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**A Feminist Reading of John Irving's Novels: An Analysis of His
Portrayal of Feminist Issues**

Bakalářská práce

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TÉMA ČESKY:

Pohled ženských kritiček na téma feminizmu v románech Johna Irvinga

TÉMA ANGLICKY:

Evaluation of the topic of feminism in John Irving's novels from the point of view of female critics

VEDOUČÍ PRÁCE:

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ZÁSADY PRO VYPRACOVÁNÍ:

1. Introduction
2. Feminism
3. John Irving
4. The World According to Garp
4.1 Portrayal of feminism
5. The Hotel New Hampshire
5.1 The issue of rape
6. The Cider House Rules
6.1 The issue of abortions
7. Conclusion

SEZNAM DOPORUČENÉ LITERATURY:

- Irving, John. The world according to Garp. London: Corgi, 1994.
Irving, John. The hotel New Hampshire. London: Corgi, 1994.
Irving, John. The cider house rules. New York: Ballantine Books, 1993.
Loudermilk, Kim A. Fictional feminism: how American bestsellers affect the movement for women's equality. New York: Routledge, 2004.
Doane, Janice a Devon Hodges. Nostalgia and sexual difference: the resistance to contemporary feminism. New York: Methuen, 1987.
Moi, Toril. Sexual/textual politics: feminist literary theory. London: Routledge, 1994.

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Declaration

I declare that I wrote this bachelor thesis by myself under the supervision of
Mgr. David Livingstone, Ph.D. and only used the cited literature.

Olomouc, April 2017

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Signature

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I would like to express my gratitude to Mgr. David Livingstone, Ph.D. for his guidance and valuable advice.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	6
2. John Irving.....	8
2.1. Biography and Publications	8
2.2. Feminist Views of Irving	11
3. Women Reading: Development of Feminist Criticism.....	13
3.1. Feminist Critique	13
3.2. Gynocritics	16
3.3. Transition from Politics to Literature	17
4. Femininity and Gender Roles.....	19
4.1. Jenny Fields.....	19
4.2. Melony	22
4.3. Franny Berry.....	23
4.4. Gender Role Reversal	24
4.5. Generational Progress	25
5. Sexual Abuse.....	28
5.1. Women as Their Own Heroes	28
5.2. Ellen Jamesians	30
6. Abortions.....	32
7. Sexuality.....	35
7.1. Transsexuality.....	35
7.2. Homosexuality.....	36
7.3. Women's Sexuality.....	37
8. Conclusion.....	39
9. Resumé.....	41
10. Bibliography.....	43
11. Anotace	46
12. Abstract	47

1. Introduction

This thesis is concerned with an analysis of feminist issues portrayed in John Irving's novels *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire* and *The Cider House Rules* from the point of view of Feminist criticism. The aim is to demonstrate that Irving had largely pro-feminist views, even though in some cases his portrayal of feminist issues is quite ambivalent. I chose this topic because I believe Irving's open depiction of American society, treatment of problems between genders and openness about taboo issues such as abortion, sexual abuse and sexuality make him a unique figure in literature, particularly considering his gender and the time of publication of these novels.

In the first part of the thesis, I will briefly describe John Irving's life and his most notable publications. I will link his life experience to his works, since there are some recurrent themes or settings which reappear in his novels and are often based on his own experience. I will also supply several Feminists' views of Irving's works to demonstrate the contradictory readings of this author.

Secondly, I will provide some background information about Feminist literary criticism and its development. The most notable works that influenced the Anglo-American Feminist criticism will be discussed to show how the critics' views and principles evolved. The chapter will be divided into three parts. First I will focus on two major phases of Feminist literary criticism called the 'feminist critique' and the 'gynocritics.' Finally, the phase when critics began to focus on literary theory will be discussed.

The body of the thesis will be divided by the issues that appear in the novels and are relevant to Feminist criticism. First, I will analyze Irving's portrayal of women since he often introduces strong and dominant female characters. Such portrayal does not correspond to the stereotypical representation of women as feminine. Furthermore, the non-traditional assignment of gender roles will be discussed and will be used as further evidence of Irving's feminist values. The last subchapter will describe the generational progress towards equality that is suggested in all of the analyzed novels.

Second, I will focus on the issue of sexual abuse, which is a recurrent theme in Irving's novels. He sensitively expresses his sympathy for rape victims. Irving frequently describes women as victims of male lust, but in many cases, the victimized

women do not accept their role of a victim and rather seek revenge on the rapist in order to overcome their psychological damage.

The third topic I will discuss is the issue of abortions which is a key motif of *The Cider House Rules*. Irving's open discussion of this issue makes this novel unique and supportive of women struggle for equality. His pro-choice views are another fact in support of his feminist values. I will discuss mostly the characters Wilbur Larch and Homer Wells and the development of their approaches to abortions.

Finally, I will analyze Irving's portrayal of sexuality which is openly described in all of the novels. Interestingly, he often punishes women for their sexuality whereas men's lust is overlooked. In contrast, however, Irving incorporates transsexual and homosexual characters into his novels which results in a modern and varied composition of his characters.

2. John Irving

John Irving is a successful American novelist, who is considered to be one of the best story-tellers of his lifetime. He is interested in description of the society and he wants to show the world the society's indifference to some topics that can often be seen as taboo. As he himself expressed in an interview, he is interested in exposing abuse, wrongdoings and injustice that exist in the society. He cares about highlighting any kind of abuse, whether it is an abuse of a single person or of a group of people or whether it is caused by law or by society's indifference.¹ As Josie Campbell in her book *John Irving: A Critical Companion* states, he intermixes comedy and tragedy and focuses on morality.² This makes him an extraordinary figure in literature, as he openly describes sexuality, abortion, sexual abuse and violence using the tragicomic situations. His distinctive style is perfectly demonstrated at the beginning of his novel *The Cider House Rules* with the opening sentence:

In the hospital of the orphanage-the boys' division at St. Cloud's, Maine-two nurses were in charge of naming the new babies and checking that their little penises were healing from the obligatory circumcision.³

It is quite an unusual beginning of a novel but it is typical of Irving and his style. His style is catchy and some things may be considered exaggerated. His openness about sex can be seen as shocking, yet he successfully manages to describe society's issues which should not be ignored.

2.1. Biography and Publications

John Irving was born in Exeter, New Hampshire in 1942. He was raised by a single mother and was later adopted by his step-father. He never met his biological father and this absence of a parent is reflected in many of his works. He attended the Phillips Exeter Academy, which inspired the creation of the Steering School in *The World According to Garp*. Actually, most of his novels are set in the places well-known by Irving. During his studies, he was dedicated to wrestling, which he also frequently uses

¹ John Irving, interview by Ron Hansen, "John Irving, The Art of Fiction No. 93," *The Paris Review*, no. 100 (Summer-Fall, 1986), accessed March 21, 2017, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2757/john-irving-the-art-of-fiction-no-93-john-irving>.

² Josie P. Campbell, *John Irving: A Critical Companion* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 6.

³ John Irving, *The Cider House Rules* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1986), 1.

in his novels. After graduation, he briefly attended the University of Pittsburgh and then Harvard. He lived in Austria from 1963 to 1964, studying at the University of Vienna. The city of Vienna became a common setting of his novels, examples being *Setting Free the Bears* or *The Hotel New Hampshire*.

During his studies he met his first wife Shyla Leary and married her in 1964. They had two sons that strongly influenced Irving's writing. Family life and fear for children is frequently represented in his works. Garp's warning against the undertow, or as they call it Under Toad, reappears in the novel and becomes a symbol of anxiety of potential threats within a family. The same symbol appears in *The Hotel New Hampshire* in the form of the dead dog Sorrow.

After the marriage and the birth of his first son, Irving graduated from the University of New Hampshire and continued his studies at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he worked on "*Bears*, which was his master's thesis and which, in 1968, became his first published novel"⁴ called *Setting Free the Bears*. It tells a story of two young men who begin an adventurous journey, planning the liberation of animals of a zoo in Vienna. It is a novel about freedom and history. Irving's typical themes are established in this novel including bears, Vienna, violence and death.

After some time spent in Vienna and the birth of his second son, Irving published his second novel *The Water-Method Man* in 1972, which is about the personal growth of Fred Trumper and ends with a happy ending and a celebration of a family. A year later, his third novel *The 158-Pound Marriage* was published. It tells the story of two couples who decide to swap spouses which results in even more complicated relationships. According to Campbell, all of these novels received positive reviews and were praised by the critics, but they did not sell well and did not allow Irving to be a full-time writer.⁵

The turning point came in 1976 with the publication of Irving's fourth novel *The World According to Garp*. It became a best-seller and gained him popularity as well as the possibility to dedicate himself to writing exclusively. It seemed that Irving found a way to attract the readers and more success followed with the novels *The Hotel New Hampshire*, published in 1981 that tells a story of the Berry family and with *The Cider House Rules*, published in 1985 which is about Wilbur Larch, an abortionist

⁴ Campbell, *John Irving*, 2.

⁵ Campbell, *John Irving*, 2-3.

and the director of an orphanage and his indecisive apprentice and orphan Homer Wells. Irving began to write the latter novel after the divorce with his first wife in 1982. At that time, his mother decided to reveal the truth about his biological father by giving Irving his father's letters which he had sent him during World War II. "The letters inspired the war adventures of the Wally character,"⁶ who also worked as a pilot and survived a plane crash in Burma, making this passage highly autobiographical.

Irving re-married in 1987 and had a third son. His marriage with Janet Turnbull was probably more mature and the spouses trusted each other, since as Irving admits, it was not before Janet that he shared with someone the secret about the sexual abuse from his childhood. Initially, he did not know what the older woman, his abuser, did to him was wrong, and he recognized it as abuse later when he was interested in older women rather than in girls of his own age.⁷ Sexual abuse reappears in his works and is a key motif of his novel *The Hotel New Hampshire*, portraying female victims of rape and their ways of overcoming the psychological damage.

Irving published his seventh novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany* in 1989. It tells the story of two friends, Johnny Wheelwright and Owen Meany. Owen believes himself to be an instrument of God. The novel develops the themes of faith and the effects of war. It was followed by the publication of Irving's longest novel *A Son of the Circus* in 1994, which is a very complex detective work with a variety of storylines set mostly in India.

The first novel which features a woman as a main character was *A Widow for One Year*, published in 1998. The main character, Ruth Cole, is represented as a strong woman who meets with sexual abuse, death and parental absence, as is typical of Irving's writing.

There have been 5 novels published by Irving in this century so far. The first of them, his tenth novel, was published in 2001 and is called *The Fourth Hand*. In 2005 Irving published his so far most autobiographical novel called *Until I Find You*. His most recent works are *Last Night in Twisted River* (2009), *In One Person* (2012) and *Avenue of Mysteries* (2015).

⁶ Gregory Kirschling, "John Irving Comes Clean," *Entertainment Weekly*, no. 830 (July 22, 2005): 40-46, accessed February 17, 2017, <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?sid=fe2092d4-f4f6-4327-ab70-97f036ab0e37%40sessionmgr4009&vid=0&hid=4110&bdata=Jmxhbm9Y3Mmc2l0ZT1lZHMtbG12ZQ%3d%3d#AN=17741597&db=f3h>.

⁷ Gregory Kirschling, "John Irving Comes Clean."

2.2. Feminist Views of Irving

In terms of Feminist criticism, John Irving is quite a controversial figure. He is interested in portraying female characters, sexuality, sexual violence and Feminism. Some believe he is a male Feminist author while some claim that a deeper analysis of his works shows that he actually portrays Feminism quite negatively. Actually, it is questioned whether a man can be a Feminist. Pam Morris in her work *Literatura a feminismus* says that it is possible. However, she claims that even though men can write about gender issues and condemn the practices and stereotyping, they can never fully understand women's experience because the situation of men and women in society is very different.⁸ It is clear that Irving's position was not an easy one. Even though he causes controversy between Feminists and his portrayal of feminist issues is often ambivalent, it has to be taken into consideration that he is a male writer writing about these issues as of the 1960's. His involvement in the feminist cause makes him an extraordinary figure in literature.

Irving's controversy and critics' ambivalent views on his depiction of feminist issues is demonstrated by the distinctive reviews and awards he obtained. As Kim. A. Loudermilk in her book *Fictional Feminism* writes, the feminist magazine *Ms.* included Irving on the list of male heroes in 1982, for incorporating feminist themes in his works. Furthermore, the National Women's Political Caucus called him one of the "Good Guys" for his sympathetic discussion of abortion in *The Cider House Rules*.⁹ Josie Campbell also believes that in the three novels that will be analyzed, Irving showed his sympathy for women¹⁰ and a similar view is expressed by Debra Shostak, who mentioned in her article "The Family Romances of John Irving" his "sensitivity to female experience."¹¹ The critics Janice Doane and Devon Hodges in their work "Women and the World According to Garp" praise Irving's sympathy for rape victims, single mothers and his modern depiction of gender roles. Yet at the same time they mention ambivalences in his portrayal of feminist issues.¹²

⁸ Pam Morris, *Literatura a feminismus*, transl. Renata Kamenická and Marian Siedloczek (Brno: Host, 2000), 12.

⁹ Kim A. Loudermilk, *Fictional Feminism: How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Women's Equality* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 67.

¹⁰ Campbell, *John Irving*, 5.

¹¹ Debra Shostak, "The Family Romances of John Irving", in *John Irving*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001), 95.

¹² Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, "Women and the World According to Garp" in *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 66.

As Loudemilk mentions, even though the most critics found Irving's perception of Feminism positive, one of the negative responses came only a month later after his praise by the magazine *Ms.*, which published Marilyn French's article "The 'Garp' Phenomenon" that criticized his description of Feminism. Loudermilk agrees with French's analysis and also believes that Irving's representation of Feminists is a negative one.¹³ Furthermore, Sally Robinson in the work *Marked Men* states that *The World According to Garp* is an ambiguous and mostly anti-feminist novel.¹⁴ These contradictory reactions to Irving's works demonstrate the controversial nature of his novels.

In terms of Irving's opinion of women, he believes women are "better equipped to endure fear and brutality, to contain their anxiousness about their loved ones, because they have to be. They've had to endure so much in the way of rape, violations of all sorts, punishments, and condescensions, if nothing harsher – many of these created by men."¹⁵ With this statement he reveals his belief that women are mentally stronger than men. He acknowledges the hardships of women in the past which strengthened them and he frequently writes about these issues to highlight their existence in the society.

¹³ Loudermilk, *Fictional Feminism*, 69-70.

¹⁴ Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 106.

¹⁵ John Irving, interview by Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with John Irving," *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Winter, 1982): 1-18, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208139>.

3. Women Reading: Development of Feminist Criticism

The Feminist movement has always tried to achieve the equality of sexes and to lower the degree of discrimination of women until it would eventually disappear. The Feminists have promoted women's freedom, their right to make choices and questioned the traditional gender role assignment in the society. Furthermore they tried to deconstruct the stereotypical beliefs held about women that were consequently imposed on them. They were also interested in sexuality and believed "that the construction of gender is grounded in male attempts to control female sexuality."¹⁶ Women and men were always described as two opposites. Male were the active, productive and dominant ones whereas women the passive and submissive sex. The Feminists aimed to blur these differences and to achieve gender equality.

The literary criticism and the literary field was initially dominated by men. The change came in the 1960s with the rise of the Second Wave of Feminism when Feminist movement returned into politics and gained strength and support in the society. This gave rise to the Feminist literary criticism, which focused on the portrayal of women in literary works and which wanted to offer a female perspectives and experience in the literary field dominated by men whose perspectives were considered as universal.

This chapter focuses on its development, on the most notable authors and on their works that contributed to the evolution of the Feminist literary criticism. I found especially helpful for this part Toril Moi's book *Sexual/Textual Politics*.

The following two subchapters will be divided according to Elaine Showalter's terminology. She introduced the term 'feminist critique' that refers to the early period of Feminist criticism, which focused on the works produced by men and secondly the term 'gynocritics,' which is a period focusing on the female literary production.

3.1. Feminist Critique

Early feminist critics studied the dominant male literary production. They were strongly dedicated to the feminist cause in politics and as Moi says, the pioneering feminist critics had to cope with the difficulty of finding a balance between their

¹⁶ Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 3.

political involvement and their roles as literary critics. The task was even more difficult since the criteria of 'good' literary criticism were established by men.¹⁷

Early feminist critics were concerned with the portrayal of women in the literary works and on their stereotyping. They suggested the deconstruction of the stereotypes in order to fight the patriarchal hierarchy that was deeply rooted in the literary tradition. The portrayal and perception of female gender is one of the fundamental concerns of feminist critics. There are two basic presumptions of Feminist literary criticism. "One is that the inequality of the sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate, but a cultural construct, and therefore a proper subject of study for any humanistic discipline. The second is that a male perspective, assumed to be 'universal', has dominated fields of knowledge."¹⁸ As Moi says, there is a tendency among Feminists to distinguish between the terms 'female' and 'feminine'. The first term refers to the biological women and the second one to the constructed patterns imposed on women by the society. The male dominance and oppression is then performed by imposing the 'feminine' standards on all females and presenting those standards as natural.¹⁹ The feminist critics fight these standards because if one is a woman does not necessarily mean, she also complies with the feminine standards.

Moi believes there were 5 notable works that contributed to the development of Anglo-American Feminist literary criticism. These works were *A Room of One's Own* (1927) by Virginia Woolf, *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir, *The Troublesome Helpmate* (1966) by Katharine M. Roger, *Thinking About Women* (1968) by Mary Ellmann and *Sexual Politics* (1969) by Kate Millett.²⁰ These works mostly focused on male writers and examined their portrayal of women, stereotypes and female oppression in the patriarchal system.

Virginia Woolf was an early precursor of modern Feminist criticism. Her work *A Room of One's Own*, the first modernist Feminist manifesto, described the obstacles of female writers and the lack of their personal space. She believed that women should be independent and free to express themselves and manifests this opinions in her pioneering essay.

¹⁷ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1985), 23.

¹⁸ Greene and Kahn, *Making a Difference*, 1-2.

¹⁹ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 65.

²⁰ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 22.

The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir's influential book, offered an innovative analysis of the patriarchal hierarchy within a society. The thesis of her work was that "throughout history, women have been reduced to objects for men: 'woman' has been constructed as man's Other, denied the right to her own subjectivity and to responsibility for her own actions."²¹ Beauvoir thus highlighted the fact that women were always considered as 'the second sex,' a secondary gender submissive to the main male sex. The male views of women were considered as universal and she suggested that these standards should be reviewed.

Katharine M. Roger in her work *The Troublesome Helpmate* was concerned with a study of misogyny and of sexism in literature. She tried to summarize the reasons of sexual oppression in the society. She believed that the main reason for the male misogyny was a "patriarchal feeling, the wish to keep women subject to them"²² because the image of a submissive woman and a dominant man persisted in the culture.

Mary Ellmann's book *Thinking About Women* dealt with gender discrimination in literature and with the portrayal of female stereotypes by male writers. Her claim was that "Western culture at all levels is permeated by a phenomenon Ellmann labels 'thought by sexual analogy'."²³ The aim of her work was to highlight the illogicality of this thinking and to decompose the stereotypes set by male writers. She summarized "eleven major stereotypes of femininity as presented by male writers and critics: formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy, and finally 'the two incorrigible figures' of the Witch and the Shrew."²⁴ Ellmann used wit and irony to decompose these stereotypes and to show its effects in society.

Even more influential work was Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, which strongly influenced future Anglo-American feminist critics because of its radical and passionate statements. Millett mostly focused on male's texts and on their description of male power, patriarchal hierarchy and on the sex relations between sexes. Furthermore, as Moi states, Millett refused the role of a passive reader and rejected the typical hierarchy of the reader and the text. She did not see the author as the authority and

²¹ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 92.

²² Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 26.

²³ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 32.

²⁴ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 34.

rather promoted the reader's right to offer her own reading of the text. She refused the traditional characteristics of a reader as a feminine and passive consumer of a text.²⁵ Millett's book was a pioneering work of Feminist criticism, supporting the female voice that should not be silenced.

Both *Thinking About Women* and *Sexual Politics* influenced the 'Images of Women' criticism, a new branch of Feminist criticism which surged in the 1970s. These critics studied and criticized both female and male writers and valued the realistic and authentic portrayal of the characters. As Moi says, they felt strong connection between literature and life and thus emphasized the writers' obligation to share information from their lives to clarify ones cultural and social background since no criticism is objective. The following generations of feminist critics share the same opinion that to present one's views as universal is being authoritarian.²⁶

3.2. Gynocritics

The second phase of the Feminist criticism surged in 1975 when the feminist critics started to focus on the female writers and on the features that differentiate them from the male writers. "This woman-centred approach has now become the dominant trend within Anglo-American feminist criticism"²⁷ and Elaine Showalter labelled this phase as the 'gynocritics'. The most notable works from this period which studied women texts were Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

Ellen Moers' book is considered a pioneering work which set the grounds for the more developed critical approaches. In *Literary Women*, Moers studied the female literary tradition and described it as a "subculture with its own patterns of relationship, themes, images and concerns."²⁸ Her way of fighting the patriarchy and male dominance was to set women writers aside and treat them as a separate group. However, as Moi says, this separation of female writers from the main literary production was rejected by Elain Showalter. In *A Literature of Their Own* she

²⁵ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 24-25.

²⁶ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 43-44.

²⁷ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 51.

²⁸ Greene and Kahn, *Making a Difference*, 50.

highlighted the fact that women writers are often ignored or that their popularity does not last very long despite the good quality of their works.²⁹

The most notable work focusing on the female writers was Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which was "for many outside feminism the first "real" or "persuasive" book about a "distinctly female" literature and for many inside feminism, a compelling display of the power of a feminist poetics to reread texts."³⁰ According to Moi, the authors opposed the traditional belief that only men possessed the talent of creativity and that women were always described as passive, obedient and submissive beings. Such women were the perfect ones. Gubar and Gilbert introduced the opposite type of a female character, the monster woman who refused her submissive role.³¹

3.3. Transition from Politics to Literature

As for the literary theory, the early feminist critics were mostly unconcerned with this issue and were more interested in politics and in the Feminist movement. That changed in the 1980s. As Susan S. Lanser in her article "Feminist Literary Criticism" says, the emphasis changed from *Feminist* literary criticism to Feminist *literary* criticism. The political nature of the Feminist criticism lost some of its strength and there was more emphasis on the literary side.³²

The first person who offered the very first definitions of Feminist criticism was Annette Kolodny in 1975. She also promoted the comparative approach to discover how texts written by men and women differ, because "since gender is a *relational* entity, it is clearly impossible to locate a difference of style or content without a comparison."³³ This comparative approach in Feminist criticism was further developed and supported by Myra Jehlen who also promoted the comparison of male and female texts in order to examine the differences between the women and men writers. They believed writers of both sexes should be read by women in order to offer a female viewpoint and opinions on the texts.

²⁹ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 55.

³⁰ Susan S. Lanser, "Feminist Literary Criticism: How Feminist? How Literary? How Critical?," *NWSA Journal*, vol. 3, no.1 (Winter, 1991): 3-19.

³¹ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 58.

³² Lanser, "Feminist Literary Criticism: How Feminist? How Literary? How Critical?."

³³ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 71.

Feminist literary criticism underwent the series of changes and developed significantly. The feminist critics realized that it was not sufficient to examine only male works, since that would mean omitting the female writers who are as valuable as the male ones. It is important to study the portrayal of women, stereotypes, sexuality and other issues related to Feminism in both male and female texts. However, it is also essential to highlight and review women writers and the expression of their experience. In order to achieve equality, both male and female texts should be read and evaluated from the point of view of the Feminist literary criticism.

4. Femininity and Gender Roles

The general tendency of writers was to portray women as feminine, thus mostly as passive characters submissive to men. However, Irving often does not follow those standards and does not describe women as necessarily feminine. On the contrary, he introduces strong and independent female characters. Furthermore, he rejects the traditional assignment of gender roles and generally, his novels “have a good deal to say about Feminist movement and the changing roles of husband and wives.”³⁴

According to Irving, the homemaker is not necessarily a women’s position in a household, although there are some aspects of his portrayal of women that are seen as problematic from the feminist point of view.

4.1. Jenny Fields

Jenny Fields is the central female character of *The World According to Garp*. She represents a strong woman who makes her own decisions and does not need a man to rely on. She “pushes gender boundaries”³⁵ and since her youth, she rejects the standard female roles and refuses to participate in women’s hunt for a good husband. She leaves her college studies after realizing that it is only a “polite way to bide time, as if she were really a cow, being prepared only for the insertion of the device for artificial insemination.”³⁶ She rejects to fulfill her parents’ wish to find a man and be a good wife and decides to do things her own way.

Even though Jenny rejects partnership and sex, she needs a man to have a baby. She finds a solution which suits her and has sex only once in her life with a dying soldier T. S. Garp. She gets pregnant and achieves what she wanted. However, Irving does not portray Jenny as a traditional mother who is concerned with the housework or cooking. Even her son Garp says that “she was no natural in motherhood,”³⁷ even though she is a caring person. This depiction goes against the traditional view that all women are natural mothers whose main task is to live according to a domestic ideal.

³⁴ Margaret Drabble, “Muck, Memory, and Imagination,” *Harper’s Magazine* (July, 1978): 82-84, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&sw=w&u=palacky&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CH1420037697&asid=0209bb140df8df28c489ffa144e7f58c>.

³⁵ Campbell, *John Irving*, 77.

³⁶ John Irving, *The World According to Garp* (London: Corgi, 1994), 14.

³⁷ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 69.

Jenny is aware of the fact that her lifestyle is considered strange and that some people look at her with contempt, yet she does not care very much. She decides to publish an autobiographical book *A Sexual Suspect*, which becomes a bestseller and influences many women. In her book, Jenny says:

I wanted a job and I wanted to live alone. That made me a sexual suspect. Then I wanted a baby, but I didn't want to have to share my body or my life to have one. That made me a sexual suspect, too.³⁸

She thus highlights the fact that if a woman's plans and choices differ from the standards imposed on them by the society, she is then seen as a weirdo or as a suspect.

Janice Doane and Devon Hodges in their article "Women and the World According to Garp" criticize the fact that Jenny is silenced and that her writing is discredited by constant criticizing of its autobiographical nature which Garp considers as the worst kind of writing. It is set in opposition with Garp's imaginative and artistic writing.³⁹ I agree with this analysis but even though Irving repeatedly denounces the autobiographical writing, Jenny's voice is heard throughout the novel and her work becomes quite influential. Also, the 1970s 'Images of Women' criticism insisted on the portrayal of reality and valued it as the best kind of writing, so Jenny's autobiographical book certainly has its value.

As for Irving's representation of the fictional Feminism, even though Jenny does not call herself a Feminist, she definitely is one based on her beliefs. She is portrayed as an ideal Feminist, a strong and an independent woman who believes in women's right to make their own choices and she consequently acts like it. In her book she promotes her independent lifestyle and her liberation from the stereotypical gender roles assignment and becomes an example for women who used to believe that women's place is in the kitchen and that men are the dominant figures who need to be obeyed.

However, the critics' views of Jenny's representation of fictional Feminism are ambivalent. Loudermilk believes that a deeper analysis shows that Jenny's representation of Feminism is largely negative. The reasons are that she does not want to admit that she is a Feminist, which suggests the uselessness of Feminism and negative beliefs held about this movement. Furthermore, she says that Jenny does not

³⁸ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 26.

³⁹ Doane and Hodges, *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference*, 67-68.

introduce any political statement and her type of Feminism is rather personal.⁴⁰ This analysis is accurate but I believe Jenny's representation of Feminism is not largely negative but largely positive. It is true that she does not call herself a Feminist, but it is because "she was not sure what it meant."⁴¹ She simply believes in equality, equal rights and in the freedom to make one's own choices regardless of the gender. These are just feminist values. At one point, she even admits that if those were feminists' ideas, "then she guessed she *was* one."⁴² Secondly, it is also true that Jenny's Feminism is more individualistic and that she does not declare any political statement. However, her philosophy and beliefs are clearly stated in her book. Despite the personal nature of her statements, they motivate many women to make important decisions in their lives. The examples are Roberta Muldoon, who undergoes the sex change operation thanks to Jenny's book and its support. Another case is Harriet Truckenmiller who leaves her abusive husband after reading Jenny's book and gaining self-confidence. Maybe Jenny's type of Feminism is not influential on a political scale, but it definitely influenced many women's lives and that also marks a certain type of progress and has its meaning.

Loudermilk further argues that Jenny portrays a typical Feminist who hates men and sex, which suggests that Feminism is to blame for women's alienation from men.⁴³ However, Jenny does not hate men in general, she just despises lust which men project on women who not always share their interest. Even though Jenny is not interested in sex, she does not refuse a friendly relationship which is demonstrated by her friendship with Ernie Holm. Jenny does not hate men, she just does not want to be constrained by them. She wants to make her own choices and more importantly, she does not want to be sexually harassed.

Jenny Fields is thus an important character with a lot of influence on other women. Her values are clearly stated and she offers a positive representation of a single mother who is not constrained by expectations of the society.

⁴⁰ Loudermilk, *Fictional Feminism*, 75.

⁴¹ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 181.

⁴² Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 181.

⁴³ Loudermilk, *Fictional Feminism*, 79.

4.2. Melony

One of the central characters of *The Cider House Rules* is Melony, an orphaned young woman. Irving does not assign her stereotypical feminine qualities, on the contrary, he describes her as both physically and mentally strong, decisive, energetic and quite aggressive person. She actually feels dominant to men and believes in her strength and abilities. When she asks for a job in the apple orchard, she says to the foreman that he can fire the two violent men who work for him because she “can do whatever the two of them do, and better than they do it.”⁴⁴ This portrayal presents a female character who is not submissive but rather dominant and believes in her abilities and qualities which are equal or even better than men’s ones.

Later in her life Melony starts working in a shipyard and becomes “a kind of a Rosie the Riveter,”⁴⁵ a symbol of strength and women’s capability in a workplace. She is actually so strong and capable that men not only respect her, but even fear her. The foreman, for whom she initially works at the apple orchard, says that he “wouldn’t ever have a woman like that [...] if I *did* have her, I’d never leave her---I wouldn’t dare,”⁴⁶ suggesting that men are afraid of a strong woman who would not be tamed so easily. She is a respected person in a bar where she goes and people know that “Melony was no one to mess with. Around Melony, even the beer drinkers behaved.”⁴⁷ She is thus portrayed as a strong and dominant woman who is respected by her male companions.

Melony’s influence and her moral values are portrayed at the end of the novel. She is one of the main reasons why Homer tells the truth to his son Angel about actually not being adopted. She becomes “a moral force”⁴⁸ because she expresses her disappointment with Homer and he is so influenced by her opinion that he decides to become truthful. Melony’s voice thus has a great value.

Melony is the strongest and the most dominant woman in the novel. However, there are other female characters who are worth mentioning for their strong nature. First of them is Candy, a beautiful and kind young woman, who has problems deciding

⁴⁴ Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 276.

⁴⁵ Alison Booth, “Neo-Victorian Self-Help, or Cider House Rules,” *American Literary History*, vol. 14, no 2. (Summer, 2002): 284-310, accessed January 24, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3054570>.

⁴⁶ Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 278.

⁴⁷ Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 318.

⁴⁸ John Irving, interview by Ron Hansen, “John Irving, The Art of Fiction No.93.”

about her future, since she is in love with two men. Nevertheless, there are cases when she appears more active and decisive than her male companions. She is the one who takes charge of helping the rape victim Rose Rose when both Wally and Homer do not want to participate. The second intelligent and capable female character is Wally's mother, Olive Worthington, who takes over the management of the apple orchard and manages it even better than her husband. As the narrator says, "she ran it very intelligently for him"⁴⁹ and did very well in a leadership position.

In *The Cider House Rules* Irving presents female characters who are self-sufficient and strong. He describes them as capable workers, decision-makers and leaders. They are respected and they play an important role in the story, regardless of their gender.

4.3. Franny Berry

Franny Berry is one of the five Berry siblings in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. She is the second oldest of the siblings but as the narrator, her brother John says, the "whole family seemed to regard her as the real authority"⁵⁰ for her dominant nature and passionate statements.

Even though most of the novel covers her teenage years, Franny is very brave and wild and always acts older than she really is. Her wild nature is demonstrated by her constant swearing and by the fact that since the beginning of the novel she is interested in sex and in her sexuality. Franny is definitely not portrayed as a frail feminine woman, on the contrary, Irving portrays her as a strong and dominant character.

Franny's authority and dominance in the family is demonstrated many times throughout the novel. She is the one who is asked what to do and she always takes the initiative to her own hands. It is her who makes the final decision in the Berry family. According to her brother, she "was born to the leading role,"⁵¹ whether it was in their family or later in her acting career.

Franny thus becomes another Irving's representation of a strong and dominant woman who is aware of her sexuality and of her qualities. She is respected by men, her

⁴⁹ Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 124.

⁵⁰ John Irving, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, (London: Corgi, 1994), 209.

⁵¹ Irving, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, 409.

voice is clearly and loudly heard and she is never regarded as less important or inferior because of her gender.

4.4. Gender Role Reversal

Helen Holm and T.S. Garp are a central couple of *The World According to Garp* and they could be considered a modern family model. Helen is portrayed as a strong, successful and intelligent woman, who makes money for the family. Her non-submissive nature is described in a passage where we are told that “she looked to be in such total possession of her life that only most confident men could continue to look at her if she looked back at them.”⁵² Helen is thus a representation of a modern woman, who focuses on her education and career, controls her own life and is not financially dependent on a man.

Garp is described as quite a sensitive man. Even though he is a sportsman dedicated to wrestling, he is “a very gentle man with his children and his wife.”⁵³ Irving does not describe him as an aggressive and insensitive person. On the contrary, Garp is overly protective of his sons and he openly expresses his emotions after realizing that Helen is cheating on him which hurt him deeply. In the moment of truth, he “hid his face in his clothes and cried.”⁵⁴ This portrayal rejects the standard view of men as strong and dominant figures and the fact that sensitivity and expressions of feelings is strictly a female quality.

Helen and Garp’s household and assignment of gender roles thus does not match the traditional model. Helen is the one who pursues her career rather than becoming a housewife and taking care of children. Actually, it is Garp, who comes with the idea to have a child and Helen agrees “only if Garp would take care of it.”⁵⁵ He then becomes a full-time homemaker who takes care of children, cooks and does the housework. This gender role assignment agrees with the feminist values and does not support the traditional family model.

Despite this portrayal of reversed gender roles, there is a certain ambivalence in Irving’s portrayal of his male and female characters. As Doane and Hodges argue, Irving’s description of women in the literary field is an ambivalent one. Garp is

⁵² Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 293.

⁵³ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 324.

⁵⁴ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 338.

⁵⁵ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 182.

presented as a writer of an imaginative fiction which is considered as a real and creative art while Helen represents a passive reader and consumer of literature.⁵⁶ Josie Campbell shares the same opinion and says that in many cases, Helen is a passive figure and more of a receiver of art. However, Campbell also argues that Helen's passivity is subverted at the end of the novel when she refuses to be buried at Steering Academy because of its previous rejection of herself and female students in general.⁵⁷ Even though there are some controversial aspects in Irving's representation of women and their roles, it is still clear that the gender roles "no longer exist in easy categories"⁵⁸

4.5. Generational Progress

A reappearing motif in Irving's novels is the shift from the patriarchal system to more egalitarian future. This tendency is seen in all of the analyzed books and it suggests that Irving believes in the gender equality progress which comes with every new generation.

Helena Wahlström Henriksson says in her study "Exploring the Relationality of Fatherhood: John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*" that the novel "seems to emphasize the possibility of generational progress from "old" patriarchal to "new" and more equalitarian (white) fatherhood."⁵⁹ I agree with this analysis, since there are clear differences between Dr. Larch, who represents the old patriarchal fatherhood and Homer Wells, the more egalitarian father representing a new generation. Even their approaches to women differ significantly.

Wilbur Larch wants to help women and embraces their right to make their own choices. However, he perceives them as subordinate to him and holds traditional views on genders. His relationship to nurse Edna and nurse Angela is authoritarian and he does not see them as equal to him. "Larch is a patriarch who runs a strictly gender hierarchically organized orphanage and hospital."⁶⁰ He represents a dominant figure and an almighty father. When he finds out there is a woman in a position of a boss, he immediately questions that and receives a critique from the two nurses "who both

⁵⁶ Doane and Hodges, *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference*, 70.

⁵⁷ Campbell, *John Irving*, 78-79.

⁵⁸ Campbell, *John Irving*, 81.

⁵⁹ Helena Wahlström Henriksson, "Exploring the Relationality of Fatherhood: John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*," in *Critical Perspectives on Masculinities and Relationalities* (Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 11.

⁶⁰ Wahlström Henriksson, "Exploring the Relationality of Fatherhood," 15.

scolded him for his readiness to assume there was something wrong whenever a woman was in charge of anything.”⁶¹ Dr. Larch thus represents a patriarch, who holds stereotypical views on women and on their place in the world. He believes men are the dominant figures and his female co-workers actually point out that he “tended to overlook women.”⁶² Actually, he never even attempted to have a relationship.

On the other hand, Homer Wells is portrayed as a person who sympathizes with women, respects their choices and perceives them as equal to himself. Even the nurses notice the difference between Larch and Homer. In the opposition to Larch, who overlooks them, Homer Wells “did not overlook women; he looked right into their eyes.”⁶³ Even in his relationship with Candy Homer respects her choices and they share the parenthood of Angel, even though Candy’s motherhood is initially held as a secret. Another Homer’s relationship is described at the end of the book, when he takes over the abortionist practice in St. Cloud’s and starts to work side by side with the nurse Caroline. They are not only co-workers, but they also become lovers.

The representation of the “phallic father of the nuclear family and the patriarchal society”⁶⁴ is portrayed by Mr. Rose. He tries to have a total control over his daughter Rose Rose. First, he wounds her boyfriend, the father of her child, and second, he goes so far that he starts an incestuous relationship and begins to rape her which ends in her pregnancy and an abortion. However, “the fathers housed by the novel’s central patriarchal families, both Mr. Rose and Dr. Larch, are dead at novel’s end,”⁶⁵ which suggests the end of the patriarchal hierarchy and the hopeful beginning of the more egalitarian system within a world and a family.

This view of a more egalitarian future and better position of women is also suggested in *The World According to Garp* with Jenny Garp, whose life is described in the last chapter “Life After Garp”. She represents a next generation which gets more equal opportunities. While Jenny and Helen occupied the typical women positions of a nurse and a teacher, Jenny becomes a doctor, which used to be a professional position reserved mainly for men. Furthermore, she does not want to lose a part of her identity after her marriage so “she stayed a Garp, and, in a frightful war with her husband, she

⁶¹ Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 223.

⁶² Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 195.

⁶³ Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 195.

⁶⁴ Campbell, *John Irving*, 119.

⁶⁵ Wahlström Henriksson, “Exploring the Relationality of Fatherhood,” 18.

saw that her three children would be all Garps, too.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, she is not afraid to get a divorce and leave the non-suitable marriage. In my reading, she becomes a representation of a more egalitarian future and of a progress that comes with every new generation. With the influence of her strong mother and grandmother, Jenny Garp understands her rights and her freedom to make her own choices.

The same progress is suggested in the depiction of Duncan Garp’s life. He is an open-minded man, which is demonstrated by the fact that he gets married to a transsexual woman. He himself noticed the progress when he stated that he “noted how times had changed; for example, there were feminist funerals everywhere now [...] and in the Philadelphia the sport announcer managed to say, without snickering, that the flag flew at half-mast for *Roberta Muldoon*.”⁶⁷

As for the suggestion of the generational progress to equality, it is also present in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. The novel begins with the portrayal of Win, referred to as the Father, and Mary, the Mother. The distribution of the gender roles in their case is very stereotypical since the mother stays home and takes care of children while the father studies at Harvard and later travels and makes money. Actually, the narrator John Berry tells us that his father was in Dairy with his mother “only long enough to get her pregnant again.”⁶⁸

However, the marriages of John Berry and Susie and of Franny and Junior Jones, which come at the end of the novel, are very different. As for the representation of John and Susie, Irving again reverses the traditional gender roles. It is John who wants to have a child but he says he would never push Susie into something she would not want to. Their relationship is not based on the patriarchal dominance, on the contrary, they are two equals. Eventually, they expect to have a baby but not their own. Franny gets pregnant and since she prioritizes her career, the same as her husband does, she offers her child to John because he is described as “just a perfect sort of *caretaker* [...] a perfect father [...] or a mother.”⁶⁹ This suggests that in the new generation the role of a care-taking mother is not reserved only for a woman.

⁶⁶ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 569.

⁶⁷ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 564.

⁶⁸ Irving, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, 43.

⁶⁹ Irving, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, 421.

5. Sexual Abuse

One of the ways men forcefully maintain their power over women is rape. Irving frequently portrays this issue and it appears in all of the analyzed novels. He openly describes the act itself and its consequences to highlight this type of abuse committed mostly on women. However, Irving does not always portray women as weak victims. In some cases they are able to defend themselves against the abusers and if not, they seek revenge on them. The rapists are punished for their crimes, frequently by the women themselves.

5.1. Women as Their Own Heroes

The central female characters of *The Cider House Rules* who meet with the sexual violence are Melony and Rose Rose. Melony is not portrayed as a weak victim or a passive taker of the abuse. On the contrary, she is strong enough to defend herself and she actually manages to beat up and thus humiliate the men who attempt to rape her. As far as Melony is concerned, men have no power over her. The only exception is Homer Wells, who becomes her idolized hero. The second character who is raped and suffers its consequences is Rose Rose, whose rapist is her father. She becomes pregnant and has to have an abortion. She is portrayed as a defenseless victim, however, after the exposure of her rapist, she stabs him to take a revenge on him. As the rapist knows what he has done, he actually accepts his punishment and decides to die.

One of the most openly and disturbingly described act of rape is the one of Hope Standish, who is a central character of Garp's novel *The World According to Garp*. The abuser Oren Rath kidnaps Hope to rape her and murder her. Hope realizes that no man will save her after she tells Oren's brothers about his intentions but they show no sign of interest. She even doubts she would get any help from a police officer, since when she would cry for help "the trooper would wink at Oren Rath"⁷⁰ as if she was joking. She must depend only on herself and become her own hero. Even though Oren actually rapes her, she does not act as a passive and resigned observer of the act. On the contrary, Hope plots the plan of revenge and finally brutally kills the rapist in the middle of the rape. She is a representation of a strong woman who even in a terrible situation manages to defend herself from the certain death and acts

⁷⁰ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 387.

spontaneously. As Garp himself says, “Hope is seen as a strong survivor of a weak man’s world.”⁷¹

The issue of rape is the main concern of *The Hotel New Hampshire*. There are two main characters in the novel who are raped and who have to overcome their mental damage caused by that terrible experience. However, their way of doing that is very different which suggests that everyone reacts differently to it and that the experience of a rape victim can never be understood and described universally.

The first female character who is not only raped, but gang-raped is Franny Berry. She is a strong character interested in sex and in her sexuality but after the rape experience, she suppresses it for a while. This suggests the damage that the sexual violence causes to the victims. Franny’s way of dealing with the consequences of such violence is overlooking it. She refuses to admit that she was raped and rather says that she was just beaten up and claims that the attackers did not get the “her in her.”⁷²

On the other hand, the second rape victim Susie acknowledges the damage that the rapists caused her and in response to the terrible experience, she starts to wear a bear costume to hide herself from the rest of the world. The rapists not only raped her, but also humiliated her by putting a bag over her head not to have to look at her face. This act “symbolizes that rape is primarily about power and sexual oppression.”⁷³ Susie tries to persuade Franny to deal with her issues and admit what has happened to her. She actually “often acts as Irving’s voice to demand recognition of rape’s seriousness.”⁷⁴

Both of the women carry their issues and need to get rid of them. They manage to help each other rather than being saved by a man. Initially, they become lovers which helps Franny to rediscover her sexuality and Susie to gain some self-confidence. Finally, Franny recognizes that she was raped and decides to take a revenge on her rapist Chipper Dove. The siblings and Susie stage a play to scare Chipper almost to death by threatening him with a rape by a bear, Susie. This theatrical performance helps both Franny and Susie overcome their fears and get rid of their mental issues.

⁷¹ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 420.

⁷² Irving, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, 233.

⁷³ Johanna Larsson, “Ambivalent Feminist Views in John Irving’s ‘The World According to Garp’ and ‘The Hotel New Hampshire’” (Sweden: Lulea University of Technology, 2005), 12-13.

⁷⁴ Tara Coburn, “John Irving, Female Sexuality, and the Victorian Feminine Ideal” (master’s thesis, Eastern Illinois University, 2002), 58, <http://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/1411>.

This suggests that women are strong enough to deal with the violence and that they are able to help themselves. No man is needed to save them.

However, the critics often see Irving's portrayal of rape as problematic. Loudermilk believes that Irving presents women as natural victims and that his work suggests that the rapists deserve some compassion as well, since they are victims of the male lust.⁷⁵ It is true that he frequently mentions male lust and that men have no control over it. However, I do not agree with the statement that the rapists would be granted some compassion. Irving is highlighting the fact that this issue is present in the society and he "is underscoring the awfulness of rape."⁷⁶ His sympathy is granted to the victims, not to the rapists.

In all of the novels Irving openly portrays the terrible nature of rape. The statement that rape is "the most brutalizing experience that can be survived"⁷⁷ is expressed in *The Hotel New Hampshire* and it suggests Irving's sympathy for the rape victims and his disapproval of such violence. The rapists and the act itself is condemned as awful and the sympathy is granted to the victims. Furthermore, the victims are often portrayed as strong survivors rather than weak receivers of the violence and Irving empowers them to take revenge on the men who caused them harm.

5.2. Ellen Jamesians

The Ellen Jamesians form a group representing a radical Feminism in *The World According to Garp*. The group is formed after a girl Ellen James is raped and her tongue is cut out. The women who sympathize with Ellen establish this group out of anger and to highlight the horrible nature of rape. This group is quite polemic since its members mutilate themselves on purpose to express their sympathy to Ellen and to make it a symbolic gesture. The main character Garp does not understand it and says that these women are crazy. However, what he "fails to understand is that their self-mutilation "speaks" the very subject of rape. The Ellen Jamesians' cut flesh becomes the word for rape."⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Loudermilk, *Fictional Feminism*, 80.

⁷⁶ Campbell, *John Irving*, 106.

⁷⁷ Irving, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, 329.

⁷⁸ Campbell, *John Irving*, 85.

Many critics perceive Ellen Jamesians as Irving's negative depiction of Feminism. Loudermilk argues that Ellen Jamesians are presented as grotesquely mutilated, silent and overzealous group which represents a fictional Feminism of the novel and gives Feminism a bad name. Most of the characters hate them, especially T. S. Garp, who becomes their main enemy.⁷⁹ Sally Robinson further claims that these women are described as "false" victims and that their actions are meaningless.⁸⁰ It is true that their actions are extreme, but the Ellen Jamesians do not represent the mainstream Feminism, they are a radical group. Furthermore, even though they are not portrayed as sympathetic figures, there are moments when Garp sympathizes with them and understands their actions.

The first moment is when he finds out that a boy, as he calls him the "The Moustache Kid," who raped a little girl in the park, avoided the punishment. Garp is very disillusioned and says that "he felt such a terrible sense of injustice that he could even imagine some very unhappy woman despairing enough to cut off her own tongue."⁸¹ In this situation, Garp understands the motives of Ellen Jamesians for their mutilation which suggests that it takes a really extreme situation for a man to understand women's pain and feelings about rape.

Another such emotional situation is when Garp attends the feminist funeral of his mother Jenny. He "felt the whole history of the world's self-mutilation – though violent and illogical, it expressed, perhaps like nothing else, a terrible hurt."⁸² By that Irving expresses Garp's understanding and sympathy for women who suffered a sexual harassment. Even though he finds the mutilation illogical, he comes closer to an understanding of the experience of a rape victim.

Even though Ellen Jamesians do not provide a positive representation of Feminism, they are granted a certain dose of understanding and sympathy. They are the radical group, but sometimes the desperate people do extreme things to gain attention. In the moments of hopelessness, Garp moves closer to the rape victims' feelings and partially understands Ellen Jamesians' actions.

⁷⁹ Loudermilk, *Fictional Feminism*, 71.

⁸⁰ Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, 104.

⁸¹ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 201.

⁸² Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 468.

6. Abortions

The issue of abortions is discussed in depth in the novel *The Cider House Rules* and makes the novel unique but controversial. The novel was published in the 1985, when abortions were legal in America, yet there were continuing fights of the pro-life and pro-choice supporters, so this issue was still relevant and needed to be talked about since “the legalization of abortions assured woman’s liberty with relation to the male.”⁸³

The novel presents the abortions with openness and stresses women’s right to make their own choices and that makes it “probably the only bestselling, mainstream novel to speak so thoroughly and continuously about abortion, written by a major American author.”⁸⁴ Irving himself supported women’s right for a termination of pregnancy in his speech at Oscars in 2000, by thanking “everyone at Planned Parenthood and the National Abortion Rights League.”⁸⁵ Also, in one of the interviews he expressed that he sees the illegal abortions as a violence against women⁸⁶ by which he clearly expressed his pro-choice view of the issue which is demonstrated in all of the analyzed novels.

The novel introduces the abortion controversy with the protagonist Doctor Wilbur Larch. He is an obstetrician who starts to practice his profession in the times when abortions were illegal. Initially, he refuses to perform them but after the death of one of his patients due to the unsafe abortion practice, he decides to help women. This terrible event makes him realize that he is not in the position to make decisions over the body of someone else and that there will always be women seeking a possibility to abort. Rather than follow the law, he chooses to fulfill women’s wishes and so he gives “them what they want: an orphan or an abortion.”⁸⁷

Doctor Larch expresses his refusal of the anti-abortion laws which are produced and passed mainly by male politicians who have all the power. He wonders “for whom did some minds insist that babies, even clearly unwanted ones, *must* be

⁸³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by H. M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 148.

⁸⁴ Helena Wahlström, “Reproduction, Politics, and John Irving’s *The Cider House Rules*,” *Culture Unbound*, vol. 5 (2013): 251-271, <http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se/article.asp?DOI=10.3384/cu.2000.1525.135251>.

⁸⁵ John Irving, “John Irving Wins Adapted Screenplay: 2000 Oscars,” YouTube video, posted by “Oscars,” July 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJOYSgdPiH0>.

⁸⁶ John Irving, interview by Ron Hansen, “John Irving, The Art of Fiction No.93.”

⁸⁷ Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 187.

brought, screaming, into the world?”⁸⁸ As a head of an orphanage, Larch knows that orphans’ future is not always very bright so he questions the insistence on a children’s birth. “The novel represents abortion as a social practice involving both men and women, and stresses gendered and sexualized positions of empowerment and need.”⁸⁹ So as Larch suggests, the power is in the hands of male politicians and doctors. Women’s needs and their own choices are in the opposition to the men’s world.

The second major character is Homer Wells, the orphan and Larch’s apprentice with whom he shares a father-son bond. Initially, Homer studies the abortionist techniques but after some time, he comes to a conviction that he does not want to continue in terminating women’s pregnancies. He does not judge Larch’s practices, he believes “it’s his choice – if it’s a fetus, to him, that’s fine. It’s a baby to me.”⁹⁰ As long as there is someone else to help women to abort, Homer feels free of this duty and refuses to perform abortions for moral reasons.

The change comes with the pregnancy of Rose Rose, caused by an intercourse with her violent father. Homer immediately says she needs an abortion but unfortunately, Doctor Larch is no longer alive. When Homer finds out there is no one else who would help women to get a safe abortion, he realizes he cannot avoid his responsibility. Helena Wahlström, the author of the article “Reproduction, Politics, and John Irving’s *The Cider House Rules*” believes that Irving connects Homer’s change of mind and his transition to a pro-choice conviction to his maturing into a responsible adult.⁹¹ I agree with this reading since Homer’s start of the abortionist practice coincides with the time when he decides to make other important changes in his life. He becomes honest with his son and reveals the truth about him and Candy. Furthermore, this change comes after Larch’s death, so Homer feels responsible for women in need and believes there needs to be someone who would help them. This suggests Irving’s stance that the pro-choice belief comes with one’s maturity and that finally, it is a right thing to do.

The central female characters who obtain an abortion are Candy and Rose Rose, who are women of different social status and with different reasons for the abortion. This suggests that the abortion is a widely needed and wanted practice.

⁸⁸ Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 10.

⁸⁹ Wahlström, “Reproduction, Politics, and John Irving’s *The Cider House Rules*.”

⁹⁰ Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 169.

⁹¹ Wahlström, “Reproduction, Politics, and John Irving’s *The Cider House Rules*.”

Candy is an example of an independent woman, who gets pregnant with her boyfriend Wally, who is well-secured and would not have a problem to have a child. It is Candy, who wishes to terminate her pregnancy because “it’s just not the right time.”⁹² It is her own choice which is not forced by someone else or by social or economic reasons.

The case of Rose Rose is completely different. She is an Afro-American woman who seeks an abortion because she was raped and what is more, the rapist was her own father. Even in this case, the woman is not able to terminate her pregnancy legally and if it was not for Homer, she would have to undergo some questionable practices to abort the fetus. Irving sympathetically portrays this terrible case of the incestuous rape and strengthens the belief that women should have an access to a safe abortion.

Both of these characters underwent the abortionist procedure, yet in some other time they became mothers. According to Wahlström, Irving intentionally creates a connection between motherhood and abortions to oppose the pro-life claims that women who had or supported abortions refuse a family life and motherhood.⁹³ The novel opposes these false accusations. In case of Candy, she has a son Angel later in her life and as Homer tells her, she is “a good mother,”⁹⁴ regardless of the fact that she had an abortion earlier in her life. As for the character of Rose Rose, she is also a mother and takes care of her child, thus Irving clearly rejects the claim that those who support abortions are anti-motherhood.

Even in *The World According to Garp* there is a suggestion of a pro-choice stance of one of its central characters. Jenny Fields believes that women should have a control over their bodies and they should have a right of choice in general. She expresses the same opinion concerning the termination of pregnancy. She says that women “shouldn’t *have* to have babies”⁹⁵ and thus expresses her pro-choice belief.

As for *The Hotel New Hampshire*, Irving also briefly mentions the abortion issue. First, he introduces it with the female character named Schwanger, who published a book about abortions. She actually published it when the occupation of Austria ended so that it “had made the expulsion of this unwanted child symbolic of Austria’s freeing

⁹² Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 148.

⁹³ Wahlström, “Reproduction, Politics, and John Irving’s *The Cider House Rules*.”

⁹⁴ Irving, *The Cider House Rules*, 501.

⁹⁵ Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 18.

herself.”⁹⁶ In this case, Irving thus suggests that the abortion is an act of freeing oneself and compares it to the independence of a nation. The second case when the abortion is mentioned is at the end of the book when Franny gets accidentally pregnant and decides to give her baby to her brother “rather than do the modern thing.”⁹⁷ The novel does not explicitly show any abortion practice, but calling it ‘a modern thing’ expresses a positive posture towards the issue.

There is no doubt of Irving’s pro-choice views, which are apparent especially in *The Cider House Rules*. The novel expresses a support of women’s right to have an abortion and consequently a control over their bodies and lives. Irving’s stance to this issue is clearly pro-feminist since the illegality of abortions and the control over female fertility is one of the ways men control women.

7. Sexuality

Sexuality is one of the most frequent themes in Irving’s novels. He does not concentrate only on heterosexual relationships, on the contrary, he focuses also on homosexual and transsexual characters. As Morris says, it was necessary to stop marginalizing lesbians in literature and offer their positive portrayal, since the lesbians were always connected to the sin and sickness.⁹⁸ The frequent portrayal of homosexuals makes Irving’s works modern and unprejudiced, even though some critics perceive his portrayal of lesbians as problematic. As for his representation of female sexuality, he often creates female characters interested in sex and sexuality, but in many cases the punishment awaits them, which is one of the troubling aspect of Irving’s texts.

7.1. Transsexuality

One of the central characters of *The World According to Garp* is Roberta Muldoon, a transsexual woman. She is a former popular football player Robert Muldoon and decides to undergo the reassignment surgery after reading Jenny’s book *A Sexual Suspect*. This suggests the influence of this feminist book on an individual and it may be a suggestion that feminist ideas encourage people to find their own identity and to

⁹⁶ Irving, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, 246.

⁹⁷ Irving, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, 421.

⁹⁸ Morris, *Literatura a Feminismus*, 180.

stop being afraid. Irving's novel is praised that "in a gesture toward androgyny, it provides characters who prove the viability of transsexuality."⁹⁹

According to Campbell, Irving's portrayal of Roberta demonstrates that the borders between genders are not so clear anymore and points out that Irving assigns Roberta stereotypical feminine qualities to expose the prejudices held about sexes.¹⁰⁰ After the sex reassignment surgery Roberta becomes passive, protective and caring person. The example situation is when her boyfriend breaks up with her. She is emotionally unstable and instead of beating her boyfriend for his rude treatment, she decides not to do anything. However, her protectiveness is not typically feminine but rather aggressive and physical. She intervenes many times using her physical force to protect the people she loves.

Another transsexual character is introduced at the end of the novel. It is a young woman who takes care of Duncan's apartment after her sex operation and eventually, they get married. The portrayal of the marriage of a man with a transsexual woman indicates Irving's modern approach and his rejection of homophobia.

Generally, Irving's depiction of the transsexual characters and his attempt to highlight the fact that these people exist in our society is very modern. He does not portray strict gender division. On the contrary, he blurs the boundaries between genders which marks a pro-feminist approach.

7.2. Homosexuality

Homosexual characters appear in all of the discussed novels. Irving does not marginalize the people of this sexual orientation and in some cases even offers a positive portrayal of their relationships. The homosexual couples appearing in these works are Franny and Susie, Melony and Lorna and finally some characters in *The World According to Garp*.

Franny Berry and Susie are both rape victims and they become lovers. Irving openly describes their sexual relationship rather than denying or suppressing its existence. He frequently mentions how "Franny was singing the song Susie could make her sing"¹⁰¹ referring to them having sex. Their lesbian relationship is described positively. They even manage to help each other with their issues caused by the rape

⁹⁹ Doane and Hodges, *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference*, 66.

¹⁰⁰ Campbell, *John Irving*, 77.

¹⁰¹ Irving, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, 285.

experience. Susie gains self-confidence and Franny rediscovers her sexuality. However, the troubling aspect of Irving's depiction of the lesbian relationship is that it does not last long. Franny never acknowledges being a lesbian and at the end of the novel both women get married to men. The good thing is that Irving offers a positive portrayal of homosexual relationship, but he does not assign it proper recognition and duration.

The lesbian relationship of Melony and Lorna in *The Cider House Rules* is depicted more seriously. It is described equally as a heterosexual relationship, with the same problems and values. The couple encounters problems like infidelity, abortion, break-up and getting back together. Irving thus equalizes the lesbian relationship with the heterosexual one and makes it appear as a standard thing which is present in the society.

The lesbians are not central characters of *The World According to Garp*, but they are mentioned several times. However, critics perceive Irving's depiction of homosexuals in this novel quite troubling. Loudermilk believes that the representation of lesbians in the novel is based on stereotypes, such as that lesbians are unfeminine and unattractive. They are also referred to negatively, ridiculed or connected to violence. She believes that this makes the novel homophobic regarding this matter.¹⁰² I agree with this reading, since Garp and Roberta's vision of lesbians is based on stereotypical views and is rather negative. Once they encounter a woman or a group of women whom they dislike, they tend to suggest that it must be lesbians and it creates a negative association of lesbianism with violence or something negative.

Even though *The World According to Garp* offers quite negative portrayal of lesbians, the other two novels are less influenced by the stereotypes held about homosexuality. The important thing is that Irving incorporates homosexual characters in his works and does not marginalize them. *The Cider House Rules* and *The Hotel New Hampshire* provide a positive image of lesbian relationships and thus create a notion that lesbianism is a natural phenomenon present in the society.

7.3. Women's Sexuality

Women's sexuality is one of the troubling issues appearing in Irving's novels. The positive fact supporting his pro-feminist values is that "his novels often celebrate

¹⁰² Loudermilk, *Fictional Feminism*, 83-84.

sexuality and sexual empowerment for women.”¹⁰³ He acknowledges sexuality and lust of both sexes and does not suppress it in case of women. However, the problem is that in many cases his female characters are punished for their interest in sexuality. On the other hand, men’s lust is more prominent, more natural and does not tend to be punished.

Loudermilk criticizes the fact that female sexuality in Irving’s works is either suppressed, as in Jenny’s case, punished by rape or punished differently, nevertheless the consequences are always terrible.¹⁰⁴ There are several examples supporting this statement.

Male lust is frequently discussed in *The World According to Garp* and the novel evokes the feeling that men have no control over it. The main male character Garp cheats on his wife Helen several times without any consequences. On the other hand, Helen’s affair is greatly punished by the death of one of their sons and the hurt of the other. However, as Robinson says, Helen’s cheating can be seen as a kind of punishment of Garp’s affairs. Also, the guilt resulting from the accident is not only Helen’s, but she and Garp are both blamed equally.¹⁰⁵

The female character with most interest in sexuality appearing in *The Hotel New Hampshire* is Franny Berry. She likes to flirt with men and is aware of her sexual power. However, Irving seems to punish her for it by making her a victim of a gang-rape. This experience results in her rejection of sexuality, although not for long. She starts experimenting and rediscovers her sexuality with a lesbian woman Susie. Later she has sex with her brother John since they love each other more than they should. She is the one who takes the initiative and decides to save them both from the lust they feel by having sex all night.

Irving’s treatment of female sexuality sometimes suggests his stereotypical tendencies. He tends to punish women for their expression of sexuality, but he also empowers them to overcome the results of the punishment. Despite this troubling matter appearing in his novels, it is at least praiseworthy that except in Jenny’s case, Irving does not suppress female sexuality and admits that women are lustful characters as well.

¹⁰³ Coburn, “John Irving, Female Sexuality, and the Victorian Feminine Ideal,” 15.

¹⁰⁴ Loudermilk, *Fictional Feminism*, 79.

¹⁰⁵ Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, 111.

8. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to provide a feminist reading of John Irving's novels *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire* and *The Cider House Rules* and to provide the overview of the ambivalent reactions of the female critics. The thesis sought to demonstrate that Irving mostly holds feminist values.

Irving's progressive and supportive attitude towards women is clearly demonstrated by his portrayal of female characters who are strong, dominant, capable and independent. They play important roles in the novels and their opinions have their value. The feminine qualities that are stereotypically assigned to women are suppressed which is one of the evidence of Irving's feminist values.

In case of the gender role assignment, it was proven that Irving's views are modern based on his portrayal of non-traditional gender role division. The roles of his male and female characters are reversed in many cases which marks Irving's feminist beliefs. Furthermore, the portrayal of generational progress toward equality indicates both support of equality between sexes and of the modern family model. These are another evidence supporting the argument of the thesis.

Regarding the rape issue, Irving's representation is quite ambivalent in some cases. However, it was argued that he mainly describes this matter to highlight its existence in the society and to express his sympathy for women. He presents the female characters who are strong enough to overcome their mental damage caused by the rape experience and to seek revenge on their rapists. The separate subchapter was dedicated to the group of Ellen Jamesians, since they are often perceived as Irving's negative representation of Feminism. However, it was demonstrated that they are not completely negative figures and that their actions are understood in some emotionally charged situations. Furthermore, they represent a group of radical Feminists, not the mainstream Feminism.

It was proven that Irving's attitude towards abortions is clearly positive. He rejects the negative suppositions held about abortions and creates a positive connection between a pro-choice stance and one's maturity and honesty. This support of women's right to make their own choices and to have control over their bodies engages Irving with the feminist cause and serves as an evidence of his positive feminist values.

Interestingly, sexuality is the most troubling issue discussed in the novels. It was demonstrated that the positive aspect of Irving's work is the incorporation of

homosexual and transsexual characters into his novels and his open depiction of female sexuality. However, sometimes he tends to express stereotypical views that are held about homosexuals and to punish women for their open expression of sexuality.

Despite Irving's occasionally ambivalent portrayal of feminist issues and the fact that some feminist critics perceive him negatively, regarding he is a male writer and that he published the novels in the 1970s and 1980s, I believe that his works contributed to the feminist cause and that his work is very modern and represents feminist issues mostly positively and sympathetically.

9. Resumé

John Irving je z pohledu kritiček velmi kontroverzním spisovatelem, protože se ve svých dílech často věnuje tématům, která jsou předmětem zájmu feministické kritiky. Mezi tato témata patří vyobrazování žen v literatuře, jejich sexualita, téma sexuálního násilí a v neposlední řadě problematika potratů, kde muži zneužívají své moci a zakazováním interrupcí znemožňují ženám mít kontrolu nad svým tělem a plodností.

První část práce je věnována životu Johna Irvinga a výčtu jeho tvorby, pro pochopení toho, jak své životní zkušenosti promítá do svých děl. Následující podkapitola pak obsahuje přehled různých názorů na Irvinga a poukazuje na spor ve vnímání jeho tvorby ze strany žen. Pro lepší pochopení feministické literární kritiky a postojů těchto kritiček je další kapitola věnována právě této problematice a jejímu vývoji.

Cílem této práce bylo poskytnout rozbor románů Johna Irvinga z pohledu feministické kritiky. Konkrétně šlo o knihy *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire* a *The Cider House Rules*. Dále se práce zabývala tím, jak kritičky hodnotí tyto knihy a bylo poukázáno na fakt, že jejich hodnocení jsou kvůli kontroverznosti témat často velmi rozlišná. Cílem práce bylo prokázat, že ve většině případů Irving vyobrazuje feministická témata kladně, a že on sám zastává feministické hodnoty.

Vyobrazování žen v literárních dílech často bylo a je založeno na stereotypních představách. Irving však ženy popisuje jako silné, dominantní, schopné a nezávislé postavy, čímž boří mýtus o ženě jako o pasivním stvoření bez vlastního názoru. Tento fakt prokazuje jeho kladný postoj k ženám a jeho podporu emancipace a rovnoprávnosti. Ženskost, jako soubor stereotypních představ o ženách, je v případě jeho postav potlačena, což je dalším důkazem Irvingových feministických hodnot.

Pojetí genderových rolí je jedním z hlavních zájmů feministek, které se snaží o rozbourání stereotypního přisuzování rolí ženám a mužům. V práci bylo prokázáno, že Irvingovo pojetí genderových rolí je velmi moderní a koresponduje s feministickými představami. Namísto stereotypního uspořádání jsou mužům přisuzovány typicky ženské role a naopak. Dalším pozitivním aspektem děl je Irvingovo vyobrazování vývoje, který přichází s každou novou generací, a směřuje k rovnoprávnosti žen a mužů. Lze tedy říci, že tyto romány podporují feministické hodnoty a představy o moderním uspořádání v rodině.

Irvingovo vyobrazování sexuálního násilí, konkrétně znásilnění, je často nejednoznačné a kontroverzní. Nicméně v práci bylo prokázáno, že autor tuto problematiku popisuje hlavně za účelem poukázání na její existenci ve společnosti a také k projevení soucitu s oběťmi znásilnění. Právě tyto ženy jsou v jeho knihách často vyobrazovány jako silné osobnosti, které jsou schopny se s následky znásilnění vypořádat a dokonce se v mnoha případech svým násilníkům pomstít. Samostatná podkapitola pak byla věnována skupině Ellen Jamesians, protože je kvůli své kontroverznosti často vnímána negativně. Obecně kritičky tuto skupinu považují za Irvingovo negativní vyobrazení feminismu. Je však třeba říci, že tato skupina reprezentuje radikální feminismus a ne celé hnutí. Dále bylo prokázáno, že představitelky této skupiny se v emočně vypjatých situacích setkávají s porozuměním. Jejich činy a postoje jsou tedy pochopeny a nejsou vyobrazovány zcela negativně.

Potraty jsou obecně velmi kontroverzní záležitost. Irvingovy postoje k tomuto tématu jsou však jednoznačně kladné. Několikrát sám vyjádřil svou podporu potratům a své názory také promítá do svých děl. Ve svých románech boří negativní představy o potratech a vytváří spojitost mezi podporou potratů a dospělostí a čestností jedince. Tato spojitost pak ve čtenářích vyvolává kladné představy o interrupci. Irving ve svých dílech podporuje právo žen dělat svá vlastní rozhodnutí a to ho spojuje s feministickými cíli a dokazuje jeho feministické hodnoty.

Vyobrazování ženské sexuality a homosexuálních postav je překvapivě nejproblémovějším rysem Irvingových románů. Z feministického hlediska lze kladně hodnotit autorovo začleňování transsexuálních a homosexuálních postav do příběhu a nepotlačování ženské sexuality. Nicméně je pravdou, že se v těchto dílech často objevují stereotypní představy o lesbách a také tendence trestat ženy za jejich vyjadřování sexuality. Mužská sexualita je naopak vnímána jako přirozená věc, což je jedním z negativních rysů Irvingova díla z pohledu feministické kritiky.

Navzdory tomu, že Irving občas vyobrazuje feministická témata sporně, a že jsou jeho texty někdy feministkami vnímány negativně, je třeba vzít v potaz následující faktory. Jedná se o mužského autora, který se těmito tématy zabýval v 70. a 80. letech 20. století, což jeho práci dělá jedinečnou a moderní. Věřím, že Irvingova díla přispěla k feministickým cílům, protože ve většině případů vyobrazují feministická témata pozitivně a se soucitem.

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11. Anotace

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Název práce: Rozbor románů Johna Irvinga z pohledu feministické kritiky: analýza feministických témat v jeho dílech

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. David Livingstone, Ph.D.

Počet stran: 47

Práce je zaměřena na rozbor románů Johna Irvinga z pohledu feministické kritiky. Konkrétně jde o díla *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire* a *The Cider House Rules*. V práci se snažím prokázat, že i přes občasné dvojznačnosti ve vyobrazování feministických témat Irving zastává feministické hodnoty. První část práce se soustředí na biografii a publikace Johna Irvinga a dále na historii a vývoj Angloamerické feministické literární kritiky. Následující kapitoly obsahují analýzu děl, zvláště pak témat, která jsou předmětem zájmu feministické kritiky. Prvním rozebíraným tématem je vyobrazování ženskosti a genderových rolí ve zmíněných románech. Dále se práce zaměřuje na téma sexuálního násilí, problematiku potratů a nakonec na vyobrazování sexuality v Irvingově díle.

Klíčová slova: feminismus, feministická kritika, John Irving, potrat, znásilnění, sexualita, ženskost, genderové role

12. Abstract

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Title of the thesis: A Feminist Reading of John Irving's Novels: An Analysis of His Portrayal of Feminist Issues

Supervisor: Mgr. David Livingstone, Ph.D.

Number of pages: 47

The aim of this work is to offer an analysis of Irving's novels from the point of view of Feminist criticism. The analyzed novels are *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire* and *The Cider House Rules*. The thesis argues that Irving mostly holds feminist values despite the occasional ambivalences in his portrayal of feminist issues. In the first part of the thesis, I focus on Irving's biography and his publications and then on a brief summary of the development of Anglo-American Feminist literary criticism. In the following chapters I analyze the issues which reappear in Irving's novels and are relevant to Feminist criticism. First, the portrayal of femininity and gender roles is discussed. Second, the issue of sexual violence in the novels is analyzed. Third, the abortion issue is examined and finally I analyze Irving's description of sexuality in the novels.

Key words: feminism, feminist criticism, John Irving, abortion, rape, sexuality, femininity, gender roles