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The Image of the Loser in the Work of Hubert Selby, Jr.

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VEDOUcí PRÁCE:

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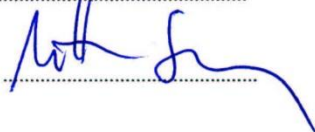
America in the sixties : the economy and the society by the editors of Fortune
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The Interplay Between Despair and Hope in the Work of Hubert Selby Jr.: A new perspective on Hubert Selby Jr.'s entire oeuvre
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Prohlašuji, že svou bakalářskou práci na téma „The Image of the Loser in the Work of Hubert Selby Jr.“ jsem vypracovala samostatně pod vedením vedoucího bakalářské práce a s použitím odborné literatury a dalších informačních zdrojů, které jsou citovány v práci a uvedeny v seznamu literatury na konci práce. Jako autorka uvedené bakalářské práce dále prohlašuji, že jsem v souvislosti s jejím vytvořením neporušila autorská práva třetích osob.

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Introduction

The fiction of Hubert Selby, Jr. is often considered depressing, bleak, and severe and reflects exactly the harsh conditions in which his major characters grew up, live and struggle for survival. The behavior and way of thinking of these tragic characters is mostly influenced by misery they live in, social exclusion, pervasive feeling of purposelessness, depression, drug addiction, sexual obsession, or hostile surroundings. Hubert Selby, Jr. is not similar to any other writer of the twentieth century; he stands apart and is regarded as a significant writer because of three things: his subject matter, and more because of style and tone of his fiction. Therefore the main aim of this thesis is to examine in more details the nature of characters in Selby's books, which I considered not receiving enough attention in the field of literary criticism. My thesis is also focused on examination of the impact of cruel urban environment and American society on personalities of the main protagonists. However, firstly I would like to briefly outline Hubert Selby's book, life and events that affected his piece of work.

General Features of the Work of Hubert Selby, Jr.¹

The most of Selby's work is inspired by places he grew up, life he lived and by people he met. His first novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, published by Grove Press in 1964, is generally remembered for Selby's intention to shock and scandalize readers by portrayal of street and domestic violence, urban despair and desire to depict a truthful image of taboo subjects such as drug addiction, gang rape, prostitution, homosexuality and transvestitism. It is a series of short stories that tie together to reveal the true nature of life in Brooklyn in 1950's. Therefore *Last exit to Brooklyn* quickly "gained a reputation as 'underground classics.'" ² Regrettably, nowadays this novel remains almost neglected by literary critics and also Selby's other novels received significantly less literary criticism. His second novel *The Room*, published in 1971, is famous for its breathtaking introspection to the insane mind of a criminal, who is affected by social alienation and loveless upbringing. Selby's third novel *The Demon*, published in 1976, tells the story about successful businessman driven by his obsessive need for sin and retribution. His fourth novel named *Requiem for a Dream*, which was published by Playboy in 1978, is focused on the topic of drug addiction and "warning that the illegal drug trade has the potential to destroy the very fabric of American society." ³ *Requiem for a Dream* tells a story about misfortunes of four addicts from Brooklyn. It belongs to the most horrifying and honest novels about drug use of all time. *Requiem for a Dream* also received only a little attention and its successful film adaptation directed by Darren Aronofsky in 2000 is more valued by criticism. *Song of the Silent Snow* was "generally neglected by critical establishment." ⁴ It is a series of fifteen short stories that was published in 1998 and reveals the hidden and unspoken demons such as hatred of God or many kinds of psychological suffering that haunt us all. In 1998 Selby finished and published *The Willow Tree* and his final novel *Waiting Period* was published two years before Selby's death in 2004 and the theme of this book is huge frustration and anger that all people

¹ Information from GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, HEKKING, Lester George, "The Interplay Between Despair and Hope in the Work of Hubert Selby Jr. A new perspective on Hubert Selby Jr.'s entire oeuvre"

² GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 12

³ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 24

⁴ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 114

feel about the "forces" in life such as various institutions, consume society and conventional thinking. His last two books were almost completely ignored by literary criticism.

What is unique about his work is that he wrote about different taboo themes not as a form of social protest, however simply because this was the life he knew, these were the people he met and he was convinced that their stories were as worthy of documentation in fiction as anybody else's.

Selby was born in New York and as he said in the interview with Allan Vorda "I believe that the biggest influence of growing up in New York was that it made me very responsive to speech and the music that there is in speech. I write by ear and the music of speech fascinates me."⁵ Thus Selby's work is not only remarkable in terms of its themes, but also is very original in terms of its typography, grammar, vivid use of language and his "innovative mastery of style and dialogue".⁶ He often did not use punctuation, commas and was known for replacing apostrophes with slashes. The occasional use of symbols instead of fully spelled-out words for numbers is also one of the unique features of his typography. He indented his paragraphs to suit the length of a pause he wished to convey and he wouldn't even bother clarifying who was speaking in the dialogue of his stories. He never used quotation marks, so it is sometimes more difficult to understand who is speaking. Moreover, Selby often uses only capital letters, when he wants to emphasize that characters get excited, shout or feel nervous. Among other features of his style belongs the use of italicized phrases as the voice of character's conscience, decapitalization of personal pronoun "I", multiple narration, dynamic quality of his prose, long stream-of-consciousness passages, and use of irony, aggressive language and slang. These unique features of his style create the sense of chaos and desolation, confusion, lack of control and are crucial for setting the atmosphere of his work. Selby's novels are usually written in first person narration to express character's emotions and thoughts. However, the third person narratives are also used and express the hostile surroundings which the protagonists live in and dismal situations they have to face every day.⁷

⁵ VORDA, Allan, "Examining the Disease: An Interview with Hubert Selby, Jr., page 288

⁶ YOUNG, Elizabeth, Elizabeth Young on the courage and daring of Hubert Selby", page 50

⁷ Information in paragraph from HEKKING, Lester George, "The Interplay Between Despair and Hope in the Work of Hubert Selby Jr. A new perspective on Hubert Selby Jr.'s entire oeuvre", page 6-33

Additionally, Selby is not much interested in description of the appearance of the protagonist, but in interior life and personality of the individual. He claimed in the interview with John O'Brien from 1981 that: "We don't live and die outside"

Life and Influence⁸

Selby's fatal experiences of his adolescence and manhood have an impact on his work which rebels against traditional conventions of literature and shows all the subjects and limitations of modern life in America. Selby was born in Brooklyn on July 23, 1928 in the middle-class family, his parents nicknamed him Cubby. At the age of fifteen he was dropped out from high school and served as an oiler with the Merchant Marine. When he was in Europe, he fell ill with tuberculosis and then spent next three years in various hospitals. During his stay in hospital he was treated by lots of drugs such as morphine or various sleeping pills. Hence it is not surprise that he became a drug addict. He had four surgeries and one of his lungs was completely removed along with ten of his ribs. Nobody expected him to live. Moreover, he suffered from lung problems and asthma. After these experiences he said:" You spend 3+ years in bed and it affects your life and everything that affects your life affects your work. I also believe that you don't understand life until you die or come close to dying. That may have a lot to do with the nature of my writing. Lying in bed also gives you a greater opportunity than usual to look inside yourself and find out exactly what's going on. I had never read a book until then. That's where it all started: reading and then desire to write."⁹ Stay in hospitals influenced him a lot also after his partial recovery, because he was drug and alcohol addicted and also arrested for possession of narcotics. He went back to New York in 1950 and despite lack even high-

⁸ Autobiographical information from HEKKING, Lester George, "The Interplay Between Despair and Hope in the Work of Hubert Selby Jr. A new perspective on Hubert Selby Jr.'s entire oeuvre" www.exitwounds.com,

GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby, Jr.*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1998,

PHILIPS, Rachel, "Hubert Selby Jr. on writing, spoken word, and dying as a way of life"

SELBY, Hubert Jr., *IT/LL BE BETTER TOMORROW*, W. Dean, Michael & Shiffrin, Kenneth, 2005

SIMPSON II, Tyrone R., *Ghetto Images in Twentieth-Century American Literature: writing apartheid*, "Something Tangible to Strike At", pages 93-95

⁹ VORDA, Allan, "Examining the Disease: An Interview with Hubert Selby, Jr., page 289

school education his literary career began. Soon, Selby became a member of a group of young rebel writers, where Gilbert Sorrentino was the central figure and later became one of the closest Selby's friends, as Selby claimed that he was also his literary mentor. This group of artists published several magazines, for example *Yugen*, *NEON*, and *THE FLOATING BEAR*, which became crucial for Selby's later career in *Black Mountains Review*, *New Directions* or *Provincetown Review*. His publications in these magazines caught attention of Grove Press, where he later published *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. In 1969 Selby decided to change his life and gave up his drinking and drug use, but his experiences with drugs and the addict lifestyle remain evident in all of his work. He continued writing and produced several novels in the 1970s, one of which would turn out to be his second-most-popular novel. Hubert Selby, Jr. was married three times during his life and was the father of four children. He died on April 26, 2004, at the age of seventy-five, at his home, listening to music.

The Image of the Loser and the Myth of the American Dream

The losers in American literature can be characterized as people whose American Dream gone wrong and whose hopes and the worst nightmares may be one and the same. Selby's concept of the American Dream is very negative and he claims that "to pursue the American Dream is not only futile but self-destructive because ultimately it destroys everything and everyone involved with it."¹⁰ American culture is often characterized by the strong emphasis on the goal of monetary success and not so much on the ways how to achieve this success. Thus for the majority of people motivated by the promise of a better life, success and wealthy became a synonym for the American Dream. Hence for many Americans is indispensable to achieve their vision of happiness introduced by consumer society. Consequently, the American Dream is just a dream of the commodity, not the real dream of human inside desires. Originally, the American dream in its pristine form was characterized by the power of one's individuality, prosperity of the whole nation, freedom and success. However, in the course of time this term

¹⁰ SELBY Jr., Hubert, Preface to *Requiem for a Dream*

has gained negative connotations and is the representation of the vain endeavor which could destroy human identity.

Hubert, Jr. is also one of the many writers who criticized the false vision of the American Dream and the controlling power of the American society. His work is also focused on the devastating impact on the victims of the myth of the American Dream, which ultimately destroys them and makes them losers. Ordinary American inhabitants were manipulated by mass media to believe that the purpose of life is wealthy and success. Thus the main characters of Selby's novels are also victimized by the brutal, competitive and uncaring society they live in. The losers for Selby are not people who failed in a nation that worships success, but people who became too obsessed by the vision of dream and happy life, that they let the external factors steal their souls. In other words the losers are those people who let the American capitalistic society change their individuality and ambitions in order to fit in. Nevertheless, loss of the soul is the source of their loneliness that intensifies their effort to fulfill their dreams, which in most cases of Selby's novels leads to their total destruction. Selby's goal is to give the understanding of the nature of powers in American society; moreover he also intends to give voice to the powerless¹¹ and describes psychology of human beings trapped in the world of pervasive pressure and expectations.

The fact is that not all the protagonist of Selby's work are considered to be the losers. Especially, in his latter book he admits that ordinary people who accept their failures and life as it is could be saved against destructive power of the American Dream. Those people who not chase after the vision of happiness all the time and change their values according to what they really desire, not what the society put into their heads.

¹¹ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 11

Last Exit to Brooklyn

The late 1950s in the United States were a decade of economic expansion, cold-war nationalism, and moral conservatism. American government was mostly focused on improving the quality of life. While the upper and middle class of American society continued to prosper, about 50 million Americans lacked the basic commodities necessary for human existence. Welfare programs failed to improve the living conditions of the poor part of inhabitants. Thus breaking the cycle of poverty was only possible for a very few individuals. For lower working-class families it was only possible to rise to a level of economic security when both of the parents worked. Thus women had to often cope with two jobs - at home and at work, which led to further familial and social disruptions. Children had to cope with parental neglect and were left to themselves to be victims of violence and crime in the neighborhood. Because of migration of many poor families to the cities, the government introduced low-rent housing projects, which on the contrary led to reinforcement of segregation of the low class and the sense of despair and inability to escape from these conditions. Urban minorities were particularly vulnerable to structural economic changes of the period, such as increasing polarization of the labor market or technological innovations, which later caused the high rates of unemployment and hard financial situation of many families. As a result of suburbanization, the inner cities lost their economic power to the suburbs and slum areas developed. Moreover, there was no money to maintain the houses in a civilized way and low-rent housing project quickly became an area of high unemployment and high crime rates. The number of crime rate doubled between 1950 and 1960. However, mostly the absence of collective hope and the breakdown of social structures were responsible for violence and crime of the poor and desperate inhabitants of housing projects. The changes in economics and social status of people always cause changes in their behavior.¹²

Last Exit to Brooklyn includes five chapters and Coda, it is set in the slums around Brooklyn waterfront. The chapters are more or less interconnected through the life of different characters and their personal hopeless stories. These characters have

¹² THE EDITORS OF FORTUNE, *America in the Sixties: The Economy and the Society* WILSON, William, *A History of Our Time: readings on postwar America*. "The Urban Underclass in Advanced Industrial Society", pages 475-495

something in common; they are “irrevocably trapped by internal as well as external factors”¹³ in a world that is full of violence, consumerism, rejection of love and loss of faith of God, in a world where everyone is doomed not to fulfill their dreams and to lose. All the characters in the novel try to deal with this absence of love, feeling of social alienation, their obsessions and external forces that somehow repress their own personality. James R. Giles wrote in his work entitled *Understanding of Hubert Selby, Jr.* “It is true that, while all the characters in the novel are victimized by a brutal environment, they are guilty of moral failures that make their victimization complete and irrevocable.”¹⁴ Selby’s characters are often identical and anonymous in terms of their action. Everything they do, they do for only reason, for survival. In Brooklyn neighborhood there live citizens who might beat you half to death because they just do not like the way you walk, speak or because you are homosexual. Although the characters in Selby’s works are “products” of their own fight against the environment they live in, against Brooklyn, which is representation of lost hope, lost dreams, lost dignity and lost soul.

Every chapter in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* starts with quotation from the Old Testament, thus each story becomes a polemic between Selby’s view of cruel reality and God. In the novel Selby wanted to portray the horrors of the modern America. Moreover he wanted to make readers to think about it, whether they like it or not. The main themes that occur in the novel are homosexuality, prostitution, drug use, criminality, violence, nature of urban street gangs and misogyny; however this novel is not unique because of its subjects. The novel is remembered because of its realistic and truthful picture of the ugliness of modern city life, which shocked and outraged many readers. The lives of the main characters are portrayed with great psychological depth, narrated most frequently from the first person viewpoint with use of stream of consciousness style. Selby’s intention was to emphasize their feeling of existential despair, self-loathing, hatred and confusion about themselves in relation to the environment. His characters are not doomed to fail because of their immoral behavior, “but but because they lost control. The lack of power is their dilemma... All these people I

¹³ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 14

¹⁴ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 30

write about are looking to outside forces to do something for them. Not one of them wants to know what he can do for somebody else. They go out and attack the world.”¹⁵

In addition, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is unique concerning point of view. The novel opens with the third person omniscient point of view and then, almost without any notice of the change, it is written in first person narration. Moreover, the style changes little through the novel; the language becomes more and more aggressive and vulgar as well as the characters it describes. As it was said in the second chapter, this style intensifies the notion of helplessness, fear, anger and lack of control.

Part I: Another Day Another Dollar

The first chapter of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is about a group of unemployment young gangsters from Brooklyn - Freddie, Vinne, Tony, and Harry, who spend most of their time in a bar named Greeks, doing nothing, drinking, joking and fighting. One night they for no reason attacked, beat and almost killed a young soldier who wanted to return to the army base. In this story the individual characters are not so important, but the major role plays the street gang, which also plays significant role in other stories such as “Tralala” and “The Queen is Dead”. The members of the gangs in Brooklyn are described by Giles as “the predators of the wasteland of urban America, hating everything and devoted to nothing”¹⁶. The street gang in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* appears in separate chapters of the novel in order to help to interconnect individual histories of the main characters. Moreover, in my opinion the gang is a representation of lack of individuality, confusion, frustration and cruel ugliness of the Brooklyn. Why do people want to be part of the brutal street gang? I think that all the members of the gang are bored with their lives; they miss something important, maybe love or faith, they are looking for some kind of happiness. However, their form of happiness is different from what is expected. Only violence, which erupts every now and then, may break their boredom and routine. Being the member of the

¹⁵ O'BRIEN, John, "An Interview with Hubert Selby, Jr."

¹⁶ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 40

gang is the only way they can hide their weaknesses, worries and uncertainty. Furthermore, in the city it is the only way how they can feel being a part of something and there is no need for them to feel so guilty of the crimes they committed.

“Someday you boys going to get in trouble. All the time fighting. Whatayamean Alex. We was just defendin Freddys wife. Yeah, they insulted Rossie. They roared, stamped, and banged their fists in the counter and tables. Alex grinned and said Scatah. Someday you be sorry. You should get a job.”¹⁷

In summary, the members of the gang are also rebels in the face of a world that is even more violent, unforgiving, and cold. Being part of the gang enables them to believe they are important and not doomed to failure. However, no one in the gang is able to change their lives, which causes their imminent downfall or stagnation in the loser’s life without any meaning.

Part II: The Queen is Dead

The second chapter of the book tells a story about young transvestite prostitute Georgette, who is thrown out of the family home by her brother, because he hates “queers”. The homophobia and prejudices against homosexual was so aggressive that it could turn brothers against each other and in fact it did. The social standards of 1950’s were quite different than of nowadays, and the stigma attached to being homosexual or transsexual lead to self-loathing and self-hatred of individuals. Consequently, these people were often hiding their sexuality by “happy” marriage or public statements about perversion of being gay.

“FILTH!!! Why dont you die Georgie! Why dont you go away and die.”¹⁸

Georgette is desperately in love with a young neighborhood criminal Vinnie and she imagines herself always closer to her goal of being his exclusive girlfriend. Georgette is probably the most famous and influential figure of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.

¹⁷ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 20

¹⁸ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 40

In one interview with Alan Vorda, Selby said that the character of Georgette is based on real person he used to know: “There was a real named George. Georgie must feel like an outcast who was totally alienated. He was hysterical in his defense, and his defense was hysteria. And the more he fed that with stimulants, the more hysterical and wacky and flighty he became. I’ve always felt like an outcast who was alienated all my life. So Georgie and I had that point of identification although this was totally unconscious. I had a tremendous sympathy for George. I felt like my life was fucking ruined and a disaster. So I had this empathy, sympathy, and compassion for Georgie. A year or two later I met someone from the old neighborhood and they said Georgie had been found dead in the street, evidently an O.D. (drug overdose). He was only about twenty years old when he died...I guess I felt Georgie needed more than a death in the street. He needed a memorial. Thus, in a very real way, Georgie is responsible for the book *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.”¹⁹

The Georgette’s behavior and tragic self-destruction is affected by “living in a world that denies God and rejects love”²⁰. Together with other major characters in the novel she only tries to find love and happiness, however never found it. She is admirable for her struggle to finish her quest for love, but unfortunately she fell in love with a brutal and selfish member of the gang. Nevertheless, Georgette perceives Vinnie as an ideal lover and hero who could embody her dream of a saving love, which is “essential to her attempted construction of an alternate, and bearable, reality”²¹. She seeks the escape from cruel reality, boredom and hopelessness that she feels by imagination of different, better reality, though such escapes in Selby’s novels always fail for characters who are intelligent and sensitive like Georgette. Actually, she knows that Vinnie is brutal, selfish and arrogant criminal, but she just needs somebody to admire and dream about to survive in the world that lacks love and is full of prejudices against her real personality.

“...(fearing that moment at a cocktail party or in a bar when this front may start crumbling from alcohol and be completely disintegrated with an attempted kiss or

¹⁹ VORDA, Allan, “Examining the Disease: An Interview with Hubert Selby, Jr., page 293

²⁰ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 19

²¹ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 21

groping of an attractive young man and being repelled with a punch-rotten fairy-followed with hysteria and incoherent apologies and excuses and running from the room)...”²²

Georgette attempts to achieve her dream of loving and she tries to satisfy her need of being loved till this searching of this dream destroys her. Ignorance of Vinnie’s real personality and unpleasant side of reality leads inevitably to the drag queen Georgette’s humiliation and psychological destruction. Sometimes is difficult to live according society’s expectation and one has to deny who they really are or change their ambitions to fit in. However, Georgette did not give up her dream so she constantly feels loneliness, anger and worthlessness. Being forced to face these feeling she seek solace in drugs and imaginative relationship with Vinnie.

“Goldie handed her half a dozen bennie²³ and she swallowed them, gulped hot coffee and sat silent...trying to think the bennie into her mind (and her room and the past few days out); not wanting to wait for it to dissolve and be absorbed by the blood and pumped through her body; wanting her heart to pound *now*, wanting the chills *now*, wanting the lie *now*; Now!!!”²⁴

“...Georgette sat on a wondrous throne in a wondrous land where people loved and kissed and sat silent together, holding hands and walking through magic nights...”²⁵

Even, in one moment during the party (when Georgette recites Poe’s “The Raven”) Vinnie does feel attraction to Georgette for a moment, but immediately he realized that other friends could ridicule him because of his emotions and he rather denied them. He is not used to feel attraction or “softness”, thus he is confused and angry with himself. “It is significant that, at the moment when his

²² SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 23

²³ Bennie is another name for amphetamine and is classified as “psychomotor stimulant drugs”. Characteristics effects of these drugs are alertness, suppression of fatigue, sleepiness and stimulation of motor activity. Information from HAMANI, C., Elena MORO, *International Review of Neurobiology*, “Emerging Horizons in Neuromodulation New Frontiers in Brain and Spine Stimulation” page 2-4

²⁴ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 41,

²⁵ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 66

hardness begins to crack, he turn to members of the gang, and especially to Harry, for vindication and support”²⁶

Another important fact is that name Harry became the most common protagonist's name in Selby's novel and it is a synonym for “powerless urban everyman”,²⁷ who feels isolated and insignificant in society. By the use of the same names Selby emphasizes their anonymity and mediocrity. All the Harrys in his novels are victims of their obsessions and unfinished dreams. As a result they are often members of the street aggressive gangs to satisfy their need to be respected. Moreover, they are frequently characterized by violent behavior and thinking and the act of violence is a manifestation of social necessity. Their actions and way of thinking are rooted in self-loathing and feeling of inferiority. All of Harrys are unable to change their view of world, as well as Harry in “The Queen is Dead”. He is used to live in the gang with other criminals and hoodlums; even he thinks that the greatest thing in his life was “the glory of having known someone killed by police during a stickup”²⁸. Being a member of the gang, he is not able to change his lamentable life. As far as I am concerned his invariable view of world is deep-rooted in growing up in a brutal environment, so many inhabitants of the city are as brutal as the place they live in order to protect themselves.

To sum up, Georgette, the homosexual drag queen, lives in a world full of aggression against homosexuals, while she is dreaming of freedom to be with her lover, to fully appreciate the beauty of art and music. Her only sin is living in such a cruel and intolerant world.²⁹ While Harry and his gang only try to survive in this careless and hopeless world by protecting themselves by violent behavior and pretence of carelessness.

²⁶ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 24

²⁷ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 24

²⁸ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 27

²⁹ MOTTRAM, Eric, “Free Like the Rest of Us: Violence and Despair in Hubert Selby's Novels”, page 335

Part III: And Baby Makes Three

The following chapter deals with the story of alcohol addicted dad, his pregnant daughter Suzzy and her husband Tommy who owns motorcycle that everybody envies him and desire to ride it, especially Spook. Spook is obsessed by motorbikes and the greatest pleasure for him is to ride Tommy's motorbike. Suzzy's father wants to maintain the family's marriage tradition and arranged a big party at the occasion of wedding and christening of a baby. Tommy is different from other man characters from novel. He owns a motorbike, has a job and is even married, thus the other men, especially Spook, from the neighborhood admire him. Spook's dream is also to buy a machine; he is saving money and after some time he is able to buy a motorbike too. Although it is old police motorbike, his dream came true and he is proud of himself. However, the others initially were laughing at him because of wearing motorcycle hat all the time in spite of not having his own motorbike, he is more admirable, because he managed to fulfill his dream.

"His eyes was bugged outta his head. I thought he was up on tea or something, but he was just high with a bike. He picked up an old police bike for a few bucks and fixed it up. You know, threw some paint on it and stole a wildass buddyseat all covered with fur and chrome, and was fulla piss and vinegar ta go."³⁰

As far as I am concerned, this shortest story in the book serves as a contrast to other stories full of violence and hatred. Selby's intention is to demonstrate that there is some kind of hope for people living in Brooklyn provided they believe in their ability to make changes and stand for themselves in this cruel atmosphere. However, firstly they have to realize that they are the only ones who are responsible for their actions and the only ones who can make changes.

³⁰ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 87

Part IV: Tralala

The fourth part of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is probably the most impressive one and the same time the most obscene personal history from the novel. Tralala is a story about Brooklyn girl who became a prostitute at the age of fifteen. She makes a living by luring mariners and soldiers from Brooklyn army base to an empty waterfront lot, distracting them with the promise of sex, and offering them as bait to a local street gang who knock them unconscious and rob their money. However, Tralala differs from Georgette, who is also prostitute, in her lack of femininity, sensibility, consciousness and absence of passion. Georgette dreams about her ideal relationship with Vinnie, but Tralala's view of life is pessimistic and she does not appreciate any expression of someone else feelings. She is only interested in cruel excitement and gain of easy money, thus she does not mind being exploited, because she exploits others too. Her only dream is to have enough money and being the best prostitute in neighborhood.

"It was about time she got something on her own. If she was going to get laid by a couple of guys for a few bucks she figured it would be smarter to get laid by one guy and get it all. All the drunks gave her the eye. And stared at her tits. It would be a slopeout."³¹

Tralala, earning her living as a prostitute, failed moral and economic standards of society and accepted "society's evaluation of her as garbage; she seems never to have had sufficient will to assert her essential humanity."³² Even she becomes more ambitious, cruel, senseless and addicted to material things with increasing number of men that she deceived and robbed. Tralala is also capable of immense brutality, not common for women, after Tony and Al, her accomplices from the street gang, have beaten up a mariner Tralala "stomped on his face until both eyes were bleeding and his nose was split and broken and then kicked him a few times in the balls"³³ Her violent way of behavior have become her way of struggle against society's exclusion, because the majority of men consider her to be mere body, which leads to the self-rejection of her personality, needs and emotions.

³¹ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 95

³² GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 26

³³ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 97

Not long afterward Tralala met and spent few days with an army officer, who paid them an expensive hotel, bought her new dresses. Moreover he also showed her life in Manhattan, which is unknown to her and she is fascinated by life in luxury. She even seems to feel affection to him. Then he told her he has to leave to go overseas and before his departure he gave her an envelope with letter expressing love for her. However, she is not delighted by his declaration of love, because she expected to be paid for her “service”, thus she is confused and angry and she believes she deserves more than love letter and cannot imagine people treating her decently. She is of the opinion that her body is more valuable than her character. As James R. Giles claimed, she is not capable to express her emotions, because of the loveless environment she grew up, thus she is satisfied even with most primitive expressions of admiration. She was afraid of unknown world where women are loved and respected rather than “merely commodified”³⁴, because she is used to treat men as they treat her, with the coldness and she sees them as a source of money, not as a human being. The possibility that her life might have changed is unbearable for Tralala, which finally leads to her physical and physic degradation.

“They were having a smoke and another drink when he turned and kissed her and told her she had the most beautiful pair of tits he had ever seen. He continued talking for few minutes, but she didnt pay any attention. She thought about her tits and what he had said and how she could get anybody with her tits...”³⁵

After her affair with the army officer she ended up completely cynical and returned to familiar Brooklyn, because she feels she does not fit in Manhattan bars. Finally, she goes to the local bar full of drunken mariners and workers from nearby factory, exposing her naked breast, which leads to her death in a fatal mass orgy in the filthy lot. As James R. Giles wrote, Tralala had a chance to live common and happy live, but this was unbearable for her, because she was dependent on materiality, which leads to her death. Moreover, “Tralala ’s pursuit of material resources is conscious and intentional and there is no evidence that she has ever regretted the loss of opportunity to change her life, she only laments the

³⁴ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 29

³⁵ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 102

absence of financial gain.”³⁶ She decided to give up any attempt to change herself and continue to sell her body as a sign of her importance in Brooklyn neighborhood. In fact, nobody even considers her a human being with emotions and treats her like she treats them, with coldness and insensitivity. She tries to defend against her feelings, does not want to interpret them, as a result she continues to behave the way she was used to, because she lacks the effort to change her view of world and she always (like other characters) blames somebody else for such a miserable life. Tralala was only projecting her anger on the others, but her anger finally caught up with her. She does not want to feel guilty for her life; therefore she acts cruelly to the others, because “anger is an attempt to make somebody else feels guilty”³⁷

“Tralala still bounced her tits on the palms of her hands turning to everyone as she was dragged out the door by arm by 2 or 3 and yelled to Jack to come on and she/d fuckim blind....so they continue to fuck her as she lay unconscious on the seat in the lot and soon they tired of the dead piece and the daisy chain broke up and they went back to Willies the Greeks and the base and the kids who were watching and waiting to take a turn took out their disappointment on Tralala...”³⁸

Thus she dies the way she has lived, as “a wasted and embittered receptacle of the material and the savage”³⁹, in the end she gets what she deserved, total dehumanization by the act of mob rape. Having always desired not to be sensitive and caring, the majority of people consider her be mere body without soul.

Part V: Strike

This part narrates about Harry Black, the mechanist in the factory, who became a local official of the union. The aim of this longest chapter in to reflect on the frustration of the main protagonist. Harry is one of the most egocentric, selfish and at least heroic figure of the book.⁴⁰ He is the best example of Selby’s Harries,

³⁶ SIMPSON II, Tyrone R., *Ghetto Images in Twentieth-Century American Literature: writing apartheid*, “Something Tangible to Strike At” page 101

³⁷ VORDA, Allan, “Examining the Disease: An Interview with Hubert Selby, Jr., page 296

³⁸ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 112-114

³⁹ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 31

⁴⁰ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 32

the product of the industrial society who is unable to change his life and at the end is defeated by his obsessions. Harry lives in society where homophobia is very common and he has grown up hating homosexuals, thus when he realized he has homosexual needs and desires, at the same time he feels some kind of happiness, self-hatred and fear of being revealed by his friends from the street gang. Hatred and deaden feeling have an effect on Harry's sexuality and relationship with his wife Mary. Being in marriage with the woman he hates, he is "infuriated by his wife's body and her sexual demands"⁴¹

"Harry turned on his side facing away from her. Mary rubbed his neck, his shoulders, then his back. Harry wished takrist she/d go sleep and leave him alone. He felt her hand going lower down his back, hoping nothing would happen; hoping he could fall asleep (he had thought that after he got married he would get used to it); wishing he could turn over and slap her across the goddamn face and tell her to stop—krist, how many times had he thought of smashing her head."⁴²

Harry is only able to have sexual intercourse with her by conceiving of it as a form of aggression, however how wife likes it and thus she wants to have sex with him often. He blames his wife for being unhappy and always upset. His loveless marriage represents an attempt to suppress his socially unacceptable nature of having homosexual desires. Because of homophobia and social prejudices "Harry has repressed his sexual desire for cross-dressed males which enforced his deep revulsion toward his wife and child."⁴³

His marriage and hidden sexual desires is not the only trap in which he is hopelessly caught. He has boring and worthless job in the local factory at which he is useless and bored all the time. After job he has to go home where his hated wife is waiting for him. His lack of ability to confess who he really is brings him to final destruction. Since his marriage he has a horrifying repeated dream, in which he is attacked by Harpies.

⁴¹ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 32

⁴² SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 118

⁴³ SIMPSON II, Tyrone R., *Ghetto Images in Twentieth-Century American Literature: writing apartheid*, "Something Tangible to Strike At", page 99

“Harpies screeching, screeching and above the roar of the wind and the screeching he could hear his flesh being ripped from his belly...”⁴⁴

This repeated nightmare symbolizes suppressed desires, unexpressed feelings and urges that torturing him till the time he is asked to run strike headquarters (in fact, nobody else wants to do this boring job). From that time he has changed, he no more carries out meaningless job in the factory, but he thinks he becomes more responsible and respectable by other employers. His life got new sense, because previously there was no area in his life in which he is successful, he failed as husband and father, even he feels hatred to his family, he also failed as worker in factory⁴⁵, where he is not important and respectable at all and most employers and managers would be pleased to fire him. However, he actually believes that managers of the factory are fond of him and a new privileged position means everything to him. Harry becomes more confident thanks to his made-up importance, which leads to his inevitable destruction. He starts to cheat, to lie, to boast until the day he discovers his real nature when he meets a gay Ginger.⁴⁶ At first, he starts to meet the members of the brutal street gang, offering them free beer and food that he bought for strike funds money. “Vinnie and other boys are for him the very images of male strength and toughness”⁴⁷, he hopes that he will manage to take control of his secret desires by meeting these tough men. After meeting Ginger his whole life is on the verge of collapsing, because he starts to feel attraction to homosexuals and later he lost control over his obsessions.

“He stayed at the bar until about midnight, the image of the fairys face and hands still in his mind, his voice still in his ear.”⁴⁸

Soon after, Harry used the opportunity and tries to empower himself through abuse of the union funds to pay his secret night visits of gay bar, where he meets the transvestite Alberta and for the first time of his life he has felt happiness after making love with her.

⁴⁴ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 124

⁴⁵ SORRENTINO, Gilbert, “The Art of Hubert Selby” page 340

⁴⁶ BINET, Roland, “The Mirror of Man”, page 382

⁴⁷ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 36

⁴⁸ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 148

“...and he was now able to look at Alberta and remember the night, in a general penumbrous way and not be afraid to be there - thought still fearing the consequences of having someone find out - but the fears and confusion were overshadowed by his feeling of happiness...Harry smiles his smile and there was a slight softness about it, and even his eyes had a slight tenderness in them.”⁴⁹

Then he visits the gay bar more often, makes friend there and spends money from union funds. These visits turn to be the only meaning of his life, while he is hopelessly in love with Regina, another transvestite, buying her dresses, going out to the restaurants and spending nights at her apartment.

The inevitable doom starts when the strike ends and Harry's position as leader of strike is suddenly terminated. Since he has not almost any money from funds, Regina rejects him, thus he loses his most important meaning of his existence – feel of love, happiness and importance. Now, when he has lost any illusions of being important, Harry sets in motion his final act of destruction⁵⁰. He seems totally dragged down by his mistake of starting an affair with homosexual and he even seems that he wants to be punished for his indiscretion and manifestation of any kind of emotions, even if it was happiness and love. Harry's sense of hopelessness derives from an unreal notion of what he ought to be instead what he actually is.⁵¹ Drunken, hopeless and almost crying, he tries to have an oral sex with ten-year-old boy Joey, and then he is beaten up by the street gang. It is probably the most sadistic scene in *Last Exit*.

“A couple of guys picked him up and stretched his arms across and around one of the crossbars of the sign and hung on his arms with all the weight and strength until Harry's arm were straining at the shoulder sockets, threatening to snap and they took turns punching his stomach, and chest and face until both eyes were drowned with blood...”⁵²

Harry's last words are” God you suck cock”⁵³ when he blames the God for the condition of the world and accuses God of his miserable life. As well as most

⁴⁹ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, pages 196-198

⁵⁰ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 37

⁵¹ Qtd in GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 39

⁵² SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 227

⁵³ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 227

characters of Selby's novel, he blames somebody else for being loser, he is not capable admit that he is responsible for his behavior, thus he is the only one who should feel guilty of his actions. It is true that being a homosexual in that time was not easy at all, therefore at the same time he has had to struggle with his obsession and social prejudices. However, his decisions were only up to him, nobody else did make him be selfish and uncaring. Harry's attempt to abuse the young boy is only a manifestation of his self-hatred and need for forgiveness.

Coda: Landsend

The last part of the book *Last Exit* describes one day in lives of Brooklyn citizens, who live in the public housing. Selby wants to show reader how lives of the minor characters are similar, hopeless and miserable even though they do not know one another. All these people are products of the violent society and it seems they do not have any chance to be different from their neighbors. They have never experience love, thus they are only able to feel anger, self-hatred, sadness and aversion to other people, even to their children. However, it is important to say that these people are not only victims of the society, because they have created the society, where nobody has any values. The tenants of the public housing are doomed to live in the same way till their deaths. Thus most of characters living in this part of Brooklyn seek the relief in violence, alcohol, drugs, religion, gossiping or sex, because only these things make their lives more bearable. "Landsend evokes images of an abject repository for hopeless human beings."⁵⁴

Especially woman's characters are important in this part, because they are often treated by their men with brutality; they have to keep house alone and thus become more and more embittered and uncaring. Women Chorus plays the significant role, it describes a group of elderly, mostly widowed women, whose only goal of the day is gossiping others and hoping for bad things to happen to

⁵⁴ SIMPSON II, Tyrone R., *Ghetto Images in Twentieth-Century American Literature: writing apartheid*, "Something Tangible to Strike At", page 104

others and being generally repulsive. This part only emphasizes the whole matter of moral degradation of characters.⁵⁵

“The women finished their shopping, took the beer home and returned to their bench. Mrs. Olson, who has had a stroke 2 years ago when her husband died, came out and as she hobbled by the women watched her and laughed... The women loved to watch her, wondering if she picked up chewing gum and dog shit with her right foot...”⁵⁶

However, there are two female characters, Lucy and Ada, who recall Brooklyn neighborhood with nostalgic lamentation, once it was prosperous and good place to life. Lucy also desires to move away from housing project to avoid her children becoming the same miserable citizens as the majority of their neighbors. Ada, a Jewish widow and mother, who once ran a candy shop laments on change of Brooklyn neighborhood during Cold War. These woman characters are the witnesses of the change of society, human values and individualities. They seem to be the only ones who can see this change and the power of the American society.

In my opinion, the majority of women behave in uncaring way, because they have been whole life oppressed by their husbands (in most cases unemployment). Many male protagonists of *Last Exit* are selfish, egocentric “machos” who care only about themselves. Therefore the women feel only anger and regret over themselves for not being able to escape from miserable life without any hope for better tomorrows. Thus gossiping and laughing at others is the only “delight” that has left them. It is the only way they can feel better than others and it gives them some sense of life. Women in *Last Exit* also behave badly to their children, which has a harmful effect on their behavior, because they grow accustomed to pervasive violence, fear and boredom. Moreover their parents are in most cases materialists, who are only interested in alcohol, sex or property and do not pay much attention to them.

“The father continued waving his finger in the boys face and told him he didn't have to teach his Harold how to fight. I'll teach him how to fight. I'll teach him

⁵⁵ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 42

⁵⁶ SELBY Jr., *Hubert, Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 280

how to kill, thats what I I/ll do. Im no going to have my son hit by lousy kids like you.”⁵⁷

Landsend serves as a summary of the five preceding stories and it portrays how people deals with their daily lives without thinking of the sorrow of the others. They are often judging others people without knowing them at all, treating them as if they were not able to feel any emotions. In Landsend Selby intends to illustrate how the environment shapes the way people live and think and he wants to show the impact of background on children, whose dreams will been left unfulfilled and they will lose the chance to change their lives, because day by day they become more like their parents. In my opinion, Landsend is an appropriate end to *Last Exit*, because it gives the reader an unfiltered look at life in this place at this time.

In conclusion, even though there are many characters in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, they have something in common, because they are forced to live in cruel environment they have created. All the characters in the novel are frustrated for some reason and excluded from the rest of the society. Georgette is suffering from lack of love, not only Vinnie’s love, but also her brother’s love. Tralala is frustrated by her inability to express any emotions and Harry is frustrated by his homosexual obsession, which he is not able to admit. Anger, discomfort and self-hatred, that main characters experience every day, is caused by lack of love, lack of self-esteem, expectations of others and feeling of insignificance in modern urban society. At the same time another characters’ serious problem is lack of control over their hidden obsessions, which in the end leads to their destruction. Thus they succumbed to forces which are beyond their control because their lack of effort to change their lives. The most of the protagonists are using drugs for ease the tension in their minds till is too late. The others seek conformation of their existence in violence and robbery or they try to empower themselves through abuse of the relatives. Moreover, some characters blame God for being unfair, they do not realize that they are the only ones who are responsible for their actions, subsequently for their failure. They also do not realize that the society the live in is created by individuals, by them. Thus the only chance to alter the

⁵⁷ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, page 279

miserable conditions is to start changing themselves. All the time they are only looking to outside forces to do something for them; they go out and attack the world. Lack of control of their lives comes from inability to accept the responsibility for actions.⁵⁸

In interview with Gilbert Sorrentino Hubert Selby summarizes his *Last Exit* as stories about the loss of control, he says that if you allow what is bothering you to get out of control for just an instant, you pay the price of destruction.⁵⁹ Selby's intention is to explore the human mind in the state of anxiety, obsession, depression and anger, which is often closely related to the dark atmosphere and environment the characters live in. Selby's primary aim is to portray the quality of human life within urban surroundings and how the way of thinking and self-expression of people is influenced by Brooklyn surroundings. As he said in interview with O'Brien: "People are people. I'm trying to give you individuals. I'm trying to give you their hearts and souls."⁶⁰ The entire narrative of *Last Exit* summarize the themes of domestic violence, homosexuality, transvestitism, parental neglect and the way people are defeated by these problems because of lack of ability to change themselves and assume responsibility for their behavior. Furthermore, Selby's exploration of taboo subject is intensified by "unrelenting and often brutal realism"⁶¹, which in my opinion make readers think about their own obsession and weak points. However, Selby does not want to moralize readers, his intention is the show to reades the real life, with all the sorrows, failures and hatred. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* has a huge impact on reader, because in every character people could find themselves in them and could easily identify with their feelings, therefore readers may possibly start to feel the fear that they could end up similarly as Harry, Georgette or Tralala - naturally, not in terms of their public humiliation or physical punishment by society, but in terms of loss of their dreams and dignity.

⁵⁸ O'BRIEN, John, "An Interview with Hubert Selby, page 317

⁵⁹ SORRENTINO, Gilbert, "The Art of Hubert Selby", page 336

⁶⁰ O'BRIEN, John, "An Interview with Hubert Selby, page 319

⁶¹ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 11

Requiem for a Dream

Requiem for a dream is a novel written in 1978, it describes almost one year in lives of four main protagonists - Harry Goldfarb, a middle class Jewish adolescent; Harry's mother Sara Goldfarb, his African-American best friend Tyrone C. Love and Harry's girlfriend from upper middle class Marion Silver – their obsession and final failure. As the title of the book implies *Requiem of a dream* is bitterly grievous story about death of dreams of the main characters. Each of four main protagonists has some dream; however they are destined to not fulfill them, because they have fallen prey to obsessions and illusion of perfect life, an illusion of the American dream. Each of the characters tries to find their own version of the American dream in different way, but the final desired feeling is the same - to be happy according to consumer society's definition of happiness. Considering this definition of happiness as truth, they will succumb to their vision and they will be driven by this obsession till final destruction.

In the preface of the newest edition of the *Requiem for a Dream* Selby muses: "Obviously, I believe that to pursue the American Dream is not only futile but self-destructive because ultimately it destroys everything and everyone involved with it. By definition it must, because it nurtures everything except of those things that are important: integrity, ethics, truth, our very heart and soul. Why? The reason is simple: because Life/life is giving, not getting." Thus the more the main characters try to make their lives perfect, the more inevitable their doom is and they do not want to admit it at all. "*Requiem for a Dream* dramatizes the ways in which vision can fail and the result of vision failed: The lines are blurred between light and darkness, sadness and joy, the physical and the mental, reality and illusion, indifference and love, sanity and insanity, life and death"⁶²

Two best friends, Harry and Tyron, decided to put together a bankroll and buy "a pound of pure"⁶³, meaning an uncut bundle of pure heroin, which they want to sell and become rich to buy their freedom from the Bronx surroundings. However, as they becomes a part of underworld of drug dealing, they started regularly

⁶² ATCHITY, Kenneth John, " Hubert Selby's '*Requiem for a Dream* '", page 399

⁶³ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, page 8

taking drugs to assure that the quality is good and they become more and more addicted to heroin, which they are not able to admit till final destruction.

“All we gotta do is cool it with the shit, you know, just a taste once in a while but no heavy shit – Right on baby – just enough to stay straight an we/d have a fuckin bundle in no time. You bet your sweet ass. Those bucks would just be pillin up till we was ass deep in braid jim. Thats right man, and we wouldnt fuck it up like those other assholes. We wont get strung out and blow it.”⁶⁴

“Pound of pure” not only represents amount of heroin, but symbolizes an ideal of the American dream, happiness and peace, that Harry, Tyron, Marion and Sara (who will be analyzed later in the thesis) want to achieve in their lives. They lie to themselves that such a goal is possible to reach and finally they are caught in despair, which caused their final destruction.⁶⁵ Especially, Harry and Tyron often confirm each other they are not going to become addicted on heroin and “fucked things up”, they keep on conformation in spite of sinister feeling they have. At the beginning they started to use drugs just for entertainment and pleasure; heroin for them is a means to build a better life. Nevertheless they started to use drugs more often, from three to four times a day; it has changed into taking drugs for easing the sorrows and pains of their daily existence.

“And whenever they started to feel the chills of fear and the grinding of anxiety they simply go off and melted all the cares and concerns away with its warmth. Sometimes they would fix up new cookers just for the sake of doing it. It was a part of keeping house. The entire routine made them feel a part of something.”⁶⁶

There is one moment in the book when Tyron experienced the sense of identification with one drug addict man during Tyron’s short stay in jail. However, he immediately denies the fact that he could have something in common with him and he could end up just like him, end up like loser in the ravaged body totally devoted only to heroin. Nevertheless, with every passing day, Harry and Tyron become bear a resemblance to that old “dope fien”, their label for drug users. They begin losing their interest in meeting of their dreams

⁶⁴ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, page 9

⁶⁵ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 98

⁶⁶ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, pages 183-184

and start to live only from shot to shot, heroin becomes the only sense of life for which they are able to do almost everything to get it, which eventually brings them down. They are no more able to see reality, while heroin influences their minds and actions. Ultimately, two best friends start to hide money and heroin from one another and they are no more interested in each other. The only goal of their everyday struggle is to get some dope to satisfy their needs and ease life's harsh reality.

“There no longer was any thought, or even desire, to make money, but just an unending effort to get enough for themselves (...) if he didnt want to part with something more precious, at that particular moment, than his life, for without his life was worse than hell, far worse than death, death seeming to be a reward rather than a threat, because this process of lingering death was the most fearful thing that could happen.”⁶⁷

Regrettably for them, heroin became a scarce article in New York and it is increasingly harder to obtain it. They decided to take one last hopeless step – to go to Florida to buy some heroin. They borrowed a car and set off, but as they are miles further from home, they started to realize slowly the mistake they had made, but is too late for them to change it, because their destiny is already sealed.

“They tried to numb their minds with the uppers of heroin, but still the desperateness of the situation forced itself upon them. Separately they each felt increasingly aware of the fact that what they were doing was insane. (...) They were strung out, a fact that they pussy footed around for a long time, but now it thrust itself right in their guts. They were strung out and they were driving through some asshole fuckin state trying to get to Miami and find the big connections.”⁶⁸

Even if they realized the cruel truth of being addicted to heroin and willing to die for it, they do not have the smallest chance to escape from it, because the power of heroin forces them to keep on driving. What once was the power of their dream has changed into the destructive power of their obsession which has taken domination over their bodies, thoughts and even souls. From the point they

⁶⁷ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, pages 189-190

⁶⁸ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, page 259

became interested more in drug than their dream, they were doomed to failure. Attempting to drive to Florida to get heroin, they are arrested in some southern state and in the jail, Tyron experienced again the sense of identification with old addicted man he had met few months ago. However at that moment, he knows that they will experience even worse fate than him, he finds himself trapped in a ruined body with no hope for better tomorrow. Ultimately, Harry's arm has been amputated because of "infection with gangrene, the result of frequent and careless use of the needle and Tyrone is sentenced to the chain gang."⁶⁹

Comparable relationship occurs between Harry and Marion. Marion comes from upper middle class and the whole life she feels worthless and not beloved by their parents and people she knows. She is convinced they can only see her beauty, but not her personality, desires and needs. Thus her whole existence has changed when she met Harry and they fell in love. They start to dream about their future together; planning to run a coffee house focused on art, and they want to travel around the Europe. Initially they both use heroin for intensify their feeling of importance and perfect free life. On the other hand they do not realize that by taking heroin they are becoming more and more dependent on the conditions that drug can evoke. Only heroin helps them to make their dream more real and share it together, because "sharing any vision is better to them – to us – than having no vision at all."⁷⁰ However, the only problem is that they do not yet realize because of the intensity of pleasure that could heroin evoke - this condition is only temporary and with more dose of heroin it becomes less intense.

"...as they relaxed and listened to the music, and discussed the plans for the coffee house, as the dope continued to flow through their blood whispering dreams to every living cell in their bodies."⁷¹

In the course of time they become alienated, in the similar way like Harry and Tyron. Even though both of them can feel it, nobody is able to admit it or try to change the situation. They become pathetic and Marion's addiction will destroy her feeling for Harry or anybody else. The last act of total alienation came in the moment when Harry encourages Marion to sell her body in order to get some

⁶⁹ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, pages 101, 112

⁷⁰ ATCHITY, Kenneth John, "Hubert Selby's '*Requiem for a Dream*'", page 400

⁷¹ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, page 130

money for heroin. Marion is still repeating that she is doing this just for love to Harry and their happiness.

“...it allowed her to do what had to be done and she just reminded herself, from time to time, that Harry needed the money and she was really doing it for him and not for the money...”⁷²

As Harry and Marion become more and more addicted to their daily dose of drug, they begin to think mostly about their need to get drug, their dreams and plans seem to be covered by drug intoxication. Nonetheless, Harry and Marion still idealize the drug world and persuade themselves that they are able to conquer it. While there is only little opportunity to get heroin on the streets, the arguments are more frequent between Harry and Marion and they blame one another for not having a needed dose of drug to endure the harsh miserable reality.

“Those mornings when they woke up and there was nothing in the house, having used the last the night before when their disease convinced them that it would be alright, that they wouldn't be sick in the morning, she became hysterical and trembled as she shot up a sleeping pill, occasionally blowing a shot and burning her arm so it swelled and turned red and she cried and yelled at Harry that it was his fault they didn't have their morning shot. What the hell you talkin about? You're the one who wall all hot in the fuckin biscuit to get off again last night.”⁷³

The heroin progressively erases their love, dream and individuality, till the point they are willing to pay anything to get the necessary money to feed their habit. Marion is so desperate without heroin in her veins that she ends up selling her body for it. While she comes to the house of the dealer to sell her body to get some heroin, she is not able to think of herself as drug user and she denies the fact that she could ever be addicted to heroin. The need to get a drug is much stronger than her dignity, thus she did what she is asked for.

“What would you like? Marion shook her head, Nothing. O, you strictly a dope fiend? Marion was startled by his question. She had never thought of herself as a dope fiend. (...) He spread his legs as she knelt in front of him and closed her

⁷² SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, page 201

⁷³ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, page 227

eyes and pulled his pants off and caressed his ass as she sucked his joint with all the enthusiasm the thought of the dope generated, glancing up at him from time to time and smiling”⁷⁴

Harry and Marion almost lost the interest in each other and they started to pursue their personal desires. They lie to one another and Marion hides some packet of heroin just for herself. As soon as Harry leaves the apartment she caresses the packet of heroin and gets carried away with feeling of security of another dose. A talented artist Marion, who once cherished her dream of own coffee house, becomes a drug addict and prostitute, whose only sense of life is heroin. She not just loses Harry, her soul-mate, but more importantly, her sense of self. However, it was not only her fault that she has become drug addicted, because she only wanted to make her dream come true, but unfortunately there is only one small step from selling drugs to take them.

Another important protagonist in *Requiem*, whose dream will destroy her life completely in the end, is Sara Goldfarb. Her husband died many years ago and her son Harry moved away, so she lives alone in a small apartment in Bronx. Watching various television series and eating candies have become the two defining poles of her existence. Sara knows almost every commercial and every figure that appears on television, moreover she is convinced that people from television know her and have understanding for her. Being totally devoted to watching television, she is a perfect person for manipulation, which is the reason of her final destruction. For Sara, television allows an escape from the tedious everyday life and feeling of loneliness. Her life completely changed when she received a phone call from “Lyle Russel of the McDick Corporation”⁷⁵, who promised her that she will soon be asked to participate in unspecified television program. Sara, excited about idea of being in the television screen, becomes obsessed by losing weight to fit into her red dress she was wearing on the occasion of Harry’s bar mitzvah. In attempt to move forward Sara turns to a commercial product, diet pills, to be “*zophitic*”⁷⁶ and looks like a celebrity. Her ambition is to look like some movie star, for the reason that consumer society

⁷⁴ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, page 24

⁷⁵ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, page 25

⁷⁶ From Jewish slang, it means woman with well shaped and sexually attractive figure.

valorizes only beauty and youth, not the character of people. She believes that if she appears on television as beautiful, slim and elegant lady, everybody will love her, she will have more friends and gain better social status. She also believes that Harry will be proud of her, her loneliness will disappear and millions of Americans will love her and she finally will be happy. Besides, after long years of being alone, it provides her a reason to wake up in the morning and not to feel worthless. Every day she and group of other widows living there wait for a letter from McDick Corporation to share with Sara seeming luck and fame.

“Its like a new life Seymour. Its already a new life...and Sara Goldfarb, Mrs. Seymour Goldfarb, muzzled her cheek into her pillow and smiled such a nice smile that even in the dark it glowed the joy that flowed from her heart and through her entire being. Life was no longer something to endure, but to live. Sara Goldfarb had been given a future.”⁷⁷

Sara, like her son Harry, becomes obsessed by her dream, by the vision that will ruin her body, personality, dignity and soul, because such a dream is only a lie, because life would never be perfect. This lie has been created by consumer society, which claims that the aim of the life is to get as many as possible, be it fame or money, no matter what the cost will be. Nevertheless, as Selby once mentioned, life is not about getting, but about giving. “Consumer society has the power to control and destroy individuals”⁷⁸ and has changed people’s ambition and hierarchy of values. Sara is victimized by external forces – the pressure of society to be successful - and also by internal forces – the desire to be important and loved. Thus “her obsessiveness and vanity can join with American consumerism to destroy her.”⁷⁹

As consequence of taking diet pills she stops to eat and starts to drink too much coffee and even have hallucination. Initially she comes to believe that her television set and refrigerator are talking to her and they are threatening to spoil her dream. After some time she begins taking more pills to calm her concern, but due to rash taking pills she has hallucinations that people from television program are judging her appearance, apartment and way of life. In their opinion her life is

⁷⁷ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, page 66

⁷⁸ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 105

⁷⁹ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 108

not perfect at all and they sneer at her. Hallucinations are not only consequence of taking pills, but also the manifestation of consumer society and its pressure on common people. Even though Sara feels that something bad going to happen, she still tries to persuade herself that she must be happy, because she is losing weight and will appear at television program. Her vision of happiness is also influenced by American society and its valorization of beauty.

“She was losing, she was losing. She should be happy. The red dress fits nice. No stuffing. No huffing. She was losing. She should be happy. The red dress fits, her hair is like Rita Hayworth, her gold shoes sparkle and she was going to be on television, a dream, a dream, and she should be happy, she should be happy!!!!”⁸⁰

Sara Goldfarb is a woman who has never done much wrong, she only falls victim to American consumer society and its vision of perfect life. She attempts to achieve her dream by using diet pills and thus enters the “negative spiral of addiction and self-destruction – all because of her gullibility and naïve dream of happiness” ⁸¹ Sara is no longer able to wait for another call from McDick corporation, that is why she decided to visit the company demanding that they have to fulfill their promise to her and make her a television celebrity, which will be loved by everyone in America. She is already in miserable physical and mental conditions; as a consequence the corporation arranges her transport to the nearest hospital “where the final stages of her dehumanization occur.”⁸² Because of her diet pills addiction, inability to eat and derangement she is prescribed electric shock treatment. After a few cycles of such treatments she became just a body without soul, dreams and power to return to common life. Electric shock treatment not only represents Sara’s total dehumanization, but also the influential powers of capitalistic society that could control and destroy the individuals who are part of it and believe in its superficial values.

“...and suddenly fire shot through her body and her eyes felt like they were going to burst from their sockets as her body burned and stiffened and felt like it would snap apart and pain shot through her head and stabbed her ears and temples and

⁸⁰ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, page 160

⁸¹ HEKKING, Lester George, “The Interplay Between Despair and Hope in the Work of Hubert Selby Jr. A new perspective on Hubert Selby Jr.’s entire oeuvre”, page 40

⁸² GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 110

her body kept jerking and bouncing as the flames seared every cell of her body...”⁸³

In conclusion, all characters of the novel *Requiem for a dream* are doomed to fail in fulfillment of their dreams based on values of consumer society. Their ambitions are not impossible to fulfill, however the only problem is that they do not know when to stop to wish more and more and be satisfied with what they have already had. Nevertheless, it is not only their fault, but the fault of the whole American society of those days. The way of consumerist life was represented by television, advertising, illegal drug trade and powerful institutions, such as McDick Corporation, could influence people view of life and hierarchy of values. Besides, these representations of consumer society could dehumanize and destroy human personality. Thus “there is much doom in *Requiem for a Dream*, but there is also some small trace of happiness, moments stolen perhaps, yet they appear.”⁸⁴ In the beginning of the novel traces of hope appear, but shortly they are destroyed by protagonists’ own tragic flaws and desire to have more and more in order to be a valuable member of consumer society. They believe that they must first achieve success and money in order to be happy, however they do not realize that this is only the false happiness, not the happiness they would feel inside them, but it is the vision of happiness that is presented by society. The whole novel is not only about drug addiction, but is focused primary on the consequences of following an illusion over truth. Selby’s novel illustrates the society’s desire for pervasive materialism and evaluation of false values such as wealth, beauty, youth and power, which do not make people really happy at all. However, the leaders of the politics, economy or public life were convinced that a mass consumption economy would bring prosperity and citizens would live better than they had before World War II. Hence the majority of Americans were influenced by the idea of infinite opportunities and when they failed to achieve their dream, they felt increasingly empty and lost. This individual feeling of aimlessness led many Americans to the very last hopeless attempt to fit in the consumer society, like Harry, Tyron, Marion and Sara did, resulting in addiction of many forms. “Human beings have always been quick to adopt alternate consciousness, alternative

⁸³ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Requiem for a Dream*, page 237

⁸⁴ BINET, Roland, “The Mirror of Man”, page 388

vision, and quicker when ordinary vision reveals a loveless and uncontrolled reality”⁸⁵ Generally, people tend to rely more on outside influences to achieve their imaginary vision of happiness, which led four main characters of the novel to addiction and self-destruction. They failed to achieve their ambitions, because they had not realized that the values, which they are based on, are empty the same way as the society makes their souls empty. In the beginning, heroin or diet pills only help them to believe and intensify the feeling of being part of something and at the same time drug dispels fear, pain, hopelessness, frustration, stress, depression and other common human anxieties. Harry, Tyron, Marion and Sara desire this feeling of security; however, they fail to admit that drug steals their liberty and individuality and they are becoming a part of the consumer society that controls and destroys them. They became victims of their own desires of perfect life, which never truly existed, and at the end of the novel they ended up alone and even more empty than they were in the beginning. “*Requiem for a Dream* is a generally successful novel uniquely combining naturalistic social protest with a predominantly existentialist message, which serves as an urgent warning of the insidious addictiveness in which American consumer culture is based.”⁸⁶ Selby intends to bring closer the idea of the evil of contemporary society based on the vision of false happiness and superficial values which authorities try to impose on people.

Song of the Silent Snow

The collection of fifteen short stories *Song of the Silent Snow* was published in 1986. In the first part of the collection Hubert Selby intends to develop in more details the ideas of his previous pieces of work, especially feeling of rage and alienation and he also shows the impact of these feelings on human mind and behavior. Whereas in the last half of the collection he muses on cure for these feelings and a little sense of hope and affirmation is evident. Selby portrays the depressed American society, dashed dreams of men and women who struggle to

⁸⁵ ATCHITY, Kenneth John, “Hubert Selby’s ‘*Requiem for a Dream*’”, page 403

⁸⁶ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 112

gain happiness, in most cases without any result. Some of the main characters of the book became reconciled to their fate, which is the cure for their wounded soul.

The book opens with short story entitled “Fat Phils Day” in which a group of young boys plays a game of craps (a dice game) and boy nicknamed Fat Phil wins all the time. However, the other boys start to threaten him with beating, thus Phil does not want to win anymore. This portrayal of youthful violence seems to be parallel to violence of the street gang in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Growing up in violent and merciless environment will make the boys also cruel and heartless. Phil’s giving up of his ambition to win a game represents the pressure of the modern society to change people’s opinions and ambitions according to society’s request. This story offers nothing hopeful or affirmative, but only explains the reason of violence and lack of love in the competitive society.

Another story of the collection is “Hi, Champ”, which narrates about Harry Lewis, a single young man who started dating with Rita. Before their first date he asked Dempsey, a heavyweight champion, to pretend to be his friend, because he wanted to create the impression to have such a famous friend. The date turned out well and the pair spent night together. The next morning he is really happy for a short time spent with Rita, he promised to call her later. Then the narration begins to focus on Harry’s mind to observe how his depression and sexual insecurity destroy the possibility to have any relationship with a woman who seems to truly like him.

“But whats the point? It wont make any difference. You know what it will be like. The embarassement...Why bother? There/ll just another story...another lie. There is no point in calling. Its always the same.

Its all over.”⁸⁷

Harry is firmly convinced that Rita is only impressed by him because she thinks he is Dempsey’s friend. He does not even admit the possibility that she likes him because of his personality. Thus he concludes the whole evening as “a lie”. Selby in this short story develops the feeling of anxiety and loneliness of middle-class urban man, living in capitalistic society. Selby intend to show the reader the way

⁸⁷ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Song of the Silent Snow*, page 10

how consumer society shape the personality of people, because they feel increasingly meaningless, lonely and unloved, which mirrors in their self-confidence and effort to achieve their dream, not the American ones, but dreams they really desire even if these dreams do not fit in the society expectations.

On the other hand, the story entitled “Fortune Cookie” is “a study of the capacity for obsession in a struggling salesman, ends on positive note”⁸⁸ and it is obviously written in more comic tone. The main character of this narration is also Harry, man from the upper middle-class, employer of unmanned company, where he works as not very successful salesman. He is aware of the fact that he is not good at his job, so he could be fired in the next few days. His last chance to not lose his job is make the next meeting successful, however all the time he is haunted by insecurity and lack of self-confidence. After his visit of Chinese restaurant and reading the message of his fortune cookie that tells:” Take courage, today is your day for success”⁸⁹ he made a big sale, however at the same time became addicted to fortune cookies’ messages. In fact, is not able to admit that his personality, discourse and dealing with customers could be the source of his successful sales.

“He also knew that the fortune cookies did not really have anything to do with the sales, but he was not going to take any chances and so he continued with the candles in the morning and the Chinese restaurant in the afternoon.”⁹⁰

Harry quickly became a victim of the fortune cookie talisman, however, messages in cookies became more ambiguous and a little sinister; therefore Harry loses his confidence. Moreover he develops a “Chinese restaurant syndrome”⁹¹, he begins to suffer from nausea because of eating only Chinese food. Despite his state of health he is not able to give up his fortune cookies, which means his carrier success. One day, when he almost had no self-confidence because of bad message in one cookie, he read a horoscope that tells:” Today is a day to assert yourself. Great opportunities are yours”⁹², he refound his confidence again and he was ready to make another big sale. The irony of this story is that Harry is able to deny that he is dependent on the external factors, but in fact he not truly believes in

^{88 88} GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 124

⁸⁹ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Song of the Silent Snow*, page 15

⁹⁰ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Song of the Silent Snow*, page 17

⁹¹ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Song of the Silent Snow*, page 17

⁹² SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Song of the Silent Snow*, page 20

himself. The story of fortune cookies portrays the ability of people to deny their individuality in order to be a significant and useful member of the society. In my opinion the fortune cookies represent the power of society to control and destroy peoples' true self. These two stories and their main protagonist Harrys "embody Selby's weak and vulnerable urban male."⁹³

"Fortune Cookie" is followed by more complex story "Liebenacht", which is focused on the relationship of Harry and Mary. Harry feels more and more upset and fettered by his relationship with Mary, thus he decided to go to STEVES, a neighborhood bar, to meet some other men and have a fun. During his chat with men from neighborhood he learnt about the last night incident, when "Mikey no legs"⁹⁴ got drunk and injured his beloved brother Wally. Mikey turned out to be the most important character of this story. He is described as:

"He wasnt exceptionally violent or quiet, just sort of unobtrusively there, except when he got crazy drunk (...) when some twisted message tripped through his drunken body to his brain and voices burned his head and he couldnt scream them quiet..."⁹⁵

Mikey seem to be mentally be retarded, thus he is unable to find a job and helps his older brother Wally, who he has admiration for. Wally spends much time to protect his younger brother from the cruelty of the outside world. Nevertheless, at the same time he tries to protect others from Mikey's brutal irrational behavior when he got drunk. When Mikey sobered up, he even does not remember he injured his brother's hand. Ultimately Wally tells Mikey the truth, and he starts to feel guilty and he wants to expiate his violent manners. As a group of men leave a bar, they encounter a young lovers, Mikey grabs a splintered piece of fence and runs to tell the man to let Wally rape her girlfriend. Mikey obviously cannot bear the responsibility for his actions and tries to redeem drunken violence by another form of violence. The act of violence against young pair is the manifestation of Wally's forgiveness.

⁹³ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 117

⁹⁴ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Song of the Silent Snow*, page 26

⁹⁵ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Song of the Silent Snow*, page 27

“The Sound” immediately follows after that story. “The Sound” is an in-depth observation of human mind and the nature of terror that tortures the central character. Mr. Rawls is in jail, when he suddenly awakens, confused and terrified, trying to understand what made him get up. In the remaining part of the story he attempts to reveal the source of his anxiety and fear that torment his mind. He always hears a mysterious sound of unknown source. During a restless sleep he dreams of fishing with his father, and then suddenly the dream is interrupted by a noisy sound and by the image of his father disappearing into mist. The main protagonist comes to the realization that the unknown sound is “a prolonged scream of terror from inside”⁹⁶ caused by the experience from his childhood. Because of his inside torment, Rawls starts to scratch himself to bloody marks, which is the external manifestation of his agony. Then he saw in his mind the most painful memory - the flash of lightning and his father disappearing in the smoke. The story explores the childhood trauma of the main protagonist, which in the course of time results into psychological problem of feeling of repressed guilt. The childhood trauma could be compared to the traumas caused by society’s expectation that people are not able to fulfill, thus the cases of nervous breakdown are more common.

The next story entitled “Im Being God” closes the first part of the collection, which is considered to be more pessimistic and bleak, without any hope for cure to the souls of main protagonists. The story is written by epistolary manner and narrated by a woman in mental hospital. She writes regularly to her husband Harold who obviously does not answer her and neglect her feelings and sufferings. However, the husband was the reason she ended up in mental institution, because she still repeats a phrase “Im being good” in her letter, which implies that her husband wanted to control her and make her be a perfect wife. The female protagonist of the story is a victim of the conception of gender roles, because women were supposed to be a good mother, wife and to sacrifice all their life to family, thus they had to suppress their real personality and creativity. This repression often leads to the feeling of guilt for disobeying social rules or anger that destroys their souls.

⁹⁶ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 131

Another powerful story “The Coat” narrates about homeless man Harry, whose only companions are the old Army coat and the bottle of wine that keep him alive during the harsh winter.

“But Harrys coat became more than comfort, more than protection against the cold, even more than the life saver...it was his friend, his buddy...his only companion. He dearly loved his coat.”⁹⁷

His whole life is a struggle to retain his only companion, because since childhood he did not feel comfortable in the companion of other people, because he was terrified of them. In order to bear the traps of the homeless life he resorts to alcoholism, which eases the cruelty of his life. And the same role performs his coat, which serves as “a protecting shield of armor.”⁹⁸ Harry tries to hide himself from the influence of society and its expectations, because he has never really fit in, thus he has chosen the life of homeless person without any responsibility in relation to others. He avoids people, because he does not want to be a part of a competitive society, where everybody struggles only for themselves, which often results in some form of violence. One day Harry almost lost his coat in attempt to save the old heavy drinker. A street gang of young boys poured some combustible over the helpless man and lighted him. Harry saved his life by extinguishing the fire with his beloved coat. This act is the manifestation of disapproval of violent and loveless society, where he lives. Later, he experienced the cruelty of life personally, walking down on street, he was attacked by two vagabonds and in an effort to protect his coat; he was brutally beaten and ended up in the hospital. Initially the doctors see no hope for him, but without any medical explanation he recovers quickly. After few months in hospital becomes more and more afraid of his “buddy” and he desperately wants him back as soon as possible. Harry’s desperation is an illustration of oppressive power of any institutions, which was studied in more detail in his book *Requiem for a Dream*. Moreover, Harry sees the American society in reality, harsh and cruel, not idealizing it. He is convinced that he found “the most comfortable life he had ever had”, the life of homeless person. I could be expected that once Harry was the common member of the society, however he became so bored by the daily

⁹⁷ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Song of the Silent Snow*, page 63

⁹⁸ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 136

pressures and expectation on him that he has chosen to be homeless man, who is not supposed to fulfill any society's expectations. After stay in the hospital he is returning to his old familiar way of life.

"The bus came and he hopped aboard and Harry Wright headed home. He was warm...He was safe..."⁹⁹

The coat is the symbol of his protection against society pressure, without it he feels to lose his soul and identity. He decided not to pay the unavoidable cost of being successful; he just desires to be left alone in his world. However, regrettably for him he became victim of the environment of homeless people, thus there is almost no chance for people to escape from society's influence. Being homeless man he has to literally struggle for survival and his coat could be seen to be his drug, which eases the harsh reality and gives him some kind of hope.

Stories entitled "Double Feature", "Indian Summer" and "A Little Respect" develop more the idea of sudden outburst of violent behavior of Selby's characters caused by hidden obsessions and desires, of the demons that haunted all of us. In the capitalistic American society is predominantly the sense of meaningless and hopelessness.

The last three stories of *Song of the Silent Snow* represent an interesting departure from the Selby's tradition of bleak and depressing style of writing. The stories offer some hope and reconciliation with life to the protagonists. "Musician" tells a story about Harold, a middle-aged bachelor man, who once cherished a dream to become a famous pianist; however he decided rather to do unwilling desk job in order to support his two older unmarried sisters. Harold does not seem to be bitter about his broken dreams, instead he accepts his life as it is. Harold is afraid of any changes, even to have something different for lunch. Lack of ability to make changes represents his acceptance of life and broken dream. Nevertheless, he still plays piano for his sisters on Mondays and during playing he feels like a real pianist and it gives him the power to overcome his frustrations and to triumph over the deferred life. Playing the piano he lets his daily life and failure to become musician behind. However, there is a question what made him to give up his dream and why he did it. The answer is simple, the pressure and controlling

⁹⁹ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Song of the Silent Snow*, page 77

power of the society. As a man from middle-class surroundings, he was expected to have a stable job with stable income, thus he just decided to be an average urban man playing his role.

Penultimate piece of this collection is the story “Of Whales and Dreams” about older man who recalls his childhood dream to see whales swimming in the sea and surprisingly for Selby’s protagonists, he achieved to fulfill his dream. The narrator also mentions the childhood moment when he was warned to deny his dream would be the same as to sell his soul. Remembering this he managed to see whales and not to sell his soul. However, there is an important difference between our childish dreams and dreams that the people are foisted by the society. As it was said consumer society has the power to change people’s ambition and hierarchy of values and therefore people lose their individuality, their souls. In most cases people do not fulfill dreams from childhood, but change their ambition in order to fit in the society’s expectations. It could be the reason for the sense of alienation and loss in the modern society. The narrator himself said that his dreams are the same and he pursues it still. And this is the reason why he was able to achieve them and at the same time not to lose his soul. However, it is obvious that Selby’s authorship is focused more on people who have changed their vision of dream, their genuine dream, and thus failed to fulfill them. Even worse this vision of dream often destroyed them. In my opinion this story serves as a contrast to Selby’s other novels and short stories to make the reader realize the difference between the truthful dream and collective dream.

The last story of the collection has the same title as the whole collection. The story deals with middle-class businessman, again Harry, who suffered from the psychological breakdown, because he was convinced that he is not able to support his family financially. His collapse started by purchase of expensive house in Connecticut and it continued by unbearable stress and insomnia. The nervous breakdown was caused by relentless pressure of the American society and the expectations of being able to support his family. As the story opens he was afraid of any expression of love or closeness from his wife and children, because he simply thought that he had failed in the role of husband and father.

“He was suddenly so overwhelmed by the responsibility of love... the responsibility of living”¹⁰⁰

Through the story he becomes reconciled with his life and realizes that success and money are not the most important things to be happy. On the contrary they are often source of loss of happiness and individuality of a person. He found a new happiness, a life with his loving family. Harry found this cure to his anxiety among the gently falling snow and in love of his family, which eases the pain of the existence.

“He stopped and stood quietly watching and feeling the snow. He turned and looked behind him at the place where his footprints stopped. A part of him yearned to retrace his steps, to once again become a part of the joy he had briefly experienced, but he knew he could not...did not...want to ignore the other voices within him. He turned and firmly started walking toward home. He did not know what had happened, but whatever it was he knew he now had hope and what once was could be again. He could re-awaken a part of that joy and take home the song of the silent snow. He could share it. He walked a little faster. He knew his eyes were glowing and that Alice would see it. He also knew he could hold her hand.”¹⁰¹

The song of the falling snow is a metaphor of the powerful force of love and acceptance of peace in his heart. Especially, in this last story Selby offers to reader the solution of lack of love problem, and the solution is forgiveness, realization of the true values, development of our individuality, and not to be attached to material values of American capitalistic society.

To sum up, the collection *Song of the Silent Snow* continues to develop the idea of the spiritual crisis of the American society and the effect of it on common people. Selby still deals with the idea of violence, anger, psychological traumas and the sense of alienation. The stories illustrate “the pervasive nature of such a psychological and spiritual suffering in the wasteland of twentieth-century American society”¹⁰² *Song of the Silent Snow* is Selby’s complex vision of the

¹⁰⁰ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Song of the Silent Snow*, page 85

¹⁰¹ SELBY Jr., Hubert, *Song of the Silent Snow*, page 91

¹⁰² GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 115

urban controlled world and the existential question of modern man. It is an exploration of the various ways of losing the individuality cause by the modern America way of life and overwhelming influence of consumerism.

A Critical View on Hubert Selby's Work and Reader's Reactions¹⁰³

After publishing *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, which was even trialed for obscenity in England and banned in Italy, Selby's writing was considered controversial and provoking. Selby carries the reader into the violent slums around the Brooklyn waterfront, where he describes delinquency of children, homosexuality, the degeneration of the family in public housing projects, the corruption of the unions, and, in general, the vicious, obscene, and cold-hearted propensities of modern man. Not surprisingly, the book shocked and outraged readers and it was found too much cruel and hopeless for the readers of those days. Moreover, in my opinion any reader could feel compassion for the main characters, because they are depicted in really negative way. Selby revealed in the interview with O'Brien that, he wrote *Last Exit* because he was full of feeling of hatred of God as a result of the sense of alienation and the long-term stay in the hospital. All of this, naturally, made *Last Exit* extremely successful and Hubert Selby, Jr. became one of the leader writers of underground literature. Later *Last Exit* was appreciated mostly in the term of its experimental style, typography, grammar, vivid use of language and Selby was said to "writes prose with poetry in mind"¹⁰⁴ and employs poetic language to emphasize the idea of loveless atmosphere and the violent neighborhood the main characters live in.

Novel *The Room* is even more experimental in the form than his first book, because Selby abandons any concept of the fictional plot, employing insanity, fantasies and obscene thoughts of the main protagonist. Thanks to this unusual disturbing style *The Room* quickly gained the best criticism. The disappointment of the critics came with the third novel entitled *The Demon*, because of small

¹⁰³ Information taken mostly from GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby* and HEKKING, Lester George, "The Interplay Between Despair and Hope in the Work of Hubert Selby Jr. A new perspective on Hubert Selby Jr.'s entire oeuvre."

¹⁰⁴ STEPHEN, Michael, "Hubert Selby Jr.: The Poet of Prose Masters.", page 1

number of “the new ones”¹⁰⁵, Selby abandons low-class urban setting and introduces to the reader an upper-class world, his style was considered to be more conventional in style than in the previous books. However, these books also make reader to feel disconcerted. Selby’s next novel *Requiem for a Dream* focused on the theme of the power of American consumerism was said to “having gone commercial”¹⁰⁶ by the critic Paul Metcalf. Although, in my opinion it was his intention to take reader to American middle class and to show that also common people could be affected by the cruelty and competition of life. *Requiem* is an essential book in the terms of completing Selby’s vision of destructive power of American society. The important fact is that the reader feels some sympathy and sorrow for the main characters, because it was not completely their fault that they ended up so badly, but they simply became the victims of the pervasive the pressure of society and its expectations. *Song of the Silent Snow* has not received much critical attention yet. In this collection is found a new brighter aspect of Selby’s writing, surprisingly it is the tone of hope and affirmation and the proof that not everybody is doomed to lose and the power of irrational human determination not have to be defeated by their obsessions and American consumerism. Hubert Selby’s last novel *Waiting Period* is focused on feel of anxiety, frustration and anger towards the external forces that have the power to control and change our thoughts. Readers of this book feel to be the same person as the narrator is, neglected, unknown and ignored. Selby presents to the reader the existential fear all people have and they are afraid of it.

A significant contrast can be found between the dark and depressing overtone of Selby’s novels and the brighter elements in his latter novels. However, the sense of lack of love, hopelessness, frustration and worthlessness prevails in his books. Selby predominantly examines the effect of the external forces on human individuality and behavior, which is almost always destructive. However, especially in the last collection is obvious the change of Selby’s attitudes influenced by his own life full of hardships and his acceptance of life as it is.

¹⁰⁵ GILES, James R., *Understanding Hubert Selby*, page 4

¹⁰⁶ METCALF, Paul, “Herman and Hubert: The Odd Couple”, page 368

Conclusion

In my bachelor thesis I have analyzed the main characters of Hubert Selby's novels and short stories to discover what external or internal factors make them losers and if every protagonist is doomed to be loser. In the first analyzed novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn* Selby portrays the quality of human life in urban environment and captures the every-day life of people, focusing on manifestation of violence, the sense of loss of control, frustration and lack of love. Such a cruel and uncaring environment influences human individuality and behavior a lot. Hence the central characters became the products and at the same time the victims of the society they had created. It seems that there is no chance for them to escape from this influence, there is only pervasive struggle for survival in the harsh surroundings of Brooklyn. Every character in *Last Exit* could be compared to the toy, their destiny is determined according to their genes, education, intellect, opportunities and circumstances surrounded them. Most of them became outcasts, but on the other hand they are still a part of the society and influenced the others. What really makes them losers? In my opinion, one factor that makes the characters losers is the urban environment and the anonymity they have to contend with. These people simply have to be immoral, cruel and unsympathetic to manage to survive. However, they are also motivated by internal factors, which make them outcasts. The pervasive feel of insignificance, depression and lack of love forces them to behave in different way than they would probably do. Hence the change of behavior and values is the first, but the most essential factor, that ultimately destroys their individuality. Having adapted to life in the society full of losers and having let the city steal their personality makes them one of the miserable members of Brooklyn neighborhoods. Although, one character in this novel, Georgette, tries to refuse to become one of the outcasts, she is totally defeated by the pressure of the neighboring world. It implies that the power of the environment, education and genes are the main factor of human destiny, especially in the inner cities, because they do not get any feel of understanding and as a result they become more vulnerable and weak in their determination to change their lives.

The situation of the protagonist of the next novel *Requiem for a Dream* is quite similar. Hubert Selby, Jr. describes a middle-class people, who are also predestined to lose, because of the competitive environs. They became obsessed to achieve success and recognition, which is not naturally the reason for becoming a loser. However, they became victims of their own desires of their vision of the American Dream, which never truly existed. Therefore they ended up alone, humiliated and with the immense feeling of emptiness. Selby intends to bring closer the idea of the evil of contemporary capitalistic society based on the vision of false happiness and superficial values. In general, people tend to rely more on outside influences to achieve their vision of happiness, which led four main characters of the novel to addiction and self-destruction. They failed to achieve their dreams, because they had not realized that the values that these dreams are based on are not the true values, but the superficial values of the society like evaluation of youth, wealth and success. To sum up, the main characters of *Requiem* become losers because of pressure of the consumer society and their inability to distinguish the real values from society's values.

The most characters of the collection *Song of the Silent Snow* share the same destiny as the aforementioned characters. They also became products and victims of their environment and society's expectations, which led them to destruction or loss of their identity. However, there could be found few exceptions, namely the characters from the second part of the book, because they abandoned the struggle for success and their values are bound to family and life at peace. However, still *Song of the Silent Snow* could be considered to be a complex vision of the urban controlled world and exploration of the various ways of losing the independence of soul caused by the modern America way of life and great influence of consumerism.

Hubert Selby portrays the protagonists' struggles by precise examination of their minds and he explores the effects of surroundings on human individuality. For him it is almost impossible for a man to survive unbroken and their final choice is influenced by external factors. I came to the conclusion that the losers in Selby's novel are those people who became too obsessed by the vision of happiness, that they let the external factors steal their souls. The losers are not necessarily people on the periphery of the society, but those people who let the

American capitalistic society change their individuality and ambitions, which ultimately leads to their physical or mental destruction.

Summary

The first chapter of this thesis is focused on presentation and establishment of the main goals, which are a psychological analysis of the main characters in relation to sociological and historical background, and the concept of the American Dream and losers in literature. The second part is concerned with general features of Hubert Selby's work, a brief summary of his books and with the issue of Selby's unique style, which is essential for detailed analysis. In this part the most important of Selby's books are mentioned - *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Room*, *The Demon*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Song of the Silent Snow*, *The Willow Tree* and *Waiting Period*. The common themes of his work are urban despair, domestic violence, prostitution, homosexuality, the sense of alienation in urban society and the power of American capitalistic society. However, Selby's work is more remarkable because of his unique style of writing in terms of its typography, grammar and vivid use of language. Unique features of his style create the sense of chaos and desolation, confusion, and lack of control and are crucial for setting the atmosphere of his work.

The following chapter describes the author's life and the life experiences. He spent four years in hospitals because of tuberculosis. He also became addicted to drugs, after his return to New York he became a member of a group of young rebel writers and he began to publish his work. His life experiences influenced his view of the world and writing. The forth chapter is concerned with analysis of the myth of the American Dream and its relation to the character of loser. This analysis connects these two conceptions and gives the explanation of the image of the loser with respect to the myth of the American Dream, which was more related to money and materialism than to real human desires. Hubert Selby, Jr. is one of many writers who criticize the false vision of the American Dream and the controlling power of the American society. His work is focused mainly on the devastating impact on the victims of the myth of the American Dream, which ultimately destroys them and makes them losers. The losers in his books are those

people whose American Dream has gone wrong and whose hopes and the worst nightmares may be one and the same. Selby's concept of the American Dream is very negative and he was convinced that to pursue the American Dream is impossible and it destroys human individuality, because the human vision of the American Dream has changed according to social expectation and values.

The fifth chapter examines the novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn*; it is completed by a discussion of the historical background of the period. The main focus of this chapter is the detailed analysis of the psychology and behavior of the main characters and it also examines their role in the society. At the end of the chapter the common characteristics and generalization of the features of the novel can be found. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* narrates about some miserable characters in the Brooklyn neighborhood and about the horrors of life in urban areas.

The sixth chapter is about the novel *Requiem for a Dream*, and it muses on the reasons of that novel's main characters' failure, based on a psychological analysis of the central characters and the controlled and destructive power of the American consumer society. The following section is concentrated on the collection of short stories *Song of the Silent Snow*, an analysis of the main protagonists' behavior and feelings; it is also completed by the examination of the common and different feature in comparison to previous novels. In every novel Selby examines the impact of the environment on the human mind and personality, which often leads to the mental or physical destruction of the central characters.

The penultimate chapter briefly summarizes the critical view on Hubert Selby's work and the changes in the critical interpretation of his work. Selby's work is often considered to be depressed and cruel because of its themes and tone. Most critics appreciate his unique experimental style and the use of poetic language. The changes of his work are also mentioned in this chapter, especially brighter elements in his latter novels. Moreover this part is also focused on the impact of his books on the reader and the feelings the books evoke.

The last chapter is dedicated to a conclusion of the extensive psychological analysis of the main characters, summary of the main themes of Selby's work and the image of the loser in his literary output. After a detailed psychological analysis it was found that the character of the loser in Selby's novel is a person who is too

obsessed by the vision of happiness, that she/he let the external factors steal or change their individuality.

Résumé

První kapitola této bakalářské práce se zabývá uvedením do problematiky a stanovením hlavních cílů, kterými jsou psychologická analýza hlavních postav ve vztahu k sociologickému a historickému pozadí dané doby, pojetí amerického snu a vyobrazení ztroskotanců v literatuře. Druhá část se zabývá obecnými znaky tvorby Huberta Selbyho, Jr., souhrnem jeho stěžejních děl a jeho jedinečným literárním stylem, což je důležité pro podrobnější pozdější analýzu. V této části jsou zmíněny nejdůležitější Selbyho knihy, jako *Poslední odbočka na Brooklyn*, *The Room*, *The Demon*, *Requiem za sen*, *Píseň tichého sněhu*, *The Willow Tree* *Waiting Period*. Mezi společná témata jeho tvorby zajisté patří zoufalství lidí žijících ve městech, domácí násilí, prostituce, homosexualita, pocit odcizení ve společnosti a moc americké kapitalistické společnosti. Nicméně Selbyho práce je především ceněna pro jeho jedinečný styl psaní z hlediska typografie, gramatiky a barvitého použití jazyka. Tyto rysy jeho tvorby napomáhají v díle umocnit pocit chaosu, zoufalství, zmatku, ztráty kontroly a jsou klíčové pro dokreslení atmosféry.

Následující kapitola popisuje autorův život a životní zkušenosti. Hubert Selby strávil čtyři roky v nemocnici kvůli onemocnění tuberkulózou. Byl také drogově závislým a po návratu do New Yorku se stal členem skupiny autorů mladých buřičů a začal vydávat svá literární díla. Tyto životní zkušenosti ovlivnily jeho pohled na svět a literární tvorbu. Čtvrtá kapitola se zabývá zkoumáním mýtu o americkém snu a jeho vztahu k postavě ztroskotance. Tato analýza propojuje oba pojmy a objasňuje pojetí postavy ztroskotance ve vztahu ke koncepci amerického snu, který byl více spjat s penězi a materiálními hodnotami než s opravdovými lidskými touhami. Hubert Selby, Jr. je jedním z mnoha autorů, kteří kritizovali chybné pojetí amerického snu a moc americké společnosti ovládat lidi. Jeho tvorba je především zaměřena na oběti amerického snu, díky kterému se stali ztroskotanci. Postava ztroskotanců v Selbyho dílech je vyobrazením osob, jejichž americký sen se stal zároveň i jejich noční můrou. Selbyho stanovisko,

které zaujímá k pojmu amerického snu je velmi negativní a sám byl přesvědčen, že splnit si svůj americký sen není možné, protože dokáže ovlivnit povahu člověka. Pojetí amerického snu se mění v závislosti na společenských očekáváních a hodnotách.

Román *Poslední odbočka na Brooklyn* je zkoumán v kapitole páté, která je doplněna o informace z historie daného období. Hlavním cílem této části je podrobná analýza psychologie postav, jejich chování a společenské postavení. Na konci kapitoly jsou shrnuty a zobecněny všechny podstatné rysy románu. Román *Poslední odbočka na Brooklyn* vypráví především o zoufalství obyvatelů Brooklynu a hrůzách života ve městě.

Šestá kapitola pojednává o románu *Requiem za sen* a o důvodech neúspěchu hlavních hrdinů, bádání je založeno opět na psychologické analýze postav a zamyšlení nad ničivou mocí americké konzumní společnosti. Následující část se zabývá sbírkou *Píseň tichého sněhu*, analýzou pocitů a chováním hlavních postav. Tato část je také obohacena o shrnutí identických a odlišných znaků sbírky vzhledem k předchozím knihám. V každém díle se Selby zabývá vlivem okolí na lidskou psychiku a povahu, který může mít často za následek nervové zhroucení spjaté i s fyzickými problémy hlavních postav.

Předposlední kapitola stručně shrnuje různé pohledy literárních kritiků na tvorbu Huberta Selbyho, Jr. a případné změny v kritickém výkladu jeho díla. Selbyho tvorba je díky tématům a tónu charakterizována jako depresivní a surová. Většina kritiků oceňuje jeho jedinečný styl a experimentální využití básnického jazyka. V kapitole jsou také naznačeny změny, kterými Selbyho dílo prošlo, zejména pak prvek naděje, který se objevuje v jeho pozdější tvorbě. Mimo to je tato část věnována i vlivu knih na čtenáře a pocitům, které v nich vyvolávají.

V poslední kapitole jsem se zabývala shrnutím rozsáhlé analýzy postav, hlavních témat, a vyobrazením ztroskotance v autorově díle. V průběhu detailního zkoumání jsem zjistila, že ztroskotanec v díle Huberta Selbyho je postava, která je tak posedlá vidinou spokojeného života, že se nechá ovlivnit vnějšími faktory, které změní její osobnost.

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Abstract

The focus of this bachelor thesis is in the area of American literature; especially it is aimed at the work of American writer Hubert Selby, Jr., his style of writing, literary criticism, especially it is focused on detailed psychological analysis of the main protagonists and their role in the society. The study of secondary critical literature of contemporary American literature was utilized in this work and the analysis is also supplemented by sociological and historical research of the background of that period in order to comment in more detail on the influence of the urban environment on human individuality. The main focus concerning psychological analysis of the central characters is to examine their changes in behavior and way of thinking as a result of living in the urban surroundings and pressures on them caused by society's expectations. The power of the consumer society and the vision of American Dream often causes nervous breakdown of the main protagonists and destroys their individuality, thus they often end up like losers on the periphery of the society. End result of this thesis is to define the conditions that make people succumb to society's pressure.

Práce se zabývá studiem americké literatury, především dílem spisovatele Huberta Selbyho, Jr., jeho písemným projevem a literární kritikou. Tato práce se především soustředí na podrobnou analýzu psychologie hlavních postav a jejich postavení v tehdejší společnosti. Při zkoumání byla použita sekundární literatura zaměřená na soudobou americkou literaturu a také literatura, která se zabývá sociologií a dějinami za účelem podrobnějšího zkoumání vlivu života ve městě na lidskou individualitu. Hlavním cílem analýzy psychologie postav je popsat jejich změny v chování a uvažování, které jsou způsobeny životem ve městě, nátlakem a očekáváními společnosti. Nervové zhroucení hlavních hrdinů a ztráta jejich osobnosti je způsobena nátlakem konzumní společnosti a vidinou dosažení amerického snu, což vede k jejich životu ztroskotance na okraji společnosti. Konečným cílem práce je určení okolností, které je nakonec přinutí podlehnout nátlaku společnosti.

Key words: Contemporary American literature, Hubert Selby, Jr., urban environment, American dream, loser

Klíčová slova: Současná americká literatura, Hubert Selby, Jr., prostředí města, americký sen, ztroskotanec