the main protagonist Harry Rabbit Angstrom, there are of course many other major and minor protagonists in the novel. For further analysis, I will focus only on three of them; however I would like to mention at least some of the other characters briefly as well.

Firstly, I would like to give a short characteristic of reverend Jack Eccles, who is quite a significant protagonist of the story. Eccles is a young and well-liked minister, not much older than Rabbit. He is an unconventional minister, very sociable and always willing to help, who does not follow the traditional demands of his profession. He makes restoring the relationship between Rabbit and Janice his mission; however at the same time he suffers a crisis of his own faith.

Another important character is Jack Eccles’s wife Lucy. Reverend’s wife is not happy in their marriage and she dislikes the religion and faith, of which she has become jealous of, since her husband, in Lucy’s opinion, pays more attention to his parishioners than to his own family.

Last of the characters I would like to mention in this section is Marty Tothero, Rabbit’s former basketball coach. Visiting Marty is the first thing Rabbit does after coming back to town from his unsuccessful runaway. Marty tries to give Rabbit advice on his situation, although he does not manage his own life very well.

4.3.1 Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom

The main character of Updike’s novel is Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, a blue-collar protagonist of age twenty-six, a former high-school basketball star who is in love with his own past and is not able to abide the present he lives in. He gained his nickname “Rabbit” thanks to his appearance and his exceptional talent in playing basketball. Harry is six feet three tall with an athletic figure. He is married to Janice and together they raise their two year-old son Nelson. Harry’s parents and younger sister live in the same town and so do his parents-in-law.

¹⁹ *Rabbit, Run*, 22.

In the story he tries to escape from his family, job and town “by a series of disastrously sentimental and humanly irresponsible actions”.²⁰ Updike manages to make the reader feel and understand Rabbit’s desires although at the same time the reader is still able to judge the sorrowful consequences of Rabbit’s actions.

Harry and his constant runaways give an image of a highly irresponsible and careless person to the reader. He refuses to take the responsibility for his actions and he often blames the others for his own mistakes and guilt.

Harry Angstrom is by some critics being identified as Updike’s alter-ego. They claim Harry is Updike’s notion of what he might have become had he never left southeastern Pennsylvania. Although Rabbit has reached only a high-school education, and his vision of the world is very limited by prejudice, Updike lets this “morally disreputable character to speak in what sounds very much like his own voice.”²¹

Through the entire story Rabbit is trying to find something that he feels is missing from his life. He is discussing this sense of emptiness with Eccles, but their opinions about what the thing could be vary. Rabbit does not know whether the thing he has been looking for is either love, God or some meaning he could give to his life, but he fails to find it. For Updike, the sense of dissatisfaction is actually something that makes the character to move forward, to evolve and make progress. According to Updike “a satisfied person . . . in a sense dies”²² because the satisfaction and happiness defuse the life struggle of the character.

4.3.2 Janice Angstrom

Janice Angstrom is Harry’s wife. At the beginning of the story she is pregnant with their second child, drinking too much and not able to keep their home tidy. She infuriates her husband with her recklessness and apathy, and furthermore he does not find her attractive anymore. “Just yesterday,” it seems to Rabbit, “she stopped being pretty.”²³

Throughout most of the story it is not easy to identify Janice’s character traits. This protagonist remains quite passive for the most of the novel; she does not

²⁰ *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 2173.

²¹ Hilfer, 174.

²² Jurca, 167.

²³ *Rabbit, Run*, 5.

perform much action besides the horrific scene where she drowns her daughter. There is only a brief glimpse at her character at the beginning and later after Rabbit reconciles with her after she gives birth to her baby daughter. Although Janice is rather a shadow in the background of the story for most of the novel, and that is also how reverend Eccles sees her – a “pathetic shadow”²⁴, in my opinion she is one of the key characters, because majority of the incidents and twists of the story happen because of her, she is the drive of Rabbit’s actions.

For most of the novel, the reader sees Janice only through Rabbit’s eyes. A great insight to her soul is nearly at the end of the book, in the terrifying scene when Rabbit leaves her again; Janice gets drunk, and accidentally drowns their baby daughter. It is at the same part of story where it is possible to gain a better idea of Janice’s characteristics; there the reader understands what is on her mind, what frightens her and what shapes her behavior.

The main problem besides Janice’s low self-esteem and insensitive partner are also her imperious parents, whose demands she has never been able to fulfill. Some reader might find Janice only as a tragic and even innocent puppet of her environment, although it is physically her who drowns Rebecca.

4.3.3 Ruth Leonard

Ruth is a very unique character of the novel. She is a former prostitute and becomes Rabbit’s mistress. She is very distinct from the other protagonists, and she is also quite revolutionary for an ordinary woman of her time. Unlike the other protagonists, she is an atheist, and an open-minded free-thinker with a good sense of humor.

Ruth isn’t happy with her weight, however Rabbit likes her figure. She is also quite tall, unlike Janice. Ruth and Rabbit seem quite happy as they start living together. However Ruth’s sexual history remains a shadow of their happiness for Rabbit and everything is put to end the night when he makes Ruth to perform fellatio on him and then runs away after learning that his wife is in labor.

Ruth remains the only protagonist who tries to make reasonable decisions and is not tied up by the environment, conventions and people around. She makes her decisions and takes actions independently.

²⁴ *Rabbit, Run*, 132.

Ruth becomes more conscious after getting pregnant with Harry. His runaway from her the night Janice was in labor hurt Ruth deeply. However, despite how much hurt and angry she is, and aware of everything what happened after Harry had left, she keeps her pride in the end. She realizes there are not many possibilities what to do and when Rabbit comes to see her after running away from his daughter's funeral, she gives him a simple option.

“Now you work it out. You divorce that wife you feel so sorry for about once a month, you divorce her or forget me. If you can't work it out, I'm dead to you; I'm dead to you and this baby of yours is dead too. Now: get out if you want to.”²⁵

²⁵ *Rabbit, Run*, 262.

5. RICHARD FORD

Richard Ford is an American novelist and short story writer. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his novel *Independence Day*. This novel is the first one in history to win both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. His works are being associated by the literary critics to the movement of “dirty realism”. Ford is widely respected for the work with the language he applies in his texts. A literary theorist Kathy Knapp claims in her article *Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe Trilogy and the Post-9/11 Suburban Novel* Richard Ford “has been the keeper of the suburban literary tradition for the past 25 years”.²⁶

5.1 Biography

Richard Ford was born on 16 February 1944 in Jackson, Mississippi. He was born as an only child. His father who was working as a travelling salesman suffered a heart attack when Ford was only eight years old and since then, Ford was spending a great deal of time with his grandfather, who was a hotel owner in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Ford attended Michigan State University. Although he originally intended to study hotel management, he had later changed his field and started studying English. In spite of the fact that Ford had mild dyslexia, he became very interested in literature. While studying at the university, Richard Ford met his future wife Kristina Hensley. They got married in 1968. Ford received a B.A. and after graduation worked as a teacher at a junior high school in Flint, Michigan. He joined the US Marines but was discharged after contracting hepatitis.

After a short time at the law school from where Ford was dropped out, he started to attend the creative writing course at the University of California, Irvine. In 1970 he received a Master of Fine Arts degree there. For some time he taught at Williams college and Princeton University.

²⁶ Knapp, Kathy. *Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe Trilogy and the Post-9/11 Suburban Novel* (American Literary History. 2011, Issue. 23, No. 3, p. 500-528), 504.

In 1981 Ford released *The Ultimate Good Luck*, and although the book has been received positively by the literary critics, it did not sell well. That was the reason why Ford gave up writing fiction for some time and began to work as a sportswriter for the magazine *Inside Sports*. The magazine went through some major problems in 1982 and Ford tried to gain a job at *Sports Illustrated*, however he was not hired. Consequently, Ford went back to writing fiction and his experience inspired him to write *The Sportswriter*, the novel to be discussed in this thesis.

Ford's career remained quite stable after his breakout with *The Sportswriter*. The year 1995 brought yet another important event in Ford's life. He published a sequel to his previous book – a novel called *Independence Day* that sent him right to the top of his career after receiving Pulitzer Prize and PEN/Faulkner Award for the novel.

According to the latest news about Ford's life, besides his career as an author, he teaches at various universities and colleges. He is the professor of Masters Programme at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland; he also took up the post of senior fiction professor at the University of Mississippi. He currently lives in East Boothbay, Maine.

5.2 Bibliography

The first book Ford published was *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), followed by *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981). As mentioned before, the books did not sell well despite the positive critics and that is why Ford worked for a sport magazine for some time. After he had quit working as a journalist, he wrote *The Sportswriter* (1986) that won him fame and popularity. *Time* magazine chose this novel as one of the best five books of 1986.

One year later Ford released *Rock Springs*, a collection of short stories that approved his qualities. It was this collection of stories that made the critics claim Ford's work has the attributes of "dirty realism" movement. Nevertheless, not all of Ford's texts and characters share the features of "dirty realism" and for example the novels about Frank Bascombe, who is also the main character of *The Sportswriter*, is quite distinct from this genre.

Ford's novel *Wildlife* (1990) was not accepted very well by the critics, however his reputation remained stable. He received many offers to edit numerous interesting projects and he became a successful editor as well. A significant

breakout for Ford came in 1995 after publishing *Independence Day* for which he was awarded Pulitzer Prize.

In 1997 Ford published collection of stories *Women with Men*; in 2002 he released a collection of short stories *A Multitude of Sins* and another collection of stories *Vintage Ford* in 2004. Ford wrote another sequel to the story of Frank Bascombe in 2006 called *The Lay of the Land*. In the summer of 2012 Ford's latest novel *Canada* came out.

6. THE SPORTSWRITER – THE ANALYSIS

The Sportswriter is an introspective novel about a divorcee dealing with the existential and emotional crisis caused by the death of his son and a divorce. The main protagonist, Frank Bascombe, became a sportswriter after failing as a novelist. He is a divorced father of three, but his oldest son has died from Reye's syndrome. The book is written from the first-person point of view and was inspired by Ford's own experience of becoming a sportswriter after a first attempt to write books that had turned out unsuccessfully as has been mentioned in his biography above. The novel was later followed by two sequels that continue the story of Frank Bascombe. The plot of the novel is quite simple; however the story develops on two different levels thanks to Frank's introspective through which the reader learns also about Frank's previous life.

6.1 The plot

The plot takes place at Easter weekend in an imaginary suburb of Haddam, New Jersey. The story starts with Frank and his ex-wife, to whom he refers as "X", meeting at the graveyard. It is a Good Friday morning and also birthday of Frank's and X's deceased son Ralph. While Frank is waiting for his ex-wife, the reader learns from Frank's thoughts more about his recent life.

Frank works as a sportswriter and lives in an old Tudor house where their family used to live before the divorce. His wife lives in a house across the town with their two children, Paul and Clarissa. X works as a pro at the local golf course and seems quite happy with her life and career, while Frank is still lost in a state of dreaminess into which he fell when his oldest son died. Frank is now starting a new relationship with a young nurse named Vicki, "a sweet, saucy little black hair"²⁷ who is also a divorcee. They are leaving together for a trip to Detroit later that day.

After visiting the cemetery, Frank goes home to prepare for the trip. For Frank it is partly a business trip, because he is supposed to interview a former football player who has had an accident and is bound to a wheelchair now. Frank is hoping not only to make a good interview, but also enjoy a nice weekend with

²⁷ Ford, Richard. *The Sportswriter* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1995), 6.

Vicki, with whom he would like to share the future. To Frank, future with Vicki “is not a hard life to imagine.”²⁸ However the trip does not go as Frank has expected. The weather in Detroit is cold and depressive and it sets a general mood of the whole trip. Frank has difficulties falling asleep at night in the hotel and while Vicki is sleeping, he starts looking for cigarettes. He also searches in his girlfriend’s bag, but Vicki wakes up and is shocked by his acting. She forgives him, however the accident hurts their relationship.

The interview does not turn out successfully either. Frank was going to write about the hope and courage of the football player, who, although handicapped, has become a motivation leader of his team and wants to start studying at a law school. However, Frank only finds a depressed man who wants his former life back. The interview only makes Frank to feel pity for the man, and as he returns back to the hotel in a gloomy mood, he finds Vicki feeling the same, after she has been reading a self-motivational book which made her believe that she and Frank are not meant to be a couple. Frank tries to save the trip, but the weather is getting worse and the couple agrees on leaving from Detroit on an earlier flight.

When Frank arrives home, a friend of his, Walter, is waiting for him at Frank’s house. Walter and Frank are members of a Divorce Men Club. Only a few days before the Easter weekend, Walter has confessed to Frank that he let a man to pick him up one night at a bar. To Walter’s surprise, Frank does not seem shocked by that and does not make any judgments either. Walter had been struggling with his life since the divorce and now he has also started to get lost in own identity due to his experience with another man. As Walter talks about his feelings, Frank tries to be supportive although he is tired after the unsuccessful trip. Before Walter leaves, he tries to give Frank a kiss, but Frank pushes him away. Walter apologizes and leaves. In the morning, Frank calls Walter several times, but there is not respond.

On Sunday evening Frank goes to Vicki’s father’s house for Easter dinner. It is the first time he is meeting Vicki’s family, which includes her brother, father and step-mother. When he arrives, he sees that Vicki is quite cold to him and he start to worry that she might want to end their relationship. Frank tries to draw Vicki’s attention to something else and suggest playing croquet. While she is looking for croquet equipment, Frank meets her brother Cade. Frank finds Cade unfriendly and

²⁸ *The Sportswriter*, 140.

rather dumb. Frank and Vicki play croquet outside for a while and after they stop, Vicki tells Frank she has seen his ex-wife with a doctor they met on their way to Detroit, whom Frank really dislikes, considering him an annoying womanizer. Frank fails to hide how upset he feels about the news.

Before the dinner starts, Franks meets Vicki's father Wade. Wade and Frank talk about life and soon befriend. Wade has been through similar life experience and suffered times of emptiness just like Frank, after Vicki's mother died. The dinner feels little uncomfortable as not everyone gets along with the others at the table.

After the dinner, Frank and Vicki are left alone, and Vicki honestly tells Frank she does not believe he wants to commit to her. Frank gets down on his knees to prove her wrong and proposes; however, before Vicki can give him an answer, Wade tells Frank he has a phone call.

X called Frank to tell him that Walter has committed a suicide and the police are asking for Frank to identify the body. Frank tells Vicki what happened and that he needs to leave. As Frank is getting to the car, he and Vicki start an argument and she tells Frank she does not love him. He tries to get Vicki in the car so they can discuss it but when he grabs her arm she punches him in the face. Frank understands she is serious and leaves.

At the police station Frank is given a copy of Walter's suicide note. The police do not need Frank to identify Walter after all because his sister from Ohio is coming over to do so. Frank asks the police whether he could visit the death scene and the police agree. In front of the police station X is waiting for Frank with their children. They talk a little while the children are playing and Frank asks X about the doctor Vicki has mentioned before. X ensure Frank that there is nothing between her and the doctor and at the same time she makes clear that it is now only her business whom she is seeing.

Frank tells X he is going to Walter's place and suggests they could go together. X agrees, but to her surprise, after a while at the death scene and under circumstances that are far from romance, Frank suggests to have sex. His ex-wife is disgusted by his suggestion and leaves the apartment. On her way she meets the house manager who makes them both leave the place. Outside of the house, Frank asks X if they could just go home together but she leaves on her own.

Frank starts driving around the town, not knowing where to go or what to do. Eventually he ends up at the local train station where he finds some peace just in

watching people passing by. However he becomes visible when a woman who has just arrived by train is looking for someone who could give her a lift. Frank is afraid the woman is Walter's sister and in order to avoid talking to her he boards on the leaving train quickly.

Frank realizes he is on a night train to New York, even though he does not New York by night at all. On the train, he reads Walter's letter, in which Walter writes about his illegitimate daughter living in Florida. In the letter, Walter asks Frank to find his daughter and explain her Walter's death.

In the city Frank realizes he does not feel there as uncomfortably as usually, but he still does not know what to do next and after a while decides to head to his work office and tries to work on the story of the football player he visited in Detroit. There is a late night meeting taking place at the offices and Frank is soon disturbed by a young intern Catherine, with whom Frank ends up going out for a dinner the same night.

In the last part of the book, the reader learns that Frank has travelled to Florida to search for Walter's daughter. However, he has soon find out Walter made up the story about an illegitimate daughter. Nevertheless, Frank has realized that Walter's note and investigation of a non-existent woman brought him to a place where he feels happy and he has stayed in Florida for a couple of months. He is still seeing the young intern, but only occasionally. The most important thing to Frank is that he feels released from the grief over his son's death, he found peace and he feels a brand new attitude towards the life again.

6.2 The portrait of suburb – Peaceful Haddam

The town of Haddam is a suburb to New Jersey. According to Catherine Jurca, the imaginary suburb Haddam is based upon Princeton.²⁹ Haddam is a place of "hilly and shady seminary niceness"³⁰ surrounded by a plain landscape of New Jersey. "It is not a hard town to understand,"³¹ according to Frank, the narrator of the novel. The town with population about twelve thousand, of whom most of the people are commuters and work somewhere else, is described as not a very church place with a few shops and not much going on.

²⁹ Jurca, 169.

³⁰ *The Sportswriter*, 39.

³¹ *The Sportswriter*, 48.

From Frank's description, Haddam seems to be rather a well-off neighborhood, where people of various successful professions buy their large houses, seek privacy and engage in a social life with their neighbors only in an occasional small-talk. Although, Frank also mentions "servant classes" living in the town, and he highlights the fact that the children regardless their race or class all play together.

"All in all it is not an interesting town to live in. But that's the way we like it,"³² as Frank tells to the reader. Ford's imaginary suburb is a quiet, peaceful and safe place where you can rely on life without unexpected or disturbing events.

In contrast with a peaceful picture of Haddam and landscape of New Jersey, Ford puts city of New York, which the narrator refers to as Gotham. For Frank New York is not a place he enjoys after dark. Also Frank's trip to industrial Detroit sets a contrasting image to his peaceful neighborhood.

6.3 Characters and their relationships

As well as in the analysis of *Rabbit, Run*, also in the analysis of Richard Ford's novel I will focus only on the most prominent characters – Frank Bascombe, his ex-wife and his girlfriend Vicki. However, I believe it is necessary to give a brief picture of some of the other characters as well. The minor characters that are crucial to the story are, in my opinion, the male characters that often function as a mirror to Frank.

A character which is responsible for much of what is happening within the plot is Walter Lockett, a member of Divorced Men Club to which Frank also belongs. Walter is struggling with a serious crisis after the divorce which he didn't foresee. On top of that, he becomes lost within his own identity after spending a night with another man. Walter is a very tragic protagonist, seeking for help and trying to find comfort in a friendship with Frank. Frank tries to feel compassion with Walter's problems, although he does not feel comfortable in Walter's company. However, Frank is fighting his own life crisis and fails to help Walter to save him from the suicide, although may be there was nothing that could actually save him from it. Nevertheless, Walter's suicide is a certain break out in Frank's own life and the events following after Walter's death actually help Frank to find peace.

³² *The Sportswriter*, 50.

Another character with whom Frank compares his own troubles is Herb Wallagher, the football player bound to a wheelchair. When Frank comes to interview Herb, he expects a strong and motivated person who has not lost his passion for life. He partly hopes Herb's story could help him to believe in improvement. What he finds is a bitter man full of anger and without any hopes for better future.

Another important male character is Vicki's father Wade, with whom Frank meets at the Easter dinner. Although Wade and Frank meet only for a while, they talk about their lives quite frankly to each other. Frank learns that Wade has gone through a similar experience as Frank, after Vicki's mother dies. Wade had to find a new direction in his life, he succeed in doing so and living a happy life now, which gives Frank hope that also he can start from a scratch again.

6.3.1 Frank Bascombe

The narrator intrudes himself plainly at the first line of the novel: "My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter."³³ The simplicity of his statement reveals a lot about his character as well. Although Frank seemingly represents an everyman, who wants to live a good simple life and appreciate its small fortunes, "discontent is anathema to Frank."³⁴

Frank values the small and ordinary pleasures of life, however he is more complicated than ordinary people and has to struggle to enjoy the mundane life, even though it is something he really desires to appreciate as naturally as the others. As Kathy Knapp suggests in her article "Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe Trilogy and the Post-9/11 Suburban Novel", Frank "is an unhappy person who moves toward happiness."³⁵

The reader learns a lot from Frank's past from the narrator's reminiscing. He was born an only child and his father died when Frank was a small boy. His mother re-married later and died of cancer when Frank was still at the university. He used to attend a military school before he went to university and he was also supposed to go to Vietnam but was discharged after being diagnosed with a pancreatic illness. Frank talks about his life as about an unexceptional one.

³³ *The Sportswriter*, 3.

³⁴ Jurca, 169.

³⁵ Knapp, 508.

He succeeded as a novelist at the beginning of his career but later became a sportswriter as he failed to write another novel. His life and marriage were happy, however the death of his oldest son has changed him a lot and Frank fell into a state of constant dreaminess, and became alienated from his life and family.

In search for a new direction in his life, he began to have numerous affairs, which later led to the end of his marriage, which he believes was purely his fault. However, it was not the affairs that convinced X to file for divorce; it was the fact that he shared his feeling, thoughts and troubles with the other women instead of sharing it with her, as she found out after reading some of Frank's correspondence with another woman.

Frank is longing to either go back to his previous life and family, although he realizes it is not possible anymore, or to fulfill his future with something that could be comparable with his previous life. He is trying to find out what actions he needs to take to get back on his feet and he tries to learn though other people's experience.

Ford has managed to make this protagonist both, an everyman and an extraordinary hero at the same time. Any reader can identify with Frank; however his exceptional heroism lays in his struggle for nothing more than a modest life.

6.3.2 X

Frank calls his ex-wife X throughout the whole novel and the reader never finds out her real name. According to the narrator, "X is an old-fashioned, solidly Michigan girl."³⁶ The fact she is a Michigan girl is something Frank highlights for many times in the novel. He explains that the fact she is a Michigan girl is the reason she is a very strong and independent woman who has her own opinion about everything and is never afraid to say it out loud.

Although she is thirty-seven, she looks younger; her figure is tall and athletic thanks to which she used to work as a model when she was younger. She has still kept her model-like moves and walk.

Frank still feels affections for X, on the other hand he realizes and understands she has a life of her own now. The life she lives is not a bad one at all, although she is divorced. She got an opportunity to live the way she always wanted,

³⁶ *The Sportswriter*, 10.

to start a career and be independent. She lives in a house with their two children and works as a pro at the local golf course, which is something she clearly enjoys.

After the divorce, X was the one who found the new life direction quickly. She feels sorry that her ex-husband was not able to do the same, but she is not willing to get back together, as he would like to do. She believes that if they both go their own way it is the best solution for them, but at the same time she is willing to remain friends.

6.3.3 Vicki Arcenault

Vicki Arcenault is Frank's new girlfriend, also a divorcee. She works as an emergency room nurse and lives on her own in Pheasant Meadow development, not far from Haddam, where Frank lives. Vicki is thirty years old girl from South who has moved from Dallas to New Jersey not a long time ago. Franks finds Vicki very entertaining and captivating, and he believes she could become a permanent part of his future, however it is obvious to the reader that the two of them have only very little in common.

Frank often compares Vicki not only to his own values but also to his ex-wife, and although he is not willing to admit it to himself, he sees she is quite naïve and rather simple. However Frank is hoping that with her he could finally discover and appreciate the niceness of a simple and good life. "Frank likes Vicki... because she releases him from the burden of his own complexity."³⁷

Despite the fact Vicki is probably not as high-minded as Frank's ex-wife or Frank himself; she is an independent woman who, after going through an experience of a very bad marriage, wants what she knows. Vicki realizes that she and Frank do not have much in common and are not meant to be together. She knows what she feels and makes herself clear towards Frank when she breaks up with him: "I just don't love you enough to marry you."³⁸ In this scene, it is actually Vicki who does not seem naïve but realistic and is able to make more reasonable decision than Frank.

³⁷ Jurca, 170.

³⁸ *The Sportswriter*, 295.

7. JONATHAN FRANZEN

Jonathan Franzen is an American novelist and essayist who gained a great critical acclaim after publishing his third novel *The Corrections* (2001) that made Franzen a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction finalist in 2002 and for which he also received a National Book Award in 2001. Franzen is a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* magazine, where he writes short stories, essays and various journalistic texts. Thanks to the two academic years he had spent in Berlin, Franzen speaks fluent German and in 2007 he released a translation of Frank Wedekind's play *Spring Awakening*.

7.1 Biography

Jonathan Franzen was born on 17 August 1959 in Western Spring, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, but he grew up in Webster Groves, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. He was the youngest of three children, his father was an engineer and mother was a housewife. The fact he was raised in Midwest is well reflected in his work where he is able to perfectly portray the Midwestern suburban life.

He spent a part of his education studying abroad in Munich and Berlin. Franzen graduated in 1981 from Swarthmore College with a degree in German language. After his graduation and a scholarship in Berlin that followed, he also worked in a seismology lab at Harvard University's Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences.

He married Valerie Cornell in 1982. After the marriage he and his wife relocated to Boston and later to New York, where Franzen sold his first novel. Franzen and his wife separated in the middle of 1990s and are divorced now. Franzen has no children. He currently lives partly in New York City and partly in Boulder Creek, California.

He became definitely well-introduced to the broad audience after publishing his third novel *The Corrections*. He immediately became one of the most popular writers of his generation.

Franzen appeared many times on popular TV shows. He drew a lot of media attention already in 2001 thanks to refusing the invitation to *The Oprah Winfrey Show* after *The Corrections* was chosen for Oprah Winfrey's book club. *The*

Corrections have highly benefited from such media coverage. However, he appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* nearly a decade later to discuss his novel *Freedom*. Franzen starred also a minor role in *The Simpsons* where he is depicted as he argues about literature with his real-life friend Michael Chabon (an American writer).

Among many awards and honors he received, such as the Whiting Writers' Award in 1988, he was also named as one of the "Twenty Writers for the 21st Century" by *The New Yorker* magazine at the turn of the millennium.

7.2 Bibliography

Franzen published his first novel *The Twenty-Seventh City* in 1988. The novel is set in the city of St. Louis, near which he grew up. The novel deals with the degradation of the city's old fame and beauty – St. Louis used to be the “fourth city” of the United States in 1870s, the name of the novel is derived from the fact that St. Louis has fallen low in the ranking. The novel was well received and gained Franzen a good reputation for a starting author.

In 1992 Franzen released another novel – *Strong Motion*. The story of dysfunctional family takes place at the time of seismic events on the East Coast of the U.S. It is worth mentioning Franzen wrote this novel after working in the seismological center.

Nearly one decade later, Franzen writes *The Corrections*, which definitely approve his exceptional talent. With this third novel Franzen has published and that could be described as a sprawl family saga full of social criticism, Franzen has taken the suburban novel from the 20th century into the new millennium. Most of the awards that the book has received have already been listed above. To make the list complete, *The Corrections* also received the 2002 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction and the book 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 as I have mentioned before. Franzen's *The Corrections* was one of the best-selling books of fiction in the whole decade.

Shortly after *The Corrections* Franzen released his non-fictional work, a collection of essays *How to Be Alone*. Another non-fictional work followed in 2006 as Franzen published a memoir *The Discomfort Zone*. This memoir puts more light on the influence of Franzen's childhood and family life reflected in his works.

As has already been stated, Franzen speaks fluent German and he translated Frank Wedekind's play *Spring Awakening*. His translation was published in 2007, although it was originally translated in 1986.

His most recent novel *Freedom* was published in 2010. As a part of the book's promotion, Franzen was the first author to appear on the title page of *Time* magazine since the 2000 appearance of Stephen King. This novel became the real bridge between the two millennia since it follows the story of an American family from the last decades of 20th century to the time when Barrack Obama became the president.

8. THE CORRECTIONS – THE ANALYSIS

The Corrections focuses on a family of five. The Lamberts include the parents, Enid and Alfred, who are in their seventies and live in the suburban town of St. Jude; and their three grown children who all live on the East Coast. Franzen's novel follows the events in life of each family member in a few months before the Christmas, which Enid is planning to be the last Christmas as a family together.

The novel is very detailed and brings a full picture of the protagonists' lives. In order to keep the length of the following chapter similar to the previous chapters dealing with the plots of the novels, the story of *The Corrections* will be significantly simplified. I will also focus mainly on the plot concerning the Lamberts family as a whole, rather than to deal with the individual stories of the protagonists.

8.1 The plot

The novel begins with a glimpse at the life of Enid and Alfred, who live in an upper-class suburban house in Midwestern town of St. Jude. Their life as a couple has turned into a never-ending battle that took place on the background of empty days passing by ever since Alfred had retired. He used to work as an engineer at the Midland Pacific Railroad; however he retired two years before the appointed time due to which his pension was twice lower than it was supposed to be originally. Alfred suffers from Parkinson's disease and his deteriorating health condition is not making things any easier for the couple.

Enid has always been a housewife, trying to create a warm home, despite being terrorized by her bad-tempered husband. Nevertheless, their roles have switched in the last few years. Alfred has become oblivious to life in general, while Enid is still struggling to bring some inspiration and meaning to their existence. However, her despair often leads her to nagging Alfred about their life. Enid's only wish that could please her is to spend Christmas together in St. Jude as a family. She will try hard to make it come true.

Alfred and Enid are going on a cruise leaving from New York, where they are supposed to meet with their son Chip and daughter Denise before the cruise departure. Chip, the middle child, is struggling with his life crisis as he has lost his

job as a teacher and is dealing with a difficult financial situation which he is hoping to improve by selling his the screenplay he has been working on. He picks up his parents at the airport and takes them to his apartment for lunch. The youngest child, Denise, who works as a chef at a luxurious restaurant in Philadelphia is going to meet them all there as well. As Chip and his parents arrive to the apartment, they find Chips girlfriend Julia there. She only came to take her belongings and leaves quickly, because she has broken up with Chip. This leads to numerous consequences. Chip starts chasing his girlfriend and leaves his parents alone in the apartment. On his way he meets his sister, and it is only her who has to stay at Chip's apartment with their parents for lunch after all. While Denise is having lunch and an uncomfortable conversation with her parents, Chip tries to save all his failures at once, visiting his agent named Eden who is also his ex-girlfriend's boss, to ask about his script.

At Eden's office, Chip meets Gitanas Misevicius, a man from Lithuania who also happens to be his ex-girlfriends estranged husband. Gitanas offers Chip a job in Lithuania and gives him a lot of money right there. Chip who is in a desperate financial situation agrees and the same day he finds himself on a plane to Lithuania with Gitanas, who is running a business there that defrauds American investors. Chip is going to be his front man of the business.

Gary, the oldest of the three Lambert's children works as a bank vice-president in Philadelphia. He has been married for fifteen years and has three sons. He is worried he might suffer from a depression and his wife, together with their two older sons keep mocking him. When Enid calls Gary to suggest one last Christmas together, the topic turns into a possible marriage-ender for Gary and his wife, as she refuses to go. He later agrees to go only by himself and be backing home for the Christmas day.

Over the phone, Gary also learns from his mother about his father's intentions to sell one of his patents for a very low price a company called Axon has offered. Gary believes this patent is worthy much more and does not his father to sell it; however Alfred has already made up his mind. Gary is still trying to make the best from the insider information and buys shares of the Axon on the stock market.

The cruise which Alfred and Enid take does not turn out well at all. Alfred's worsening condition causes numerous embarrassing situations and finally leads Enid to search a medical treatment on the ship and she is given a drug illegal in the U.S.

by the doctor. The medicine has an immediate effect on Enid and she soon becomes addicted.

In addition to their troubled journey, Alfred has an accident – he falls overboard while urinating into the sea. He survives and accompanied by his wife is transported to the hospital.

Although Denise appears to be the most mature child of Lambert's at the beginning of the novel, the reader soon learns she also has her troubles. Not only was she involved in an affair with her father's colleague when she worked at the Midland Pacific as an intern. She married an older man later, divorced after only a few years and now is having even more problems with her love life.

Denise is working as an executive chef at an extremely successful and fancy restaurant owned by a millionaire named Brian. Denise gets herself into a serious trouble as she begins an affair with his wife Robin, and later with him as well. When the couple finds out about everything, they have an argument at Denise's house and Brian dismisses her. The same day when Denise is fired, she receives a phone call from her mother and learns about her father's accident.

As Denise becomes unemployed, she spends great deal of her days just lying in the bed. She tries to convince her brother Chip over e-mail to come home for Christmas, not as much to please their parents, but for her own sake. Meanwhile, Chip is having exciting time in Vilnius and earning a lot of money, although he does not really enjoy all of the excitement that Vilnius offers, such as seeing people get shot.

The Christmas time is closer and Enid is very excited for everyone to come home, although she has had a difficult time staying without her medicine to which she became so easily addicted on the cruise trip. When a friend of hers is leaving for a trip overseas, Enid asks her to buy the pills for her.

Gary is the first one to arrive to St. Jude for Christmas and Enid is glad he can help her with Alfred, who has become difficult to handle. While Gary is at his parents' house, his mother's friend who has returned from abroad comes over and gives Gary the medicine for Enid. Gary dislikes the idea of his mother being addicted and hides the pills from her. Gary is also not happy at all with helping his mother to take care of Alfred. Gary would simply like to sell his parents' house and move them to some place with special care.

Denise arrives to St. Jude the next day. Gary tells her about hiding their mother's medicine and Denise strongly disagrees, she thinks it is Enid's right to do whatever she wants to.

Almost all family is together now and Enid is hoping Chip will manage to arrive as well, although Denise and Gary doubt it. The four of them are having hard time getting along with each other. Not only because they have never felt like the proper family, but also because being together at their old house bring back so many memories.

Denise and Gary need to deal with their father, whose disease and dementia is worsening every day. The company Axon which bought Alfred's patent also offered him a special treatment, but since the patients suitable for the treatment must not suffer certain problem Alfred does, it does not seem likely Alfred could undergo the treatment.

At the moment when Denise is left alone to do the exercises with her father, she learns from his partly non-sense speech he knew about her affair with his co-worker at the time it happened, and the reason he retired earlier and did not get enough money for pension was only because he wanted to save her privacy. This made Denise to see her father in a brand new light.

The political situation in Lithuania is not particularly peaceful and Chip has to leave the country and head back home shortly before Christmas after all. It is not possible to leave the country by plane anymore, because the airport is closed. Gitanas tries to drive him to the Polish border, but they are stopped by the police on their way, Chip has to give almost all the money he had with him, which was most of the earning she made in Lithuania and walks the last ten kilometers to the border in snow.

He eventually manages to get to the nearest airport and on Christmas morning he stands at his parents' door. The Lamberts had all Christmas breakfast together and Enid was overjoyed, however it is during the breakfast when Gary wants to make clear about what his parents are going to do next. He believes, there are not many options. Although there is a quarrel during the breakfast, it is probably the first time when the family members are being honest with each other and true in their statements.

The fact that they all met has its results. They manage to settle their problems and actually start to function as a family after all. Alfred is moved to a

nursing home where he dies two years later. The family meets together for his last days. Edit, despite an elderly age, does not lose her hope in better future and actually feels a great relief.

8.2 The portrait of suburb

To start with, the name of the town itself carries a hidden meaning which nicely illustrates the life events of the Lamberts. St. Jude is actually “[P]atron saint of hopeless causes”³⁹, which is quite an appropriate name for a hometown of the Lamberts family.

The imaginary Midwestern suburb of St. Jude reflects well the features of its inhabitants. The town is stiff, lost in the era of previous decades, the “gerontocratic suburbs of St. Jude”⁴⁰ where mostly old people live, because their children fled from the Midwestern niceness “toward the cooler coasts”⁴¹, just like the Lamberts’ children did.

St. Jude is Enid’s dream town, or at least she has tried all her life to convince herself it is. What Enid appreciated the most about the place was its atmosphere and the friendly people whom she believed “tended to raise nice children, Enid’s world was like a lawn in which the bluegrass grew so thick that evil was simply choked out: a miracle of niceness.”⁴²

Enid gives the reader a picture of a perfect suburban town where everyone is nice, happy, friendly, traditional and stable. The fact that her own children have left the place and do not follow the nice and traditional traits of life as she hoped they would makes her very disappointed. Their lives in the East Coast make a perfect contrast to the quiet St Jude.

It is the niceness of the town that makes the young people run away. As Denise learns from one of the minor characters while she is visiting Europe, the inhabitants of the town tend to pretend everything is perfect in their neighborhood, although there are troubles often caused by the class, race or economic differences. However the suburbanites prefer to pretend than to be honest. Although Denise did

³⁹ Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), 467.

⁴⁰ *The Corrections*, 3.

⁴¹ *The Corrections*, 226.

⁴² *The Corrections*, 135.

not like the harsh judgments made about her hometown, the reader is given another point of view.

8.3 Characters and their relationships

The Corrections is a very comprehensive novel which includes numerous minor stories with many minor characters; I would like to focus the analysis exclusively on the Lamberts' family, because I believe the five family members are the crucial protagonists of the novel.

8.3.1 Alfred Lambert

Alfred is the father and the head of the family, or at least he used to be. At the beginning of the novel the reader meets Alfred as a man who has lost his power and temperament due to Parkinson's disease and starting dementia. He used to work for Midland Pacific Railroad as an engineer and is retired now. Ever since his retirement he became oblivious to everything, does not have any hobbies and spends most of his time only taking naps.

When he was younger, he was rather cold and bad tempered towards his wife and children. For most of the novel Alfred seems like an unloving father and husband who did not take any interest in his family and instead of it devoted his life to working for a company which has later caused economical problems not only to him but to the whole town of St. Jude.

However, some of the reasons that let him to his actions, including the early retirement are revealed at the end of the novel. Thanks to his strange partly nonsensical dialogue with his daughter, the reader, as well as Denise, learns more about Alfred's true personality and is even possible to respect him after all.

8.3.2 Enid Lambert

Enid is struggling with her husband's deteriorating health and mental condition. She believes in traditional values and would like to have a nice and proper home and family. Enid comes from a poor family and she has always hoped to have a comfortable home and good children, however she is disappointed in her life, marriage and the children as well.

Her marriage was not very happy and she was terrorized by her husband Alfred. Their roles have rather switched since the time Alfred had retired. Enid tries to make their life enjoyable and keeps nagging Alfred about his ignorant attitude.

Enid had to obey her husband in everything, and she took the same attitude towards her children. She is not happy with the way her children live and through slight manipulations and emotional blackmail she tries to force them to do what she would like them to. To the reader Enid might seem rather annoying and quite weak personality; however in the end it is difficult not to appreciate her as a person who does not lose hope. Enid's character is very natural and with her traditional values and stubborn desire for niceness and happiness she represents the ideal of suburban "everywoman".

8.3.3 Denise Lambert

Denise is the youngest of the Lamberts' children. She is thirty-one and very attractive. Denise works as a professional chef and a very good one. Through all her life she has had difficulties with her love life, starting with an affair with her father's colleague, over an unsuccessful marriage with much older man, to a homosexual love affair she starts with her boss's wife.

Despite her strongly competitive character and some rather unfortunate decisions she has made in her life, she still remains very human and caring, tries not to hurt other people's feelings and behaves more maturely than her brothers and parents. It is mostly thanks to her that the family manages to reconcile in the end of the novel.

Denise is not only competitive, but in her mother's eyes, she is also a rebel who has refused the traditional Midwestern values Enid believes in. At the beginning of the story Denise seems to be the disappointment for her parents mostly because of being unable to settle down, however she and her mother actually manage to find a way to each other in the end.

Denise is an independent and conscious woman indeed and by the end of the novel, the reader can see that considering the character she is very much alike her father, even though it is something she would not be willing to admit.

8.3.4 Chip Lambert

Chip is the middle child, and although at the beginning of the novel he seems to be the obvious black sheep of the family, the reader soon finds out, all the Lamberts' have their troubles. Chip is a failed teacher and also a failed screenwriter, and he is not at all what his parents hoped he could be. They believed he would follow his father and become an engineer, however Chip took an interest rather in literature than science.

Chip deals with a difficult financial situation and as a solution to his troubles; he decides to go to earn money in a defraud business in Lithuania. The time he spends in this Baltic state has a significant impact on Chip and there is more to life than just wasting his time from day to day. He becomes more aware as he witnesses some brutal scenes of the life in an unstable country.

Chip considers himself to be an intellectual and he enjoys an adventurous way of life. Throughout most of the novel he is very disapproving towards his parents, but he surprises the reader by his behavior in the end, when he turns out to be quite caring son.

8.3.5 Gary Lambert

Gary is the oldest child of the family and he is the only child who has seemingly followed his parents' life traits and whose life looks quite idyllic. He works as a banker, is married for fifteen years and together with his wife raises their three sons. However even Gary's life is not what it seems to be.

He drinks more than is usual and he is worried he might suffer from clinical depression; his manipulative wife keeps mocking him together with their two older sons and he is also concerned about his aging parents, or more precisely, about their house and investments. The argument with his wife whether to go to St. Jude for Christmas or not nearly puts an end to his marriage.

Gary is quite a distinct protagonist in contrast with the others. He is the only one who does not seem to be very troubled at the beginning of the novel, however this proves wrong and the reader watches Gary to suffer a personal decline. He is the only of the family members, who does not learn a lesson from their family crisis. While the rest of the family has fairly managed to mature through the story, Gary remains unhappy, stubborn and bitter person.

9. THE COMPARISON

Having analyzed the three novels, I would now like to focus on the comparison of how the suburbs and the suburban life are being represented in each of them. The comparison will focus on the most prominent features of the novels, such as the life of suburbanites, and their satisfaction with it; I would also like to observe the change of the women's role in suburbs, and to make a comparison of how the children protagonists are being represented in the novels. The last thing I am going to compare is how the representation of sexuality has changed within the suburban novel in time.

To start with, according to the three analyzed novels, the image of the American suburbia has not changed much in last five decades of the 20th century. Of course, the technologies have developed significantly and the equipment, household efficiency and municipal services have obviously changed, however the portrait of the suburb remained very much the same for those fifty years. The portrait of the suburbs is also unified, the suburban neighborhoods are described very much alike, no matter if they are located in the Midwest or Northeast. A perfect suburb of the second half of the 20th century is still very traditional - family houses with their bright green lawns and elegant yards, two cars in front of every house if not in the spacious garage, and naturally, a golf course, a few local shops and the indispensable building of church.

The suburbs have remained more or less the same as ever, and so did the problems of its inhabitants. The white middle-class is still tremendously drawn to the suburbs, where the families are hoping to fulfill their dream life. Nevertheless, they repeatedly become captured in the jails of their own lives and homes. This captivation results in the unbearable feeling of the urge to escape and runaway. "[A]lthough millions of people choose to live there, it is the environment we love to hate."⁴³ People know what to expect from the life in suburbs, but they seem to believe they can avoid the traditional failures of the suburban lifestyle.

The escape is pictured in all of the three analyzed novels. In *Rabbit, Run*, the flight from the family and rut of life is one of the main patterns of the novel. Harry feels he needs to escape from something, try to find something that is missing from

⁴³ Jurca, 161.

his life; however he fails to find out, not only what is running from, but also towards what is he running.

Richard Ford's everyman Frank Bascombe is also trying to escape, only in his case, there are more obvious reasons to his unhappiness. The reader knows what is Frank trying to run away from – the death of his son, “marital trouble, alienation from his children, career dissatisfaction.”⁴⁴ Unlike Harry, Frank actually manages to find his peace and new direction in life when his friend's death note takes him to Florida.

The Corrections brings a slightly different image of an escape from suburbs. In Franzen's novel, it is the younger generation, the young adults, children of the traditional Midwestern suburbanites who are running away from the suburb, as well as from the stiff and traditional values of their parents. The parents who stayed in the suburban town of St. Jude for their whole life find themselves deprived and depressed. Their children however, are dealing with the remains of the suburban values that have become an inseparable part of their personalities as they grew up in suburbia. The fact they left to live in East Coast still has not helped them to escape from who they are.

The protagonists keep running away from suburbs, but it is not the suburbs itself what are they running from. As Jurca states in her work, “after the 1950s the suburban family is a family in trauma.”⁴⁵ All the suburban families tend to deal with similar problems. The suburban fathers are often commuters, which leaves the families somehow broken, as the father turns into an absentee. The wives feel lonely, the children feel unloved. Adultery and divorce become the matters of everyday.

The young Angstroms in *Rabbit, Run* are a seriously damaged family already at the beginning of the novel, and their life becomes even more tragic in the end, after Harry's numerous flights, his adultery, and most importantly after the death of their baby daughter.

Frank Bascombe's family is also traumatized. The death of his oldest son has had a significant impact on all family members and the divorce did not make things for Bascombes any easier. However, his children and ex-wife are dealing with the situation quite well, or at least it seems so. In Ford's novel it is Frank, the father of

⁴⁴ Knapp, 505.

⁴⁵ Jurca, 166.

the family, who is going through the existential crisis, while his family manages to go on.

The Lamberts are quite a psychotic family, and all the family members are dealing with various traumas. However in Franzen's novel the protagonists manage to learn from the past and their mistakes, and so it seems the suburban family at the edge of the new millennium has may be found the recipe for a better life.

What has changed significantly is the role of women. The reader can observe the starting change already in *Rabbit, Run*, where Janice and Ruth represent two very distinct versions of suburban women. While Janice is rather submissive, naïve, and obeying, Ruth is more independent and self-willed, driven by her own decisions. Being a woman in 1950s was not obviously anything easy and Janice and Ruth do not need to be so distinct after all.

Janice's life is quite ordinary; she had a boyfriend, became pregnant, and got married. However she is very unhappy in her marriage, not able to deal with her role of a mother and wife. If she had a choice, she might have not be a mother or married woman at all, because she simply does not feel to be the right person for it and fails at these given roles.

Ruth is seemingly leading an independent life of her own, but when she becomes pregnant with Harry, she finds herself in a serious trouble. Single mothers have never had easy lives, especially in the 1950s and with a regard to her former profession, Ruth is obviously heading toward many difficulties in her life. She is aware of it, but at the same time she is a strong individual and is not willing to beg Harry. In my opinion, it is Janice and Ruth thanks to whom Updike's *Rabbit, Run* symbolizes the change of two different eras. The traditional believes reflected in Janice's character are suddenly seen in a different light with Ruth.

Frank Bascombe's ex-wife already represent the more independent and self-aware generation. She also used to be a housewife and her main responsibilities were to take care of the household and children, as rank reminiscences. X is an active person and soon found out what to do with her life after the divorce. She left the conventional role of a suburban woman, who only performs housework, and started a career as a gold pro at the local golf club.

Franzen in his novels offers a contrast of two generation even when it comes to the role of women. Enid represents the traditional suburban housewife who takes care of the household and family. She values the conventional role of women, and

has devoted her life being a good wife and mother. Enid is also hoping her daughter would be the same. However, Denise is far from that, she wants to live a modern life, explore and experiment. At the end of the novel, after Alfred dies, it becomes obvious that it is a great relief for Enid actually, and even she realizes that the life she had strived for, may be was not what she really wanted. Discovering this, she reconciles with her daughter and does not disapprove her actions and decisions anymore, she starts to respect her.

The representation of children protagonists has also developed, although the most significant feature of the children characters in suburban novels has remained the same. In all three analyzed novels, the children are only minor characters; they are often “neither seen nor heard.”⁴⁶ They are an important part of the plots; however they are not given much space and with their few lines usually stand at the edge of the story and continue to be only passive protagonists without performing any kind of deeper development. The main conflict usually climaxes in the relationship of the parents, “rather than between parent and child.”⁴⁷ Harry’s son Nelson is too little to be a prominent protagonist, but he still is a very important character of the story, because it is always him on Harry’s mind, whenever he is making some choices. The parts of the novel where the reader can observe Harry and Nelson’s relationship are quite unique, because Nelson has a great impact on Harry, who always becomes more sensitive and seemingly more mature when he is with his son.

Frank’s children, Paul and Clarissa, are older than Nelson and they are given a little bit more space in the story of *The Sportswriter*, but they still only represent minor characters in the background in comparison with the other protagonists. Frank’s alienation from his family is still reflected in the relationship with his children. He loves them very much, but he is dealing with inner conflicts and fails in focusing on his children. It is necessary for Frank to overcome his personal crises in order to become a better father again.

The children are represented dually in *The Corrections*. Firstly, there are the main protagonists, the Lamberts’ children. Although they are adults, to the reader they are also introduced in their childhood personalities through their memories. The Lamberts’ children are actually a result of the way parents were raising their

⁴⁶ Jurca, 166.

⁴⁷ Jurca, 166.

children in the decades preceding the time of the last novel, the 1990s. Gary, Chip and Denise illustrate what the children who stood aside of their suburban parents' lives and stories become after they grow up. The children are stigmatized by the environment where they grew up. The atmosphere of the suburbs has led the adults of all generation to feel an urge to escape and there is no wonder that the children, as soon as they grow up, take the first opportunities to leave the suburban life.

The Lamberts also nicely illustrate the stereotypical image of a suburban family, "lonely and depressed housewives, tense and depressed husbands, unruly and depressed children. People aren't simply sad, they're screwed up,"⁴⁸ as Jurca claims in her work. The Lamberts are the bad example of what might a suburban family turn into.

There is also a younger generation of children in Franzen's novel, and it is Gary's children. Although these protagonists are not much displayed in the novel, I believe it is necessary to mention them as well. They are the brand new generation, brought up in different values in comparison with the children of the previous decades.

While Nelson, Paul and Clarissa remained the truly childlike characters, Gary's sons (or to be more precise, his two older sons, because the youngest one still keeps his innocent attitude) besides the fact how spoiled they are, are manipulative and at the same time being manipulated. Their mother has used them in order to control her husband, and both the older sons managed to learn the means of manipulation very well. Gary is no longer the head of the family; he is a figure to mock and to make fun of in his son's eyes.

The last matter I would like to discuss in this comparison is the representation of sexuality within the three analyzed novels. It is not a big surprise that the presentation of sexuality has developed in the suburban novel, since the attitude towards sexuality has changed so much in general.

First of Updike's novels was quite revolutionary thanks to the way it depicted the sex scenes. The part where Ruth performs fellatio on Harry was at its time controversial because the display of sexuality still remained a taboo. Although Updike is not very explicit in the descriptions of the sexual scenes, in his novel, he had crossed the border of what the society and readers were used to in America of

⁴⁸ Jurca, 166.

1950s. As has been stated earlier, *Rabbit, Run* is a novel of changing times and the fact that it includes these erotic scenes confirms the beginning of the new era.

Richard Ford brings another form of sexuality which had not been a traditional part of the genre of suburban novel before, and it is homosexuality. Although the act is only being spoken about, it is definitely a significant step forward. Frank feels uncomfortable around Walter, but there are probably other reasons to it than the fact that Walter might be gay, because Frank, on the other hand, does not make any judgments about Walter's experience and is not even shocked when Walter tells him about it for the first time.

In Franzen's *The Corrections*, sex is not any kind of taboo anymore and the sexuality is presented as common and normal part of people's life. Also this novel includes homosexual love, but it is not anything revolutionary thanks to the fact that the attitude of the society has changed noticeably. Nevertheless, it is again Franzen's novel where the two generations are put into a contrast.

While Chip is having an affair with a married woman, his sister had not only had quite untraditional love life in her younger age, but is trying to identify her own sexuality in the novel while having an affair with her boss's wife and with the boss himself later as well. The experience of the young generation contrasts with the values of their parents. Enid still values the avoidance of premarital sex and wishes the younger generation believed in the same. To Enid, sex "before marriage was immoral."⁴⁹

To conclude, the genre of suburban novel has developed significantly together with the way society has changed. However some features of this genre have remained the same. The background, the suburbs itself, has not changed much at all. The setting is much unified no matter in which decade and which part of the country is the particular suburb situated. The problems of the suburban society that lead the suburbanites to run away from their settled lives have also remained more or less the same. The suburb is still a place where "heaven and hell threaten to become indistinguishable."⁵⁰ Thanks to this, it is obvious suburban novel will continue its existence as a very popular genre, a source that hardly ever will dry out or run out of topics.

⁴⁹ *The Corrections*, 139.

⁵⁰ Jurca, 168.

10. CONCLUSION

The thesis “Suburb in American Literature - A Study of Three Selected Suburban Novels” examines the depiction of suburbs and suburban lifestyle in the following novels: *Rabbit, Run* by John Updike, *The Sportswriter* by Richard Ford and *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen. The main aim of this thesis is to analyze the three selected novels, with the focus on the plot, portrait of suburbs and the main protagonists and to make a comparison of how has the genre developed in the second half of the 20th century based on the three selected novels.

The part of the thesis that follows after the Introduction is dealing with the label of suburbs, with the brief history of this type of residential area and also with a short introduction to the genre of suburban novels as well as some of the most prominent authors.

Each of the analysis is preceded by a short chapter dealing with the author, introducing his biography as well as bibliography. I believe it is necessary to know the background of the authors in order to better understand their literary works. After the introduction to life and work of John Updike, an analysis of his *Rabbit, Run* follows. This novel represents the genre at the turn of 1950s and 1960s and depicts a life of a young and disturbed suburban family.

The next parts of the thesis follow the same pattern, after a section focused on the author Richard Ford, the thesis continues with an analysis of his introspective novel *The Sportswriter*. Ford’s novel is a first person narrative and portrays the suburban life of 1970s and 1980s through the eyes of a divorcee Frank Bascombe who is in his thirties.

Following the section dealing with the author of the last novel, Jonathan Franzen, the thesis focuses on his book *The Corrections*. Franzen’s novel depicts a family of five in the 1990s, but through a retrospective it also looks back at the previous decades. The family includes aging parents and their three grown children.

The last section of the thesis focuses on the development of the genre based on the three selected novels; it deals with the similarities of the novels and observes the changes which the genre has experienced in the last five decades of the 20th century. In this part of the thesis I illustrate, that although some of the features of the genre, such as the role of women, children protagonists or display of sexuality have

undergone a significant change, the basic frame of the genre, including the depiction of the suburbs and the traditional problems that the suburban family have to face, has remained the same.

11. RESUMÉ

Cílem této bakalářské práce je analyzovat zobrazení předměstí a předměstského života na základě následujících románů: *Králíku, utíkej*, autorem této knihy je John Updike, *The Sportswriter* od Richarda Forda a *Rozhřešení* od Jonathana Franzena. Práce si klade za hlavní cíl analyzovat tyto tři vybrané romány a jejich analýza je založená na rozboru zápletky, hlavních postav a zobrazení podoby předměstí. Na základě analýzy výše uvedených románů následuje srovnání a zachycení vývoje žánru předměstského románu v druhé polovině dvacátého století.

Část práce, která následuje po Úvodu, se věnuje pojmu předměstí, stručné historii tohoto typu obytných oblastí a mimo jiné nastiňuje i samotný žánr předměstského románu spolu se zmínkou o některých jeho hlavních představitelích.

Každé analýze předchází krátká kapitola věnovaná autorovi analyzované knihy, ve které je zohledněna biografie i bibliografie daného autora. Podle mého názoru je nezbytné mít alespoň základní vědomosti o každém autorovi, aby bylo možné lépe porozumět jeho tvorbě. Prvním zmiňovaným autorem je John Updike, po kapitole věnované tomuto autorovi následuje analýza jeho románu *Králíku, utíkej*. Tento román reprezentuje svůj žánr na přelomu padesátých a šedesátých let a zachycuje život mladé rodiny, jež se potýká s řadou vážných problémů.

Další část práce pokračuje v obdobném duchu. Po kapitole věnované osobnosti Richarda Forda se práce dále zabývá analýzou jeho introspektivního románu *The Sportswriter*. Fordův román je psaný z pohledu první osoby a zachycuje předměstský život sedmdesátých a osmdesátých let skrze vyprávění rozvedeného třicátníka Franka Bascombe.

Kapitolu, která přibližuje Jonathana Franzena, autora posledního z vybraných románů, následuje analýza jeho knihy *Rozhřešení*. Tento román zachycuje pětičlennou rodinu v devadesátých letech, avšak prostřednictvím retrospektivy se román ohlíží i na předcházející desetiletí. Rodinu tvoří stárnoucí rodiče a jejich tři dospělé děti.

Poslední část této bakalářské práce je věnovaná srovnání vývoje žánru na základě tří vybraných románů. Tato část se zabývá podobností těchto románů a zároveň sleduje změny, kterými žánr předměstského románu prošel v posledních pěti desetiletích dvacátého století. V této sekci se snažím ilustrovat, že ačkoli

některé prvky tohoto žánru, jako například ženská role, dětské postavy a vyjádření sexuality prodělaly významný vývoj, základní rámec žánru, kterým mám na mysli popis předměstí jako takového a problémy, se kterými se rodiny na předměstích musejí potýkat, zůstává i nadále stejný.

12. ABSTRACT

This thesis is focuses on the development of the genre of the suburban novel in the second half of the 20th century based on the three selected novels. The first novel, *Rabbit, Run* by John Updike represents the era of 1950s and 1960s; *The Sportswriter* by Richard Ford depicts the time of 1970s and 1980s and the last novel, *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen focuses on the last decade of the century. The thesis analyzes those three novels and based on the analyses it observes the changes in the genre, as well as the similarities which remained the same throughout the last five decades of the 20th century. A special attention of the analyses is paid to the plot, the portrait of the suburbs and to the main protagonists.

13. ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce je věnovaná vývoji žánru předměstského románu ve druhé polovině dvacátého století na základě analýzy tří vybraných románů. První z těchto románů je *Králíku, utíkej*, jehož autorem je John Updike. Jeho kniha reprezentuje éru padesátých a šedesátých let. Dalším románem je *The Sportswriter* od Richarda Forda, který zachycuje období sedmdesátých a osmdesátých let. Posledním z trojice analyzovaných románů je *Rozhřešení* od Jonathana Franzena. Tento román se odehrává v devadesátých letech. Tato práce analyzuje tři výše uvedené romány a sleduje změny, kterými žánr prošel během posledních pěti desetiletí dvacátého století. Zvláštní pozornost je v jednotlivých analýzách věnovaná záplatce a hlavním postavám románů, ale také vyobrazení podoby předměstí jako takového.

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