

Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci
Filozofická fakulta
Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Bc. Lada Homolová
The Early Works of Percival Everett
Diplomová práce

Vedoucí práce: Prof. PhDr. Marcel Arbeit, Dr.

2013

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma “The Early Works of Percival Everett” vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne

Podpis

Touto cestou bych ráda poděkovala především Prof. PhDr. Marcelu Arbeitovi, Dr. za všechny rady, pomoc, i psychickou podporu, kterou mi v průběhu psaní ochotně poskytoval.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	5
2. Literary Context.....	7
3. Suder (1983).....	13
Insanity/Mental Disorders.....	15
Sexuality.....	20
Racism.....	21
Conclusion.....	23
4. Walk Me to the Distance (1985).....	25
Traditional Families versus Families of Choice.....	27
Sexuality.....	31
War.....	33
Conclusion.....	35
5. Cutting Lisa (1986).....	37
Family and Family Values.....	39
Romantic Relationships and Adultery.....	43
Conclusion.....	45
6. For Her Dark Skin (1990).....	48
Race.....	50
Relationships and Adultery.....	52
The Differences Between Euripides' and Everett's Medea	58
Conclusion.....	59
7. Zulus (1990).....	61
War.....	64
Racism.....	67
Sexuality.....	68
8. Conclusion.....	70
Resumé.....	73
Bibliography.....	74
Anotace.....	77
Annotation.....	77

1. Introduction

This thesis is dedicated to early novels of Percival Everett, a contemporary (born in 1956) American writer, musician, painter and currently also a distinguished professor of English at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.¹ So far, he is the author of over twenty novels (the last one, called *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell: A Novel*, was published in 2013), two short story collections and three collections of poems.

I have chosen his first five books that cover the period from the year 1983 to 1990, not only because most of them are my personal favorites by this author, but also because as his early works, they are not those that established him as a writer. If some of his books are discussed or mentioned in literary journals or anthologies, there are, with very few exceptions, his later works. The lack of resources – books or articles that would be concerned with his early works – is both problematic and challenging, but it was one of the main reasons why I decided to choose and research this topic. Everett is known to those who are interested in the contemporary American literature, especially contemporary African American and/or Southern literature, but apart from that, he has yet to reach the international fame. And it is not only secondary sources that are scarce – none of Everett's books has been translated to Czech yet. Therefore, I would like to raise both Czech and international academic readers' awareness when it comes to Percival Everett, as I consider him a brilliant novelist, definitely worth being read, analyzed and translated.

In this thesis, I will first introduce Everett as an African

¹ See "Faculty Profile – Percival Everett," USC University of Southern California, accessed June 25, 2013, <http://dornsife.usc.edu/cf/faculty-and-staff/faculty.cfm?pid=1003237>.

American, Southern, and African American Southern writer. I will briefly explain what such categorization entails in the historical perspective and what it means at present. Then I will focus on his early novels, proceeding chronologically, and I will examine their thematic structure and narrative strategies, while searching for some common grounds and repeating patterns. I will also compare the novels with one another, following how certain motives and themes evolved during the course of the seven years in which the novels were written.

In the conclusion, a final summary of the findings will be made and related to the theoretical background.

2. Literary Context

Percival Everett is usually labeled either a Southern writer, an African American writer, or both, which means that his books should share some common features with other writers of this particular region and/or race. Also, it is important to realize that apart from the “official” characteristics, these two labels still evoke certain stereotypes that will be mentioned later in the text.

While it is true that Everett comes from the South (born in Georgia, grew up in South Carolina)² and that he is African American, his texts should be examined rather than his photos and his birth certificate. Therefore, I will try to find out how “typical” Southern or African American writer Everett really is.

To answer that question, it is of course necessary to have at least some background in the history of Southern and African American literature. Fred Hobson speaks about the uniqueness of the Southern authors in his book *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (1991). He claims that a Southerner “shared with the rest of the world, but not with the non-southern parts of the United States, the realization that things do not always work out”³ and points out the ever-present feeling of failure that is caused by the lost war and the resulting events that followed. He does not consider this feeling to be a purely negative thing, though; on the contrary: “Just as failure is more interesting than success (particularly failure when so much was hoped and expected) and defeat more interesting than victory, the

2 “Literary Encyclopedia – Percival Everett,” Literary Encyclopedia, accessed May 23, 2013, <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=12878>.

3 Fred Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1991) 2.

southern writer had a great advantage over his nonsouthern counterpart.”⁴

Hobson also gives a brief summary of the themes and attitudes of the southern writers throughout the twentieth century. He points out that in the period between the 1920s and 1940s they were “far more conscious of place, family, community, religion and its social manifestations, and the power of the past in the present that were nonsouthern American writers.”⁵ These themes – place, family, community and religion – prevailed even in the following decades as the new generation of authors continued with the tradition.

The change came in the 1970s, when, according to Hobson, the atmosphere changed and the South finally managed to get rid of the old feeling of guilt and shame. The 1970s and 1980s (when Percival Everett started publishing his first novels) mark the rise of the “suddenly Superior South, optimistic, forward-looking, more virtuous and now threatening to become more prosperous than the rest of the country.”⁶

Even though the attitude has changed, the themes remained the same. The problem with such broad categories is, however, that they cannot be considered typically Southern as such. Everett, as will be proven in the subsequent chapters, does indeed write about “family,” his characters do not live alone, they live in “communities” and his novels also sometimes deal with “religion,” but the same can be said about almost any other writer. Even the extent into which each author goes is difficult to measure objectively. James C. Cobb addresses a similar issue in *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. In

4 Hobson, 2.

5 Hobson, 4.

6 Hobson, 8.

the chapter called “Southern Writers” he summarizes the themes of the Southern literary icon, William Faulkner: “Faulkner devoted most of his attention to white southerners’ struggles to maintain a sense of cultural or moral identity in the face of forces beyond their control [. . .]”⁷ He also compares Faulkner with African American Southern writers who “focused on similar struggle involving those who, by virtue of their race, had been relegated to the margins of America’s most marginalized society.”⁸ Therefore, after putting these characteristics together, we can picture a prototypical Southern writer as someone whose protagonists struggle with their cultural or moral identities and are particularly aware of their surroundings – the place where they live, their local communities, their own families and also their religion, or lack thereof. All of these factors also may or may not contribute to, or help them with their aforementioned struggle for an identity.

The second part of the quotation from Cobb brings us to the African American fiction and its typical features, if there are any. Everett himself mocks what he sees as a prototypical African American novel in *Erasure* (2001) where he lets his protagonist, an unacknowledged and misunderstood professor and writer, create a copybook “black” novella (the character’s own fictional mock autobiography called *My Pafology* which he later renames and calls it *Fuck*), after being repeatedly being accused of not respecting his African American origin in his own works. What he intends to be a parody then becomes a huge commercial success and is taken seriously by the readers. He insinuates that the “white audience”

7 James C. Cobb, “Southern Writers” in *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 163.

8 Cobb, 163.

expects African American writers to concentrate exclusively on the “black experience,” on the lives of the lower class uneducated African Americans who have to fight poverty, violence and racial prejudices.

These themes can, of course, be traced back to the famous African American writers such as Richard Wright, Toni Morrison or James Baldwin. Michael Hill, in his essay “Toni Morrison and the Post-civil Rights: African American Novel,” calls the period in which these authors wrote “a Golden Age”⁹ and it seems as if their style and themes became deeply rooted in the minds of their non-African American readers. Hill also commented on Everett’s work by explaining how the old themes of these established authors are being looked at from different angles and different perspectives by the new emerging writers. He used Charles Johnson and his *Oxherding Tale* (1992) as an example, because Johnson was one of the pioneers of this attitude:

Johnson makes slavery the main subject of *Oxherding Tale*, but instead of returning to bondage as a site of physical domination and psychic determination, Johnson muses more broadly on the phenomenological meaning of enslavement. This brand of universalism not only makes Johnson a crucial forbear of younger black iconoclasts like Percival Everett and Jeffrey Renard Allen but also reveals how late twentieth-century black novels acknowledge their precursors even while insisting on fresh narrative approaches.¹⁰

9 Michael Hill, “Toni Morrison and the Post-Civil Rights – African American Novel” in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 1066.

10 Hill, 1070.

Calling Everett an iconoclast – someone who refuses and/or destroys the old conventions and dogmas – and yet claiming that he belongs to the generation that, at least to a certain point, follows the tradition of their predecessors, may seem contradictory. It is not, though, because Everett’s “fresh narrative approach” often manifests itself as a protest against “pigeonholing” the writers – and not only them – on the grounds of their race. The best and clearest example of this can be seen again in *Erasure* where Everett demonstrates the knowledge of the African American literature and previous conventions (especially Richard Wright), but as he can see them being taken to the extreme by his contemporaries, he revolts against them and against being pushed to write in this particular way.

It needs to be said that Everett, however, was not the first one to rebel because the situation for such “iconoclasm” has been favorable since the 1980s. Hill remarks: “By the early 1980s, African American novelists saw white readers’ influence as less important.”¹¹ Therefore they were less likely to allow the public to influence their works in general and they have also “moved from tentative explorations to commanding performances,”¹² which, too, is true for Everett, as there is usually nothing very tentative about the way he approaches his chosen topics. Hill then aptly concludes that “the African American novel had transformed from a brooding genre to a space of confident executions and unqualified critical and commercial success.”¹³

Putting aside the historical and partially even social aspect and concentrating only on the writers, it can be said that being a

11 Hill, 1072.

12 Hill, 1076.

13 Hill, 1077.

Southerner and/or African American meant carrying around quite an amount of unresolved issues of an emotional nature. For Southerners, there was the feeling of failure and of being overlooked or even disdained by the rest of the country. African Americans, in addition to that, had to fight racism, prejudices and segregation. The slow, ever-continuing change in the society was reflected in literature as well and therefore the works of both the Southern and African American writers became less concentrated on these problems and opened itself to other topics. I will follow those that I have outlined above to be typically Southern and/or typically African American, but also other topics that are characteristic and important for Everett (and many other writers, of course, regardless of their place of birth or ethnic origin) such as sexuality, adultery, insanity or war.

3. *Suder* (1983)

Everett's first book, *Suder*, tells the story of a troubled African American baseball player who finds himself in both a life and professional crisis. There are two narrative lines – the first concentrates on the present events in Craig Suder's life, the second is retrospective and goes back to his childhood.

The present narrative starts with Suder repeatedly making mistakes during the game and it is revealed that he has been playing rather badly for the last couple of matches. The team's physician is blaming his supposedly injured leg and the coach believes that it is just a temporary thing that will eventually pass. However, Suder himself does not know what causes his recent troubles, which unsettles him even more.

His family situation is far from ideal as well. Suder's inability to perform well in the field is mirrored in his sexual life and his wife interprets his problem with erection as a sign that he does not love her anymore. Their son Peter seems to be ashamed of Suder – he barely talks to him, refuses to accompany him to the stadium to see the games and prefers spending his time outside the house, or in his room.

Suder is soon ordered to take forced holiday to pull himself together and, with the new time on his hands, he becomes obsessed with *Ornithology* by famous African American saxophonist and composer Charlie Parker,¹⁴ a (real¹⁵) song that he has known from his childhood. He tries to play it to his wife, brother, friends and he even takes the record to a bar, but he is only met with incomprehension and irritation. As an answer to that, he buys a saxophone, determined to learn to play it.

14 See "The Official Site of Charlie "Yardbird" Parker," accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.cmgww.com/music/parker/index.php>.

15 Steve Coleman, "Charlie Parker: Ornithology (Live at Birdland 1950)," Jazz.com, accessed March 22, 2013, www.jazz.com/music/2009/8/29/charlie-parker-ornithology-live-at-birdland-1950.

He also starts noticing things that he did not notice before and comes to the conclusion that his wife might be cheating on him. When he sees her leaving their neighbor's house, he makes a scene and decides to spend some time away with his friend Sid, a retired baseball player who lives in a yacht. Sid persuades Suder to go on a trip with him and together they set out to the sea. Soon enough Suder finds out that the reason for the voyage is not Sid's wish to distract a troubled friend, but a meeting with drug dealers. Sid outwits the men to get both the money and the drugs, but Suder, scared and shocked by the exchange (Sid threatened to kill him at one point), throws both the drugs and his friend into the water, and leaves with the money.

He then makes a stop in Portland, Oregon where he contacts his manager Lou and asks him if he could use his cabin for some time. He also realizes that Sid is now following him, trying to get his revenge and also his money back. On the way to the cabin, Suder wins a bet with a circus owner and eventually buys an elephant from him. He purchases a truck with the stolen money and together with Renoir, as he names his new pet, he settles down in the cabin.

During one of his stops in the nearby town, he witnesses a scene between a mother and her daughter which results in the mother slapping the girl. The girl, Jincy, hides in Suder's car and after some persuasion Suder lets her stay in the cabin. They almost immediately become friends and the girl develops a crush on Suder. They are visited both by Lou and Sid – the latter ending up as their prisoner – and Suder decides to learn to fly. The present narrative ends with him jumping off a cliff and flying around.

The second narrative line concentrates on Suder's transition from childhood to early adolescence and his relationship with his parents, older brother and the opposite sex. The most attention is paid to Suder's

mentally unstable mother who suspects her husband of cheating on her with another woman and decides to lose weight in order to be as thin as her. She picks up jogging and also becomes quite fond of a Christian dentist, Dr. McCoy, who is a fanatic believer and in addition to that a racist. The mother's erratic and sometimes even aggressive behavior has a negative influence on the whole family, but especially on Suder, as will be demonstrated later.

Insanity/Mental Disorders

Insanity is one of the most prominent themes of the novel. There are many characters that could be seen as suffering from a mental disorder, but the question is where the borderline between "sane" and "insane" actually lies, and, of course, whether a clear cut between these two is even possible. Suder himself starts doubting his own sanity as a boy when his mother tells him that he is not like his father and brother but like her (the rest of the family believes her to be mentally ill).¹⁶ She does not actually refer to mental health in this particular case, though, but rather a purity of the mind, because she is convinced that her husband has an affair and she resents Martin, her older son, because he masturbates.

One other time Suder decides to collect the dead birds that his brother shot with his BB gun and he puts them in a box in the garage. He does not really have a special reason for doing so, but when the box is later found by the father and Martin, they immediately suspect the mother. Suder then comes to the conclusion that they blame her, because it was a crazy thing to do and if it was actually he who did it, he must be insane just like her.

Mrs. Suder is perceived as "crazy" by both her family and the

¹⁶ Percival Everett, *Suder* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 14.

neighbors, yet, when Suder asks his father, whether it would not be better for his mother (and them as a family as well) to be taken into psychiatric care (or straight into an asylum), Dr. Suder answers: “White people’s foolishness. Causes more problems than it cures.”¹⁷ He believes that the best thing he can do for his wife is to show her support and kindness and even though he strongly disagrees with her sudden fascination with Dr. McCoy and his Christian group meetings, he at least decides to start jogging with her. Their story in the book ends when they both reach the goal that the mother has set out for herself in the very beginning – to run around the whole town. When they are approaching the finish, the neighbors start clapping and both the mother and father are moved to tears. There is not mentioned what happened with them later and the question whether Mr. Suder really had a lover or not remains unanswered. When the mother sends Suder to spy on the father and the woman she suspects to be his mistress, he finds nothing suspicious, but since he saw them in a public place, it neither proves nor disproves anything. It would be a useful piece of information to know, though, because knowing the truth would in this case shed more light on Mrs. Suder’s mental state. I believe that if there was no mistress, then the woman was most likely suffering from some kind of personality disorder such as mild paranoia and histrionic personality disorder. If there was someone else in her husband’s life, I believe it would significantly worsen her existing (and perhaps not that serious) condition and even though most of her actions would still be seen as “crazy” and would still be inexcusable, they would also be a little more understandable. Also, if that was the case, even her obsession with Dr. McCoy could be interpreted as a search for some kind of moral and religious authority in the time of a crisis.

¹⁷ *Suder*, 87.

Lou Tyler, one of Suder's superiors, sometimes appears to be insane, or at least not mentally stable as well. He is present from the very first chapter and there seems to be nothing strange about him until chapter four. There it is revealed that: "Lou took up taxidermy when his wife died four years ago and since then he's been stuffing every dead thing in sight."¹⁸ Both his office and his flat are filled with dead animals and Lou practically loses control of himself every time he has an opportunity to gain a new addition to his already impressive collection. For example, one time Lou asks Suder for a ride home after a match and then forces him to take a longer route home during which they pick up road kills. Suder is disgusted because he has to put the dead animals into his trunk, but everything goes well until they spot a live deer. Lou then almost violently gets hold of the steering wheel and tries to hit it with Suder's car, risking their lives just because he has never had a chance to stuff a deer before.

The ultimate moment of craziness for Lou, however, comes when he sees Renoir for the first time. He first thinks that Suder acquired the elephant for him and when he learns that Suder keeps it as a pet, he is very disappointed. He comes back later with a chain saw, obsessed with the thought of killing and stuffing it and only due to Suder's early return from a walk the elephant is saved. Lou, at that point of the story, behaves like a madman. He does not mind that Jincy, a little girl, is standing in front of Renoir, screaming and terrified, the only thing on his mind is getting the elephant stuffed, because he has not done anything like it before.

Lou's crazed behavior finally cost him his life when he got hit by a car while picking up road kills again. According to the newspaper article¹⁹ that Suder and Jincy read, Lou was holding a dead dog in his

¹⁸ *Suder*, 23.

¹⁹ *Suder*, 150.

arms when he emerged on the road seemingly out of nowhere and therefore we may deduce that he was so taken by the discovery of a new animal corpse that he temporarily lost all his inhibitions and was not able to think rationally.

The character whose mental health is being questioned most, however, is Suder himself. I have already mentioned some of the episodes from his childhood in connection to his mother, but no matter what he thought of these incidents, he did not really manifest any symptoms of a mental disease as a young man. His family started to get suspicious only when he became obsessed with *Ornithology* and began carrying the record with him everywhere, trying to play it to everyone he met, hoping that someone would like it as much as he does. Surely, this does not seem like a normal, healthy behavior (at least not from the family's point of view), but considering the crisis he has been experiencing at that time, one of the possible explanation could be that he was simply trying to find someone who would understand him.

Also, the choice of the song was not random as it was first played to Suder by a family friend Mr. Powell (a friend of his father, to be more specific) who treated the boy very kindly and often spoke with him about various topics such as music or the concept of freedom. That is probably why he associated the song with pleasant memories and it subconsciously calmed him down.

Suder's friendship with Mr. Powell also sheds more light at his keeping a circus elephant as a pet. When deciding the animal's name, he chose Renoir, stating that: "The elephant should have a French name."²⁰ France is mentioned before only in connection with Mr. Powell. He confesses to Suder and his father once that he is considering moving there in the future: "Yeah, I'd like to go there. You know, get away from

²⁰ *Suder*, 115.

this country. I hear things are different there, real different. People are free.”²¹ Powell’s idealization of France leaves a strong impression on Suder and he later asks the man whether he could go with him. When asked why he would wish to do so, he answers: “I want to be free,”²² and explains freedom as: “Doing what you want to do. [. . .] When you want to do it.”²³

France and freedom seem to be directly connected in Suder’s mind, so when he names the elephant after a famous French painter (about whom he knows nothing more than that someone of this name existed), it may symbolize his inner wish to free himself from his current problems and the situation which he finds himself in. He gets the elephant before his journey to Lou’s cottage, so it seems that this may be the point when he decides to separate himself from the influence of the others and finally do whatever he wants, whenever he wants to. He does not care about the reactions that the unusual pet may cause, he does not feel the need to inform his family about his whereabouts. Lou’s cottage is not located in France, but it temporarily brings Suder the freedom that he wished for.

The breaking point of the story of Suder’s mental health is when he decides that he wants to learn how to fly (he already gave up on the saxophone) and comes to the conclusion that the best way how to achieve that is become as “bird-like” as possible. Suder starts eating worms and because birds have higher body temperature than humans, he does everything he can to catch a cold, first trying to swim in a cold lake, then kissing an unattractive woman in a bar only because she appears to be sick. He shaves his whole body to lower the friction in the air and even makes himself a fake pair of wings like Icarus. His sudden decision

21 *Suder*, 88.

22 *Suder*, 101.

23 *Suder*, 101.

to become a bird is not explicitly explained, but one possible answer can be found in the context. When Mr. Powell meets Suder for the first time, he says that he reminds him of “Bird”²⁴ and the father explains that this is one of Charlie Parker’s nicknames. Therefore, when Suder many years later fails to learn to play the saxophone, he has to find another way to become “Bird”, even if it means becoming an actual bird.

Sexuality

Sexuality is another theme that is widely discussed and described in the novel. In the present narrative, Suder is having troubles with potency, even though he is young and healthy and there is no obvious medical reason for it. Everett, however, provides the reader with many hints to the most probable origin of his problem.

Suder’s father was a doctor, therefore it would be rather expected of him to have a rational and non-judgmental approach to the matters of sex and masturbation, but it is never mentioned whether he gave his sons “the talk” or discussed the matter with them. Judging by the boys’ behavior, though, I would expect it not to be the case. The only parent who often comments on any kind of sexual activity is the mother. For her, a devoted Christian, masturbation is something impure and filthy, something that a good person should never do. She is furious when she finds Martin’s sticky magazines with photos of naked women and she badly scolds him. Later this scene echoes at the boys’ baseball match where mother keeps yelling at Martin during his turn at the bat:

“You pull on yourself, Martin!” She moved along the fence. “You’re a disgusting person, Martin! My son, the pervert!” Martin looked ahead at the pitcher. “Clench that bat, Martin!” Ma shouted. “Wrap

²⁴ *Suder*, 30.

those nasty fingers around it. Is that how you hold it, Martin?”²⁵

Both boys are traumatized by this outburst, even though Suder is then praised for his abstinence. He later establishes a friendship with Naomi, a simple girl who Martin and the other boys “used” before for their first sexual experiments. Naomi believes that this is the only way through which she can make the boys like her, but subconsciously she knows they have no regard for her anyway.

The friendship between the two then turns into relatively innocent sexual experimentation as well, but it is soon ruined by Suder’s mother when she catches the couple kissing and touching each other. She slaps Suder and screams at him never to kiss Naomi again. She also feels that as a mother, she should be able to provide everything that Suder needs and she attempts to “French-kiss” him. That scares and disgusts Suder so much that he starts crying.

All the examples above only show that the mother managed to turn every new and natural experience that should have been positive into something very traumatic. In Suder’s mind, she achieved to associate any kind of sexual activity with shame and repulsion. He may have repressed that later in his life, but eventually it got back to the surface when he found himself in a crisis.

The problem with his impotence, however, seems to solve itself in the end. When Suder jumps off the cliff and finally frees himself by “becoming a bird,” he feels intense happiness flying above the ground and he notes that he has got an erection.

Racism

The theme of racial discrimination and hatred is less developed than

²⁵ *Suder*, 79.

those of insanity or sexuality, but unlike them, it is clearly introduced in the very first chapter. When Suder goes to a bar after his latest unsuccessful game, one of the men that he encounters first tells him that the team would have earned more points if he was not playing and then adds that: “Black boys ain’t got no business in baseball no way.”²⁶

Sid, as a retired baseball player, later confirms the high frequency of this opinion when he confesses the real reason why he was allowed to play the major baseball league. He says:

“Well, when I started there wasn’t but four or five blacks playing in the big leagues and they was all excellent—Jackie Robinson,²⁷ Satchel Paige, and like that. And they brought me in because they was looking for a darky that wasn’t so good.”²⁸

Sid was later fired when he, according to his own words, significantly improved his skills and suddenly did not fulfill the original function of making the African American baseball players look bad.

Apart from the racial discrimination in the sports field, there are many more episodes in which the issue is raised. For example, Doctor McCoy prays before he examines Suder’s teeth, using the phrase “little colored boy.”²⁹ Later, when the mother invites the doctor to a family dinner, the father and Mr. Powell deliberately ignore his attempts to pray before the meal and they interrupt everything he says. That escalates into

²⁶ *Suder*, 6.

²⁷ Jackie Robinson became the first African American baseball player ever to play in Major League Baseball in the year 1947. He was drafted by the Brooklyn Dodgers and soon after that, other teams followed their example. See Jack O’Connell, “Robinson’s many peers follow his lead: Second baseman a trailblazer for all players of color,” MBL.com, April 13, 2007, Accessed August 1, 2013, http://mlb.mlb.com/news/article.jsp?ymd=20070412&content_id=1895202.

²⁸ *Suder*, 83.

²⁹ *Suder*, 40.

the doctor saying: “If you folks believed more strongly in God, maybe you wouldn’t be colored.”³⁰

The doctor’s suggestion that being of other race than Caucasian can be considered God’s punishment is the harshest statement on that topic in the book and McCoy’s hatred of the African Americans is only boosted when he is asked by the father to leave immediately after his little racist hate speech at the dinner table. When he sees the mother jogging some time after the incident during the dinner and calls her “a crazy nigger woman.”³¹

Some twenty years after this incident, the situation has improved to a certain degree, yet, when Suder is seen in the town near Lou’s cottage for the first time, the local sheriff still feels the need to express wonder concerning the color of Suder’s skin. After they introduce themselves to each other, the sheriff notes: “You’re black.”³² and by that he renders Suder speechless. He then tries to explain the statement by adding: “We don’t get many blacks around these parts.”³³ That proves to be true and Suder seems to attract the attention of locals more than any other visitors or passers-by. The local citizens do not act violently or impolitely; he is only constantly stared at.

Conclusion

Even though *Suder* is Everett’s first novel, it already contains most of the important themes that he would further investigate in his later works. It shows his interest in mental instability and psychological problems, in male sexuality, religion, especially religious fanaticism, racism and

30 *Suder*, 54.

31 *Suder*, 128.

32 *Suder*, 136.

33 *Suder*, 136.

human relationships with the peculiar emphasis on the possible non-sexual relationships of a man and a young girl. Also, interestingly, even though it is not exactly specified where the story takes place, at least not from the very beginning, it is possible to deduce the approximate location. Since Lou plans to make a boat trip to San Francisco, California but Suder eventually ends up with the stolen ship in Portland, Oregon, it is safe to presume that they are both living on the West Coast, not on the South.

4. Walk Me to the Distance (1985)

The story starts with David Larson coming back home to Savannah, Georgia from the Vietnam war. While he was away, his parents died in a traffic accident and his sister got married and now she refuses to see him, so he buys a car and decides to leave the city. On his way through Wyoming to an unspecified place (he himself is not sure where he is going), he tries to shoot a jackrabbit, but he damages the car instead and learns that it will take a week or two before it will be repaired. The repairman advises him to stay in a house of Chloë Sixbury, an old woman with a wooden leg and a mentally retarded adult son, Patrick.

It is soon apparent that Sixbury and Larson have a similar personality and they bond quite easily. Larson also befriends some of the local men and is offered a job nearby. One of his new acquaintances, the veterinary doctor Howard Dale, even promises to introduce him to his girlfriend May and her friend Sarah, but when they meet the women in a bar, Sarah and Larson start arguing and criticizing each other's life choices. Before the quarrel can get resolved, a gun fight breaks out and both Larson and Dale help tending to the wounded. After that, they retreat to the women's shared trailer and Larson and Sarah agree to start a sexual relationship even though they do not like each other.

Because Larson is satisfied with his employment, the town and its inhabitants, he decides to stay permanently. He also reconnects with his sister who now runs a therapeutic group for the war veterans in Chicago, Illinois. She wants Larson to give a speech to them, but he refuses.

Back home, Larson convinces Sixbury to buy Patrick a prostitute, because so far he has only molested sheep, but Patrick does not show any kind of interest in her. Larson, however, develops a crush on the girl

(named Olivia) and keeps trying to find her again. When they meet again by accident, Olivia does not recognize him at first, but then they talk and Larson finally realizes that she is not what he imagined her to be.

After Sixbury catches Patrick red-handed with a ewe, she shouts at him and hits him with her wooden leg. Scared, Patrick runs away and there is not a trace of him anywhere, so both Sixbury and Larson must come to terms with the possibility that Patrick might have accidentally drowned or got himself killed.

During one of Larson's work shifts, an unknown Vietnamese woman stops by, briefly inquires whether he is the David Larson who fought in Vietnam and when he agrees, she shows him a seven-year-old girl who is supposed to be his daughter. Larson knows that it is not true, but the woman manages to sneak out and leaves the child with him. The police searches for her, but they are unable to find her, so Sixbury decides that the girl, Butch, as Larson nicknames her, will stay with her.

The newly created family lives quite comfortably until Butch disappears and the evidence suggests that Patrick might have something to do with it. The sheriff, Larson, Dale and a few other men get tipped off and soon they find a cottage where Patrick had been hiding the whole time. He had raped Butch, so the sheriff leaves with her (most likely knowing what will follow) and the men decide to hang Patrick on the spot. Larson does not participate, nor does he try to stop them. The murder seems to go unnoticed by the authorities, but Larson feels that he should leave the town, unsure if only for a while, or forever. He flies to visit his sister and her husband, but they have become so alienated at that time that their relationship seems to be beyond mending.

After returning back to Sixbury and Butch, Larson is told that the state police launched an investigation into the matter with Patrick and that the men who participated or witnessed his execution are getting

nervous. They suspect that it was Dale who denounced them, because he was the one most shaken by the crime. That later proves to be the true, but Larson cannot bring himself to care, for two reasons. The first is that he almost wishes he had the courage to do the right thing, the second that Sixbury meanwhile suffered a stroke. Half of her body remains paralyzed and she loses both her independence and her will to live. When the police inspector comes to question her about Patrick, she lies that she saw him alive yesterday and it is implied that she, too, may be aware of what really happened. Sixbury changes her testament so that Larson would eventually inherit all her property and he promises that he will take care of Butch. The novel ends with these two sharing a peaceful moment during an every day routine and Larson noticing that Sixbury has a gun prepared in her night stand, indicating that she will choose to end her life to escape her suffering.

Traditional Families versus Families of Choice

Both David Larson and Sixbury have been disappointed with their families, although for different reasons. Sixbury always wanted children, but she miscarried several times, then gave birth to a stillborn child, and only the last attempt proved to be successful when Patrick was born. Even though her husband was supportive, he was a soldier and spent the first years of Patrick's life abroad, fighting. Sixbury also suspected that while he was in the war, he cheated on her repeatedly. At the very beginning, she confessed to Larson: "He was with lots of women over there,"³⁴ and then added: "Frank denied it, but I know."³⁵ Larson earned her respect from that moment on when he admitted that in Vietnam he

34 Percival Everett, *Walk Me to the Distance* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1985), 8.

35 *Walk Me to the Distance*, 8.

had used the services of prostitutes from time to time.

Sixbury's husband who survived the Second World War, but died in a car crash in which Sixbury lost her leg, was not the only source of disappointment for her. Even though she had been taking care of Patrick since he was born and she was afraid that he will have to be sent to a mental institution after her death, she had mixed feelings about him. Once she even claimed that she had no children.³⁶ If this statement is to be taken seriously, then it means that Sixbury considered herself to be alone in the world for a long time.

Larson found himself in a similar situation. As I have mentioned before, his parents died while he was away and his sister Jill married a man whom he does not like. When they talked on the phone for the first time since Larson returned, Jill expressed her wish to wait until they see each other in person, they quarreled and then Jill hung up on him. Even though she later apologized and endeavored to make amends, their relationship remained strained. Larson spent several days in Jill's and her husband's house in Chicago, yet they did not talk about his experience in Vietnam, or his new life at Sixbury's ranch. It was obvious that they both meant well and still want the best for each other – for example, the sister attempted to set Larson up with a divorced friend of hers – but because of the lack of communication and tolerance on both parts, it always ended up in a disaster.

As Larson and Sixbury do not have the families they would need and want, they create a little family of their own. Patrick is not a part of it – he stays with them and they care of him, but it seems that even he is at some level aware of the fact that he does not belong there. When he does not even acknowledge the presence of Olivia, the prostitute that

³⁶ *Walk Me to the Distance*, 12.

Larson and Sixbury paid him, the girl returns to the living room and she falls asleep on the couch with both her employers for the night. Larson then wakes up early in the morning and he realizes that they are being watched by Patrick. The boy says nothing and then leaves, but Larson feels oddly threatened by Patrick's mere presence. It is not clear how much Patrick can actually comprehend apart from simple orders that Sixbury gives him, but judging by this scene I would presume that he may have understood that he is being left out.

Sixbury's dream of a "normal" healthy child comes true the day Larson is asked to take care of Butch at least until her mother is found. She realizes that because of her age she is not the ideal guardian, but her desire to fulfill her dream prevails. Although Butch can speak only a few words in English and she is very shy, she seems to be happy with her new family and quickly forms an attachment to both of them, especially Sixbury.

Here, the term "family" can already be used, because even though Sixbury, Larson and Butch are not related by blood, they do everything that anyone could expect from a traditional family. Larson, at some points, doubts whether this really is what he wants to do with his life, and because these thoughts are making him feel guilty, he decides to take his new family out of town, planning to have dinner, see a movie and then spend the night in a motel. There, he experiences the first negative reaction to his unusual family. A receptionist insults Sixbury and Butch and Larson immediately attacks him. Even though he initially was not happy about Sixbury's choice to adopt Butch permanently, his reaction was instinctive and very primal in a way – it was a reaction that one would expect from someone protecting his relatives or dear ones.

Larson's insecurity and unwillingness to commit himself to the

idea of raising Butch eventually leaves him. When he is asked by a policeman nearly at the end of the story whether he has got any children, he does not hesitate and answers: “A seven-year old daughter.”³⁷ The process of getting into this stage is gradual and it is certainly influenced by several factors: Larson’s meeting with his sister that has already been discussed, Patrick’s sexual assault of Butch and Sixbury’s subsequent reaction and, of course, by the prospect of Sixbury being unable to take care of herself after the stroke, let alone looking after the girl.

The scene in which Sixbury lies about seeing Patrick alive the day before, even though both Larson and the readers know that he has been dead for a long time, is particularly interesting, because there has been no clue given before that she might be aware of the murder. The truth is, however, that as an intelligent woman who knows the local community very well, she could have realized that something suspicious was going on. To cover up their crime, the men did not tell anyone who the rapist was, but since Sixbury was the one who tended to Butch when she was brought in and they were close, it is also possible that the girl said something to her. No matter whether someone admitted their involvement in the murder to Sixbury, or whether she figured it out by herself, if she did not know about it, there would be no reason for her to lie to the investigator and cover up for Larson and the others. It may seem cruel that she protected men who executed her son, but considering the fact that she loved³⁸ (not romantically) David whom she did not want to send to jail and that Patrick hurt a little child, her adoptive daughter, for her it must have been a logical choice. She, just like Larson, gave preference and priority to her new “artificially created” family over her old one.

³⁷ *Walk Me to the Distance*, 180.

³⁸ *Walk Me to the Distance*, 194.

Sexuality

The theme of sexual relations and sexuality is consistent throughout the whole novel with the main focus on Larson and his complicated attitude towards sex. It becomes clear during the course of the story that he is only attracted to young, innocent girls, probably because he himself feels tainted by the war experience. When his friend Howard Dale introduces him to his girlfriend's friend Sarah who is approximately the same age as Larson (between twenty five and thirty), the two start arguing from the very beginning and it is clear that she is not the type of woman that he would have otherwise preferred for himself. When she criticizes his decision to become a soldier, he thinks that she is pretentious, yet they agree to try to look past it because they do not have many other options to start a relationship in a small town. He then compares the following intercourse to his experience with a prostitute in Georgia, thinking that: "There may not have been passion in that bed, either, but at least he had been after his money's worth, at least he had come."³⁹ The situation becomes worse in the morning when Sarah attempts to perform oral sex on Larson and he is unable to get an erection – a problem he shares with the protagonist of Everett's first book, Craig Suder.

After the fiasco with Sarah, there are two other "love" interests for Larson. The first is the prostitute that he and Sixbury paid for Patrick – Larson notices that she is quite young and he knows that like most of the women of her profession, she would not choose it if she believed that there was another option for her. After the night at Sixbury's farm, he offers the prostitute a lift and they stop at a gas station. Larson tells her that she can buy whatever she wants to and the prostitute picks a plastic

³⁹ *Walk Me to the Distance*, 27.

doll – a child’s toy. That only strengthens his vision of her as a naïve, fragile being that needs his protection. He spends a lot of time trying to find her again, but their reunion only leads to a disillusionment on Larson’s side when he realizes that he only saw what he wanted to see and that the girl is much harsher than he thought. After that, he loses his interest in her.

With Katy, another girl who captures Larson’s attention, the beginning is very much the same – they meet by chance, this time on an airplane, talk during the flight and then Larson manages to retrace her back home. Katy, too, is young, very sweet and when she is introduced to Sixbury, even the older woman approves of her. By the time the novel ends, the relationship of Katy and Larson is still quite new and fragile, so it is left to the reader to decide what will happen in the future – whether they will be together, or whether the girl will not be able to overcome the age difference between them and the fact that Larson now has a full custody of a small child.

Another unconventional view of human sexuality is presented through the character of Patrick. He has been bullied since childhood because of his mental retardation and he does not have any friends, let alone love interests, he only has his mother. The only time when he is heard speaking, namely repeating the word “bitch,” is when Larson catches him in the barn having sex with a sheep. Larson’s reaction is quite unexpected:

What was odd was that David hadn’t been disgusted by the act he just witnessed. In fact, it was as if he had seen Patrick for the first time as a human being. There was passion in the retarded man’s activity. It was unfortunate, yes. It was pitiful, certainly. But it was

not disgusting.⁴⁰

Eventually, he tells Sixbury, although he originally did not intend to do so, and while she is not happy about it, she does not intervene. She even claims that she understands his motivation seeing that he has no chance to get together with a real girl. After they decide on buying him a prostitute, Sixbury voices quite a terrible prediction: “What if he wants more after this? You know, like a dog that’s tasted the blood of stock.”⁴¹

I would argue, though, that since nothing happened between Patrick and the prostitute, the final impulse for the retarded man was when Sixbury caught him with a sheep for the first time. The scene that she caused was quite dramatic and even Patrick must have understood that he did something despicable, because not only has this drove him out of the farm, his home, but maybe it also created some sort of an equation in his mind that having sex with an ewe is forbidden and unacceptable, while sleeping with someone of the opposite sex is all right. That would, of course, be perfectly acceptable if Patrick were mentally sound enough to recognize that Butch is too young for this kind of activity, or if he were able not to ignore the lack of her consent.

It would be too harsh to claim that Sixbury is partially to blame for Butch’s rape, but it is possible that she felt guilty about it, which contributed to her decision to lie about her son’s murder.

War

Although the story takes place in the United States, far away from the

40 *Walk Me to the Distance*, 22.

41 *Walk Me to the Distance*, 43.

battles fought in Vietnam, the war still has influence on Larson's life and even the other characters occasionally feel the need to express their opinion about it. Not a single one of these opinions is positive.

Larson himself admits that no one forced him to join the army, it was his own decision, but he also says: "No one *likes* the army. Some people make it a career, sure, but no one likes it."⁴² His strongest confession comes when he is contemplating whether he is still able of feeling emotions and affection towards people. The realization that he loves Sixbury is the only thing that manages to calm him down:

He held on, as if for dear life, to the feeling he'd had while hugging Sixbury that cool evening. He loved her. Perhaps the war had affected him more than he realized. [. . .] He had wondered whether he had *ever* been capable of loving anyone.⁴³

In the end it turns out that Larson is capable of love because of his devotion to Sixbury and Butch, but the excerpt only shows the emptiness with which he returned from the battlefield that left him doubting his ability to love.

Probably the most controversial criticism of the war in the novel comes from the grandfather of a girl Larson met in a bar. He and the young woman left together and they were disturbed by her grandfather, also a war veteran, who lived with her. The old man had a theory that victims should be judged as well as the aggressors, that is, if you even concede the existence of such a thing as "a victim." He further explains: "I told her that I ain't yet in my life met a defenseless person. Except for

⁴² *Walk Me to the Distance*, 23.

⁴³ *Walk Me to the Distance*, 85.

babies.”⁴⁴ He also protested against the troops being sent abroad to fight battles that are not, in his opinion, theirs. When he comments on American soldiers in the Second World War, he says: “We ain’t got no business being over there.”⁴⁵

Another person, who chose to share her view on armed conflicts, was Sarah, when she met Larson for the first time. As someone who worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (an existing organization)⁴⁶ she felt superior in her effort to help the Native Americans and presumed that the only thing that can lead someone to join the army is either the need to prove to himself and the other men his own manliness, or the desire to kill.

The last and probably most moderate are then Larson’s sister Jill and her husband with their organization called AVF (Action for Vets). From what Jill mentioned to her brother, they organize meetings and talks for the war veterans but they have little success. The reason for that is not explicitly mentioned, but considering how unsupportive Jill was at the beginning and how quickly – too quickly for it to be genuine – she went from one extreme to another in her attitude, it is hard to imagine her as someone in whom the retired soldiers might want to confide.

Conclusion

Walk Me to the Distance follows some of the motifs and themes that have already been raised in *Suder* – it examines human, but especially male sexuality and its problematic points or shadow areas, the protagonist’s relationships with women (that are more often unsuccessful than not), and it focuses on the importance of families. Butch is given to

44 *Walk Me to the Distance*, 159.

45 *Walk Me to the Distance*, 159.

46 *Walk Me to the Distance*, 24.

Larson by an unknown woman and he struggles for a long time to accept such a responsibility, but eventually their bond is, in my opinion, stronger and healthier than the very casual friendship of Suder and Jincy.

The topic of racism is nearly omitted. Nearly, because there is one time when Butch is called “a gook” by the angry receptionist, but otherwise the race of characters is not even mentioned and the fact that Butch is Vietnamese never played a role in deciding whether Sixbury and Larson would keep her or not.

Insanity, too, is not present in the sense that it was in *Suder*. Even though Patrick suffers from some kind of mental disability and it is not precisely stated what his diagnosis is (it is likely that Sixbury may not be sure about it herself), he had displayed the symptoms of a mental disorder since an early age. The reader may, as I did, question the extent of his ability to analyze what is happening around him, because what we know about him, we know from either Sixbury or Larson, but his illness is a given fact and not something to be hesitant about, as it was in *Suder*.

Also, unlike in *Suder*, it is explicitly stated that Larson comes from the South. Both he and his sister, however, found their “true” homes somewhere else – Jill in Illinois, Larson in Wyoming.

Both novels share an ambiguous ending which is typical for almost all Everett’s books, though. There are several possible courses of action indicated, but a definite conclusion is never given.

5. *Cutting Lisa* (1986)

The novel begins with a prologue telling a story of John Livesey, an older doctor working half-time at a hospital in Staunton, Virginia. One day he is called to an unusual case – a woman gave birth via Cesarean section and it was her husband who cut the baby out, even though he had no previous medical experience or pain killers at hand, simply because he wanted to be the one who delivers the baby. The doctor is angry with the father for taking such a risk and for letting the mother suffer, but as a professional he knows that the man did a good job and he admires him for it.

In the first chapter, the doctor appears again when he travels across the United States to meet his son Elgin, daughter-in-law Lisa and his granddaughter Katy, whom he had not seen for several years because they now live in Eugene, Oregon. They plan to go on a holiday together to Yachats (also in Oregon) and before they leave, Lisa tells Livesey that she is expecting their second child.

Upon their arrival, Livesey quickly makes new friends in the town, owners of the cottage that they have rented, Mr. Turner and his wife Lorraine who is in a wheelchair, but his relationship with Lisa seems to deteriorate. They have different opinions about a proper diet, smoking and also how to bring up Katy. He, therefore, spends more time with the Turners with whom he feels at ease.

Livesey and Turner decide to go shooting one day and on their trip they manage to save a young woman, who stopped to change a tire, from attackers. Livesey finds the girl, Ruth, very attractive, so when their paths cross again in a restaurant later that day, he uses that opportunity to talk to her and get to know her better. Soon, he visits her at work with Katy and they have lunch the next day. Eventually, their dates lead to confessing the mutual attraction and the make love for the first time.

The doctor cannot be completely happy with the new development of the situation, though, because something suspicious is going on at home. Livesey seems to be the only one who is excited about the new baby and no one wants to tell him why that is. He figures out a possible reason soon enough, though, when Elgin and his best friend Greg have an accident while climbing a rock in the sea. The whole family watches as it is the men's annual ritual to try to get to the top, but Greg falters and, as Elgin reaches for him to catch him, they both fall. Greg breaks his arm, but Elgin's injuries are far worse and he has to spend several weeks in the hospital. Livesey, when he is thinking back about the incident, realizes that when the men hit the water, Lisa called Greg's name, not Elgin's, and starts to suspect them of having an affair. Later, he finds out by chance that his son had a vasectomy last year and therefore it is highly improbable that he would be the father of the child Lisa carries.

Ruth wants to be supportive and she invites Livesey to have lunch with her and her mother, telling him that she might be in love with him and, therefore, she wants her mother to get to know him. The meeting turns out better than Livesey expected, but he still got other things in mind that bother him – Lorraine, whom he came to respect greatly, does not seem to be in good health. He also finally talks with Elgin about Lisa's romance with Greg and he learns that according to all three of them, the affair is over and the husband and wife are trying to start over again. Livesey doubts that Lisa and Greg are no longer seeing each other and he confronts them one by one. Lisa admits that she loves both her husband and Greg and it is obvious that she is even considering the possibility to leave the family. Livesey suggests that it is still not late for her to have an abortion.

He then goes to visit Ruth, but he walks in on her sleeping with

another man. The very same day he also finds out that it is not Lorraine who is sick, but actually her husband who has just been diagnosed with cancer. He steals Lorraine's sleeping pills and the novel ends with an ambiguous scene where Livesey has already dosed Lisa with the stolen medicine and is most likely preparing to do the abortion himself.

Family and Family Values

In the beginning of the novel, doctor Livesey happens to be in a similar situation as Suder and Larson – he realizes that he gradually became alienated from the rest of his family. Nevertheless, unlike Craig Suder he does not decide to ignore the problem and run away, and unlike David Larson he does not want to find himself another substitute family members of choice. The doctor's situation is described as follows: "He did not really know his granddaughter at all, and he was haunted by the thought that he and his son had never truly known each other."⁴⁷

The family holiday in a rented house provides an opportunity for Livesey to get to know his relatives better and to attempt to improve their relationship. Before he learns the truth about her pregnancy and the secret affair with Elgin's friend, he even admits to liking Lisa, even though they, too, have never been particularly close: "They liked each other well enough and got along, but since the first time they had met there had been a wall between them, or at least a screen."⁴⁸

The gap between Livesey and Lisa only deepens when he learns about their new eating habits. Everyone in the family is now a vegetarian, no alcohol is allowed and his smoking is constantly criticized. Livesey refuses to submit to these conditions and as a protest he buys himself meat, bacon and several bottles of alcohol. Lisa is far

47 Percival Everett, *Cutting Lisa* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 2000), 11.

48 *Cutting Lisa*, 15.

from thrilled, but unexpectedly, it brings him closer to Elgin and Katy, because his son realizes that Lisa is being too strict about the rules and maybe takes them to an extreme. Katy misses the non-vegetarian meals, so she, too, is sympathetic to his cause.

The time they spend together eventually brings some results. Livesey and his son start feeling much more relaxed in the presence of the other and they often tease each other – Livesey by telling Katy embarrassing stories about her father as a child, Elgin by joking about his relationship with Ruth, a girl forty years Livesey’s junior. Even though Livesey does not feel comfortable with sharing the details of his new sexual adventure, they manage to talk about the concept in general quite well. Elgin is then even more amused when he hears about his father’s upcoming lunch date with Ruth and her mother, finding the prospect of Ruth’s mother being younger than Livesey both ironic and hilarious.

The importance of a family is later confirmed out loud when Livesey discusses Lisa’s affair with Greg. He is not only angry with his daughter-in-law, but also with Greg: “This man is hurting my son, my grandchild. He’s threatening my family.”⁴⁹ Turner offers him support and also the possibility of shooting the invader, using the argument that “[t]he family is sacred,”⁵⁰ a sentence that could easily become a motto of the whole novel.

Even though the family as a unit is celebrated and wished to be protected, it is without any doubt Katy for whom Livesey cares most among his relatives. The girl is very sweet and bright and no matter how scared Livesey was at the beginning, complaining that he does not know his own granddaughter, the two get on very well. They often go on trips

49 *Cutting Lisa*, 98.

50 *Cutting Lisa*, 98.

together, Livesey tells her stories and they spend quite a lot of time, happy in each other's company. Because she knows that her parents are having some kind of trouble in their marriage, she forms an even stronger attachment to him, seeing her grandfather as a role model for her, and she decides that she would like to be a doctor one day, too.⁵¹

Livesey always knew that he loved his family, even when they each lived at the opposite sides of the country, but only during their holiday he realized, or was reminded of how much they actually mean to him. With that realization, however, he was forced to make a definite decision: he needed to determine how far he is willing to go while protecting his son and granddaughter. When Turner off-handedly suggested shooting Greg, the origin of their problems, the doctor tried to turn it into a joke, because the possibility scared him. However, when he met the man in a bar later, he himself felt tempted; not because he would want to get revenge, but because he still perceived Greg as dangerous. He admitted to Lisa a couple of hours later that he was thinking about it, but eventually decided that he "couldn't do it. Or wouldn't do it."⁵²

Not able to commit a cold-blooded murder, Livesey has still one option left. Because Lisa did not answer his question whether she will eventually leave Elgin or not, it is obvious that it is still an open possibility. He cannot make her stop loving Greg, but he can take the child out of the picture, because the baby is, too, a factor in her decision-making process. As I have written in the synopsis, the ending is intentionally left ambiguous but there are strong indicators that he really is planning to cut the child out of her like Mr. Thompson, the man who both scared and inspired him in the prologue. Apart from the title of the novel itself which points in this particular direction, there are other clues.

51 *Cutting Lisa*, 123.

52 *Cutting Lisa*, 132.

After Livesey stole the sleeping pills from Lorraine's medical cabinet, he visited Elgin in the hospital and gave a speech for his sleeping son in which he said:

We stumble through the years, trying to take care of our own. We do what we have to do. Sacrifices must be made. I'm glad you're not awake to ask me what I'm talking about. I'm a hard man, son. And perhaps I was not the best of fathers. If that's true, I'm sorry. I love you. I loved your mother. I'm not trying to make up for anything. You know that's not my way. Just realize that I love you. I love Katy. And now I love Lisa.⁵³

It is necessary to realize that this scene comes after Livesey found out that his best friend was diagnosed with cancer and did not have much time left, and after he caught Ruth cheating on him. The only thing that remained unchanged in his life was his family – the only thing he had left and he decided to protect it no matter what the consequences for him might be.

When he returns from the hospital, he, Katy and Lisa spend a nice evening together. It is Livesey who administers the drinks – at first hot cocoa after which Lisa starts feeling a little sleepy, but the doctor asks her to make an exception and have a drink with him just for once. Lisa surprisingly agrees, but notes that: “It's been a long time. Tastes bitter.”⁵⁴ After Livesey puts Katy to bed, he finds Lisa dizzy in the living room, trying to stand up. The final sentence – “He switched on the overhead light in the kitchen and cleared the table”⁵⁵ – evokes the

53 *Cutting Lisa*, 144.

54 *Cutting Lisa*, 146.

55 *Cutting Lisa*, 147.

preparation before a surgery with the big, strong light above the doctor and the patient.

Livesey may have changed his mind about going through with the procedure, but even if he only attempted the forced abortion, it would be quite lawfully considered a crime. Above all, it also shows how desperate he must have been to take such a drastic step to do something that he thought would protect his son and granddaughter.

Romantic Relationships and Adultery

Adultery is a frequent theme in Everett's novels, but in *Cutting Lisa* there seem to be more characters that either still are or were cheating at their partner than of those faithful ones. The first to admit an adultery is Oliver Turner. He asks Livesey whether he has ever cheated on his wife while she was still alive and Livesey concedes that there was one occasion when he was seriously considering it. Turner confesses that he has done significantly more than that, but even though he had sex with other women, he does not believe that he was unfaithful to his wheelchair-bound wife Lorraine. During their conversation it is possible to spot a similarity between Lorraine and Sixbury, because when Livesey inquires whether Turner's wife knows about his affairs, Turner answers: "She's a bright woman. She probably knows. We've never talked about it."⁵⁶

While Turner is seeking company of other women purely for sexual gratification, the situation between Lisa and her lover Greg is different, because there are feelings involved. What might have been Lisa's motivation or what she had been missing in her marriage that she

⁵⁶ *Cutting Lisa*, 38.

found herself a lover is not revealed in the novel. But even if their affair had started as a purely sexual relationship, it changed in the course of time, as by the end of the book, Lisa is still in love with Greg, even though she claims that they broke up.

Lisa's extramarital activities have a significant impact on the development of the story and therefore they are revealed and later confirmed little by little. The reader at first suspects that something is not right between her and Elgin, and then is led to the right conclusion by Livesey. I would argue, though, that Ruth's act of adultery has an equally large influence on Livesey's behavior and, especially, on his final decision. In spite of that, it is described only in several sentences. There were no signs given ahead that Ruth might be seeing other men, so when Livesey caught her red-handed with a lover, it came out as a surprise both for him and for everyone else. Livesey was particularly hurt by this discovery, because it came at the time when he has already allowed himself to hope that some sort of more permanent understanding is possible between them.

At the beginning he was, of course, quite skeptical. He was aware that the age difference between him and Ruth is about forty years and that their holiday romance will probably not last long. Both his friends and Elgin, however, supported his decision to give Ruth a chance and they seemed to like her enough, which was a great encouragement for Livesey.

After their first night together, he woke up next to someone after a long time and he still expected to see his wife lying on the other side of bed.⁵⁷ He thought of the late Mrs. Livesey even in other instances and then lied to Ruth that he does not miss his wife when he is there with

⁵⁷ *Cutting Lisa*, 60.

her.

The change in his behavior and attitude comes slowly, but eventually he does not even want to exclude the possibility of Ruth coming back to Virginia with him. They do not talk about it, but since she wants him, an important man in her life, to meet her mother, and she tells him she might be in love with him, it is not a completely unreasonable vision. Livesey's plans are, of course, destroyed at the moment when he sees her with another man, but the question whether it was a "one-night stand" for Ruth, or whether she had a parallel relationship with someone else remains unanswered. Nevertheless, the difference would hardly matter to Livesey; the result would still be the same and would still contribute to his determination to "save" his family.

Conclusion

Again, just like it was in *Walk Me to the Distance*, the main protagonist is a Southerner who is searching for happiness outside the South. In Larson case, the relocation was permanent and the search successful, because he found a true friend in Sixbury and he had adopted a child. With Livesey, the situation is more complicated. He only leaves the South to go on a holiday and he never considers staying in Oregon. He would consider asking Ruth to return with him to Virginia, but since their relationship ends before he may propose such a thing, it only remains one of the possibilities that he entertained for some time.

On the other hand, the recurrent theme of a man taking care of a young female child finally escalates in *Cutting Lisa*. Unlike Suder or Larson, Livesey willingly takes responsibility for a child and treats her

flawlessly, but it is not a full time commitment and the girl is actually biologically related to him. Yet, this relationship gives the impression of being the most harmonic of the three, possibly because the decision to become close and to dedicate his time to raise the girl came from Livesey's free will and was not pushed by anyone else. Also, Katy is the only one from the children's trio who was never abused, never lived in poverty and she still has her own parents who love her very much. Handling her is not as demanding and complicated as it was with the other girls.

The theme of the importance of a family, too, becomes more prominent. Suder temporarily separates himself from his wife and son, but decides to allow Jincy to stay with him. Sixbury and Larson both remain silent about Patrick's murder so that the newly created family does not fall apart. While they are both covering up a crime neither of them committed, Livesey's solution of the situation is far more radical and despicable, because he is leaving his daughter-in-law no choice in the matter and playing God by deciding about the life or death of her unborn child.

Considering that no mentally sound person would probably decide to deal with the family situation in the way that Livesey did, it can be perceived as a manifestation of insanity or some kind of a mental illness. The slight problem that comes with that theory is that there are no hints, apart from Livesey's strange hobby of painting fruit only, nothing else, leading towards the conclusion that he would suffer from any form of mental illness. If the ending was a result of some long-term illness, it would mean that it was not diagnosed and went unnoticed by people around him. As he was a medical doctor who used to work in a hospital, I find it rather unlikely. It seems to me that even though his actions were

planned and carefully prepared, they were initiated by his deep rational conviction based on his twisted logic, telling him that he has used up all other possible solutions.

The last similarity with the preceding novels is a peculiar one. Just like in *Suder*, Charlie Parker is mentioned in *Cutting Lisa* as one of Livesey's favorite musicians and, on one occasion, Livesey notes that he wishes he "knew more about birds."⁵⁸

58 *Cutting Lisa*, 122.

6. *For Her Dark Skin* (1990)

For Her Dark Skin differs from the first three Everett's novels both in its structure and setting; it draws on ancient Greek mythology. The story is told from many points of view, each one indicated on the top of the page by the name of the person through whose eyes the events are currently narrated. The graphic realization, therefore, resembles a play much more than a traditional novel. The length of the segments differ – sometimes a speaker gets a page or two, sometimes their part consists of a single sentence only.

The story itself revolves around Jason, the legendary Greek leader of the Argonauts, and Medea, the princess sorceresses. Jason falls in love with dark-skinned Medea at first sight and the feeling is partly reciprocated – Medea believes that a spell has been cast on her to make her fall in love with Jason, even though she is otherwise disgusted by him. After their first night together, Jason decides to marry Medea and her father eventually agrees on one condition. He gives Jason a task: he wants him to plow a field with his fire-breathing bulls, then plant seeds there and fight the warriors that will grow out of them. If he does not succeed, he and his men will be killed, therefore Medea decides to use her magical abilities to help him, even though it goes against the wishes of her father. Her assistance is recognized eventually and Medea is allowed to leave with Jason on the condition that she will never return.

Medea, of course, realizes that it would be profitable for her if her future husband performed a heroic act, and she helps him retrieve the Golden Fleece. This causes their ship to be followed by an enemy army lead by Medea's brother. Medea again proposes a plan how to get rid of the danger, but it involves killing her beloved brother and she is deeply saddened by the necessity of such a move. Nevertheless, once she has

decided that it has to be done, it has to be done and when they get Medea's brother separated from his warriors by a trick, Jason kills him in a sword fight.

As a punishment from Zeus, they wander the sea for some time, unable to get home, but eventually Medea's aunt Circe helps them without knowing who they are at first. Circe learns the truth about the identity of their victim only after the cleansing ritual is performed (if she knew that Medea and Jason killed Medea's brother, she would not have assisted them) and she angrily sends them away. The group leaves scolded, but finally since the ritual has broken the curse casted by Zeus, they are now able to find their way back to Greece.

Once they arrive to Athens, Jason and Medea get married and it is obvious that they are already expecting their first child. At the celebration afterwards, Jason announces that they will move to Corinth and Medea makes her first friend, a young Corinthian woman called Tamar,⁵⁹ who is visiting her relatives in Athens. They later become neighbors and Medea finds out that Tamar has recently married Polydeuces, Jason's first in command.

Even though the love spell is still working, Medea is not happy with her husband whom she otherwise despises (she does not find Jason attractive neither physically or mentally). She decides that it will be the best for her children not to even be born (by that time she is fairly certain that she is expecting twins) and she makes herself a potion to abort the pregnancy, but the potion fails. Meanwhile, Jason finds himself enchanted by a young Corinthian princess with whom he quickly starts a love affair. Medea gives birth to her boys, but Jason tells her that they were not meant to be together and that he is leaving her. The king

⁵⁹ According to *For Her Dark Skin*, Tamar is a cousin of the great Greek tragedian Euripides. She mentions him several times and one chapter of the novel consists entirely of Tamar's letter to him. It reveals that they are quite close as she informs him about various events from both her life and the life of her neighbors, Jason and Medea.

himself then comes to tell her that she is exiled, never allowed to come back. Medea pretends to resign on her fate and asks Jason to give the king's daughter a few precious gifts from her as a gesture of good will. The princess then tries the dress and the golden crown she received as gifts, and burns in magical flames, together with her father who attempts to save her.

When Jason returns home to confront Medea about her spells, he finds out that she killed their children to protect them from him, and he collapses.

Race

Medea in *For Her Dark Skin* is defined not only by her non-Greek origin, but also by the color of her skin. Back home she stands out for several reasons – she is a daughter of the king, a powerful witch and, last but not least, she is physically very attractive. None of these things matter very much once she enters Athens. But even before that, there are several interesting points made by other characters. When Jason speaks about black people for the first time, his remarks sound more like notes from an old American slave trader:

“A dark man from that land might not pull an oar at all, but stare at you blankly as if there were something to be understood. You could flog the poor bastard senseless and still he would leave you the worse, wondering what it was you had failed to see.”⁶⁰

He is similarly biased towards women: “Medea was certainly exotic and

60 Percival Everett, *For Her Dark Skin* (Seattle: Owl Creek Press, 1990), 6.

erotic and extraordinarily beautiful, but she was wild; perhaps a function of her complexion.”⁶¹

Jason does not understand people coming from a different culture and he has got his set of preconceptions, but that only fits his rather negative portrayal in the novel. It also does not apply to all other character as a rule given by the cultural and time settings, because, for example, Polydeuces, who is Jason’s inferior in rank but superior in intellect, can see through the prejudices and he quite quickly comes to respect Medea for her abilities.

Even though Jason was puzzled by most of the black people that he had met before, he fell in love with Medea because she was different from other women he knew, and because he felt a strong physical attraction towards her. Her otherness did not matter – when she helped him to steal the Golden Fleece, Jason knew his position in Greece would be strong enough even with a black wife. In addition to that, Medea had a say in the course of things only until the group returned to Athens. The attitude towards “blackness” can be divided in a similar way.

While the whole group still wandered the sea, Medea had an advantage over the Argonauts because of her magical skills and her knowledge of the local people and their surroundings. Having dark skin was considered as something desirable in that part of the world. When Medea’s brother met her and Jason before their final confrontation (in which he got killed), he said to him: “You have lightened my sister’s soul, taken away its color and depth.”⁶² And even though it may seem at the first glance that the word “color” in that sentence is not referring to race, Medea explains it in the next paragraph. She notes that her

61 *For Her Dark Skin*, 69.

62 *For Her Dark Skin*, 47.

brother, too, has his own opinion about how everything in the world works and if there is something that does not fit it, he alters it to start corresponding to his ideas. Therefore she notes, “For him, it was a racial thing,”⁶³ and implies that the “color” in her brother’s speech really means actual color of skin.

Medea’s aunt, Circe the witch, reacts similarly. Even though she helps the couple and the Argonauts to lift the curse that has been troubling them, she is very angry with her niece. She scolds her: “I will not sit here with you, with the likes of you, with this man you have chosen over your father and country, your blood and color.”⁶⁴

The situation reverses in Athens and Corinth. As a black woman, Medea stands out again, but not in a desirable way (or because she would wish it so) and as soon as her pregnancy starts showing, various characters wonder about the color of the unborn children. Jason has both fair skin and hair and everyone except Medea hope that the heirs born from his wife will share this characteristic. A black wife of a Greek hero seemed, as I stated before, somewhat acceptable, but his children should be, by the general public opinion, as pale as he is. In the end, the twins take after his father and he proudly takes the boys to show them to the people of Corinth, even though Medea remains hidden in their house.

Relationships and Adultery

The topic of romantic relationships is again discussed in length in the novel. Four couples are presented, each illustrating a different issue or problem.

63 *For Her Dark Skin*, 47.

64 *For Her Dark Skin*, 55.

Medea and Jason got together as a result of a love spell cast by Cupid. It influenced Medea's feelings, but not her mental capacity, which was the worst kind of punishment for a woman like her. Medea realizes that Jason is weak and not particularly intelligent from the very beginning, yet, she knows she has to leave everything behind and follow him. As they get to know each other better, Medea does not hide her disdain for him and Jason realizes that even though she is bound by the magic to love him, she is still very dangerous. This becomes especially apparent after the murder of her brother, because the fact that Medea arranged their meeting and gave Jason advices without which he would not succeed makes him both grateful, but also terrified. "What fate awaited *me* with a change of wind?"⁶⁵ he asks himself.

One would expect Jason to be more cautious around a person with Medea's powers and skills, but he, instead of respecting his wife and treating her the way she deserves, considers her to be something between an object for fulfilling his desires and another servant or subordinate of his. It starts with not telling her that they are going to move to Corinth; Medea learns about this important change in her life from the gossips of others. It culminates when he starts treating her, a princess, like a king would treat his subject. After a row between the two, Medea decides to walk out of the room, not wanting to talk to Jason any more. He stops her by saying: "I have not dismissed you."⁶⁶ The humiliation and helplessness she feels in that moment only adds up to the already pent up hatred towards Jason.

Understandably, all people who know both Medea and Jason well side with her. When Jason goes to visit his newborn babies for the first time, he gets aroused by seeing Medea spread out on the bed and he

65 *For Her Dark Skin*, 39.

66 *For Her Dark Skin*, 102.

rapes her, ignoring her protests that she is still sore after the process of delivering the babies. His only excuse or false pretense for doing so is that when he asks her whether she loves him, she is compelled by the spell to say yes, even though the mere thought of sleeping with Jason makes her sick. She is saved by her male nurse, who, too, looks up to her and does not want to see her suffering. The man hits Jason with a vase and knocks him out.

After these two episodes, Medea then refers to her husband as a “Dog.” or even uses the pronoun “it” when speaking about him.⁶⁷ Her final revenge is cruel, but as Jason stated before, he probably should have expected that if she ever turns her back towards him, the consequences will be serious. Medea does not physically hurt him (the question is whether she even could, given the nature of the curse that afflicted her), but she takes everything he cared about away from him – his new lover and a future wife, his most important ally, the Corinthian king, and his own children whom Jason genuinely liked. She inquires afterwards why he is crying, – “You are alive. You have not been burned. You have not been cut. Oh, I see—your *smile* is gone. Grieve for your *smile*”⁶⁸ – indicating that depriving him of happiness is a punishment worse than death. Jason, still crying, then accuses her of being cruel to which Medea objects that she was motivated, putting the blame on Jason.

Apart from the humiliation that Medea had to suffer through in her own home, she was also publicly disgraced by Jason’s affair with princess Creusa. Jason noticed her in Athens shortly after his wedding and she was described as a very young, perky, Nabokov’s *Lolita* type of a girl⁶⁹ – rather a child than a woman. He took liking in her, but his

67 Both: *For Her Dark Skin*, 136.

68 *For Her Dark Skin*, 152.

69 The similarity can be seen both in the characters of *Lolita* and *Creusa*, and in the way she and

interest did not go further than that at first. They started to meet more often in Corinth, however, and it turned out that the princess was enthralled by Jason as well.

Creusa represented everything that Jason envisioned for himself. She had fair skin, blond hair, she was of noble origin (from a recognized, respected kingdom, not a barbarian like Medea) and still a virgin. If Jason married her, his social status would improve even more and he knew that people would accept it, because his first wife was “only” a black woman.

Medea, of course, was not hurt by the fact that Jason has a lover; she did not care about that. It was her pride that was wounded by the affair, not her feelings, because she did not appreciate being bested by “a breastless twit,”⁷⁰ as she called Creusa, and more than that, she probably could not imagine her boys growing up with their father’s new wife, not with her.

When the Corinthian king came to visit Medea and told her that she needs to leave the city, he made it clear that she can take her children with her. It was an understandable move – he expected Creusa to have offspring of her own later and these would be the heirs to the crown, not Jason’s boys birthed by Medea. Jason, however, claimed the opposite and he wanted the custody of the children. It is impossible to estimate what would have happened if they all lived in the end, because Creusa liked to be seen with the boys in public and, herself an unpredictable child, she might have decided to take either of the men’s side. Medea

Jason are basically exploiting each other. Jason lusts after Creusa and wants to marry her because she can give him heirs that will not be disrespected or recognized by the Corinthian society. Creusa, on the other hand, sees this as a opportunity to marry a famous hero. The most striking difference between *For Her Dark Skin* and *Lolita (1955)*, however, is that no one is bothered by Creusa’s age in the respective book and her and Jason’s relationship is not considered as something improper or wrong. Quite on the contrary, Creusa has the full support of his father, the king.

70 *For Her Dark Skin*, 122.

must have been aware of all these possibilities and consider them carefully before she made her final decision.

The third significant relationship apart from Jason and Medea or Jason and Creusa, gradually developed between Medea and Polydeuces. Unlike Jason, Polydeuces was a rational, self-possessed man who harbored real feelings for Medea and supported her the whole time as her friend. He, too, was attracted to her from the beginning:

Also, if she had offered me her body there on deck, I would have taken her. The woman exuded passion as we did sweat. I was jealous of the image I held in my mind of her black body squeezing and kneading Jason's pale and cowardly form.⁷¹

This excerpt shows not only his admiration of Medea and the beginning of some kind of attachment towards her, but also how poorly Polydeuces thinks of his leader. He follows him, because that is the way of a soldier, but he is aware of the fact that Jason is certainly not the best and the most capable man amongst them.

Medea quickly sees through the characters of the whole crew of the ship and she, too, identifies Polydeuces as the one that has the biggest potential. She comes to trust him, and does not understand why he does not mind being ordered around by Jason.

During the course of time, Polydeuces' feelings for Medea deepen and he suffers through the wedding, partly because he can see that Medea is not happy, and partly probably because he realizes that he will never have her for himself. He admits: "Just standing with her I

⁷¹ *For Her Dark Skin*, 30.

think I gained some years, some wisdom, feeling privileged to glimpse something important, if not recognizable.”⁷²

Even though Polydeuces knows that Medea and Jason are moving to Corinth, he is shaken when they meet again in the new city. He later admits that he followed them, especially Medea, because he felt he “owed her something.”⁷³

The most likely reason for such a statement is that, unlike Jason, Polydeuces was able to recognize Medea’s considerable contribution to their quest and saw her not only as a black woman, or a witch, but as a valuable ally and a friend. He was the only one who offered to help her in the time of her crisis, when she had to decide whether she will leave the city as the king ordered. He was also the only one to whom she said goodbye.

Polydeuces’ relationship with Medea was not sexual in a way that they would consummate their union, but due to the mutual attraction and strong feelings I think that this fact does not make their “affair” less significant.

This, of course, did not please Polydeuces’ wife at all. She and Medea were good friends, therefore she was aware of Medea’s situation and her miserable life with Jason, but when she was told of the embrace between the two, she automatically assumed that they were lovers and became furious. Polydeuces swore it not to be true and, eventually, he and his wife remained the only couple that even has the potential to reach happiness together, because they are both open-minded, tolerant and, most of all, they both think the other is an exceptional person.

72 *For Her Dark Skin*, 62.

73 *For Her Dark Skin*, 90.

The Differences Between Euripides' and Everett's Medea

Apart from Euripides' *Medea* being written as a play to be performed and Everett's *For Her Dark Skin* as a novel to be read, there are many other differences between the two stories. Euripides does not concentrate on the details of Medea's journey with the Argonauts; the play starts with Medea already in Corinth, knowing that Jason is about to marry the young princess. There are pieces of information about their past, given retrospectively and not in a great detail. Everett chose the opposite approach – he uses the chronological order of events, switches the points of view and adds the characters' personal opinions or comments on the things that are happening either to them or around them.

Also, the characters themselves are portrayed quite differently. Euripides' Jason is much more likable and smarter than Everett's. He is also willing to help his wife, knowing that Medea's new situation is, of course, the result of his own doing. Yet, he shares a certain view of the world with his modern counterpart – they both perceive their “white” culture as the best option that there is. For example, Medea is told that her help to the Argonauts was rewarded more than enough just because she got the opportunity to move from her own Barbarian country and she can now live in Greece. Jason generally thinks of Medea's place of origin and its culture very lowly and considers Greece to be superior in every aspect. This may remind readers of the attitude of many white Americans towards the African Americans (and their culture) in the past and may also be the reason why Everett decided to portray Medea as a black woman. Then, she is not only different because of her upbringing and beliefs, but she stands out in the crowd also because of the color of her skin. When it comes to Medea's character, both Euripides' and Everett's Medeas are proud, strong and vengeful women. Everett

provides the reader with the insight into her mind, but mostly it seems like an elaboration, or the author's interpretation of the original. The only aspect that he exaggerates is Medea's simultaneous love and hatred towards Jason, which is caused by the fact that she did not fall in love with him on her own, but because of Cupid's spell.

There are some other differences in plot: while Euripides' Medea asks an old friend for a refuge before she avenges Jason's infidelity and later she knows that she has a place to go, the future of Everett's Medea is unsure, because the part in which the friend appears is missing in the novel. However, Medea has an ally in Polydeuces, who is not mentioned in Euripides' play.

Medea's own children whom she kills in the end are just newborn babies in *For Her Dark Skin*, but in Euripides' play they are older and can already walk and talk. Everett changed not only the boys' age, but also the gender of the nurse, who is male in his novel, but female in the play.

Conclusion

In its structure, *For Her Dark Skin* may be seen as the predecessor of novels like *Erasure* (2001), or *A History of the African-American People (Proposed)* by Strom Thurmond, as Told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid (2004). It does not come in a form of a diary (as *Erasure*) or correspondence and interviews (as *A History*), but its innovative format and the switching of the points of view is much closer to these later novels of Everett's than his other early works. Also, for the first time he uses allusion, when Euripides, the author of a play called *Medea*, is mentioned as Tamar's cousin.

Regarding the themes, however, no matter what the setting is, or where the story takes place, Everett focuses on similar themes again. He

introduces dysfunctional families – not only Jason, Medea and their children, but also Medea, her father and brother – and he writes about complicated relationships, sexual violence, adultery and its consequences.

There is another open ending, because, as the novel does not follow the story of Jason and Medea further, the reader may speculate what fate awaits Medea now – whether it will follow the same course as in Euripides' play, or whether she is going to choose a different path, a different option. Considering that she can hardly stay in Corinth because of the murder of the king and the princess and she also cannot go back home, since her father exiled her (even before she caused the death of her brother), there are not many possibilities for her. Everett does not send her help in the form of a friend willing to provide a shelter for her, and it is up to readers to decide what they think is going to happen with her.

7. *Zulus* (1990)

Zulus follows the dystopian story of Alice Achitophel, an obese office worker who is employed in the Division of Religious Adjustments. The book is divided into chapters, each chapter named after a single letter of the alphabet, going from A to Z. With each letter, there are words or names assigned to it, setting out the tone for the whole segment.

In the beginning, Alice is asked by a strange man whether he can watch snow from her front porch and she reluctantly allows it. After a while, she invites the man inside for a cup of tea, but the stranger uses the situation, rapes her and runs away. Alice knows that she has just conceived a baby and from her musings it is apparent that this could be a problem, as all women were officially asked to undergo the process of sterilization. When Alice got the letter years ago, she ignored it and no one came for her, but she may now be the only fertile woman alive.

When she goes to work the following day, she is asked by her boss, Mr. Theodore Theodore, to have dinner with him. Alice is suspicious of this, but also flattered, because she has been infatuated with the man for quite some time. More information is also revealed about the current world situation – the food is given to people in ratios, cheese and crackers only. Also, Alice claims that she is “a heifer,” which means that she believes that God works in cheese warehouses.⁷⁴ The whole society seems to be “cheese-oriented” and fruit can be obtained only through black market. It is also mentioned that this organization of the society is a product of the war that took place some time ago and that Alice’s father was an idealistic dreamer who took his own life when the war ended.

At home, Alice gets upset because her neighbor’s antenna is again interfering with her own reception, so she grabs her father’s tools and

⁷⁴ Percival Everett, *Zulus* (Sag Harbor: Permanent Press, 1990), 24.

tries to remove the device. The neighbor then calls the police and Alice fears that if they arrest her, her pregnancy will be discovered and aborted. Therefore, she flees to Theodore's house, hoping that her boss would help her. She confesses everything to him and he admits that he belongs to the group of rebels who fight against the current establishment. He lets Alice stay in his house and comes up with a plan how to get her out of the city. Alice's feelings for him deepen even further during their time together, but when the trash collection truck, in which they plan to move her, arrives, Theodore introduces Alice to his girlfriend Lucinda. Together with their leader, a man called Kevin Peters, they escape the city and then continue on foot to Peters' cottage located in the woods, in an area that is not so heavily guarded. There, Alice is again reminded of the fact that "being able to become pregnant" is something absolutely unique and she, for the first time, starts worrying that she may be used as a breeding machine in the future and that even the rebels' camp to which they are heading does not necessarily have to be a safe haven.

When they arrive to the camp, Kevin Peters leaves them, as he likes to live separately and does not want to belong to the rebels' community. Lucinda, who grew up there, introduces Alice and Theodore, and they announce to the "Body" (the local rebel government) that Alice is expecting a baby. That is later confirmed during a medical exam, and so is Alice's suspicion that she is now a well-treated prisoner of the rebels. She keeps thinking about Kevin Peters and understands now why he prefers living by himself in the forest.

Since she got pregnant, Alice noticed some changes going on in her body. In the camp, she starts quickly gaining even more weight and eventually she dreams about making a journey inside of her, where, between her organs, she finds her new, skinny self. Her old body then

ruptures open and this new Alice emerges,⁷⁵ bloody and naked. This occurrence causes such chaos that Alice manages to escape and is later found by Peters, who brings her back to his cottage. He does not believe her story at first, but after he receives information from the rebels, he comes around and the two start a romantic relationship.

Alice decides that now, when she is no longer fat, she can do all the things she wanted, such as fighting against the regime. She and Peters run away from their pursuers, even though Alice keeps seeing them in her visionary dreams. They finally reach the city again and decide to stay at Peters' friend, Geraldine Rigg. The women like each other well enough, but the idyll is soon interrupted because of an intruder, a possible spy, who attacks Alice in the house. His identity or affiliation is not confirmed, but due to the incident, Geraldine learns the truth about Alice's past. She thinks her insane, especially when she admits to her ability to see what is going on in the rebels' camp, because the head belonging to her old body is still there, seeing and listening to everything that is going on in that room.

Alice becomes pregnant again, Peters being the father, and she starts working in a local hospital. Her boss and Geraldine are friends, so they allow Alice to help them with stealing pills from the dying patients as a part of the resistance plot. Alice gets something stolen from her, too, though – her baby daughter, who is taken from her by Theodore and Lucinda in one of her dreams/visions. In the end, knowing that there is no hope for the humanity and to prevent their daughter to be used as a breeding mare, Alice and Peters decide to release a special kind of gas that they found, a remnant chemical weapon from the war that was never

75 This scene suggests that the reason behind the choice of the protagonist's name was most likely not only that it starts with the letter "A", and that it is a fairly common first name for females. It can be seen as a tribute or a reaction to Edward Albee who wrote about a big Alice and a small Alice in his play *Tiny Alice* already in the year 1964, and at the same time to Lewis Carroll and his *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

used before, because it is targeted to humans only and does not dissipate, so it will eventually kill all people on the planet.

War

The information about the recent history and current situation of the world of Alice Achitophel is not given in a continuous, consistent line, but only in sentences or paragraphs scattered throughout the whole text. It is then up to readers to gather these bits together and create a more detailed picture of the society and the events that have transpired in the past.

It is mentioned explicitly that the war was of a chemical and nuclear character that “left the planet a surface of pockets alternating from dead, to densely alive to horribly mutated.”⁷⁶ The animals were not affected as much when it came to mutations, but most of them died either because of the bombings, or because of the subsequent changes in the ecosystems. The first animal that Alice sees in the forest is symptomatically a vulture.

Also, the color of the sky changed permanently to something between blue and green and when the group walks through a muddy trench, Alice is upset because of the unnaturally blood-red color of its walls, which I think indicates that the soil is still contaminated.

The new weapons of massive destruction, introduced in the war, left the feeling of fear and shock in survivors. Many of them witnessed the deaths of their own family members and it is not explained why most people were affected (i.e. killed), while others were not. Lucinda describes the effect of one of the weapons while telling her friends how her mother died: “She didn’t scream or grimace, convulse or catch fire,

⁷⁶ *Zulus*, 55.

she just crumpled to her knees and died, her eyes open, her mouth open, the skin peeling from her lips and she was dead.”⁷⁷

Kevin Peters later tells Alice a similar story, as he witnessed the massacre of his family: “There was no sound, no flash, just the bloating and peeling of flesh, the melting of eyes.”⁷⁸

Both Lucinda and Peters experienced this trauma as young children and it understandably scarred them for the rest of their lives, not only because they were present during such terrible incidents, but also because of the survivor’s guilt. Especially Peters was not shy with his opinion, stating that the worst thing about it was that he could not join his loved ones. He tried to commit suicide right after the attack, but he failed.

Another fact that is mentioned about the war is that it came in at least two waves, but who fought against whom is never said. Presumably, the winning side is now in charge of the government, but in comparison with the rebels, they seem to be a less radical fraction of the political spectrum. The government searches for Alice because they suspect her of being a terrorist and they nearly catch the whole group on their way to the rebel camp, but otherwise the whole system seems rather peculiar. The most striking example of that is their lack of the enforcement of their sterilization policy – Alice simply ignored the invitation and no one ever discovered that she disobeyed the order. The same applies to her initial obesity. There were camps for overweight people, since such a “condition” was not considered normal, but everyone automatically expected Alice to have some kind of medical problem that caused her obesity and, therefore, she was not sent there.

The general attitude towards the war is the same as we can find in

⁷⁷ *Zulus*, 95.

⁷⁸ *Zulus*, 121.

Walk Me to the Distance, as all characters that ever get to speak about their opinions about armed conflicts, express a strong hatred and/or disgust with them. Alice's father, a pacifist, is the first to share his views on wars in his daughter's memories of him. He is original in his conception of what actually is the problem, because he says: "It's not the wars. It's how the fuckers fight them."⁷⁹ Alice later concludes that the war was the final impulse for her father to commit suicide, noting that the war "made him mad."⁸⁰

Another interesting observation comes from Peters, when he explains that the situation before the war was actually worse than now, at least from the psychological point of view, because all people were scared of the post-war future and of what it may bring. Now they know and that is better than the uncertainty. He also claims, though: "War is terrible, it's insane, but it's all we've got,"⁸¹ which illustrates how they have all become used to seeing the terror around them.

Alice herself hates war, too, but just like the other characters in *Zulus* she is waging her own war against the government, at first by her passive resistance, and then by choosing to help stealing pills from the hospital, and just like Larson from *Walk Me to the Distance*, no one forces her to do it – it is her own choice to become involved.

In the end, however, both she and Peters are disillusioned and disappointed with humanity – with people who not only caused and fought the war, but also made the post-war society the way it is. The deadly gas that they are about to release was originally meant to be used as a weapon anyway, probably to deliver one last fatal blow to the enemy, but they use it as a precaution, a preventive action to stop people

79 *Zulus*, 40.

80 *Zulus*, 96.

81 *Zulus*, 55.

from going the wrong direction even further.

Racism

Racism is not overtly discussed in the novel, yet the book contains a few interesting remarks about it. The first one is introduced with the words and phrases that Everett associates with letter C: “C is for Chandler, Happy because he is caucasian.”⁸² There he indicates that for some people, their (fair) color of skin can be the source of happiness.

The ethnic origin of the characters, however, is not mentioned – with one exception. Kevin Peters is described as “a large black man”⁸³ and when the group, consisting of him, Alice, Theodore and Lucinda, is bathing naked in a lake, Everett plays with the stereotypical jokes about African Americans, when he lets Alice vividly describe the man’s genitals: “[. . .] but she was frightened by the black man’s penis; it was unlike the pathetic tool which had been used to violate her, but large and heavy, and she imagined her father’s had been similar.”⁸⁴ This may also lead the reader to the conclusion that Alice’s father was black, too, but it is neither confirmed nor denied in the story.

The last instance where the issue of race is discussed is when Alice and Peters talk about religion and Peters admits that when he used to go to church, it bothered him that so many black people saw God as a white man and he had trouble relating to such God. It is mentioned only in several sentences, but it does cover a large racial and religious issue.

82 *Zulus*, 33.

83 *Zulus*, 49.

84 *Zulus*, 65.

Sexuality

Like racism, sexuality is not the main concern of the book, but it still plays an important role. Alice does not have a relationship or a lover when she is fat, but she is desperately in love with Theodore, a small, handsome man with perfect hair. When she gets to know Theodore's girlfriend Lucinda, a skinny, gorgeous woman, and overcomes the feeling of jealousy towards her, she becomes attracted to her, too.

Finally, after she falls in love with Peters the two live together for some time in Geraldine Rigg's house. The relationship with Peters satisfies both her sexual and emotional needs and she finds at least some kind of happiness in the world when they are together. The intriguing part, however, is that she is the first Everett's character who is attracted to such a wide selection of different kinds of people – two completely different men (both physically and in their character) and a woman. Before, there was David Larson in *Walk Me to the Distance* who preferred one specific type of women, while preferences of the protagonists of his other early novels have never been discussed by Everett.

Conclusion

Zulus is Everett's first novel with a female protagonist. One could argue about Medea in *For Her Dark Skin*, but since the story was told from many points of view, Medea's being only one of them, I do not think that it could be strictly seen as a story with a female protagonist.

Yet, the comparison with Medea suggests itself; they are both women who have suffered by a hand of a man and who had unique abilities that singled them out from the mainstream society. In addition

to that, both of them had quite a specific capability to recognize the exact moment when they conceived, of which gender the baby is going to be, and they felt the incessant presence of the baby before it is usual for other women.

Everett also continues with his anti-war stance and shows the terrible consequences and dangers of using chemical and nuclear weapons on large scale.⁸⁵ This time he speaks not only about the impact it has on victims (as it was in *Walk Me to the Distance*), but also in which way it influences nature.

Apart from that, he returns to the importance of music that has played a significant role in his first novel, *Suder*. Peters is a saxophone player and the characters once visit an underground jazz club. This theme is explored in a paper by Sylvie Bauer, “The Music of Words in *Zulus*” published in *Percival Everett: Transatlantic Readings*⁸⁶ where she speaks about the music being the opposite of the regime imposed by the government and very elaborately describes the musicality of the novel.

85 The weapon used in *Zulus* seems to work on a similar principle as the neutron bomb which was designed to cause minimal damage to buildings, infrastructure, etc., compared to the degree of damage its radiation brings to living organisms. See “The Neutron Bomb,” Atomic Archive, accessed August 10, 2013, <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Fusion/Fusion5.shtml>.

86 See Claire Maniez and Anne-Laure Tissut. *Percival Everett: Transatlantic Readings*. Paris: Éditions Le Manuscrit, 2007.

8. Conclusion

All the four themes that were singled out in the beginning as those that are very often present in the works of Southern writers – place, family, community and religion – can be found in Everett’s novels with various frequency. The one that he concentrates on the most is “family,” extended not only to those related by blood or marriage, but also to people whom particular characters made their kin by choice. Everett presents his readers with a great variety of relationships within a family – in *Suder*, the protagonist is scarred for life as a child by his mother’s behavior and ultimately, even the family that he builds in his adult years falls apart, which causes him to leave home and eventually jump off a cliff with Icarus-like wings.

Walk Me to the Distance shows that even though blood is thicker than water, it does not have to mean anything, because the ultimate choice when deciding who is and who is not “family” can be based on feelings and sympathies, rather than actual family relationships. It also points out that no matter how non-traditional a family may be – in *Walk Me to the Distance* there was David, a young man, Sixbury, an old woman, and Butch, a Vietnamese child that was biologically not related to either of them, yet, it was more cherished than Sixbury’s own mentally disabled son.

Cutting Lisa developed the notion of what a person is able to do or sacrifice to protect those who are dear to him. While Sixbury lied about seeing her son alive after he has been dead for a long time, doctor Livesey resorted to a much more drastic action, hoping to protect the happiness of his son and granddaughter by drugging his daughter-in-law and performing an abortion on her.

For Her Dark Skin dealt with dysfunctional families as well –

Medea's relatives rejected her for marrying Jason and Medea helped to kill his own brother and then murdered her two children because her marriage came to an end and she lost her pride and already quite meager social status.

Zulus then captured the horror of seeing one's relatives die in a war, or committing suicide because of the war, and how this traumatized the children who survived. It also touched the concept of motherhood during Alice's pregnancies.

Religion stays more in the background in these novels, but still there is the fanatical Christian doctor McCoy in *Suder*, Greek gods and goddesses in *For Her Dark Skin* and the Division of Religious Adjustments where Alice works in *Zulus*.

Place and community are trickier when it comes to Everett's works. If he mentions where a story is taking place, he does so very casually, does not draw much attention to it. The same can be said about the ethnic origins of his characters – sometimes their ethnicity is specified, as in the case of *Suder*, Butch, Medea or Kevin Peters, but most of the times Everett does not mention them, probably because he feels as if it did not matter, or he leaves it up to the reader to decide how they want the characters to look like. Here, we can possibly see indications of something that would, in time, manifest itself in *Erasure*.

Out of the five main protagonists, there are only two that are "openly Southern" (meaning that they mention it several times, either when asked about their birthplace or when they talk or think about where they come from) – David Larson from Georgia and doctor Livesey from Virginia. The rest consists of a man living on the West Coast of the United States, a Barbarian princess from the ancient Kingdom of Colchis and an obese woman living in a post-apocalyptic world where it hardly matters which state you originally came from. This is not a typical thing

for a Southern author, but Everett himself now lives in Los Angeles, California, and therefore it is obvious that he is not tied to the South to the degree that he would not be able to leave it (speaking only about the place, not his Southern identity) and the same holds true for the characters in his novels.

What is, however, typical for a Southern author and can be also found in Everett's books is the struggle mentioned in the second chapter. His protagonists struggle not only "to maintain a sense of cultural or moral identity in the face of forces beyond their control" as I have quoted from Cobb before, but also with the consequences of wars (*Walk Me to the Distance*, *Zulus*), their own sexuality (something that can be found in all the first five books and also in his later works), and racism.

While the descriptions of the racial discrimination and racism follow up on the tradition of great African American writers that wrote before him, the new trend that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s has obviously influenced Everett as well. He mentions it, he points out how wrong such things are, but he is not bitter about it, nor does he make it the one and only theme of his novels.

After taking all this into account, I believe that Percival Everett should be classified as a Southern writer and also as an African American writer, but both labels do not stick completely. In his novels, he proves that he is far more than that and that he is able to rise above his local or racial identity, because in the modern, cosmopolitan world these boundaries are becoming more and more blurred and less and less important.

Resumé

Cílem této diplomové práce bylo představit raná díla amerického spisovatele, hudebníka, malíře a univerzitního profesora Percivala Everetta, který v současné době působí na University of South Carolina v Kalifornii. Everett doposavad publikoval přes dvacet románů (přičemž poslední, nazvaný *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell: A Novel*, vyšel v roce 2013), dvě sbírky povídek a tři sbírky básní.

Po úvodu a obecné části, v níž je čtenář uveden do základního historického, společenského a literárního kontextu jižanské a afroamerické literatury, práce sleduje prvních pět Everettových románů – *Suder*, *Walk Me to the Distance*, *Cutting Lisa*, *For Her Dark Skin* a *Zulus*, které pokrývají jeho tvůrčí období mezi roky 1983 až 1990. Pozornost je věnována především tomu, zda, a pokud ano, tak jakým způsobem, se autor vyrovnává s motivy a tradicemi typickými pro jiné jižanské a afroamerické autory; a tématům které Everett sdílí s autory napříč zeměmi a etniky, jako je například lidská sexualita, nevěra, šílenství, nebo války a jejich dopad na jedince i lidstvo jako celek. Účelem pak není pouhý výčet a srovnání, ale i zařazení Everetta do již zmiňovaného literárního kontextu jižanské a afroamerické literatury. Práce se snaží poukázat na skutečnost, že ačkoli bývá Everett řazen mezi jižanské a afroamerické autory, jeho díla zdaleka přesahují tyto kategorie, neboť Everett je především moderním, kosmopolitním spisovatelem, pro kterého již není nejdůležitějším to, odkud pochází, nebo jaké je barvy pleti.

Bibliography

Albee, Edward. *The Collected Plays Of Edward Albee: Volume 1 1958 – 1965*. New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2004.

Atomic Archive. “The Neutron Bomb.” Accessed August 10, 2013.
<http://www.atomicarchive.com/Fusion/Fusion5.shtml>.

Bryant, Joseph Allen. *Twentieth-century Southern Literature*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*. Stockholm: Jan Förlag, 1946.

Cobb, James C. “Southern Writers” in *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. 131-163. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Euripides. *Medea of Euripides*. Translated by Gilbert Murray. New York: Oxford University Press, 1912. Kindle Edition.

Everett, Percival. *American Desert: A Novel*. New York: Hyperion, 2004.

Everett, Percival. *Cutting Lisa*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 2000.

Everett, Percival. *Erasure: A Novel*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2011.

Everett, Percival. *For Her Dark Skin*. Seattle: Owl Creek Press, 1990.

Everett, Percival. *Glyph: A Novel*. London: Faber and Faber, 2004.

- Everett, Percival. *God's Country: A Novel*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994.
- Everett, Percival. *Suder*. New York: Viking Press, 1983.
- Everett, Percival. *The Water Cure*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2007.
- Everett, Percival. *Walk Me to the Distance*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1985.
- Everett, Percival. *Watershed*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.
- Everett, Percival. *Zulus*. Sag Harbor: Permanent Press, 1990.
- Everett, Percival, and Kincaid James R.. *A History of the African-American People (proposed) by Strom Thurmond: A Novel*. New York: Akashic Books, 2004.
- Gretlund, Jan Nordby. "Still there?": Encapsulated Prejudice in Today's Souther Fiction" In *The (Un)Popular South*, edited by Marcel Arbeit and M. Thomas Inge. 97-112. Olomouc: Palacký University, 2011.
- Hill, Michael. "Toni Morrison and the Post-Civil Rights – African American Novel" in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, edited by Leonard Cassuto, Clare Virginia Eby and Benjamin Reiss. 1066-1083. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Hobson, Fred. *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*. Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1991.

Literary Encyclopedia. "Literary Encyclopedia – Percival Everett." Accessed May 23, 2013. <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=12878>.

Maniez, Claire, and Anne-Laure Tissut. *Percival Everett: Transatlantic Readings*. Paris: Éditions Le Manuscrit, 2007. Kindle Edition.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. London: Campbell, 1992.

O'Connell, Jack. "Robinson's many peers follow his lead: Second baseman a trailblazer for all players of color." MBL.com. April 13, 2007. Accessed August 1, 2013. http://mlb.mlb.com/news/article.jsp?ymd=20070412&content_id=1895202.

O'Donnell, Patrick. *The American Novel Now: Contemporary American Fiction Since 1980*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

USC University of Southern California. "Faculty Profile – Percival Everett." Accessed June 25, 2013. <http://dornsife.usc.edu/cf/faculty-and-staff/faculty.cfm?pid=1003237>.

Anotace

Jméno: Bc. Lada Homolová

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Název práce: The Early Works of Percival Everett

Vedoucí práce: Prof. PhDr. Marcel Arbeit, Dr.

Počet stran: 78

Počet příloh: 1

Klíčová slova: Percival Everett, současná americká literatura, jižanská literatura, afroamerická literatura

Anotace: Tato práce se zabývá ranými díly Percivala Everetta a jeho zařazením do kontextu literatury amerického Jihu, afroamerické literatury a i americké literatury obecně. Ukazuje, jak Everett odpoutává pozornost od svých etnických kořenů a zaměřuje se na obecné problémy intelektuála, který se střetává se stereotypy moderního světa.

Annotation

Name: Bc. Lada Homolová

Department: Department of English and American Studies

Name of the thesis: The Early Works of Percival Everett

Supervisor: Prof. PhDr. Marcel Arbeit, Dr.

Number of pages: 78

Number of supplements: 1

Key words: Percival Everett, contemporary American literature, Southern literature, African American literature

Annotation: This thesis examines early works of Percival Everett and his place in the context of the Southern literature, African American literature and contemporary American literature in general. It demonstrates how Everett diverts the attention of the readers from his ethnic origins and concentrates on the problems of an intellectual living in the modern world.