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**Non-traditional Relationships in the Selected Works of
Michael Cunningham**

Netradiční vztahy ve vybraných dílech Michaela Cunninghama

Bakalářská práce

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Abstrakt:

Tato práce se zabývá aplikací psychologických a sociologických teorií na netradiční vztahy ve třech románech amerického spisovatele Michaela Cunninghama: *Domov na konci světa*, *Hodiny* a *Za soumraku*. Jejím cílem je ukázat, že způsoby myšlení naší heteronormativní společnosti, která preferuje monogamní vztahy, často vedou k mylným úsudkům ohledně toho, jaké chování je normální. Práce kontrastuje slova „normální“ a „tradiční“ a poukazuje na to, že vše, co je normální, nemůže sice být považováno za tradiční, ale to ještě neznamená, že je to špatné či nemorální. Aplikací teorií psychologie a sociologie na románové postavy, k nimž lidé bývají shovívavější než ke skutečným osobám, se práce snaží inspirovat k toleranci i mimo svět literatury.

Klíčová slova: literatura, americká literatura, Michael Cunningham, *Domov na konci světa*, *Hodiny*, *Po setmění*, netradiční vztahy, mezilidské vztahy, sexual landscape, milostný trojúhelník, sexuální fluidita, polyamorie.

Annotation

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Abstract:

This thesis is concerned with the application of psychological and sociological theories on the non-traditional relationships found in three novels of the American author, Michael Cunningham. They are: *A House at the End of the World*, *The Hours*, and *By Nightfall*. Its aim is to show that our thinking, influenced by the heteronormative, monogamy-preferring society we live in, frequently leads to incorrect opinions as to what behavior is normal. The thesis contrasts the words "normal" and "traditional" and points out that what is normal cannot always be considered traditional, but that does not mean it is bad or immoral. By applying the theories of psychology and sociology on fictional characters with whom people are more indulgent compared to real persons, this thesis attempts to inspire tolerance even outside the world of literature.

Key words: literature, American literature, Michael Cunningham, *A Home at the End of the World*, *The Hours*, *By Nightfall*, non-traditional relationships, interpersonal relationships, sexual landscape, love triangle, sexual fluidity, polyamory.

Prohlášení

Místopřísežně prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci na téma: „Non-traditional Relationships in the Selected Works of Michael Cunningham” vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne.....

Podpis.....

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I would also like to thank Mary Vermillion, writer and Professor of English, who not only pointed me in the right direction that led to Michael Cunningham, but who also spent countless hours scrutinizing my own creative writing efforts.

Finally, I would like to thank Michael Cunningham himself for writing such admirable stories that I *still* love even after dissecting them for so many hours.

It all started in a dormitory of Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

*My very religious American roommate told me one night that she thought
homosexuality was wrong by God.*

A few days later, a friend of mine confided in me with great fear that she was a lesbian.

I did not resent her; I valued the courage she needed to gather to tell me her secret.

After all, that was the reason her parents sent her to the U.S.

They expected she would return home more traditional.

They thought it was just a phase and they expected it would eventually pass.

And then, my roommate met this friend in her Spanish class.

She was exhilarated and kept praising her for being so helpful in her Spanish studies.

It got me thinking.

*What would my roommate say, what would she do, if she found out
the girl was a lesbian?*

Would she start hating her?

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1 Introduction

The present thesis combines its author's interests in sociology and psychology with literature, her field of study. Its aim is to look at literature through the lens of these two sciences, but its overall goal is to promote tolerance outside the world of literature. During her short life, the author has noticed that people can be very strict and intolerant towards what is non-traditional in the real world; they express a lot more leniency when it comes to fiction and fictional characters. When questioned about their love for characters such as Gregory House from *House M.D.*, or Dexter Morgan from *Dexter*, they are aware these are insupportable (and quite non-traditional) people, but they watch all the episodes of these TV shows regardless. The author noticed this "double standard" and decided to write her thesis on non-traditional relationships.

"I'm interested," Michael Cunningham said in an interview, "in sexuality that falls outside the official lines of demarcation."¹ He also agrees that the main purpose of fiction may be to accompany us through life, to give us, by opening the consciousness of another person, the possibility to privately analyze our own feelings, identify with the character, and possibly feel relieved that we are not crazy for having felt a certain way.² For these reasons, I chose his works to work with in this thesis.

Cunningham is quite the non-traditional man. Even though he identifies himself as a homosexual, he refuses to be labeled a "gay writer," and he holds various non-traditional beliefs about family and life as such. "I have seen people," Cunningham said to an interviewer, "mop up the vomit and mop up the shit and hold one another as they died. These are the things they told us you need your family for and—guess what?—you don't."³ This rather graphic statement makes it clear that for Cunningham, family is not defined by the sex of its members or by the traditionalism of its structure. Where people love each other, there is always a family, however non-traditional. He clearly

¹ Michael Cunningham, "Michael Cunningham," interview by Thessaly La Force, *The Paris Review*, October 14, 2010, <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2010/10/14/michael-cunningham>.

² Michael Cunningham, "Michael Cunningham," interview by Justin Spring, *Bomb*, Winter 1999, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2208/michael-cunningham>.

³ Michael Cunningham, "Michael Cunningham," interview by Philip Gambone, *Something Inside: Conversations with Gay Fiction Writers* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 148.

does not perceive the world as black and white; he says his and everyone else's life is much more complicated.⁴ He thinks that fiction, unlike other media, can “get under the skin of other people,” and unlike other media that show things, fiction can “take you for a walk into the heart and soul of somebody.”⁵ Fiction also serves as a means to talk about our life's problems, sorrows, and losses (because happiness belongs to our real worlds) in ways we do not do in normal life.⁶ “First, last, and always,” he says, “I'm concerned as a writer—and reader—with what it's like to be alive, for a minute, in the middle of everything.”⁷

Cunningham thinks literature is art, and something more than art—something to help us make sense of the world. Reading this opinion of Cunningham's, the author of this thesis thought she found a kindred spirit, and therefore three of Cunningham's novels were chosen as primary sources for this work. Chronologically they are *A Home at the End of the World*,⁸ *The Hours*,⁹ and *By Nightfall*.¹⁰

This thesis features a brief chapter on the person of Michael Cunningham and the ways in which he is praised or criticized by the public. Following are two chapters applying psychological and sociological theories to his three novels. One deals with *By Nightfall*, and uses the concept of mid-life crisis and the model of sexual landscape on the protagonist of the novel, Peter Harris. The other chapter deals with the triangular relationships which appear in *The Hours* and *A Home at the End of the World*, using the model of the eternal triangle (also known as love triangle) and introduces the concept of polyamory. I decided to provide original summaries of all three books that are dealt with here; I consider them necessary to facilitate the reader's orientation in the analyses. The summaries are incorporated in the beginnings of chapters which deal with the particular novels.

I found it difficult to completely separate theory and practice, and therefore I opted for only partial separation. The above-mentioned theories and models that are

⁴ Cunningham, *Conversations*, 144.

⁵ Cunningham, *Conversations*, 144.

⁶ Cunningham, *Conversations*, 145.

⁷ Cunningham, “Michael Cunningham,” *Bomb*.

⁸ Michael Cunningham, *A Home at the End of the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990).

⁹ Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998).

¹⁰ Michael Cunningham, *By Nightfall* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2010).

primarily used are explained prior to the analyses and following the summaries. Additional theoretical information is then supplied in the course of the analyses, organized into sub-chapters.

The immediate aim of this thesis is twofold: firstly, to introduce readers to new concepts and ways of looking at the world, demonstrating them straight away on fictional characters with which people are more indulgent than with real human beings, and illustrating that at any given moment, anyone can cross the line of *traditional*, but remain *normal*. Secondly, I am trying to show that *traditional* tools can frequently fail helping us understand the world around us, but that does not mean the world has become *abnormal*; it is merely *non-traditional*.

2 Michael Cunningham in a Nutshell

Michael Cunningham is an American author and screenwriter. Born on November 6, 1952 in Cincinnati, Ohio, he grew up in Pasadena, California. He studied English at Stanford University, and later gained the degree of Master of Fine Arts from the Iowa Writer's Workshop at University of Iowa in 1980. Up to date he has written seven novels, a book of non-fiction, a collection of fairytales and two screenplays, one of them for the 2004 film adaptation of his novel *A Home at the End of the World*. He does not frequently discuss his personal life or the times of growing up, but in his works he is frequently preoccupied with mother and son relationships while the fathers are at least partially absent.¹¹ Due to revisiting this theme, he has been accused of supporting the dated 1960s notion that families with a strong mother and a weak (or absent) father produce gay sons.¹² (From the novels of concern for the present thesis it is indeed true for Jonathan in *A Home...* and possibly also Richard in *The Hours*.) Cunningham himself, however, prefers to view his novels *Golden States*, *A Home at the End of the World*, and *Flesh and Blood* as following their male protagonists' ways from unhappy nuclear families to future non-traditional family arrangements.¹³

After his M.F.A. Cunningham moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, with which he had had a love-hate relationship, finally paying his homage in the 2002 non-fiction publication entitled *Land's End: A Walk through Provincetown*.¹⁴

Even though he lived in a partnership with a boyfriend, Ken Corbett, for 26 years, he resents being labeled a gay writer and this attitude provoked criticism from other gay authors.¹⁵ His works are viewed as assimilative (rather than queer);¹⁶ his characters are not homosexuals—they are men and women who just happen to be

¹¹ Tory Young, *Michael Cunningham's The Hours: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 11–13.

¹² Young, *Reader's Guide*, 24.

¹³ Young, *Reader's Guide*, 11–14.

¹⁴ Luca Prono, *Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Popular Culture* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), 78.

¹⁵ Young, *Reader's Guide*, 14.

¹⁶ Young, *Reader's Guide*, 15.

homosexuals.¹⁷ He is, therefore, sometimes criticized for writing about gay people for a straight audience,¹⁸ and by emphasizing the emotional hindrance and misery of gay characters, whereby affirming the heterosexual norm.¹⁹ In short, it seems that, being gay himself, Cunningham is expected to only debate gay issues in his writing and sell solely to the gay audience. He does not, however, discuss only sexuality; his main interest is definitely the individual, the family in all its possible non-traditional forms, and the role of the individual within that family.²⁰ He says he lives in a “bigger world than just the world that specifically pertains to [his] sexual orientation.”²¹

Cunningham lives a life of a writer and a political activist, fighting for gay rights in theory as well as in practice. He has been arrested several times for civil disobedience. In both his real life and on paper he is involved in spreading AIDS awareness. He says that surviving through the worst of the AIDS epidemic changed his view of death and the world in general.²²

When asked what the term “gay novelist” meant to him, Cunningham answered that he considers the notion of “gay literature” less and less useful. There was a need, he said, for books about non-traditional (sexual) experience, but now the time has come to take literature to another level. “In my ideal world,” he concludes, “you’ll just pick up a book and it will turn out to have all straight characters in it, or it will turn out to have gay characters in it, or some combination of the two.”²³

¹⁷ Young, *Reader's Guide*, 16.

¹⁸ Young, *Reader's Guide*, 16.

¹⁹ Young, *Reader's Guide*, 17.

²⁰ Young, *Reader's Guide*, 25.

²¹ Cunningham, *Conversations*, 149.

²² Michael Cunningham, “Michael Cunningham: A Life in Writing,” interview by Emma Brockes, *The Guardian*, February 7, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/feb/07/michael-cunningham-life-writing>.

²³ Cunningham, *Conversations*, 149.

3 Peter Harris and Ethan “Mizzy” Taylor in *By Nightfall*

3.1 Peter and Mizzy: Introduction

By Nightfall, Cunningham’s fifth novel, was first published in 2010. The present chapter discusses the unusual relationship that forms between the protagonist Peter Harris and his brother-in-law Mizzy. The chapter concentrates mainly on Peter for two reasons. Peter is the focalizer and hence his thoughts are known to the reader, whereas Mizzy, his thoughts and motivations remain a mystery throughout the novel. Secondly, Peter is undoubtedly the one more affected by the relationship. After a short summary of the plot of the novel, I will introduce the model of sexual landscape,²⁴ apply it on the character of Peter, and attempt to explain how and why it was possible for him to form such attachment to Mizzy.

3.2 *By Nightfall*: A Brief Summary

By Nightfall tells the story of the Harrises, a middle-aged couple living in New York City: Peter, a forty-four-year old second-rate art dealer, and Rebecca, four years his junior, editor of a minor art magazine. They have one daughter, Beatrice, who moved to Boston and contrary to her parents’ expectations, does not go to college and instead works nights at a hotel bar.

In their empty nest, Peter and Rebecca fall into a stereotype, best illustrated by the following scene happening every morning: “He shaves while she showers, and when she’s done showering she leaves the water on for him because it takes him exactly as long to shave as it does her to shower.”²⁵ Peter works Monday through Saturday, on Saturday nights they go out, and then they have sex. Sunday is their day together, and on Sunday evenings they call Beatrice. Everything is perfectly normal until Rebecca’s brother Ethan, nicknamed Mizzy, announces he is coming to stay with them for a while to attempt to pursue a career in the arts. “Mizzy” is short for “The Mistake,” a name

²⁴ First published in Paula Rust, “Sexual Identity and Bisexual Identities: The Struggle for Selfdescription in a Changing Sexual Landscape,” in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Anthology*, ed. Brett Beemyn and Michele Eliason, 64–86 (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

²⁵ Michael Cunningham, *By Nightfall* (New York: Picador, 2010), 137–138.

reminiscent of his being conceived by mistake in his parents' late forties. Mizzy, while being loved and pampered by his three older sisters, is also the black sheep of the family. In his mid-twenties, he still drifts through his life, in no hurry to settle down; he has also had a drug abuse problem, but now he is supposed to be clean.

From the beginning, Peter is attracted to Mizzy's unbridled youth, and he slowly cultivates an obsession with the young man. One day, when Peter returns from work earlier, he overhears Mizzy inviting a drug dealer into their apartment and buying drugs. When Mizzy finds out he was caught in the act, he begs Peter not to tell Rebecca because her and the other two sisters' care is suffocating him and he does not want to go to rehabilitation again. Peter is indeed conflicted whether to tell his wife or not.

Since Mizzy wishes to do "something in the arts," Peter takes him along when he is selling a piece to an art collector. He and Mizzy take a walk by the ocean, and they kiss. By that time Peter feels himself in love with Mizzy, willing to abandon his life with Rebecca and run away with him. Mizzy, too, confesses that he has had a crush on Peter since he was four, and feels not fully gay, but definitely gay for Peter. It is hard to guess whether Mizzy's motivation to kiss Peter was the actual desire to kiss him or simply a successful attempt at settling the score; now both of them have something they could tell Rebecca on the other. After this, Mizzy suddenly leaves for San Francisco, hoping he has sealed Peter's lips. Dismayed, Peter first confides in his colleague and best friend Uta, and then, when Rebecca voices her own dissatisfaction with their marriage, the novel ends in the not-so-ambiguous sentence, "He begins to tell her everything that has happened."²⁶

3.3 The Sexual Landscape Model

In the recent debates concerning gay rights and the legalization of same sex marriage, the main argument has been that sexual orientation is determined by the individual's biology; the conservative, mostly religious stance is that a person's sexual orientation depends solely on their choice.²⁷ No telling explanation for homosexuality has been

²⁶ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 228.

²⁷ Liahna E. Gordon, and Tony J. Silva, "Inhabiting the Sexual Landscape: Toward an Interpretative Theory of the Development of Sexual Orientation and Identity," *Journal of Homosexuality* 62:4 (April 2015), 495. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2014.986417> (accessed April 19, 2016).

found yet, genetic²⁸ or otherwise.²⁹ Therefore, with the cause of homosexuality unknown, it is not easy to measure sexual orientation or to accept any potential model with which to do so.³⁰

In 1949, American psychologist Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues proposed a 7-point linear scale model which ranged from exclusively homosexual to exclusively heterosexual.³¹ A much less-known theory was published in 1996 by American sociologist Paula Rust, who specializes in sexual orientation research, called the sexual landscape. This model contrasts sharply with Kinsey's two-dimensional model—it is three-dimensional.³² Gordon and Silva explain the sexual landscape as including the entire context in which we live with people, for example, acting as landmarks in this landscape; our position within the landscape changes constantly as well as the landscape itself.³³ The people we meet as well as any alterations in our environment can therefore influence our sexual preferences in real time, and one's sexual orientation can change during their lifetime as new stimuli enter his or her sexual landscape.

3.4 Changes in Peter's Sexual Landscape

Peter is in his mid-forties, one half of “a middle aged couple . . . , married for twenty-one . . . years, companionable by now, prone to banter, not much sex anymore but not *no* sex, not like other long-married couples”.³⁴ His sexual life with his wife Rebecca has shrunk to a regular Saturday night session. He bears in mind she is four years younger than him, but never fails to notice the “fold of flesh on her belly [and the] heaviness in her haunches,” at the same time realizing that he's far from being a “porn star”

²⁸ Eleanor Whiteway and Denis R. Alexander, “Understanding the Causes of Same-Sex Attraction,” *Science and Christian Belief* 27:1 (April 2015), 27.

<http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=2ede0ac8-e56b-4cb1-b0cb-8978fda18d5d%40sessionmgr105&vid=2&hid=119> (accessed April 14, 2016).

²⁹ Whiteway and Alexander, “Understanding the Causes,” 39–40.

³⁰ Gordon and Silva, “Inhabiting the Sexual Landscape,” 497.

³¹ Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, “Sexual Behavior in the Human Male,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 109 (March 1949): 201–290.

³² Gordon and Silva, “Inhabiting the Sexual Landscape,” 506.

³³ Gordon and Silva, “Inhabiting the Sexual Landscape,” 506–507.

³⁴ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 11.

himself.³⁵ His constant longing for the younger version of Rebecca (besides prompting his attraction to Mizzy), signals that Peter finds himself in a devitalized marriage: one that used to be filled with vitality, mutual love, and (what he remembers most fondly) a quality sex life, but now the time the couple spend together is just “duty time.”³⁶ And even though Peter does describe a time when Rebecca had a “crush on the photographer from L.A.,” he never had an affair or a crush himself.³⁷

Speaking in terms of the sexual landscape theory, it could be said that Peter is not as close as he used to be to the monument of the real Rebecca in his landscape; rather, he is moving away from her and closer to an imagined, mirage-like younger Rebecca he can never reach because she does not exist. When a new feature in his landscape appears, that of Rebecca’s 25-year-old brother Mizzy, Peter wishes that Mizzy was Rebecca who suddenly regained her youth while showering. In the bathroom scene, which is at the same time their first encounter, Peter is tempted to touch this imagined Rebecca and enters the shower where he finds the real Mizzy. Peter is, of course, startled and apologetic, but he still lingers in the bathroom (“maybe a second or longer than he should”), thinking of Rebecca,³⁸ and later on he even ascribes to Mizzy a “certain aspect of disembodiment” his ideal of Rebecca shares.³⁹ Peter leaves the bathroom; terrified that Mizzy might “get the wrong idea” that it was him in whom Peter was interested.

From the above-mentioned scene it can be induced that what draws Peter’s attention to Mizzy is (at least at first) mostly physical; it is Mizzy’s youth and his resemblance to Rebecca combined. Watching Mizzy sleep, Peter arrives at the conclusion that Mizzy is Rebecca incarnated and the personification of youth itself. His desire to touch the sleeping Mizzy confuses him (“Whoa. What’s that about?”⁴⁰), and even though he claims to have had previous sexual experience with men, when he “whacked off with his friend Rick throughout junior high,” and can see the male beauty,

³⁵ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 15.

³⁶ Bryan Strong and Christine DeVault, *Marriage and Family Experience*, 4th ed. (St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1989), 292.

³⁷ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 64.

³⁸ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 38.

³⁹ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 57.

⁴⁰ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 87.

he thinks (some) men are great, but none are sexually attractive.⁴¹ Mizzy, still unwittingly at the time, attracts even more attention by not being ashamed for his nudity in front of Peter, showing off his youth. Peter, mindful of Rebecca's previously expressed opinion that her brother is capable of anything, thinks as follows: "Is [Mizzy] being seductive or is it just his regular carnal heedlessness? There's no reason for him to think Peter might be interested, and even if there were, he wouldn't get sexy around his sister's husband. Would he?"⁴²

In mid-novel, Peter poses the question: "How can Mizzy, alone among a realm of men, excite him [Peter] so? Is it possible to be gay for one man only?"⁴³ The research on sexual fluidity suggests that in some cases, "a close emotional relationship with someone of any gender could potentially lead to sexual desire for that person."⁴⁴

Returning once again to Rust's theory of sexual landscape, Peter's attempt to judge whether he is gay or straight is probably futile because it is based on only once feeling attracted to a man. Of course, Mizzy could initiate a shift in Peter's sexuality,⁴⁵ but he is a unique monument in Peter's landscape and no generalization can reliably be drawn from the feelings Peter has for him.⁴⁶ It should also be said that there is a difference between thoughts and feelings of attraction (such as those for Mizzy) and actual behavior (such as the "whack[ing] off with his friend Rick throughout junior high"⁴⁷): whereas "it is not disputed that individuals can make conscious choices about their sexual behavior . . . attraction itself is thought to be inherent, a state of being that 'happens' to someone rather than being the result of a conscious choice."⁴⁸ The following quote states clearly that Peter is attracted to Mizzy, but comparing owning

⁴¹ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 87.

⁴² Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 50.

⁴³ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 112.

⁴⁴ Melissa Manley, Lisa M. Diamond, and Sari M. van Anders, "Polyamory, Monoamory, and Sexual Fluidity: A Longitudinal Study of Identity and Sexual Trajectories," *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* 2:2 (June 2015), 170. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000098> (accessed April 14, 2016).

⁴⁵ Gordon and Silva, "Inhabiting the Sexual Landscape," 508.

⁴⁶ Gordon and Silva, "Inhabiting the Sexual Landscape," 522.

⁴⁷ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 87.

⁴⁸ Whiteway and Alexander, "Understanding the Causes," 21.

him to owning art cannot be in Peter's case considered sexual; he wants to display Mizzy just like he would do with a statue:

He'd rather if it was the dealer. He doesn't want Mizzy to be seeing some girl. He doesn't want that because, say it, he wants to own Mizzy, the way he wants to own art. He wants Mizzy's sharp fucked-up mind and he wants his self-destruction and he wants his... *being* to be here, all here, he doesn't want him squandering it on anybody else, certainly not a girl who can give him something Peter can't. . . . [H]e wants to curate Mizzy.⁴⁹

When it rains, it pours, and Peter's constant considering and reconsidering of his feelings for Mizzy sharpens his senses to pick up more information to help create assumptions that Mizzy is trying to seduce him, is "offering himself,"⁵⁰ or walks about naked just to attract him. But are these really just Peter's assumptions? As someone whose sexuality is fluid enough, Mizzy, known to have had affairs with both women and men, probably sees himself as either bisexual, or at least not strictly heterosexual. There indeed are individuals who "[can]not describe their sexual orientation on a scale of exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality due to reasons such as being attracted to personality and not gender . . . or being attracted to different genders in different ways."⁵¹ Peter, who expresses fear of being considered gay, on the other hand, is likely to conceptualize any remote feelings of same sex attraction as expressing his sexual orientation as opposed to simply sexual feelings as he would do if he was attracted to a woman.⁵² Therefore by walking naked around Peter's apartment, Mizzy might be already working to undermine Peter's self-control, and possibly maneuver him into doing something that might secure that Mizzy's secret will be kept.

After Mizzy flees for San Francisco, and Peter realizes he was in all likelihood set up to keep his mouth shut, he tells everything to his colleague Uta. Even though Uta agrees with him when Peter says, "I'm a fool,"⁵³ to his question, "How could I love another guy and not be gay?" she simply replies: "Easy."⁵⁴ Unlike Peter, Uta does not

⁴⁹ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 159.

⁵⁰ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 120.

⁵¹ Manley, Diamond, and van Anders, "Sexual Fluidity," 169.

⁵² Gordon and Silva, "Inhabiting the Sexual Landscape," 513.

⁵³ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 215.

⁵⁴ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 214.

hold the “one-drop rule” to be true. The rule originates from the historical law upheld during racial segregation in America; it stated that anyone with a black ancestor, however distant, should be considered black, hence the name, referring to a single drop of black blood.⁵⁵ In terms of homosexuality, this rule can be understood in the way that “if one has ever had a homosexual experience, one must be entirely homosexual.”⁵⁶

3.5 Midlife Transition

3.5.1 Crisis or Transition?

The popular term midlife crisis most frequently refers to “personal turmoil and sudden changes in personal goals and lifestyle, brought about by the realization of aging, physical decline, or entrapment in unwelcome, restrictive roles,” occurring around the age of forty.⁵⁷ Elliott Jacques, the Canadian psychologist who is believed to have coined the term midlife crisis in 1965, claimed that the fear of death is the major cause of distress, but with human lifespan becoming much longer in the last decades, this opinion is probably outdated.⁵⁸ Elaine Wethington’s research on the self-perception of midlife crisis found that few respondents mentioned the fear of death per se, but the decline of health and stamina and the shortening of the amount of time to accomplish goals were frequently mentioned.⁵⁹ The term midlife transition (rather than crisis) has also been used by some researchers who viewed it as “one in a set of changes over time, related to stages of personality development,”⁶⁰ suggesting that the forties are a common time for one of the many conflicts in life, not necessarily for a catastrophe.

⁵⁵ Corey Elizabeth Flanders and Elaine Hatfield, “Social Perception of Bisexuality,” *Psychology and Sexuality* 5:3 (July 2014), 233. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2012.749505> (accessed April 14, 2016).

⁵⁶ Flanders and Hatfield, “Social Perception,” 233.

⁵⁷ Elaine Wethington, “Expecting Stress: Americans and the Midlife Crisis,” *Motivation and Emotion*, 24:2 (June 2000), 86. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1005611230993> (accessed April 23, 2016).

⁵⁸ Wethington, “Expecting Stress,” 87.

⁵⁹ Wethington, “Expecting Stress,” 99.

⁶⁰ Wethington, “Expecting Stress,” 86.

3.5.2 Peter Harris in Crisis

Peter seems to have all the abovementioned symptoms of midlife crisis. First of all he is made to be aware of death: his long-term friend Bette, also an art dealer, tells him she is giving up her job because of the cancer she has been struggling with for ten years and is planning to move to Spain. She never pronounces the words “I am dying,” but Peter thinks he can guess as much from what she did say. His (allegedly) declining health also manifests itself as he is sick and vomits in the first part of the novel, constantly having in mind his “funny stomach (cancer?).”⁶¹

I have described the nature of his marriage in detail in the previous sections, and here I will only restate that his relationship with Rebecca has become a routine, and by extension boring, therefore it could also be referred to as “unwelcome and restrictive.”

Throughout the novel, Peter is plagued by thoughts of his (perceived) failures, be it his rhetorical question, “But still, he [Peter] has failed, hasn’t he?”⁶² after Rebecca explicitly says he has not done anything wrong by her, or his recurrent opinion that he is a disaster of a parent. The fact his daughter Bea often refuses to speak to him on the phone supports his notion, but objectively it is hard to say why exactly Bea treats him this way as her actions are never fully explained in the novel. Due to the lack of arguments in his favor, Peter blames Bea’s reserve (and even her lack of male suitors) on himself, thinking that she thinks that “art is ridiculous, by which she means Peter is ridiculous.”⁶³

Peter can hardly console his soul, wounded by his failure at parenting, thinking about his career—he is not satisfied with himself even in that area. “Peter has been at this for almost two decades, and has never graduated to the majors. He’s been loyal to a body of artists who’ve done well enough, but not spectacularly. If he doesn’t step up soon, he can probably expect to grow old as a solid, minor dealer, respected but not feared.”⁶⁴

Finally, the persistent dwelling on his infamous accomplishments leads him as far as to characterize himself as “Peter Harris, hostile child, horrible adolescent, winner

⁶¹ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 78.

⁶² Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 9.

⁶³ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 36.

⁶⁴ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 75.

of various second prizes...⁶⁵ He does not even spare his looks the severe criticism. His barber points out to him he might want to dye his hair to hide the gray hairs, and Peter himself observes he is “wearing a few extra pounds around the waist.”⁶⁶ There is no wonder that after such amount of self-criticism he arrives at the conclusion that Rebecca is happy to be left alone at home while he goes after his errands, and that she has in fact ceased loving him altogether.

3.6 Back to the Landscape: The Resolution of the Crisis

In all probability, Mizzy’s charms could never be as effective as they are if Peter was not so profoundly dissatisfied and bored with every aspect of his (sexual) landscape. As stated above, the sexual landscape is made up of every facet of life, and therefore anything and everything may (or may not) influence a person’s sexuality and/or to whom he is attracted. After all, Mizzy is exactly what Peter is not. Peter has a stable job on which he depends for his bread and butter; Mizzy drifts from continent to continent with no occupation to speak of, his family footing the bill. Peter is getting older and heavier, and Mizzy, in his mid-twenties, is the emblem of beauty. Peter is bored with his dead-end marriage where he has the same sex every Saturday night, while Mizzy can afford to date people of all shapes, sizes, and genders, and he can do whatever he pleases altogether, while Peter listens to the clocks ticking away his life, the hopes to accomplish his dreams (whatever they may be) slowly disappearing. Peter is looking for a way out of the stereotype that is his life, and he finds it in Mizzy. He wants to be that “someone to whom something large and strange and scandalous had happened.”⁶⁷ He wants to be “swept off, . . . ruin the lives of others (not to mention his own) and yet retain some aspect of blamelessness because passion trumps everything, no matter how deluded, no matter how doomed.”⁶⁸ Notice that *he* wants to be the one who does the scandalous thing; *he* wants to ruin himself and others. Therefore, when on the last pages of the novel, after all the damage has been done, Rebecca confesses she is jealous of Mizzy’s being so free and “fucked up,”⁶⁹ Peter panics, denies Rebecca the right to this

⁶⁵ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 11.

⁶⁶ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 14.

⁶⁷ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 198.

⁶⁸ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 212.

⁶⁹ Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 223.

fantasy, claiming (if only in his mind) that it is *his* fantasy. His midlife crisis is suddenly resolved, and it is him who is convincing Rebecca they should not separate, thinking: “He has the real hope of increased prosperity (Groff will probably join his roster) . . . he has the slightly trickier hope that he and Rebecca will be happy again. Happy enough. . . His gallery joins the first rank, he and Rebecca regain their ease together.”⁷⁰

3.7 Conclusion

In the above chapter, I have attempted to describe the character of Peter Harris from the 2010 novel *By Nightfall* using the theory of sexual landscape with the help of research on midlife crisis. I have illustrated that Peter is doubly susceptible to falling in love (for the lack of a better term) with a person as unlikely as his wife’s much younger brother due to his strong disappointment with his life (or landscape) as a whole as well as due to the apparition of a new person—phenomenon even—in his immediate vicinity (or a new monument in his landscape). Peter’s strong attraction to Mizzy and the subsequent disappointment in him possibly led Peter, at the very end of the novel, to overcome the dissatisfaction with his life, and he gained new will to not only carry on with his marriage, but even attempt to make it happier.

⁷⁰Cunningham, *By Nightfall*, 212.

4 Triangular Relationships in *The Hours* and *A Home at the End of the World*

4.1 Triangular Relationships: Introduction

In this chapter, I will mainly be discussing two of Cunningham's books: *A Home at the End of the World* (1990) and *The Hours* (1998), revisiting *By Nightfall* only briefly. *A Home...* which Cunningham considers his first novel (after disowning his 1984 book, *Golden States*)⁷¹ spans three decades in the lives of four characters. They are Jonathan, Bobby (the two main narrators), Clare, and Alice, Jonathan's mother, all of them taking turns narrating the story in the first person.

The Hours, Cunningham's most appreciated novel to date and the winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award, both in 1999, is a story of three women living in three different places and times, but all connected to Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs Dalloway*.⁷² The title *The Hours* itself is associated with Woolf's novel as it used to be its working title. Just like *Mrs Dalloway*, all three parts of *The Hours* take place within one day in the life of each of the characters. The chapters titled "Mrs. Woolf" are concerned with (a fictionalized) Virginia Woolf at the time she was writing *Mrs Dalloway*. The "Mrs. Brown" chapters tell the story of Laura Brown, a bookish housewife. The chapters on Clarissa Vaughan are titled "Mrs. Dalloway" for two reasons: Mrs. Dalloway is the nickname of Vaughan given to her by her friend Richard, and the story of her day was written by Cunningham so that its plot and characters mirror those in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*.

After the summaries of both novels, I will look in more detail at the two triangular relationships: Bobby—Jonathan—Clare in *A Home...*, and Clarissa—Richard—Louis in *The Hours*. With the models of the love triangle and the ménage à trois, I will attempt to show the complexity of Cunningham's characters as well as the difficulties into which one can run while trying to pigeonhole non-traditional relationships using traditional tools.

⁷¹ Cunningham, *Conversations*, 143.

⁷² Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925).

4.2 “Mrs. Dalloway” in *The Hours*: A Brief Summary⁷³

The story of “Mrs. Dalloway” takes place in New York at the end of the 20th century. The fifty-two-year-old protagonist, Clarissa Vaughan, sets out to buy flowers for a party she is hosting that night for poet Richard Brown, her friend and former lover. Richard has received an award for his life’s work, including a novel largely concerned with Clarissa. During her walk to the flower shop, Clarissa is reminiscing about her past and her relationship with Richard. She recalls herself, aged eighteen, having a summer love affair with Richard in the presence of Richard’s then partner, Louis.

On her way from the shop, Clarissa decides to check on Richard in his apartment. Richard, who currently lives alone, is in the last stage of AIDS, and therefore prone to depression, memory loss and confusion. Being the closest friend Richard has left, Clarissa acts as his self-proclaimed caretaker. Richard displays infantile and psychotic behavior—he complains about hearing voices in his head. His home is neglected and his own appearance is equally unkempt. Clarissa judges Richard unable to prepare for the party on his own, and leaves, promising to return in the evening to help him.

After she returns home, Clarissa finds that Sally, her partner of eighteen years, is about to leave for a business lunch; Clarissa hasn’t been invited to join. She instead goes on preparing for the party and thinking about her past, perceiving the moment when she and Richard first kissed as the only time of happiness in her life, and that such happiness her stable but comparatively uninteresting partnership with Sally can never provide.

Louis, the old lover of Richard’s, suddenly appears at Clarissa’s doorstep. They haven’t seen each other for five years. He confesses he used to be jealous of Clarissa’s relationship with Richard, and tells her of his new lover, a much younger man who is in fact a student of his drama class. An emotional man, Louis starts crying because in reality he is not in love with the student, and when Clarissa’s nineteen-year-old daughter Julia returns home, Louis quickly disappears, ashamed of his tears. Julia has brought along her forty-year-old friend Mary. Mary is a lesbian activist, and she despises Clarissa and thinks her pathetic for being too “old school” and trying to

⁷³ For the purposes of the present chapter, this summary is concerned only with the chapters entitled “Mrs. Dalloway.”

assimilate into the heterosexual world (i.e. living with Sally in a marriage-like relationship with a stable home). Mary herself has her own pathetic aspect—she is desperately in love with the heterosexual Julia.

Later that day, Clarissa again visits Richard's apartment to help him get ready for the award ceremony and her following party. She finds him standing on the windowsill from which he, after a short conversation, jumps to his death. Clarissa runs down to him and, unsure what else to do, sits by his body.

At night Laura Brown, Richard's mother and the protagonist of another part of *The Hours*, visits Clarissa. The two women, together with Sally and Julia, eat some of the food originally intended for the party, then go to sleep. Clarissa is slowly starting to come to terms with the sudden demonstration of human fragility and mortality that is Richard's suicide.

4.3 A Home at the End of the World: A Brief Summary

Bobby Morrow and Jonathan Glover were both born and raised in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, during the 1960s and 1970s. They meet in middle school, aged thirteen, and form an unlikely friendship. Bobby's elder brother dies in a domestic accident the whole family witnesses. Both his parents mentally decline, his mother eventually dying (most likely by her own hand), his father giving in to drinking. Bobby himself goes on doing what his brother has taught him: listening to music, smoking marihuana, and, from time to time, abusing other substances. Jonathan, on the other hand, spends most of his childhood sheltered at home with his overprotective mother Alice, while his father Ned works long hours at the small movie theater he owns.

Bobby spends most of his high school years living with the Glovers in order to escape his broken home. His more sensitive side starts to show. He takes to Alice Glover immediately, admires her cooking, invites her to listen to music, and asks her to dance several times. As if the two boys switched personalities, Jonathan becomes sulky and irresponsible. The boys listen to music, smoke marihuana (both Bobby's favorite pastimes), and engage in sexual experiments together with Jonathan being the initiator.

Whereas Jonathan moves to New York City to attend college, Bobby never applies for college, and, having found interest in cooking (and a good teacher in Alice), he goes on to cooking school and plans to open his own restaurant. His father burns their house down when he falls asleep with a cigarette and dies in the fire, leaving

Bobby homeless as well as an orphan, and so Bobby moves in with the Glovers. After his restaurant business fails, he starts working in a bakery.

Jonathan becomes estranged from his family, going on living in New York City after finishing college with the eccentric roommate Clare, eleven years his senior. They live in an apartment together in an unusually loving but strictly platonic relationship. Jonathan, now openly gay, is seeing other men, but still he and Clare plan on one day having a baby together.

Due to Ned's health, the Glovers move to the dry climate of Arizona, and Bobby follows Jonathan to New York City, staying with him and Clare. This originally temporary arrangement turns into a permanent one, and Bobby, Jonathan, and Clare form a three-piece partnership, each loving and devoted to the other two. Even though there are no more sexual encounters between Bobby and Jonathan, Clare and Bobby become lovers, Clare eventually becoming pregnant with Bobby's (instead of Jonathan's) child. Jonathan escapes this "happy family" the morning after he introduces its two remaining members to his long-term lover Erich. He lives for a time in San Francisco, the three of them finally meeting again in Arizona, at Ned's funeral. The family is reformed and they decide to buy a house in the country. All three of them move to Woodstock, Jonathan and Bobby open a café, and Clare takes care of her newborn daughter Rebecca.

Jonathan's former lover Erich visits them in the country, his health having deteriorated, presumably due to AIDS. Bobby offers to Erich to repeat his visits and Erich does so until he is unable to travel and moves in with them permanently because there is nobody else to take care of him while he is dying. When Rebecca is about two years old, Clare pretends taking her daughter for a visit to her mother, but in reality she is escaping the "family." She has noticed that Rebecca starts to remember things, and she does not want her daughter's first memories to be of the death of Erich and later Jonathan. Bobby and Jonathan nurse Erich until his death.

4.4 Triangular Relationships

4.4.1 The Eternal Triangle

"In geometric terms, the eternal triangle can be represented as comprising three points—a jealous mate (*A*) in a relationship with an unfaithful partner (*B*) who has a

lover (*C*). *A* feels *abandoned*, *B* is *between* two mates, and *C* is the *catalyst* for the crisis in union *A-B*.”⁷⁴

4.4.1.1 A, the Abandoned

Undoubtedly the most difficult position is that of *A*, the abandoned partner. The role *A* plays begins when they discover the affair of *B* with *C*;⁷⁵ once *A* finds out, the need arises to re-evaluate their opinion of *B*, the cheating partner, as well as their entire relationship, and self-doubt may also appear: “What sort of person has the affair revealed *B* to be? . . . What sort of person has the affair revealed *A* to be—did *A* contribute to the affair by h/h own inadequacies . . . ?”⁷⁶ *A* then has four problematic areas to deal with: the ambivalence towards *B*, feelings of rivalry towards *C*, the option to compensate for their emotional loss by involving with another person (*D*), and how or whether at all to show their jealousy.⁷⁷

A’s ambivalent feelings towards *B* can manifest in three ways: *A* considers the union fatally compromised, and leaves the relationship immediately, often causing damage to *B*’s or common property in revenge and in order to have the last word.⁷⁸ *A* can also confront *B* and, in a desperate attempt to save the relationship, forgive everything *B* has done. The question, however, is whether *A* is really able to forget everything and return to the state in which the relationship was before *B*’s infidelity because *B*’s behavior has raised doubts about *B*’s integrity.⁷⁹ The third option, most likely available only to a limited amount of *As*, is sitting down with *B* and making them explain what led them into the arms of *C* and what *A* and *B* can do to possibly save their relationship.⁸⁰

If *A* attempts to compete with their rival *C*, they can bring about a confrontation in order to see the person for which *B* has abandoned them. If *A* is lucky to find *C* less appealing than they are, *A*’s conflict may be quickly resolved. On the other hand, if *C* is

⁷⁴ Alvin Pam and Judith Pearson, *Splitting Up: Enmeshment and Estrangement in the Process of Divorce* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), 148.

⁷⁵ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 152.

⁷⁶ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 155.

⁷⁷ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 155.

⁷⁸ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 155–156.

⁷⁹ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 156.

⁸⁰ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 156.

richer, younger, or more attractive than *A*, the confrontation can only add to *A*'s pain.⁸¹ Whatever the outcome of such meeting, it would be naïve of both *A* and *C* to think that, even though their conversations are bound to be painful, they can resolve the triangle without *B*.⁸²

In an attempt to show *B* that *A* is also still attractive for others, *A* can also find a lover, here referred to as *D*. The *A-D* relationship is usually much less serious than that between *B* and *C* because *A*'s main motivation is only to punish *B*. The closer *D* is to *B*, the better. An ideal *D* is for example *B*'s brother or sister, possibly his best friend or business partner. *D* is however a minor character in the drama and usually exits the scene, ditched by *A* the moment *B* comes back.⁸³

Finally, should *A* speak up and express their jealousy openly or just rage on the inside? *A* might not want to give *B* the chance to see them break down; on the other hand, *B* already knows they are being unfaithful, so why can *A* not speak their mind? Voiced jealousy, however, could give *B* a good argument to leave *A*: *A* is making a scene.⁸⁴

4.4.1.2 B, the Inbetweener

“A person in the role of *B* cannot readily be stereotyped as a sexual opportunist, inasmuch unfaithful spouses are so because of a variety of reasons.”⁸⁵ A common *B* is usually someone struggling with a strong need to be loved.⁸⁶ Some *Bs*, however, can get used to the comfort of having two mates—a secure one (*A*) and a forbidden one (*C*).⁸⁷ Moreover, *A* and *C* are usually strikingly different, and their “good qualities” combined might give *B* an ideal partner.^{88 89}

⁸¹ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 157.

⁸² Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 157.

⁸³ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 158.

⁸⁴ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 159.

⁸⁵ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 159.

⁸⁶ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 160.

⁸⁷ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 160–161.

⁸⁸ Deidre Johnson, *Love: Bondage or Liberation* (London: Karmac Books, 2010), 6.

⁸⁹ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 161.

4.4.1.3 C, the Catalyst

Pam and Pearson quote *The Mistress' Survival Manual* by Melissa Sands,⁹⁰ who argues that *C* (in her portrayal a female), is often mistakenly referred to as a “home wrecker.” Mistakenly because Sands claims the mistress hardly has the power to separate *A* and *B*.⁹¹ Indeed, more often than not, a mistress is trying to convince her lover to abandon his wife for her, and even though the husband promises he will, he is very reluctant to actually do so. The mistress then usually breaks up with him.⁹² Last but not least, *C* cannot be considered the *cause* of the problem between *A* and *B*; they are only the *catalyst* of a problem that has already existed in the *A-B* relationship.⁹³

4.4.1.4 Two Different Triangles

Deidre Johnson mentions two types of love triangles based on the dynamics between the persons involved. They are the rivalrous triangle and the split-object triangle. In the former, *A* and *C* are competing for *B*'s love. In the latter, *B* has simply split their attention between *A* and *C*.⁹⁴

4.4.2 Bisexuality, Polyamory and the Ménage à Trois

4.4.2.1 Ménage à Trois

Ménage à trois is a term borrowed from French, meaning “household of three.” The Oxford English Dictionary Online offers the following definition: “a relationship or domestic arrangement in which three people (usually a husband and wife and the lover of one of these) live together or are romantically or sexually involved.”⁹⁵

4.4.2.2 Polyamory and Bisexuality

According to the OED Online, polyamory is: “The fact of having simultaneous close emotional relationships with two or more other individuals, viewed as an alternative to monogamy, esp. in regard to matters of sexual fidelity,” or “the custom or practice of

⁹⁰ Melissa Sands, *The Mistress' Survival Manual* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Corporation, 1978).

⁹¹ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 164.

⁹² Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 152.

⁹³ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 164.

⁹⁴ Johnson, *Love*, 6.

⁹⁵ Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “ménage à trois, n.” <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/253749> (accessed April 25, 2016).

engaging in multiple sexual relationships with the knowledge and consent of all partners concerned.”⁹⁶

There is not much evidence to support the perception of monogamy (a one-to-one relationship) as superior to polyamory in terms of the usual benefits a relationship offers: sexual satisfaction, increased health, and mutual support, indicating that non-monogamy may indeed be an option for certain people.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, openly polyamorous individuals are perceived negatively by the lay public and variously labeled.⁹⁸ In his 2012 experiment concerning lay attitudes to polyamory, psychologist Christopher Burris let the participants describe their attitudes towards a woman (or a man, depending on to which condition the participants were assigned) who already was in a relationship but met another man. The woman either claimed to be happy in her current relationship and only looking for a sexual fling with the other man, or she was unhappy with her boyfriend and felt attracted to her new acquaintance. The third option was for the woman to claim she loved both men simultaneously.⁹⁹ Nothing was said about whether the woman acted on her feelings.¹⁰⁰ Surprisingly, even though the research participants rated all these attitudes negatively, they were much more sympathetic towards the protagonist seeking a sexual fling than they were to the one expressing polyamorous feelings,¹⁰¹ not even the emphasis on love the polyamorous protagonist expressed generated higher approval.¹⁰²

With monogamy still being the norm in our society, polyamorous individuals are often thought to be “fooling themselves” or labeled as “needy,” and their experience tends to be not taken seriously.¹⁰³ The same could be said of how bisexuality is perceived by the heteronormative society which still tends to define sexuality as a

⁹⁶ Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “polyamory, n.”. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/252745> (accessed April 25, 2016).

⁹⁷ Manley, Diamond, and van Anders, “Sexual Fluidity,” 168.

⁹⁸ Christopher T. Burris, “Torn between Two Lovers? Lay Perceptions of Polyamorous Individuals,” *Psychology and Sexuality* 5:3 (July 2014), 259. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2013.779311> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁹⁹ Burris, “Torn between Two Lovers,” 260.

¹⁰⁰ Burris, “Torn between Two Lovers,” 264.

¹⁰¹ Burris, “Torn between Two Lovers,” 263.

¹⁰² Burris, “Torn between Two Lovers,” 265.

¹⁰³ Burris, “Torn between Two Lovers,” 265.

dichotomy, leading to the invisibility of bisexuality, also referred to as bisexual erasure.¹⁰⁴

Bisexual erasure can and does operate in a multiple ways. For example, some people may think that bisexuality is not a stable, legitimate identity, but rather a transition point from heterosexuality to homosexuality. Others might believe that bisexuality does not exist because those who identify as such are really lesbian women or gay men who are too afraid to come out fully, or who want to hold onto some amount of heterosexual privilege.¹⁰⁵

4.5 Louis, Richard, and Clarissa

4.5.1 Reconstructing the Eternal Triangle for “Mrs. Dalloway”

Using the terminology introduced in 4.4.1, the triangle may be reconstructed as follows: Louis is the one who is in a long-term relationship with Richard, both before and after Clarissa’s interference; therefore he is *A*, the abandoned partner. Richard is obviously *B*, the cheating party, having sexual relations with both Louis and Clarissa. Finally, Clarissa, “the mistress,” is *C*. This triangle can be labeled as a split-object triangle rather than a rivalrous one. During his short-lived affair with Clarissa, Richard spends alternate nights with both her and Louis. Louis, even though jealous of Clarissa, does not initiate fights that Clarissa would most likely not join anyway.

4.5.2 Too Complex for a Theory?

So far the eternal triangle theory seemingly holds water. Problems arise, however, when the structure is closely examined. *B* is often of one sex; *A* and *C* are of the opposite sex. (This is true of heterosexual love triangles, in homosexual ones, all participants would naturally be of the same sex.) As mentioned above, sexuality is not a dichotomy; there are more positions than homosexual or heterosexual—bisexual, for example. Both Richard and Clarissa exhibit some extent of sexual fluidity as both are able to be in satisfying relationships with both sexes. From what the reader knows about Louis, his sexual fluidity, if present at all, is much less prominent. This being said, Louis evidently finds himself in a position much more difficult than that of a “traditional” *A*. A non-

¹⁰⁴ Flanders and Hatfield, “Social Perception,” 233.

¹⁰⁵ Flanders and Hatfield, “Social Perception,” 233.

traditional *A*, Louis needs to deal with a rival he cannot compare to (at least not physically), and he loses the chance to find the rival less attractive which would ease his mental pain.

Further difficulties arise when applying the theory to *A*'s available coping mechanisms listed in 4.4.1.1, especially *A*'s possible affair with a fourth party. Louis did make “a desperate attempt . . . to retain his claim for Richard,”¹⁰⁶ but this attempt was actually with Clarissa. Therefore the cheated *A* started an affair with *D* who is identical with the lover *C*. Clarissa herself remembers the “desperate attempt” thusly: “[Louis] was not interested in her nor she in him, for all his celebrated beauty. They both loved Richard, they both wanted Richard, and that would have to do as a bond between them.”¹⁰⁷ To some extent, Clarissa recognizes having functioned as a *D* in an out-of-spite affair of Louis's to make Richard jealous. (As noted above, the closer the relationship between *B* and *D*, the better, and no-one is closer than the actual lover *C*.) At the same time, Clarissa does not (and did not) consider her behavior a betrayal of Louis, only an “expansion of the possible.”¹⁰⁸ Louis also seemingly did not protest, at least not verbally—he instead resorted to self-harming behaviors, cutting himself “with various tools and kitchen knives.”¹⁰⁹

4.5.3 Thirty-Four Years Later

Over thirty years have passed since the short-lived affair between Clarissa and Richard was terminated. It was Clarissa who initiated the break-up, claiming Richard wanted too much (of her?) and she wanted to be free, therefore “they canceled their little experiment.”¹¹⁰ She seems to think she was living a delusion. “Why should he want her?” she asks herself, “When he knew as well as she the bent of his deepest longings and when he had Louis, worshipful Louis.”¹¹¹ The relationship they had prior to the affair suffered no damage; in fact, Clarissa has graduated to the role of “Richard's oldest friend, his best friend, his first reader—Clarissa who sees him every day, when

¹⁰⁶ Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), 138.

¹⁰⁷ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 96.

¹⁰⁸ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 96.

¹⁰⁹ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 96.

¹¹⁰ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 52.

¹¹¹ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 52.

even some of his more recent friends have come to imagine he's already died."¹¹² And even though they keep in touch daily in a friendly fashion, she still loves him and constantly thinks of him, sometimes imagining that "they might have had a life together[.] They might have been husband and wife, soul mates, with lovers on the side."¹¹³

Due to his progressing illness, not many of Richard's thoughts on the matter are recorded. He only confesses to being in love with both Louis and Clarissa, i.e. to having polyamorous feelings. Richard also dislikes Clarissa's partner of eighteen years, Sally, "as if [she] was some sort of utterly banal safe haven,"¹¹⁴ and seems to still want to appropriate Clarissa by writing his novel mainly about her. Louis only appears in a single short scene, "in which he whines about the paucity of love in the world."¹¹⁵

Louis returns to New York City in time to only speak with Clarissa; before he can meet him, Richard commits suicide. He confesses he was (and still is) furious at her, and he is angry with Richard for how little space he gets in his novel. He feels cheated and underappreciated "after more than a dozen years; after living with Richard in six different apartments, holding him, fucking him senseless; after thousands of meals together."¹¹⁶ He feels revenged seeing the "relatively abrupt departure of Clarissa's unnaturally prolonged prime"¹¹⁷ and by thinking about the father of her daughter Julia, conceived thanks to donor semen, imagining him "a strapping young blond, hard up, an actor or painter, maybe, a lover, a criminal, a desperate boy, down to selling his fluids."¹¹⁸ Louis's relationship with Richard lasted ten more years and also broke up.

What Louis does not (and cannot) notice in his blind rage is Clarissa's jealousy of him and his situation. The reason she ended her affair with Richard—her freedom—has been thwarted by the long years spent in a stable relationship with Sally, and she yearns to be as free as she considers Louis to be, still able, aged fifty-three, to drift from city to city, from one lover to another.

¹¹² Cunningham, *The Hours*, 65.

¹¹³ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 67–68.

¹¹⁴ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 20.

¹¹⁵ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 126.

¹¹⁶ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 126.

¹¹⁷ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 125.

¹¹⁸ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 137.

4.5.4 “Mrs. Dalloway:” Conclusion

Clarissa, even though she bitterly recollects that Richard’s deepest longings were for Louis, is comfortable in her friendship with Richard and her position of a caregiver, as long as she can hold onto the memories of that summer’s happiness. Louis, however, as usually are, ended up being the one most hurt by his then partner’s affair, and his feelings toward Clarissa are still bitter. He remained in the relationship with Richard for ten more years, and after Richard received a letter from Clarissa, he finally was fed up with being “the more blessed, less brilliant member.”¹¹⁹ There is no sign that Louis considered the relationship contaminated by Richard’s infidelity, but the ghostly presence of Clarissa and Richard’s (perceived) preference of her ultimately let Louis to lose his temper and move on in his life.

4.6 Jonathan, Bobby, and Clare

4.6.1 Reconstructing the Eternal Triangle for *A Home*...

Using again the terminology from 4.4.1, even creating a reliable love triangle is an issue as it is unclear who is abandoned, who is the unfaithful one and who is the lover. Out of the six permutations, the most sensible one appears to be that in which Jonathan is *A*, Bobby is *B*, and Clare is *C*, i.e. Bobby belongs with Jonathan, and Clare is merely his lover. Multiple arguments speak in favor of this particular organization. Firstly, Bobby’s relationships with both Jonathan and Clare were sexual (in case this can be taken as meaning “strongest”); even though they lived together, Jonathan and Clare never were sexual together. Secondly, both Jonathan and Clare have thoughts of leaving the lives of the other two, while Bobby is not reported to have any such inclinations. Finally, and probably most importantly, Jonathan and Bobby have known each other the longest—their relationship has been there prior to their respective ones with Clare. Clare herself feels jealousy “not of their devotion to one another so much as their history together.”¹²⁰

Looking at the novel in its full complexity, however, other arrangements are also possible. For example one with Jonathan acting as *B*, torn between Bobby (*A*) and Clare

¹¹⁹ Cunningham, *The Hours*, 139.

¹²⁰ Michael Cunningham, *A Home at the End of the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 237.

(C), supported by this thought of Jonathan's: "I was angry and envious. I wanted Bobby. In another sense, I wanted Clare."¹²¹ In yet another possible arrangement, Clare acts as *B*, Jonathan as *A*, and Bobby as *C*, when this replica of Jonathan's is used as evidence: "You think Bobby and I are each half a man. That's why you ended up with the two of us. Together we add up to one person in your eyes."¹²² As said above, *Bs* might indeed find a lover who, in combination with the current partner, will make up an "ideal partner."^{123 124}

4.6.2 Another Solution

This particular triangular relationship seems to be much too complicated to fit any one eternal triangle arrangement. It seems to be as fluid as the sexuality of all three of its members, shifting and changing throughout the course of the novel. Therefore, a more appropriate model is needed for this complex relationship. Compared to *The Hours*, where the love triangle scheme still (somehow) fits the situation, in *A Home...* there is an extra connection; while there was not much love between Clarissa and Louis, each of the three in *A Home...* are connected through mutual love, and so the best way to view this triangle is as a polyamorous relationship—a three-way romance. Since the three characters also happen to live together, a *ménage à trois* may too be considered.

4.6.3 Changing Moods

As I mentioned in the previous section, the relationship of Clare, Bobby, and Jonathan is fluid and tumultuous. Clare and Jonathan alternate expressing doubts and support of the three-way romance. After telling Jonathan that he and Clare are now also in love, Bobby enthusiastically proposes, "What if we had a kid now? . . . The three of us," and Clare asks him to "kindly shut up."¹²⁵ On another occasion, she defends the idea of a polyamorous family thusly, "Now I wanted a baby, and I wanted to raise it with Jonathan. We could be a new kind of family."¹²⁶

¹²¹ Cunningham, *A Home*, 179.

¹²² Cunningham, *A Home*, 307.

¹²³ Johnson, *Love*, 6.

¹²⁴ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 161.

¹²⁵ Cunningham, *A Home*, 178.

¹²⁶ Cunningham, *A Home*, 204.

Jonathan, in the light of the possibility Erich has infected him with HIV, tries to persuade Clare to marry Bobby, telling her, “You and Bobby are the family . . . Just the two of you.”¹²⁷ Explaining his abrupt departure from the common household to Bobby, Jonathan says, “I’d just stay around being the uncle until you and Clare moved out and left me alone in that awful apartment.”¹²⁸

Bobby who seems to be content whatever is happening around him, expresses his opinion only once but sufficiently enough: “Here’s what’s unsayable about us,” he tells the reader. “Jonathan and I are members of a team so old nobody else could join even if we wanted them to. We adore Clare but she’s not quite on the team. . . . What binds us is stronger than sex. It is stronger than love. We’re related.”¹²⁹

4.6.4 The End of the Three-Way Romance

After Clare becomes pregnant, she remains the sole naysayer. Bobby suggests moving out to the country in order to be even more like a family; Jonathan agrees, while Clare rages that they are “nothing like a family.”¹³⁰ She has more thoughts of departure than Jonathan, and even though Jonathan is the first to attempt to live a separate life, he eventually returns. Clare’s departure at the end of the novel, however, seems permanent.

In the corner of her mind, Clare has always felt like the proverbial third wheel. Jealous of “their history together,”¹³¹ and feeling Bobby and Jonathan love one another more than they love her, she compares herself to “Snow White living among the dwarfs.”¹³² Her age might also play a role as she is eleven years older than both men. She is the one who breaks the three-way romance in the end, even though she lies to Jonathan and Bobby about her intentions. “Forgive me, boys,” she thinks. “I seem to have gotten what I wanted, after all. A baby of my own, a direction to drive in.”¹³³ Except for a few necessities, she leaves behind everything which includes a house and a restaurant bought with her own money. Bobby senses that Clare has taken Rebecca

¹²⁷ Cunningham, *A Home*, 203.

¹²⁸ Cunningham, *A Home*, 217.

¹²⁹ Cunningham, *A Home*, 260.

¹³⁰ Cunningham, *A Home*, 253.

¹³¹ Cunningham, *A Home*, 237.

¹³² Cunningham, *A Home*, 279–280.

¹³³ Cunningham, *A Home*, 328.

away permanently, but does not seem to be sad losing his daughter; he only expresses certainty that “Jonathan and [him] belong [t]here, together.”¹³⁴

4.6.4.1 The Insupportable Hendersons

“The Hendersons were a family with modest expectations and simple tastes. They liked going to the movies or watching TV. They liked having a few beers in a cheap little bar. . . . Clare came to be known as Mom, I was Junior, and Jonathan was Uncle Jonny. . . . Mom was the boss. She wanted us to mind our manners. . . . Junior was a well-intentioned, shadowy presence, a dim-witted Boy Scout type who could be talked into anything. Uncle Jonny was the bad influence. He had to be watched.”¹³⁵

In this way Bobby describes the Hendersons, a made-up family he, Clare, and Jonathan impersonated when they went out together. It could serve as mimicry to hide their polyamorous relationship from the intolerant real world as well as a dream of the family they wished to be when both Jonathan and Clare were in the right mood. As time passed, Bobby reports that “Clare is turning herself into the Mom character from our Hendersons days. We don’t talk about the Hendersons anymore, maybe because the difference between our actual lives and their hypothetical ones has shrunk below the measuring point.”¹³⁶

In other words, when the Hendersons were only a theory—a game the three of them played—it was fun. When they no more impersonated them but *became* the Hendersons, they (or only Clare) realized that the “simple tastes” were not good enough material for building happiness.

4.6.5 Family after Child Loss

There is yet another thing that connects Bobby and Jonathan: the death of a sibling. Bobby lost his elder brother Carlton at age nine, in an accident during their parents’ open house party. Carlton ran into a closed glass door, the glass shattered, and one of the shards stuck into his throat. After he pulled it out, he bled out immediately in the arms of his girlfriend with Bobby, his parents, and the rest of the guests watching. Jonathan’s sister died at birth when Jonathan was about three years old.

¹³⁴ Cunningham, *A Home*, 331.

¹³⁵ Cunningham, *A Home*, 156.

¹³⁶ Cunningham, *A Home*, 270.

The loss of a child naturally destabilizes the surviving family members. The parents' marriage suffers, in many cases so strongly it leads to separation.¹³⁷ Few couples are brought closer together by the tragedy.¹³⁸ It has been found that "marriages did not end because of a child's death but because after the child's death parents felt it was no longer worth struggling with marital problems that had existed before the loss."¹³⁹ Men and women experience grief differently. While fathers feel the social pressure to remain strong, they do not grieve openly or at least not in front of their wives.¹⁴⁰ Mothers experience loss of sexual appetite and are disgusted by their husbands' desires to make love.¹⁴¹ While men are more prone to start drinking, women frequently neglect their other children and show inability to take care of the household.¹⁴² The misunderstandings caused by spouses' different attitudes to grief then cause further problems in the relationship, adding to the resurfaced old problems and greater irritability and intolerance of both partners; "what appear to be relatively minor events and matters that might have been overlooked or quickly forgiven and forgotten had the child lived seem. . . to become major sources of tension between spouses."¹⁴³

Parental grief following the loss of a newborn or an infant is reported to be less severe and lasting compared to the loss of an older child.¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, "the older the age of the infant the greater the sense of mother's morbid fear," especially after losing a son.¹⁴⁵ A more frequent reaction after the loss of an infant is recurring guilt in form of flashbacks of the dying scenes.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁷ Reiko Schwab, "Effects of a Child's Death on the Marital Relationship: A Preliminary Study," *Death Studies* 16:2 (March–April 1992), 141. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07481189208252564> (accessed April 19, 2016).

¹³⁸ Schwab, "Effects of a Child's Death," 142.

¹³⁹ Schwab, "Effects of a Child's Death," 142.

¹⁴⁰ Schwab, "Effects of a Child's Death," 142.

¹⁴¹ Schwab, "Effects of a Child's Death," 149

¹⁴² Schwab, "Effects of a Child's Death," 150.

¹⁴³ Schwab, "Effects of a Child's Death," 151.

¹⁴⁴ Ariella Lang and Laurie Gottlieb, "Parental Grief Reactions and Marital Intimacy Following Infant Death," *Death Studies* 17:3 (May–June 1993), 233. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07481189308252620> (accessed April 19, 2016).

¹⁴⁵ Lang and Gottlieb, "Parental Grief," 246.

¹⁴⁶ Lang and Gottlieb, "Parental Grief," 236.

If there are other children in the relationship, they are also influenced by the death of their sibling even when too young to understand what happened and feel grief themselves. The attitude of the grieving parents itself changes the child's position within the family. They may start overprotecting the "precious survivor," and often do not explain to him or her what happened to the sibling.¹⁴⁷ In their 1979 article on the effects of sibling death, psychiatrist Robert Krell and psychologist Leslie Rabkin distinguish three categories of surviving children: the Haunted Child, the Bound Child, and the Resurrected Child.¹⁴⁸ If parents choose not to talk about the deceased child, a sense of a mysterious dark secret evolves in the family. Instead of being sheltered, the surviving child is haunted by this secret, afraid to demand clarification.¹⁴⁹ The surviving child becomes bound if the parents either act in an overprotective fashion or distance themselves emotionally, both in fear for the other child's life and in an attempt to protect themselves from experiencing another great loss.¹⁵⁰ Parents may also put more pressure on the survivor and expect him or her to live a dual life—that of their sibling along with their own.¹⁵¹

4.6.5.1 The Haunted Boys

The death of Jonathan's baby sister and that of Bobby's brother Carlton both take place before they meet. They are never recorded to discuss their loss in great detail. Jonathan was too young to remember much of what happened, not to mention experiencing a great deal of his own grief. His father mourned the loss of his newborn daughter openly, but his mother, who seemed to not have wanted a second child, did not cry. She did, however, give the impression of "a vacant body, waiting dumbfounded to be infused with a human soul."¹⁵² After the tragedy she refused going outdoors even more than she did prior to it. She also distanced herself sexually (and physically in general) from her

¹⁴⁷ Robert Krell and Leslie Rabkin, "Effects of Sibling Death on the Surviving Child: A Family Perspective," *Family Process* 18:4 (December 1979), 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1979.00471.x> (accessed April 19, 2016).

¹⁴⁸ Krell and Rabkin, "Effects of Sibling Death," 3.

¹⁴⁹ Krell and Rabkin, "Effects of Sibling Death," 3.

¹⁵⁰ Krell and Rabkin, "Effects of Sibling Death," 3.

¹⁵¹ Krell and Rabkin, "Effects of Sibling Death," 4.

¹⁵² Cunningham, *A Home*, 14.

husband, as if “a force field had grown up around her, transparent and solid as glass,”¹⁵³ which never quite subsided. After a period of grief of unreported length, the family somewhat returned to their “normal family life.”¹⁵⁴

Carlton was seven years Bobby’s senior and had a great influence on him. He was suspected by the local police of taking drugs and he taught Bobby to smoke marijuana and from time to time brought home other substances. Their bond was very strong and Bobby looked up to Carlton for teaching and guidance. After Carlton’s tragic accident, Bobby’s mother “has established her life of separateness behind the guest-room door,”¹⁵⁵ eventually committing suicide in about a year after the loss of her older son, while the father started drinking.

In accordance with the researches cited above, Jonathan’s family was able to endure the loss of a newborn without falling apart. The signs of his mother’s physical and mental weakness are mentioned prior to the baby’s death, and so is her reluctance to maintain physical contact with her husband. Both these “vices” of hers were augmented by the loss. The tragedy was, however, never spoken about, and Jonathan was only able to piece together what happened later in life; therefore I would place Jonathan in the category of haunted children, especially because of his age at the time of his sister’s death.

Bobby’s family, having lost a teenager, seemed to suffer more greatly. His mother retired into her own world, losing the interest in everything, including her own life. Both these reactions are typical of women’s experience of grief while seeking solace in alcohol, as Bobby’s father did, is the men’s domain. Not even Bobby, however, seems to discuss the loss with his father, and he definitely did not speak on the topic with his mother. He too can be considered a haunted child, but haunted by the specific person of his own brother he quite well and fondly remembers.

4.6.5.2 Possible Effects of Sibling Loss on the Relationship(s) of Bobby and Jonathan

In a fit of rage, Clare says to Bobby:

¹⁵³ Cunningham, *A Home*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ Cunningham, *A Home*, 19.

¹⁵⁵ Cunningham, *A Home*, 36.

“You’re a company man, aren’t you? You mirror everybody’s desires. . . . When you lived with Jonathan’s parents, you were a nice Ohio boy, when you lived in the East Village you were cool, and now that we live in the country you’re this sweet sort of hippie-dad figure.”¹⁵⁶

Bobby thinks it more or less true, telling the reader, “I am part of the living and part of the dead.”¹⁵⁷ He says that “without Jonathan, [he] *haunted* [his] own life” (emphasis added),¹⁵⁸ and when Clare runs away with Rebecca, Bobby thinks she “has taken Rebecca to the world of the living.”¹⁵⁹ It is again Clare who observes that Bobby looks up to Jonathan in a similar way he looked up to his elder brother, and indeed, Bobby confirms this by considering his bond with Jonathan “stronger than sex [and] . . . stronger than love;”¹⁶⁰ he perceives them as blood relations.

Jonathan still can confront his parents about his feelings of being haunted and he does bring it up in a conversation with his father. He says: “I keep thinking there must be something I don’t remember. I’ve got a decent job, I have lovers and friends. So why do I feel so numb and separate? Why do I feel like a failure? Did you do something to me?”¹⁶¹ His father is taken by his own thoughts for a moment, and Jonathan recognizes he is remembering *something*, but his father offers no clarification. When Clare and Bobby’s daughter is born, Jonathan is by far her most (overly) caring parent. He finds an infant to take care of while Bobby is seeking for a figure to look up to.

4.6.6 Alice Glover in Doubt

During the course of the novel, Jonathan is growing more and more certain that the life in the polyamorous triangle could be his life. His mother Alice, however, expresses doubt. She says she may just be old-fashioned, but she cannot help thinking her son is being “exploited in all this.”¹⁶² She can see the normal couple—Bobby and Clare—corresponding to her heteronormative, monogamous ideals, and Jonathan seems to be the third one, the extra one. “Three is an odd number,” she says to him. “When there are

¹⁵⁶ Cunningham, *A Home*, 272.

¹⁵⁷ Cunningham, *A Home*, 272.

¹⁵⁸ Cunningham, *A Home*, 214.

¹⁵⁹ Cunningham, *A Home*, 331.

¹⁶⁰ Cunningham, *A Home*, 260.

¹⁶¹ Cunningham, *A Home*, 198.

¹⁶² Cunningham, *A Home*, 285.

three, one usually gets squeezed out. . . . We have a hard enough time staying together as couples.”¹⁶³ Jonathan, however, considers those presumptions a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Finally, when Alice looks at Jonathan more closely, she observes: “Do you think that when it comes down to brass tracks, Bobby will choose you? That’s it, isn’t it? You think Clare will recede, and you and Bobby will raise that child together, with her in the background.”¹⁶⁴

4.7 *By Nightfall* Revisited

In *By Nightfall*, the eternal triangle is approximately as straightforward as in *The Hours*. Rebecca plays the role of *A*, Peter is *B*, and Mizzy is *C*. Peter’s stereotypical life and his longing for excitement, described in more detail in Chapter 3 above, led him to fall in love with his brother-in-law. Rebecca, the *A* of the present triangle, cannot be discussed in much detail since, throughout the novel, she is unaware of her husband’s feelings.

Peter’s role is typical of a *B* in the sense that he does feel the need to be loved more than he is. What he wants even more, however, is excitement, and freedom; he wants to do something scandalous to make himself known as a man of adventure as opposed to his current reputation of a respectable second-rate art dealer. He does not want to just have an affair with Mizzy—he has no intention to continue living in the triangle. Such behavior is somewhat atypical of a *B* who usually wants to keep both partners because they complement each other.¹⁶⁵ ¹⁶⁶ Peter only wants to keep Mizzy, the forbidden partner, and drop Rebecca, the secure partner, altogether.

From Peter’s point of view, it can be said Mizzy is indeed a *C* in a love triangle, but from Mizzy’s perspective it is hardly the case. He has no intention to speak of to be in a relationship with Peter; if Peter’s final thoughts are to be believed, Mizzy was only attempting to make him keep a secret. And therefore, since no emotions of *A* are expressed, and the love triangle is only perceived as such by Peter, I chose not to discuss it in more detail.

¹⁶³ Cunningham, *A Home*, 292.

¹⁶⁴ Cunningham, *A Home*, 293.

¹⁶⁵ Johnson, *Love*, 6.

¹⁶⁶ Pam and Pearson, *Splitting Up*, 161.

4.8 Triangular Relationships: Conclusion

In this chapter, I used the common love triangle, and attempted to apply it on the triangular relationships in *The Hours* and *A Home at the End of the World* to little (or no) success. It is because the well-known paradigm describing a mostly heterosexual experience does not fit in the more varied sexual landscapes with which Cunningham intentionally endows his characters. For *The Hours*, the love triangle theory still matches the triangular relationship of Clarissa, Richard, and Louis, but the characters' sexual fluidity and (possible) bisexuality make it significantly harder to explain than a traditional heterosexual love triangle. In *A Home...* the love triangle model fails altogether to help us understand what is going on between the characters—an extra but undeniable link interferes with the very attempt to label the vertices of the triangle. All three of them are bound by mutual love, meaning one person is in love with two people at once. In recent years, this cannot be possibly considered traditional—polyamory just is not normal. Homosexuality is somewhat normal, but polyamory goes on being largely viewed as perverse.

The aim of this chapter was to demonstrate that in our mostly heteronormative and monogamy-preferring society, difficulties may arise for individuals who attempt to reason their way into understanding non-heterosexual and/or non-monogamous relationships. The mind tools we unconsciously rely on do not serve us (or serve us poorly), resulting in the subsequent short-circuit thinking that the non-traditional is abnormal, bad, and therefore needs to be dismissed and demonized. By introducing characters such as Peter Harris, a middle-aged everyman, Cunningham shows us that sexual fluidity or the existence of phenomena such as bisexuality and polyamory are normal and have long been the subject of sociological and psychological research; they just have not yet entered the lay public's category of what is *normal*.

5 Conclusion

I have introduced several well-known (and less well-known) psychological and sociological theories, the love triangle, the *ménage à trois*, and mid-life crisis to quote some examples, as well as the sexual landscape model and the influence a death of a child can have on the surviving family. By applying real-world theories on fictional characters I would like to inspire a discussion, if only internal, on the difference between what is *traditional* and what is *normal*. Just like Peter Harris, all his life a *traditional* man, under complicated circumstances found himself having *non-traditional* feelings, every single one of us can one day cross the line of *traditional*; every single one of us can suddenly find him- or herself, quite *non-traditionally*, in love with two people at once, just like Clare, Jonathan, and Bobby. All four characters undoubtedly noticed their *non-traditionality*, but at the same time they still felt *normal* enough. All of them, possibly with the exception of Bobby, were confused by this discrepancy, not realizing many things can be *normal*, but only few of them can be *traditional*.

It could be said that I would like to cheat people into being more tolerant and open to the *non-traditional* out there in the world by starting them thinking on fictional characters first before scrutinizing real people. “If Peter had simply become obsessed with a girl,” Cunningham said about the protagonist of his *By Nightfall*, “the story would have been too conventional.”¹⁶⁷ The author’s intentions clearly are to write about non-traditional individuals, and I would like to believe that he is urging his readers to inspect his characters’ motives more closely in order to teach them to think of the human experience in more detail, and as a result eliminate short-circuit judgments and the fear of the non-traditional in real life. To use Cunningham’s own words, “That’s part of why we *have* novels—to reveal the life-affirming consciousness . . . that people don’t wear on their sleeves.”¹⁶⁸

It can be seen in this thesis, which only presents a thin slice of his works, that Cunningham is preoccupied with the number three and the triangular shape. “There’s

¹⁶⁷ Cunningham, “Michael Cunningham,” *The Paris Review*.

¹⁶⁸ Cunningham, “Michael Cunningham,” *Bomb*.

something about three,” he confessed.¹⁶⁹ “One point is whatever you want. Two are a straight line. But with a third, the possibilities are endless.”¹⁷⁰ “And three has a way of turning up,” he says, not only in his works, and gives the Holy Trinity as an example.¹⁷¹ Cunningham has set out to show that the world cannot and should not be perceived in terms of multiple one-to-one relationships. Rather, by preferring threes to twos, he inspires his readers to create broader views of literature, the world, and literature as a reflector of the world. Sexual fluidity never ceases to be the source of interest and inspiration for him, as he claims to be especially interested in “how various sexualities cannot be really accurately defined as straight or gay, or even bisexual.”¹⁷²

In her short biography of Cunningham, Tory Young wonders: “Should we . . . recognize Cunningham’s novels as speaking to contemporary notions of sexuality as polymorphous, rather than representing or writing for one heterogeneous gay or straight audience?”¹⁷³ In this thesis, I humbly hope I have proven that the answer is “yes.”

¹⁶⁹ Michael Cunningham, “Michael Cunningham Bears Witness,” interview by Christopher Bollen, *Interview*, May 30, 2014. <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/michael-cunningham-the-snow-queen>.

¹⁷⁰ Cunningham, “Michael Cunningham Bears Witness.”

¹⁷¹ Michael Cunningham, “Michael Cunningham Interview: Shining a Light on Ageing, Love, and Innocence,” interview by Hephizbah Anderson, *Independent*, May 23, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/michael-cunningham-interview-shining-a-light-on-ageing-love-and-innocence-9424673.html>.

¹⁷² Cunningham, “Michael Cunningham Bears Witness.”

¹⁷³ Young, *Reader’s Guide*, 19.

6 Resumé

Bakalářská práce „Netradiční vztahy ve vybraných dílech Michaela Cunninghama“ spojuje zájem své autorky o psychologii a sociologii s literaturou, jejím studijním oborem. Cílem práce je nahlédnout s pomocí těchto dvou vědeckých disciplín na tři romány současného amerického spisovatele Michaela Cunninghama (*Domov na konci světa*¹⁷⁴, *Hodiny*¹⁷⁵ a *Za soumraku*¹⁷⁶), ale má i cíl vyšší, a to podnítit čtenáře k větší toleranci k ostatním lidem.

K napsání práce na toto téma autorku přiměla osobní zkušenost, že lidé si často oblíbí fiktivní postavy, jako např. Dr. House či Dexter ze stejnojmenných seriálů, které by ve skutečném životě pravděpodobně velmi špatně snášeli. Autorka proto učinila závěr, že lidé jsou k postavám daleko tolerantnější než k lidem, s nimiž se setkávají ve skutečném životě, a proto by mohli být přístupnější k charakterním rozborům postav a díky nim se naučit lépe chápat motivace osob mimo literaturu.

Michael Cunningham se otevřeně vyjadřuje o své homosexualitě a často o ní i píše, ale odmítá být zaškatulkován jako „homosexuální spisovatel“. V jeho dílech se vyskytují netradiční postavy, prožívající netradiční pocity, shlukující se do netradičních rodin. Jeho díla jsou proto ideální pro ilustraci toho, že když je něco *netradiční*, nemusí to být *nenormální*, popř. nemorální a odsouzeníhodné. Tato práce poukazuje na rozdíl ve významu slov *normální* a *tradiční* a upozorňuje na to, jak vliv naší heteronormativní společnosti, preferující monogamní vztahy, negativně ovlivňuje naše chápání světa v jeho nekonečné různorodosti.

Práce zahrnuje kapitolu se stručným životopisem Michaela Cunninghama, ale převážně se zaměřuje na to, jaké názory na jeho díla panují mezi kritiky a veřejností a jak je vnímá sám autor. Následující dvě kapitoly se věnují aplikaci psychologických a sociologických modelů a teorií na jednotlivé Cunninghamovy romány. První z kapitol se zabývá románem *Za úsvitu*, konkrétně jeho protagonistou, Peterem Harissem, a pomocí teorie sexuální krajiny (sexual landscape) vysvětluje jeho milostné vzplanutí k o dvacet let mladšímu bratru jeho manželky, Ethanovi. Peter, čtyřiačtyřicetiletý nepřilíš

¹⁷⁴ V originále *A Home at the End of the World*, v češtině vydal Odeon v r. 2005.

¹⁷⁵ V originále *The Hours*, v češtině vydal Odeon v r. 2004.

¹⁷⁶ V originále *By Nightfall*, v češtině vydal Odeon v r. 2011.

úspěšný majitel galerie, prožívá krizi středního věku a najednou se v jeho životě objevuje mladý a pohledný muž, který se navíc velmi podobá Peterově manželce Rebecce zamlada. Ačkoliv se Peter celý svůj život považoval za heterosexuála, nemůže ignorovat své pocity k Ethanovi a začne uvažovat o tom, zda není homosexuál. Jak ale vysvětluje teorie sexuální krajiny, sexualita není jev černo-bílý, ale může být proměnlivá (fluidní) a ovlivnitelná všemi aspekty našeho života, včetně lidí, s nimiž se setkáváme. Znuděný čtyřicátník Peter tedy klidně mohl být přitahován mladším manželčíným příbuzným, ale dle mnoha vědeckých výzkumů se jeho chování nedá považovat za abnormální. Rozhodně je netradiční, protože v naší současné společnosti je stále tradicí heterosexuality. Homosexualita je pomalu ale jistě přijímána jako normální, ne však tradiční, ovšem představa proměnlivé sexuality, ovlivnitelné jakoukoliv událostí v našem životě, je stále vnímána jako abnormální.

Druhá z kapitol se zabývá trojúhelníkovými vztahovými strukturami v románech *Hodiny* a *Dům na konci světa*. Primárně se snaží analyzovat tyto vztahy za pomoci dobře známého modelu milostného trojúhelníku a poukazuje na to, že ke správnému pochopení těchto komplexních vztahů lidí různých sexuálních orientací (popř. různých stupňů sexuální fluidity) tento heteronormativní model nestačí, pochopení nenapomáhá, ba naopak spíše mate. Na vztah mezi Clarissou, Louisem a Richardem v románu *Hodiny* se milostný trojúhelník více méně aplikovat dá, protože je jasné, kdo hraje jakou roli. Narazíme ovšem, jakmile si role uvědomíme: Louis je zhrzeným partnerem, Richard nevěrníkem a Clarissa jeho milenkou. Dva muži a jedna žena jsou v milostném trojúhelníku samozřejmě běžní, ale ne v tomto postavení, kdy pohlaví dlouhodobého partnera neodpovídá pohlaví nevěrníkova milence nebo milenky, jako je tomu právě v této situaci. V románu *Dům na konci světa* narazíme při analýze vztahu Jonathana, Clare a Bobbyho na problémy okamžitě. Zdaleka totiž není jasné, kdo je vlastně zhrzený, kdo nevěrník a kdo milenec či milenka. Oproti milostnému trojúhelníku se v tomto případě totiž vyskytuje jeden vztah navíc: všechny tři postavy jsou spojeny vzájemnou láskou. Je tedy potřeba představit nový koncept: polyamorii, tedy lásku pociťovanou ke dvěma či více jedincům současně. Je-li homosexualita při nejmenším okrajově dnešní společností přijímána, polyamorie je stále považována za nejen nenormální, ale i nemorální. Podobně jako bisexualita není polyamorie vnímána jako skutečná. Bisexuálové jsou často mylně vnímáni jako homosexuálové s nedostatkem kuráže, lidé milující dva (či více) osob jsou považováni za zmatené nebo samy sebe obelhávající. Není divu, že Clare, Jonathan a Bobby, produkty výchovy 60. a 70. let

minulého století, jsou svými pocity zmateni a pravidelně v nich sami sebe utvrzují nebo je vyvracejí, protože ačkoliv (stejně tak jako Peter z předcházející kapitoly) pocítují netradiční emoce, jsou přesvědčeni, že oni sami jsou normální, a právě propastný rozdíl mezi těmito dvěma nálepkami způsobuje jejich nejistotu.

Dle mnoha Cunninghamových vyjádření lze soudit, že psát o tom, co je netradiční a rozšiřovat hranice normálního, je jeho cílem a posláním. Zajisté by se nezlobil, kdyby byla jeho díla čtena nejen jako literatura, ale také jako „cvičení v toleranci“.

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¹⁷⁷ This data refers to the original publication of the article. It was republished online in August 2004, paginated 1–5. In the thesis, I use the 2004 version and its pagination.

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