

Charles University in Prague
Faculty of Education
Department of English Language and Literature



BACHELOR THESIS

**The Theme of (Homo)Sexuality in the Fiction of
Michael Cunningham**

Author: Pavel Bárta

Supervisor: PhDr. Petr Chalupský, Ph.D.

Prague 2013

Declaration

I hereby declare that I have elaborated this bachelor thesis individually and that I have used only the cited sources.

Prague, 28th June 2013

Pavel Bárta

Signature:

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor, PhDr. Petr Chalupský, Ph.D., for his support, guidance and valuable advice which were essential to the completion of my bachelor thesis.

Abstract

This bachelor thesis, *The Theme of (Homo)Sexuality in the Fiction of Michael Cunningham*, focuses on the approach to homosexuality in the United States of America and its position in American literature, particularly in the fiction of Michael Cunningham. The major part of the thesis deals with the theme of sexuality in three of Cunningham's novels, *A Home at the End of the World*, *The Hours* and *By Nightfall*, its impact on the protagonists and provides comparison among them.

Key words

Michael Cunningham, gay literature, sexuality, homosexuality, homoeroticism, AIDS, interpersonal relationships

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce, pojmenovaná „Téma (homo)sexuality v díle Michaela Cunninghama“, se zaměřuje na přístup k homosexualitě ve Spojených státech amerických a jejím místem v americké literatuře, především v tvorbě Michaela Cunninghama. Hlavní část práce se zabývá zobrazením sexuality ve třech Cunninghamových románech, *Domov na konci světa*, *Hodiny* a *Za soumraku*. Sleduje vliv sexuality na hrdiny těchto románů a komparatisticky ji zkoumá.

Klíčová slova

Michael Cunningham, gay literatura, sexualita, homosexualita, homoerotismus, AIDS, mezilidské vztahy

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1 Theoretical Part	2
1.1 Three milestones related to gay culture	2
1.2 American vs. European model	3
1.3 Gay literature and a canon of gay literature	4
1.4 Five Houses of Gay Fiction	5
1.5 Michael Cunningham	7
1.5.1 Biography	7
1.5.2 Michael Cunningham as a gay writer	8
1.5.3 Michael Cunningham as an assimilative writer	9
2 Practical Part	12
2.1 The significance of sexuality in Cunningham's selected novels	12
2.2 Childhood, puberty and adolescence	14
2.3 Borders of heterosexuality, bisexuality and homosexuality	18
2.4 Homoerotic encounters and relationships	23
2.5 AIDS	26
Conclusion	30
Works Cited	33

Introduction

This bachelor thesis mainly focuses on the theme of homosexuality in the fiction of Michael Cunningham. The primary impulse to write my thesis about Cunningham's novels was purely personal because they made a strong impression upon me while I was reading them. I have chosen three of his novels, namely the breakthrough novel *A Home at the End of the World* (1990), the brilliant and critically most acclaimed *The Hours* (1998), and his latest – and as far as I am concerned slightly underrated – *By Nightfall* (2010), to depict how the theme of homosexuality pervades his works and how it has changed in the course of time. The word 'homo' in the title of my thesis is put into brackets because of Cunningham's complex understanding of human sexuality, which does not divide people into such categories as heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual, yet, in the terms of sexuality, he does concentrate on homosexuality or at least homosexual inclinations the most in the three selected novels.

In the theoretical part of my bachelor thesis, I attempt to provide a brief outline of the historical development of homosexuality and homosexual culture in the USA in the 20th century since Cunningham is an American born in 1952. The difference between the American and European approach to homosexuality and its place within these two societies is also shortly discussed. The second half of the theoretical part includes Cunningham's biography, tries to explain his position in the gay literature and his stance on being called a gay writer, and clarifies why he is considered to be an assimilative writer.

At the beginning of the practical part, I would like to show how significant the theme of sexuality, particularly homosexuality, is in the three selected novels and explicate that it is the main theme only in *By Nightfall*, but not in the other two novels. The practical part then works with the primary sources, while trying to discover themes which are connected with sexuality of the main characters. Such themes which I find most relevant are childhood, puberty and adolescence, the borders of heterosexuality, bisexuality and homosexuality, homoerotic encounters and relationships, and AIDS. In each chapter of the practical part, I attempt to discuss one of the themes with respect to (homo)sexuality, either separately in each novel or drawing a comparison among them. The conclusion summarises the gained findings and provides a final reflection on the chosen topic.

1 THEORETICAL PART

The theoretical part of this bachelor thesis, firstly, focuses on homosexuality, especially on gay literature, and, secondly, provides a brief biography of Michael Cunningham and attempts to categorise him with respect to the presence of homosexual themes in his works. Since Cunningham is an American writer, born in 1952, the first section of the theoretical part primarily concentrates on homosexuality in the USA in the second half of the 20th century. It also shortly discusses the definition and development of gay literature, and depicts the main difference between American and European perception of homosexuality.

1.1 Three milestones related to gay culture

The second half of the 20th century represents a crucial period for liberation of homosexuality and its acceptance within society. According to Roman Trušník, there are three historical “milestones related to gay culture” (Trušník, *Drag Queen* 97), which helped to shape not only gay culture, but also gay identity. “The first was the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s report *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*, in 1948, which shed light into the sexual lives of American men and started a general interest in the issues of sexuality” (Trušník, *Drag Queen* 97). In his report, Kinsey showed that “human sexuality is much more malleable than it was originally assumed” (Trušník, *Podoby* 16, as translated by Pavel Bárta¹). Kinsey introduces a scale of human sexuality, zero being people exclusively heterosexual and six being people exclusively homosexual, whereas “most of human beings, according to the author, do not belong to either of these extremes” (Trušník, *Podoby* 17). The report then draws a conclusion that human sexuality cannot be strictly divided into heterosexuality and homosexuality, and it has to be realised that sexuality is truly difficult to be fully comprehended.

“The second was the Stonewall Riots” (Trušník, *Drag Queen* 97), which were “triggered by a police swoop in Stonewall Inn bar, New York, in 1969” (Putna 9). The Stonewall Riots are “generally considered the symbolic beginning of the gay liberation movement” (Trušník, *Drag Queen* 97), although some scholars, such as “English historian Scott Bravmann” (Putna, 11), question their historical value and do not regard them as a

¹ All subsequent translations from Czech are made by Pavel Bárta.

turning point in gay history. “The third was the emergence of the first AIDS cases in the early 1980s,” which basically put an end to “the New York gay subculture” (Trušník, *Drag Queen* 97). Paradoxically enough, although the 1980s represent a miserable period for homosexual society, due to the AIDS, “homosexual issues aroused interest in heterosexual readers” (Trušník, *Podoby* 66). Such a dangerous disease became a sought-after literary theme because it afflicted not only homosexuals, but also heterosexuals. Literature containing the theme of homosexuality closely connected with the theme of AIDS then found a broader amount of readers.

1.2 American vs. European model

In *Homosexualita v dějinách české kultury (Homosexuality in the History of Czech Culture)*, Martin C. Putna stresses that a distinction has to be made between the American and the European approach to homosexuality. The American model represents not only the USA, but also “the whole Anglo-Saxon world” (Putna 9), while the European concentrates mainly on France and Germany. “The American model is based on a central motive of a fight for recognition of homosexuals as a minority within the American society” (Putna 9). The fight is naturally connected to the Stonewall Riots and, to a certain degree, continues in the figurative sense of the word. However, a few years after Stonewall, “there came a strong right-wing and religious-fundamentalist reaction,” (Putna 9) which caused that the gay liberation movement adopted a rather “defensive stance, in which it basically remained” (Putna 9). By drawing a comparison with other minorities, Putna clarifies that homosexuals have to be truly taken as a minority in the American model. In fact, he even goes a step further and states that “homosexuals consider themselves to be a NATION,” (Putna 19, ‘NATION’ emphasised in the original version) because they have their city quarters, flag and national holiday. The American model then becomes a national model, corresponding to other national minorities in the USA, which try to be respected by the society and if possible to integrate to a certain degree, yet they keep their traditions and borders.

The European model lacks a similar united programme and is rather based on “a principle of integration” (Putna 21). Homosexuals tend to be seen not as a part of a bound community, i.e. gay culture, but rather as members of society as a whole, i.e. “general culture” (Putna 54). Putna explains it simply, yet clearly and aptly: Whereas the American

model attempts to create its own “homosexual history” and “homosexual art”, the European observes “homosexuality in history” and “homosexuality in art” (Putna 21). Nevertheless, the distinction is not applicable to all gay artists and writers, including Michael Cunningham, who introduces the theme of homosexuality into his novels, but does not intend to write homosexual novels.

1.3 Gay literature and a canon of gay literature

As every nation, the gay nation also feels the urge to compile its own history, culture and literature. The case of gay literature, however, is quite problematic because various scholars and literary critics view it differently. Therefore, not even the definition of gay literature is clear and generally accepted.

Martin C. Putna raises the question of what actually gay literature is. “Is it texts about homosexuals, or texts by homosexuals, or both, or, on the contrary, only texts by homosexuals about homosexuals?” (Putna 20). He comes to a conclusion that the American model corresponds to the definition by Claude J. Summers, who basically agrees that it is fiction about homosexuals, written by homosexuals, but also by “lesbian authors” (Putna 20). On the contrary, Roman Trušník considers gay novels to be “novels that make use of gay motifs and themes, regardless of the sexual orientation of their authors” (*Drag Queen* 97). In *A History of Gay Literature* (1999), Gregory Woods provides no definition of gay literature and rather asks where it starts and ends. He concludes that due to the lack of “stable definitions, the concept of ‘gay literature’ has to be seen as a moveable feast” (Woods, 16). While most of the literary critics still attempt to define the term gay literature, American writer, David Leavitt, came with the term post-gay literature, explaining it in his essay “Out of the Closet and Off the Shelf” (2005): “Gay fiction is giving way to post-gay fiction: novels and stories whose authors, rather than making a character's homosexuality the fulcrum on which the plot turns, either take it for granted, look at it as part of something larger or ignore it altogether” (Leavitt). To sum up, most of the available definitions concerning gay literature come to an agreement that gay fiction contains homosexuality themes, which are more dominant in some novels and less in others, but sexuality of its writers remains a vexed problem.

Since the definition of gay literature appears to be such a problematic issue, the efforts to compile a canon of gay literature are even more so. In *Homosexualita v dějinách české kultury*, Putna mentions two canons, which he considers to be worthy of notice. The

first of them, *Gay Fictions Wilde to Stonewall. Studies in a Male Homosexual Literary Tradition* (1990), written by Claude J. Summers, examines the theme of homosexuality in literature from “Oscar Wilde, a symbol of persecution of gays and their resistance” to Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man*, “‘homosexual everyman,’ who does not deal with his identity issue, for it is clear, given and not problematic since the beginning” (Putna 12). The second one is the critically acclaimed *A History of Gay Literature* by Gregory Woods, who states in his canon that “a continuous, or even intermittent, ‘gay tradition’ in literature” can be found not in novels, but mainly in “a tradition of verse” (Woods 1), yet he attempted to compile a canon of gay prose. According to Woods, the beginning of gay literature is a time when gay authors started “writing explicitly about the experience of being gay” (12). He admits that “anthologies have played a central role in the establishing of canons of homosexual literature” (7), which is also a case of his own work, in which he introduces gay novels in chronological order, relevant to the topics he chose.

1.4 Five Houses of Gay Fiction

As a contrast to the attempts of creating a chronological canon of gay literature, Reed Woodhouse, in his introduction, *Five Houses of Gay Fictions, Revisited, to Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction of Gay Fiction, 1945-1955* (1998), divides it into five branches, or houses, as he names them, according to the approach of the authors to homosexuality.

The first house, the ghetto fiction, emerged from a core fiction chosen for “a course at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education called ‘Gay Male Fiction’” (Woodhouse 1), which was led by Woodhouse and his friend Michael Schwartz. Woodhouse chose the word ‘ghetto’ because “this core fiction seemed to occupy a place in literature analogous to the place occupied in the city by the gay ghetto; a place where homosexuality was both taken for granted and at the same time easily identifiable” (1) The novels of the ghetto literature have no “normative reference to the straight world,” (2) and therefore are written “by, for, and about gay men” (1). A representative of the ghetto house is Andrew Holleran with his novel *Dancer from the Dance* (1978), in which the main character abandons his life within heterosexual society in order to discover “the beauty of the gay ghetto” (Woodhouse 123), while losing any contact with the straight world.

The second house, the proto-ghetto fiction, “lacked a gay community, and sometimes even the name ‘gay’” (2). It focuses mainly on individuals who might be

surrounded by heterosexual society, but very often disregard it. A perfect example may be *A Single Man* (1964) by Christopher Isherwood, since its main protagonist, George, is neither involved in the gay community, nor does he try to engage himself in the heterosexual. He even “avoids his friends except when pinned down by them” (Woodhouse 155), which makes him almost an outsider and a complete individual.

The third house, the closet literature, perceives “homosexuality as something defining, indeed, but horrifyingly so” (2). One of the typical features of this house is “taking sex seriously” (2), it does not “whimsify it, nor denature it of moral meaning” (2). As a “closet novel *par excellence*” (2), Woodhouse presents James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) because it depicts intercourse of the two main male protagonists, David and Giovanni, in an unvarnished way. At the beginning, David is infatuated by Giovanni, but later he becomes horrified by his room representing “a place in which he is losing his manhood” (Woodhouse 19), and mainly by his newly discovered homosexuality which redefines his whole personality.

“Assimilative literature could be thought of as a fiction about gay men for straight readers” (Woodhouse 3). This house of gay literature places its characters into the mainstream, heterosexual society and let them deal with issues typical for heterosexual literature, such as friendships with heterosexual people, family or finding a lover and settling down. The representatives are David Leavitt and also Michael Cunningham.

The last house is called transgressive, or queer, fiction. In this context, queer does not mean homosexual, but “‘estranged’ or ‘marginal’” (Woodhouse 3). Queer stories are “frequently ones of horror, dissociation, or emotional numbness,” (3) and “pornographic or parodic of pornography” (4). The novels, representing this house, *Closer* (1989), *Frisk* (1991), and *Try* (1994) by Dennis Cooper “exemplified the frightening coolness and unemotionality” (Woodhouse 4) of the main characters. All of the novels also deal with sex a lot, especially the main protagonist of *Frisk*, Dennis, is obsessed with sex, “becomes drawn to sexual violence, starts hiring pornstars” (Woodhouse 81) and falls in love with a boy, whom he has seen photographed in a porn magazine.

1.5 Michael Cunningham

1.5.1 Biography

The basis of Michael Cunningham's biography is taken from two afterwords of the Czech translations of his novels *A Home at the End of the World* and *The Hours*. Both of the afterwords are written by Hana Ulmanová, and although she primarily focuses on the stories of the novels, she also provides a brief and well-structured biography of Michael Cunningham in both of them.

In her afterword *Kdo se nebojí Virginie Woolfové (Who's Not Afraid of Virginia Woolf)* to the Czech translation of Cunningham's novel *The Hours*, Ulmanová states that Michael Cunningham "was born in 1952 in Cincinnati, Ohio, and spent his childhood and youth in Pasadena and Los Angeles, California" (183). Cunningham studied literature at the Stanford University and later received his M. F. A. from the University in Iowa in 1980. He started writing in the 1980s and some of his first works appeared in "famous magazines, such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Redbook*, *Esquire*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker* or *Vogue*" (Ulmanová, *Kdo se nebojí* 183).

Ulmanová characterises Cunningham's first novel, *Golden States*, which was published in 1984, as a failure, when she describes it in her afterword *Touha sdílet (Desire to Share)* to the Czech translation of *A Home at the End of the World*: "Only a few copies were sold and the critical response was tepid" (393). After this unpleasant experience, Cunningham travelled a lot and worked mostly as a bartender and waiter, yet he did not give up on writing.

In 1988, Cunningham sent an excerpt from his second novel, *A Home at the End of the World*, to *The New Yorker* magazine, which published it as a short story named *White Angel* that "caused a sensation" (Ulmanová, *Touha* 393). The whole novel was published in 1990 and meant a breakthrough for Cunningham because it was generally critically acclaimed.

Cunningham's third novel, *Flesh and Blood*, was published five years later, but the turning point of his writer career came with his fourth novel, *The Hours*, which was published in 1998. The literary homage to Virginia Woolf "surpassed all expectations including (Cunningham's) own" (Ulmanová, *Touha* 394). *The Hours* became a bestseller and Cunningham was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award for it in 1999.

Cunningham's next novel *Specimen Days* appeared seven years later and his so far latest novel, *By Nightfall*, was published in 2010 and also received generally good reviews.

Michael Cunningham lives in New York with his long-time partner Ken Corbett.

1.5.2 Michael Cunningham as a gay writer

Michael Cunningham is a homosexual, and as it is obvious from various interviews with him, he does not mind discussing his own sexuality and also speaks openly about sexuality in general. Not surprisingly are the characters of his novels, including the three novels chosen for this bachelor thesis, often bisexual or homosexual.

Despite the fact that his novels deal with homosexuality, Cunningham himself refuses to be called an exclusively gay writer, as he explains it in an interview with Chadwick Moore for *Out* magazine:

I don't want to be seen as only a gay writer. I've always been out, and most of my novels are concerned with the lives of gay people. I'm perfectly happy to be a gay writer, because, well, that's what I am. What I never wanted was to be pushed into a niche. I didn't want the gay aspects of my books to be perceived as their single, primary characteristic. (Moore)

Cunningham simply tries to clarify that although the sexuality of the characters of his novels is an important theme, it is not the only one. He endeavours to discover various parts of individuality: "I'm trying to write about more than my characters' outward qualities, and focus on the depths of their beings, their fears and their devotions, which take place at a level deeper than sexual orientation" (Moore). Such features of a personality, as the mentioned fears or devotions, are common for all human beings regardless of their sexual orientation. Since Cunningham's preoccupation seems to be connected with the deep roots of a human personality, he can hardly be labelled as only a gay writer.

The sexuality of the characters has naturally a huge impact on their thinking and behaviour, but other factors, such as nationality, race, gender or social class equally determine their personalities. All these influences are crucial not only for the fictional characters, but also for both the writer and the reader. The writer's background affects what he writes about and how he writes it and, similarly, the reader's background impacts

how the reader interprets the writer's work. It is then important to gather all possible qualities, either inner or outer, of the writer to fully understand their work and not just pick one of them and strictly categorise the particular writer.

Michael Cunningham describes himself in a similar way: "I am a gay writer. I'm also a white male writer, an upper-middle-class writer, an American writer. All those qualities matter in some ways, and, in others, matter very little" (Moore). Cunningham does not deny being a gay writer, but he also tries to look at himself from several other perspectives to provide a larger context of himself and his work.

Cunningham is also aware of the fact that it is much easier for contemporary homosexual writers to publish a book with homosexual content than it was in the past. He compares his current situation with homosexual modernist writers, namely E. M. Forster, who "didn't publish *Maurice*, his gay novel, during his lifetime," and Marcel Proust, who "portrayed himself as a heterosexual" (Moore). Cunningham adds that he has "never experienced a moment's hesitation on the part of any editor about "'cleaning up' the gay stuff" in his work (Moore). He considers it one of the advantages of the contemporary approach to gay literature.

While contemplating the positively developing attitude of the society to homosexuality, Cunningham acknowledges that "being gay is less traumatic now than it's ever been" (Moore), but, on the other hand, he admits that there are still several problems concerning the homosexuality issue.

1.5.3 Michael Cunningham as an assimilative writer

According to Reed Woodhouse's division of gay literature, Michael Cunningham is a representative of the assimilative fiction. One of the most characteristic features of the assimilative branch of gay literature is a depiction of "gay life within the implicit or explicit context of mainstream life" (Woodhouse 3). The assimilative literature also "tacitly appeals to mainstream values – especially those of the family, or of monogamous love" (Woodhouse 3).

Woodhouse decided to classify Cunningham as an assimilative writer because of his novel *A Home at the End of the World*, in which the author tries to reformulate the classic idea of a family, which is "composed of one gay man, one bisexual man, one older straight woman, and eventually the baby they all have together" (Woodhouse 172). Roman Trušník, an expert on American gay literature, agrees with Woodhouse that "Cunningham

is indeed an assimilative author but he is actually revising the very concept of assimilation: instead of shunning the issues central to the gay subculture, he takes them directly to the literary mainstream” (98).

Cunningham has become a mainstream writer, especially due to the success of his novel *The Hours*, and, consequently, helped to integrate the theme of homosexuality into the mainstream literature. One of the reasons why Cunningham’s works have become so popular, even within heterosexual majority, might be – besides the indisputable literary value – a fact that he “sees homosexuality itself as a less defining identity” (Woodhouse 174). This standpoint enables Cunningham to create bisexual or homosexual characters, which are not very different from heterosexuals and could be, in fact, easily substituted by them. It may also simplify it for an average heterosexual reader to identify themselves with a character whose sexuality is different. In these terms, Cunningham is a pure assimilative writer who integrates homosexuality into the mainstream literature.

In the case of the first chosen novel, *A Home at the End of the World*, the concept of Cunningham being an assimilative writer does not function completely. It does meet the condition that Cunningham introduces bisexual and homosexual themes into the mainstream literature, but the principles of assimilative gay literature cannot be applied to the whole story of the novel.

In the first part of the novel, when the two main characters, Jonathan and Bobby, mature, they are exploring their sexuality, but Cunningham does not really depict how the society reacts on these two boys. Their relationship is reflected only in the character of Alice, Jonathan’s mother, but not openly discussed. The situation concerning the sexuality issue in the second part of the novel is similar to the first one, at least in terms of isolation. Although Jonathan is now living in New York and having a sexual relationship with another man, Erich, he does not want to integrate him into his own life. Homosexuality then represents a separated piece of Jonathan’s life, which cannot become a part of everyday life and, consequently, one of the principles of assimilative literature is violated. The third part refers to the title of the novel, which itself evokes feelings of isolation and elimination from society. Jonathan, Bobby and Clare are raising Bobby and Clare’s baby girl Rebecca as if she were also Jonathan’s. The family is living isolated with almost no social contact with other people; hence the assimilative factor becomes somewhat lost towards the end of the novel.

The greatest development concerning homosexuality can be seen in the characters of Alice and Jonathan and their changing attitudes to Jonathan’s sexual orientation. The

novel itself portrays the gradual assimilation of homosexuality into the heterosexual society, but does not perceive it as fully integrated yet.

The atmosphere of the other two novels, *The Hours* and *By Nightfall*, is rather different. The protagonists of these novels are not as isolated as those in *A Home at the End of the World*, most of them are in everyday touch with society, so it is easier to infer how the society views the bisexual and homosexual minority. In both of the novels, the minorities can be seen as successfully assimilated.

It is understandable that the first two time levels in *The Hours*, specifically 1923 and 1949, are not as liberal as the last one, which is set in the present, i.e. the end of the 20th century. The approach to homosexuality developed very slowly and the two first time levels, in fact, do not deal with homosexuality very much. In this sense, the third level is to be focused on. It is especially evident on the example of the main protagonist of this time level, Clarissa Vaughn, who is living in a long-term lesbian relationship with her partner Sally. Their relationship seems to be accepted by the society and the only character who appears to have a rather negative approach to the lesbian couple is Mary Krull, a friend of Clarissa's daughter Julia. Clarissa is certain that Julia mocks her for her "quaint (she must consider them quaint) notions about lesbian identity" (Cunningham, *Hours* 23). Nevertheless, the character of Mary Krull is not being observed in depth throughout the novel and there are also no other significant negative notions about sexuality on the part of the society.

Michael Cunningham's latest novel, *By Nightfall*, concentrates on the main protagonist, Peter Harris, who is questioning his own sexuality, whether he has homosexual inclinations or not, but never homosexuality in general. Bisexuals or homosexuals appear to be perfectly integrated in the society, or at least in Peter's society, meaning upper-middle, well educated society, which seems to accept them as they are.

There can be seen a huge progress of the relation between homosexuality and modern society in the three novels. Michael Cunningham does not want homosexuals to be excluded into their own minority or ghetto, as Reed Woodhouse aptly calls it. On the contrary, he tries to integrate his characters into the mainstream society. Therefore he affirms how crucial his position is within the assimilative gay and mainstream literature.

2 PRACTICAL PART

2.1 The significance of sexuality in Cunningham's selected novels

Michael Cunningham himself is a gay, and therefore it seems only natural that he incorporates homosexuality into his novels. Despite this fact, he does not write exclusively about homosexual people, but also focuses on bisexuals and heterosexuals. Above all, he attempts to depict the ambiguity and incessant transformation of human sexuality and not to pigeonhole his characters according to their sexual orientation. Although the sexuality issue is crucial in Cunningham's novels, it is not always the main theme.

In the case of the first novel selected for this bachelor thesis, *A Home at the End of the World*, the sexual orientation of the characters is certainly of great importance; however, it is not the aim of the novel to discuss sexuality as the primary theme. In an interview with Kecia Lynn for The Iowa Writers' Workshop held by the University of Iowa, Cunningham explains that his intentions were "to write a novel about a profound and complicated friendship" (YouTube interview). The friendship in question concerns the two main protagonists of the novel, Jonathan and Bobby, and is also affected by homosexual desires, mainly from Jonathan's side. Their relationship, however, is made even more complicated by the presence of Clare, Jonathan's flatmate, who becomes Bobby's lover later in the novel. The relational triangle then tries to cope with their different sexual orientations and find a balance. Their cohabitation gradually develops into the probably most important theme of the novel, i.e. a need of reforming the classical concept of a family. Logically, this theme is very closely connected with the theme of sexuality. In fact, most of the themes of the novel are more or less related to sexual orientation of the main characters. Although sexuality might not be taken as the main theme, it definitely pervades the whole novel.

Interestingly enough, from the three selected novels for this thesis, Cunningham's most successful and appreciated novel *The Hours* seems to sideline the theme of sexuality the most. The plot of the novel is divided into three stories set in one day but different time levels. In the first part, where the reader can observe Virginia Woolf creating her novel *Mrs Dalloway*, there are only two relevant notions of either bisexuality or homosexuality. Firstly, when Virginia contemplates the main character of her novel, Clarissa Dalloway, she decides that Clarissa will love a girl, and it makes Virginia wonder how it feels to love

a girl. Second instance concerns Virginia's kiss with her sister Vanessa, which is innocent, but it is indicated that Virginia may see something more in it. The second part depicts one day in the life of an unhappy housewife Laura Brown, who cursorily kisses another woman, as well. The kiss raises several questions for Laura, but although she admits that she liked it, she does not examine it further in depth. The first two parts evidently do not deal with the theme of sexuality a lot.

Most of the characters in the third part of the novel have bisexual and homosexual orientation. The main protagonist of this time level, Clarissa Vaughn, has been living with her girlfriend Sally in a content relationship for 18 years. Most of Clarissa's thoughts are dedicated to Richard, the second main protagonist, who is a homosexual dying of AIDS. Despite the fact that there are other homosexual characters in the story of Clarissa Vaughn, homosexuality itself does not create much conflict and seems to be accepted by both society and individuals. In this sense, sexual orientation does not really matter and the greatest focus is taken on the interpersonal relationships regardless of sexuality. In an interview with Jim Halterman, Cunningham expressed his fear of losing a certain circle of his readers because he does not deal much with homosexuality in the novel. "When I wrote *The Hours* I thought: 'Well, this is the end of my gay male readers'" because of the lack of gay relationships and sexual scenes between men (Halterman).

Contrastingly, in his latest novel, *By Nightfall*, Cunningham makes homosexuality "a problem for the first time, it becomes a theme" (Fischer, Zjevení 217). The main protagonist of the novel, Peter Harris, becomes infatuated with a brother of his wife, and consequently starts questioning his own sexuality. The main conflict of the novel then represents homosexual desire, which is being described in much more detail than in the two preceding novels.

Generally, what is shared by the three selected novels is that there is homosexuality present in all of them, but it is dealt with in different ways. Whereas in *A Home at the End of the World* and *The Hours*, sexuality is not the ruling theme, it dominates in *By Nightfall*. The relations between sexuality and other themes present in the novels are explored in the following chapters.

2.2 Childhood, puberty and adolescence

For the characters of Michael Cunningham's novels, the past of their lives is very significant, and therefore he explores such fundamental periods of human life as childhood, puberty and adolescence. He uses the past not only to create a nostalgic atmosphere but also to demonstrate the impact of the past on one's destiny. In all of the mentioned stages, he attempts to depict how sexual orientation of the main protagonists develops and changes.

In the second chapter of the novel *A Home at the End of the World*, i.e. the first chapter told from Jonathan's perspective, Jonathan recalls his childhood when he was five years old and quite unexpectedly describes his father's beauty: "I want to talk about my father's beauty. I know it's not a usual subject for a man – when we talk about our fathers we are far more likely to tell tales of courage or titanic rage, even of tenderness. But I want to talk about my father's frank, unadulterated beauty" (Cunningham, *Home* 6). By uttering that father's beauty is "not a usual subject for a man" at the very beginning of Jonathan's story, he indicates that he will probably differ from other boys. The way, in which Jonathan continues to delineate his father's attractive physical appearance, resembles rather a glorifying description of a subject of desire. Jonathan truly loves his father, Ned, until the moment his mother, Alice, has a miscarriage. When she returns home, she hugs Jonathan so tightly that he cannot reach his father, which results in his surrender to his mother. "I resisted a moment, tried to return to my father, but she was too strong. I disappeared. I left my father, and gave myself over to my mother's more ravenous sorrow" (Cunningham, *Home* 15). From this moment on, Jonathan and his father lose the ability to maintain the good relationship they had when Jonathan was a little boy, and never succeed to regain it again.

Reed Woodhouse characterises Jonathan's story as a cliché. "The son, rejected by his father, is colonised by his mother: no wonder he becomes gay" (177). Woodhouse admits that he discovered this stereotypical explanation of homosexuality in "the psychology section of Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh in 1965" (177), and he expresses his negative attitude to it. Psychology has ever since made many discoveries in the study of homosexuality, and therefore it cannot be considered as applicable to Jonathan's sexuality. On the other hand, it must have affected Jonathan's personality and might have caused Jonathan's inability to open emotionally. Cunningham neither endorses nor disproves this

theory. “This book is a sort of monstrosity of nonjudgmentalism” (Woodhouse 177), and it is left up to the reader to decide how to interpret this theory.

A similar, yet not the same tendency is to be seen in the character of Richie in *The Hours*. The three-year-old son of Laura Brown is “rescued, resurrected, transported by love” when he sees his mother (Cunningham, *Hours* 44). Similarly to Jonathan, Richie spends his days with his mother and is under her spell. However, the relationship with his father is not described in detail, and therefore it is not possible to apply the theory of a rejecting father and a loving mother. In fact, the reader learns later in the novel that it was Laura who rejected the whole family when she chose to leave her husband and children. Nevertheless, it is an interesting point that both Jonathan and Richie, who were in love with their mothers in their early childhoods, turn out to be homosexuals.

The character of Jonathan shows signs of effeminacy from an early age, more precisely from the age of five. At one moment of the novel, he is standing in the bathroom and staring at his reflection in the mirror. He puts on his mother’s make-up and then he spreads his cheeks with his father’s shaving foam. While observing himself, he remarks: “I was not ladylike, nor was I manly” (Cunningham, *Home* 10). The scene can be perceived as Jonathan’s first reflection on his sexuality, although he naturally does not fully understand its meaning since he is just five years old. The incident might be also seen as symbolic because at first Jonathan puts on the make-up and only after that his father’s shaving foam. In other words, he might be trying to wrap his feminine core into a male cover, as gay men are often stereotypically believed to have rather feminine qualities.

The childhood of Bobby, the second main protagonist of *A Home at the End of the World*, is also affected by love. At the age of nine, Bobby boundlessly adores his sixteen-year-old brother Carlton. Bobby longs to be the same as Carlton, hence he follows his every action, including the bad ones such as taking drugs. Unfortunately, Carlton dies in an accident when he rams himself into a glass door, which causes him several major cut injuries and he bleeds to death.

When Jonathan and Bobby meet for the first time, in the seventh grade, they soon become close friends. For Bobby, who is an outsider, the friendship represents a sort of consolation because of his difficult family situation. Not only his brother died, but also his mother did. She was not able to cope with the death of her son, isolated herself in a guest room and gradually faded away. Bobby, in fact, seems to take Jonathan as a brother, and in this way he tries to fill an empty space left after his deceased brother Carlton.

Once they reach puberty, their relationship changes quite significantly. Jonathan fully realizes his sexuality and initiates the first sexual encounter between him and Bobby. Whereas Jonathan's homosexuality is quite self-evident, Bobby's sexuality remains slightly mysterious throughout the whole novel. He seems peculiarly asexual and there is no notion in the novel that he would ever commence some sexual act, yet he obliges to Jonathan. The question arises whether Bobby, as a teenager, feels some passion for Jonathan or he just thinks he should do everything Jonathan requires in order not to lose him. The question remains without a clear answer.

The theme of brotherly love can also be found in *By Nightfall*. Cunningham uses flashbacks to portray the relationship between Peter Harris, the main character of the novel, and his older brother Matthew. In his puberty, Peter did like his brother Matthew a lot, but at the same time he was jealous of him because he was a close friend of Joanna Hurst, Peter's first platonic love. In a conversation with his brother, Peter tries to reveal his true feelings concerning Joanna to Matthew and is sure that Matthew feels the same way about her. It comes as a shock when he realizes that Matthew loves neither Joanna nor any other girl since he is a homosexual. This single conversation disclosing Matthew's sexuality is the only occasion they two attempt to talk about it together in their whole lives. The reader learns that Matthew eventually died of AIDS at the age of twenty two. Peter seems to be fonder of Matthew in the present, in his forties, than he has ever been, and he wonders whether his brother's homosexuality has something in common with his current homosexual desire.

In an interview with Gregg Shapiro for Wisconsin Gazette, Cunningham wonders why brotherhood is such a frequent theme in his novels: "I do not have any brothers. I have one younger sister. I'm surprised to find these powerful brother figures appearing in my fiction so much" (Shapiro). He offers a possible explanation: "When I was at high school, I had this crew of guy friends. They were like my second family" (Shapiro). The interviewer Gregg Shapiro designates Cunningham's guy friends as "surrogate brothers", which is a term that could be easily applied to the characters of *A Home at the End of the World*, Jonathan and especially Bobby, who attempts to substitute Jonathan for his deceased brother. Cunningham also admits that he "was in love with all of them" and confides: "Because it was all caught up with my awakening sexuality, it may have stayed with me in a way that it hasn't for those other guys" (Shapiro). This personal experience is quite obviously reflected in both *A Home at the End of the World*, where both of the main male protagonists carry their mutual brotherly friendship and love into their adulthood, and also

in *By Nightfall*, where Peter keeps thinking about his brother Matthew, even almost twenty years after he died.

Adolescence, i.e. a transition period between puberty and adulthood, is not much, or rather at all, dealt with in *By Nightfall*. The main protagonist is portrayed only in the present, in his middle age, and in flashbacks, in his childhood and puberty. On the contrary, adolescence in *A Home at the End of the World* represents a period of radical changes. Jonathan leaves Cleveland to study in New York, which also enables him to gain some new sexual experience with other men there. Bobby, on the other hand, moves to Jonathan's old room in his parents' house because his father, the only living relative of his, also dies when he falls asleep with a lit cigarette, which causes a fire that ruins their whole house. Although Bobby begins to lead quite a stereotypical life and does not have any friends or love, he seems quite satisfied because he takes Jonathan's parents as his own, which makes him feel as he was living in a complete family.

In *The Hours*, chiefly in the third time level concerning Clarissa Vaughn, adolescence is a great source of memories important for the main protagonists. However, the period of adolescence is never described directly or in flashbacks, but it is rather indicated in the thoughts and dialogues of the characters. Clarissa, Richard and Louis all recollect the times when they were 18 or 19 years old, especially one particular summer, which they spent in Wellfleet. Richard and Louis formed a gay couple, but, at the same time, Richard had an affair with Clarissa, although they both have otherwise homosexual orientation. The memories are still haunting them, primarily Clarissa who, in her middle age, still hesitates whether she should have tried to start a life with Richard or not. Experiences from the period of adolescence then create the major conflict of the novel, which is carried into the present.

2.3 Borders of heterosexuality, bisexuality and homosexuality

The theme of sexuality in Michael Cunningham's novels is a rather complicated issue since it is not possible to strictly divide the characters into three separate sexuality groups, i.e. heterosexuals, bisexuals and homosexuals. Some may say that most of the characters of Cunningham's novels are homosexual, but such an interpretation does not seem to be sufficient because the majority of the characters have had both heterosexual and homosexual experiences, or at least have contemplated attraction to both sexes. In his article, "Michael Cunningham: Time's Arrow", for the *Out* magazine, Tim Murphy labels one of the characters of Cunningham's novels, namely Ethan, the object of desire of Peter, the main protagonist of *By Nightfall*, as "polysexual," i.e. open to all possible sexualities and reluctant to distinguish only heterosexuals and homosexuals. In fact, this term could be applicable, to a certain degree, to the characters of Cunningham's works.

Cunningham, himself, expressed his understanding of human sexuality in an interview with Thessaly La Force for *The Paris Review* magazine:

Human sexuality is tremendously complicated, so much so that the designations "gay," "straight," and "bisexual" are all but meaningless. How many of us have had crushes, and even sexual experiences, with people who fall outside our official "erotic category"? Okay, not everyone, but many of us. I'm interested in sexuality that falls outside the official lines of demarcation. (La Force)

This perception of sexuality is apparent in all of the three novels chosen for this bachelor thesis, although, naturally, there are several differences among them in order to fully depict the variety of human sexuality.

The three main protagonists of *A Home at the End of the World*, Jonathan, Bobby and Clare, have all ambiguous sexuality. Jonathan has seen traces of his homosexuality since an early age and fully discovered it in his early puberty. After having left home, Jonathan came to New York in the early 1980s, where he got in touch with the gay subculture, experienced quite a number of sexual affairs with other men, and started a sexual relationship with Erich. At the beginning of the second part of the novel, the reader finds Jonathan in a quite riven situation. He is living with his friend Clare, and explains that their relationship is based on the mental understanding of each other, and designates them as "half-lovers," but "not lovers in the fleshy sense" (Cunningham, *Home* 109)

because they have had no sexual intercourse. While Jonathan is experiencing an almost perfect mental relationship with a woman, without any sex involved, he keeps having a sexual one with a man, although the two of them cannot even communicate with each other. The trouble is that Jonathan is not able to join these two parts of his life together, which causes an inner tension in him and, consequently, results in his constant dissatisfaction.

Whereas Jonathan's sexual orientation is predominantly homosexual, Clare's seems to be heterosexual, even though she has had some lesbian experiences. "She'd been married to a dancer" and "she'd been the lover of a semi-famous woman author" (Cunningham, *Home* 112). Clare takes pleasure in being eccentric, and her bisexual relationships might be either one of the reasons for such behaviour, or one of the results. From the outset of the second part of the novel, Jonathan oscillates between friendship with and love for Clare, yet he is never interested in her sexually. Clare, on the other hand, rather appears to be in love with Jonathan since "the plain fear that I (i.e. Jonathan) would leave her" could be seen "under her friendly avidity" (Cunningham, *Home* 121). Understandably, it raises the question of how the story would progress if Jonathan was bisexual, but the answer would be just a speculation. The close, yet intricate friendship is made even more complicated by Bobby's arrival in New York.

Bobby's sexuality seems to be the most mysterious issue of the whole novel. Not long after his arrival in New York, Bobby is seduced by Clare and experiences his first sexual encounter with a woman. In comparison with his homosexual experiences with Jonathan, Bobby seems to have a stronger reaction to sex with Clare. After their first intercourse, Bobby says: "I never thought I would" (Cunningham, *Home* 170). This little utterance may indicate that he could have given some thought to intercourse with women, yet there are no mentions of it in the novel. In fact, neither chapter told from Bobby's perspective contains any description of his attitude to sex or sexuality, and since his character does not feel any sexual desire, he seems a rather asexual person. Even literary critics differ in their attempts to define Bobby's sexuality. Whereas Gregory Woods describes Bobby as a heterosexual (352), Reese Woodhouse perceives him as a bisexual (172), and, similarly, Hana Ulmanová inclines to regard Bobby as a bisexual (Touha, 396). The dispute stems from how much importance the literary critics ascribe to the homosexual experiences which Bobby had with Jonathan as a teenager.

All of the members of this friendship triangle later realise that they love one other, and they start living as a family together. This new formation also requires their ability to

harmonize their different sexualities in order to live happily together. While the two male protagonists seem to be satisfied with their current situation and cope with it quite successfully, Clare hesitates, is reluctant, and, finally, leaves them. In the case of the novel *A Home at the End of the World*, the cohabitation of the three sexually different characters is not possible.

In the first two time levels of *The Hours*, concerning Virginia Woolf and Laura Brown, the theme of sexuality is chiefly shown on a kiss which both of the characters exchange with other women. Although Michael Cunningham is well aware of Virginia Woolf's life and studied her personality in depth because of this novel, it has to be realised that she is still a fictional character. Therefore, this interpretation will focus on Virginia Woolf's sexuality only in the terms of the novel, *The Hours*, and it will not focus on her sexuality as a real human being. The first mention of love between women, in Virginia's story, is presented in her thoughts regarding her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Virginia is contemplating that the main character, Clarissa Dalloway, will love a girl, named Sally, whose character will be based on Virginia's sister Vanessa. This can be seen as a foreshadowing of the kiss between Virginia and Vanessa, which happens later in the novel. Virginia is a married woman, yet she cannot help herself but think "of the love of a girl" (Cunningham, *Hours* 83). Together with the kiss with Vanessa, these are the only hints which could indicate Virginia's potential bisexuality. Cunningham describes the kiss as "an innocent kiss, innocent enough," but at the same time admits that, to Virginia, it feels "like the most delicious and forbidden of pleasures" (Cunningham, *Hours* 154). The question of what to seek behind this innocent, yet forbidden kiss remains unanswered.

A parallel situation could be found in the story of Laura Brown, who kisses her neighbour friend, Kitty. Firstly, "she kisses Kitty, lingeringly, on the top of her forehead," and, secondly, "they touch their lips together, but do not quite kiss" (Cunningham, *Hours* 110). This subtle kiss may not appear as a significant event, but Laura realises that "she has gone too far, they've both gone too far" (Cunningham, *Hours* 110). It also makes Laura think that she "desires Kitty," (Cunningham, *Hours* 143) and, as a consequence, she compares her desire for Kitty and her husband, Dan, and comes to a conclusion that she desires both of them, but Kitty more so at the moment and wants to kiss her again. Similarly to Virginia, this can also be seen as an indication of Laura's potential bisexuality.

The theme of sexuality is discussed a little more in the last story, regarding Clarissa Vaughn, although it rather creates a background for her story than a problem itself. Clarissa is stuck between the present and the past. She has been living with her girlfriend

Sally in a content relationship for eighteen years, but she constantly keeps thinking about her best friend Richard, who she also loves. When Clarissa and Richard were eighteen and nineteen years old, they spent a summer in Wellfleet and had a romance. Despite the fact that Clarissa is a lesbian and Richard is a homosexual, their love affair was very intense. Even back then, this romance did not cause doubts about Clarissa's sexuality, "it was simply an expansion of the possible" (Cunningham, *Hours* 96). The fact that she still regrets not having tried to live with Richard, does not mean that she would have a sexuality crisis. It was just a choice she made regardless of her sexuality. Clarissa's inner conflict originates in a dilemma between two people she loves, and whether if it is a man or a woman is not the most relevant thing. In *The Hours*, Cunningham once again shows the complexity of interpersonal relationships and human sexuality.

In *By Nightfall*, Cunningham not only makes sexuality the central conflict of his work for the first time, but he also creates a straight male main protagonist for the first time. He clarifies his decision, as follows: "I've always written about gay people and straight people, but I have tended to focus on characters that were gay or gay-ish. Part of it was a pure challenge of it. What was interesting to me was the idea that somebody like Peter, who is essentially heterosexual, could be queer for one other guy" (Shapiro). He also observes that writing in the voice of a straight male was "not as much of a stretch as you might think" (Murphy), because he believes that sexuality is not the only part of one's identity that would shape the whole personality of a particular human being. "There are questions of character that are deeper than gender and sexual orientation which, at the level I'd have to call the soul, just don't matter" (Murphy).

At first sight, the story of *By Nightfall* can look like a homosexual one. Peter Harris, in his mid forties and happily married, falls for his wife's brother, which makes him doubt whether he is a homosexual. Nevertheless, "the biggest internet seller Amazon.com does not count Michael Cunningham's latest novel, *By Nightfall*, among any of the categories, which would imply a homosexual content" (Trušník, *Podoby* 78-79)¹. There is a good reason for it because the story can be interpreted in several different ways. Cunningham admits that the impulse for writing this novel was Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice*. "I've always been fascinated by Aschenbach's fascination with Tadzio, which is eroticized but not exactly sexual; it's more about Aschenbach's love of youth and beauty and ephemerality" (La Force). *By Nightfall* truly follows the concept of *Death in Venice*, but alters it for its own purposes. Peter Harris, as a gallery owner, is perpetually searching for beauty and finds it in Ethan, nicknamed Mizzy, his wife's brother. Peter draws a

comparison between Ethan and Rodin's bronze statue of a young, beautiful man, which fascinates him. Jeanette Winterson, in her review of *By Nightfall*, aptly remarks: "The living sculpture that is Mizzy, looking as though he should be a Rodin bronze, does to Peter what beauty does to all of us, regardless of sex or sexuality — we want to touch it" (Winterson). According to this interpretation the novel is primarily about seeking beauty, while the sexual orientation of the main character is not so important.

Another reading of the novel suggests that Peter undergoes mid-life crisis, and therefore he is simply mesmerised by Ethan's charm youth. Ethan also looks like Rebecca when she was young, when Peter fell in love with her. The resemblance is so striking that one day Peter comes home, without knowing Ethan is in his and Rebecca's apartment, he hears shower, thinks he sees Rebecca in it, opens it and after realising it is Ethan, "he is taken aback, moved, aroused" (Winterson). How apt that Ethan's nickname Mizzy is derived from his other nickname Mistake. "In the new novel, it's often hard to tell whether Peter is really gay or projecting all sorts of desires -- for his wife when she was young, for his own fading youth -- onto Mizzy, or both" (Murphy).

Finally, the novel can be interpreted as a realisation of one's sexuality, or more precisely of the full range of one's sexuality. At one point of the novel, Peter asks his friend and assistant, Uta: "How can I love another guy and not be gay?" Uta's reply "easy" (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 223) is the simplest, yet a tricky answer. A parallel situation occurs when Peter asks Ethan whether he is gay. Ethan, who has had relationships with both women and men, answers: "I think I'm gay for you" (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 194). It supports Cunningham's approach to sexuality because it indicates that it is not possible to categorise people according to their sexual orientation.

Unfortunately for Peter, his situation is resolved in a rather different way than he hoped. After having decided that he would leave his wife, Peter realises that Ethan has been just a tease and has had no intention to start a new life with him. Peter is once again forced to reconsider his life, which also requires reassessing his marital situation and his sexuality. The novel then ends openly with a hint of a possible reunion with his wife.

2.4 Homoerotic encounters and relationships

It is necessary to distinguish between two terms; homoerotic and homosexual. The term homoerotic “shifts a mutual relationship of same-sex people to a sexual level, however it only states the presence of sexual relationship regardless of its emotional character” (Trušník, Podoby 18). The term homosexual then “expects identification of an individual with their permanent orientation to same-sex people” (Trušník, Podoby 18).

Michael Cunningham introduces relationships of both of these types in his novels. In *The Hours*, the only homoerotic aspects of Louis and Richard’s relationship are mentioned in Louis’ reminiscence. However, these are only short allusions, indeed, and not contributing to the story at all. On the contrary, *A Home at the End of the World*, contains more examples of homoerotic experiences, which also have a huge impact on the characters and the story. Jonathan and Bobby’s first sexual encounter can be designated as homoerotic, although from Jonathan’s side it gradually develops into homosexual because he comes to terms with his homosexuality and loves Bobby. As they mature, they have several other homoerotic encounters with each other, but these are never described explicitly. After Bobby’s arrival in New York, Jonathan attempts to discuss the intercourse they used to have with each other, but Bobby refuses to talk about it. Despite the fact that they never have sex again, they have one more homoerotic experience, lying naked next to each other and running ice cubes over their skins. Bobby describes it: “There was sex between us but we didn’t have sex – we committed no outright acts. It was a sweeter, more brotherly kind of love making” (Cunningham, *Home* 159). It seems that all possible kinds of relationships intermingle in the one of Bobby and Jonathan. They have experienced a friendship, homoerotic and homosexual encounters, brotherhood and also parenthood. Furthermore, Jonathan has a homoerotic relationship with Erich, in the true sense of the word. They have sex regularly, yet they hardly know each other. Jonathan is reluctant to start a homosexual relationship with Erich because he loves Clare and Bobby. At the beginning of their relationship, Erich also does not want to commit himself to Jonathan, but, as the story develops, he falls in love with him. However, they never end up as a couple.

A homoerotic relationship also pervades the novel *By Nightfall*, yet in a platonic form. Peter and Ethan never have sex with each other, and their only actual homoerotic experience is a single kiss. A similarity can be seen in the description of Peter and Ethan’s kiss in *By Nightfall* and Virginia and Vanessa’s kiss in *The Hours*. Whereas the kiss in *The*

Hours was “an innocent kiss, innocent enough,” (Cunningham, *Hours* 154) the kiss in *By Nightfall* is described as “passionate, passionate enough, but not exactly, not entirely, sexual” (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 193). Another similarity of this kiss can be seen in the comparison with the last homoerotic experience of Bobby and Jonathan in *A Home at the End of the World*. While Bobby describes it as “a brotherly kind of love making,” (Cunningham, *Home* 159) Peter raises a question: “Can two men kissing have been comradely” (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 193)? Despite the fact that the kiss is problematic to characterise, it definitely is a turning point of the story since it helps Peter to make a decision to leave his wife, although it all ends differently.

By Nightfall is filled with a sexual tension between the two main male protagonists. Apart from the scene in which Peter sees Ethan naked in the shower and is immediately astonished by his physical beauty there are several other moments in the novel when Ethan is either half or fully naked in the presence of Peter. The first one instantly follows the accident in the shower, when Peter and Ethan, who is topless at the moment, are sitting in the kitchen and trying to converse with each other. Peter cannot help himself but to watch Ethan’s body, while comparing it to Rodin’s statue of a young man, and wonders: “Is he being seductive” (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 54)? Peter feels that there is something hidden and unspoken in their conversation, which make it, at least for him, almost erotic. A few days later, Peter comes back home earlier due to his stomach ache and finds Ethan sleeping on a couch without a t-shirt on. Once again, Peter observes him and, unconsciously, kneels down beside him. While watching Ethan’s face, Peter contemplates several factors, which might be connected with his potential homosexuality. “There’s gay DNA in the family, and he whacked off with his friend Rick throughout junior high, and sure, he can see the beauty of men, there’ve been moments (a teenage boy in a pool in South Beach, a young Italian waiter in Babbo), but nothing’s happened and he hasn’t, as far as he can tell, been suppressing it” (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 93). Peter’s speculation about his sexuality reveals that he has had some homoerotic experiences and also thought about getting more of them. He attempts to convince himself that he has not been trying to bottle up his homoerotic, or even homosexual, desire, but his feelings for Ethan suggest otherwise. Peter decides not to wake Ethan up and goes into his own bedroom. Unexpectedly, Ethan, who wakes up later, without knowing that Peter is at home, calls a drug dealer to bring him drugs to Peter and Rebecca’s apartment. Although Peter hears the phone call and knows he should intervene, he decides to stay hidden in his bedroom and only listen. After having received the drugs, Ethan takes them, goes to a room next to Peter’s bedroom and starts masturbating. Ethan’s

masturbation is so arousing for Peter that he gets an erection. Such a strong sexual reaction makes Peter ask himself again if he is a homosexual. For the first time, Peter has a thought: “Queer for you, boy, alone in the world, as if you were a gender unto yourself” (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 117), which, once again, corresponds to Cunningham’s understanding of sexuality, where gender is not of the main importance. When Peter hears Ethan moaning, indicating he has reached orgasm, he “is briefly, terribly in love” (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 117) with him, which shifts Peter’s rather platonic infatuation for Ethan to a higher level, although still one-sided and not fully homosexual.

Late at night of the same day, Peter cannot fall asleep, and therefore goes to the kitchen to have a glass of vodka and a sleeping pill. To his surprise, he finds naked Ethan there, who asks him not to tell Rebecca that he became a drug addict again. Although Peter is well aware of the fact that he should tell her, he is so enchanted by Ethan that he promises him not to do so. Once again, Peter cannot help himself but observe Ethan’s body, and is quite excited by his nakedness. “Peter still doesn’t want to have sex with Mizzy, but there is something thrilling about downing a shot of vodka with another man who happens to be naked” (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 128). In this description of Peter’s perception of this situation, the word ‘still’ is crucial since it might foreshadow that, at the end of the novel, Peter will want to have sex with Ethan. Nevertheless, it is not absolutely true because Peter will be able to imagine a relationship with him but still in a rather platonic form with no visions of their sex. Cunningham describes the atmosphere of the kitchen scene as an “eroticized love-hum” (*Nightfall* 128), which could be understood as interconnection of Peter’s erotic interest in Ethan and the beginning of his love for him.

Towards the end of the novel, Peter does fall in love with Ethan but neither homoerotic nor homosexual aspects of their relationship are fulfilled. Ethan claims that he has been in love with Peter since he “was a little kid” (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 194), but his statement should not be regarded as valid because, at the end of the novel, the reader learns that Ethan was being seductive chiefly in order to make sure that Peter would not tell Rebecca about his drug addiction. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish between homoerotic and homosexual spheres of their relationship, especially when Ethan’s feelings about it remain unclear and Peter’s rather platonic.

2.5 AIDS

Cunningham came to live in New York in the 1980s and became familiar with the New York gay subculture at the time when the AIDS epidemic broke out. “He lived through the worst of the Aids crisis in New York and lost a lot of friends” (Brookes), which naturally reflects in his work, as he explains it: “If you survive a war or epidemic, your sense of life and the world is changed. You've just seen a level of mortality which many people don't see. And you work with that. You simply take it as part of the material you've been given and try to negotiate it as a writer” (Brookes). Each of the three novels selected for this bachelor thesis does contain the theme of AIDS. Interestingly, all of the characters who suffer from AIDS are men, and there is not a single case of a woman having this disease. Not surprisingly, all the male protagonists who have AIDS became infected during the 1980s, most likely in New York.

In *By Nightfall*, Cunningham deals with the theme of AIDS the least of the three chosen novels. In an interview with Gregg Shapiro, he exhorts people not to forget that the AIDS crisis “is not over” (Shapiro), which might be also another reason why he decided to incorporate this theme into his latest novel. Peter and his brother Matthew grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which was a city too orderly and conservative for Peter and even more so for Matthew, who “was quite possibly the most effeminate person in Milwaukee” (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 101). Quite understandably, Matthew felt the urge to flee from this city and its rigid morality in order to fully discover his homosexuality and gain some experience. Peter ruminates about Matthew’s leaving Milwaukee and its consequences: “Is it any wonder Matthew got out of there two days after he graduated from high school, and had sex with half the men in New York” (Cunningham, *Nightfall* 47)? Unfortunately for Matthew, he came to New York at the beginning of the AIDS crisis which had a fatal impact on him. Both Matthew and his boyfriend died at the age of twenty two. Even twenty years after Matthew’s death, Peter thinks about him almost every day and seems never to get over it.

In *The Hours*, the theme of AIDS appears only in the time level concerning Clarissa Vaughn because the disease became an issue in the 1980s and the other two time levels are set in 1920s and 1940s. Two AIDS cases are mentioned in the third time level. The first one, less important and not contributing to the story, concerns Evan, a boyfriend of Clarissa’s friend, Walter Hardy. The second focuses on Richard, Clarissa’s best friend and former lover. Clarissa cannot help herself but resent “Evan and all the others who got the

new drugs in time; all the fortunate ('fortunate' being, of course, a relative term) men and women whose minds had not yet been eaten into lace by the virus" (Cunningham, *Hours* 55). Richard, on the other hand, is going from bad to worse. Whereas his "muscles and organs have been revived by the new discoveries," his mental condition and "mind seems to have passed beyond any sort of repair" (Cunningham, *Hours* 56). Richard is living isolated in a messy and dirty flat, with roller blinds always pulled down. The only one who pulls them up and lets, at least, a bit of light inside is Clarissa who also symbolizes the only bright moments of Richard's life since she is the only one who ever visits him. Richard's state of mind is severe because he hears voices in his head and sometimes also envisions their source. Most of the time, he feels disconsolate not only because of his disease, but also because he thinks he has failed as a writer. Although Clarissa attempts to persuade him to believe in himself and reminds him he was awarded an important literary prize for his latest novel, he still keeps thinking that he got the prize "for having AIDS and going nuts and being brave about it, it had nothing to do with his work" (Cunningham, *Hours* 63). He has simply lost his confidence and is afraid that he was awarded just because the society pities him. All possible factors forming Richard's current situation, i.e. AIDS and consequential loss of faith in life, mental illness, a feeling of failure as a writer, and unfulfilled love for Clarissa, result in his suicide, one of the most shattering and emotionally challenging moments of all the three discussed novels.

The theme of AIDS is most dominant in *A Home at the End of the World*, more precisely in the second and the third parts of the novel since the first part concerns the childhood and puberty of the two main protagonists, Jonathan and Bobby. After having left Cleveland, Jonathan moved to New York, discovered the gay subculture there, and gained quite a huge number of sexual experiences with different men. He "had gotten to know dozens of bodies in their every mood and condition" (Cunningham, *Home* 114). One of the accidental sexual encounters with a bartender named Erich gradually develops into a relationship entirely based on sex. Despite the fact that Jonathan knows that he and Erich fall "somewhere toward the middle of the risk spectrum" (Cunningham, *Home* 172), neither he nor Erich use protection, not only when they have sex with each other, but also with other men. One of the possible reasons for such irresponsible behaviour might be the fact that the AIDS crisis is just in its beginning and, so far, it has not affected anyone they two would personally know. Although Jonathan thinks that he lives "at the beginning of an orgiastic new age" (Cunningham, *Home* 172), he also admits that this era frightens him. While trying to calm himself down, he assures himself by such nonsensical arguments as:

Erich “had seemed too busy to be available to early death” (Cunningham, *Home* 175). It only shows how much Jonathan is afraid of AIDS and longing not to be infected.

Throughout the second part of the novel, there are several descriptions of Jonathan’s physical appearance and his health. He often feels sick, concentrates only with difficulty and looks rather unhealthy. At one point of the novel, when Clare sees Jonathan after almost a year, she wonders: “He looked physically diminished, as if some air or vital fluid had leaked out of him. Had he always been so small and wan” (Cunningham, *Home* 221)? Despite the constant insinuations of Jonathan’s disease, Cunningham actually never states that he has AIDS with certainty. Nevertheless, it is probable that he does because Erich becomes infected. Erich visits Jonathan in his new house where he lives with Clare, Bobby and Rebecca, and, from his appearance, it is clear that he has AIDS. Jonathan is so disturbed by it that he literally cannot think about anything else and finally asks Erich how long he has had it. Erich admits that he has been feeling sick “for more than a year,” but then he got the diagnosis “about five months ago” (Cunningham, *Home* 303,304). Although Jonathan and Erich have not had sex for two years at least, there is still the possibility of Jonathan getting infected since it is not obvious whether Erich’s symptoms started right after getting infected or later. In fact, Jonathan might have become infected not only by Erich, but also by some other man. Clare attempts to reassure Jonathan that he does not have AIDS, but “her voice lacks conviction” (Cunningham, *Home* 306), which may correspond to Clare’s ruminating about Jonathan’s unhealthy appearance.

Since Erich’s family has abandoned him and almost all of his friends have died, Erich moves to Jonathan, Bobby and Clare’s home. At first, it seems convenient for everyone. Erich needs a full-time care because his health condition becomes severe, and all the three adult members of the family, especially Jonathan and Bobby, take care of him. Later, Clare becomes nervous when she sees that Erich and Rebecca have become friends. She feels uneasy when he touches her because she is afraid he might infect her. Clare does not also want Rebecca to be in contact with a dying person in such an early age. This might be seen as one of the main reasons why Clare decides to leave Bobby and Jonathan, and start a new life with Rebecca somewhere else.

Erich feels that he is going to die soon, and therefore he starts contemplating his past. He wonders whether he and Jonathan loved each other. Despite the fact that Jonathan has never loved Erich, he perceives their relationship as “sins of omission” (Cunningham, *Home* 318), which might indicate that Jonathan regrets not having tried to begin a true relationship with him. The novel then ends in a beautiful scene when Jonathan and Bobby

take Erich to a lake one April afternoon. Although the water is still very cold, they dare to go into it, because one of Erich's last wishes is to swim in the lake, and both him and Jonathan sense that he will probably die before summer starts. Jonathan holds Erich's hand and, for the first time, he feels "intimate with him, though they had known one another for years and had made love hundreds of times" (Cunningham, *Home* 341). At this particular moment, Jonathan can see his life the way he never has before, without fears or dissatisfaction. He also contemplates the possibility of him having AIDS, but seems rather reconciled with it.

Conclusion

In the theoretical part of this bachelor thesis, there are three crucial terms related to gay culture and literature, i.e. the American model of homosexuality, gay literature and assimilative literature. After having discussed the theme of (homo)sexuality in the three selected novels in the practical part of this thesis, it is now easier to decide whether the terms are suitable for Michael Cunningham's works. According to Martin C. Putna's model of homosexuality in the American society, it has to be perceived as a minority demanding equality with the majority, but not a full integration. As it is obvious from Cunningham's novels, he rather represents the European model because he attempts to see homosexuality as integrated in the mainstream society and not as locked up in its minority, or ghetto, as Woodhouse designates it. In this sense, Cunningham is an exception and does not correspond with the American model. The second term concerning gay literature or gay writers is also not satisfactory. Cunningham rightly refuses to be called a gay writer since he does not write exclusively for or about homosexual people. The scope of his writing is much broader and, similarly, his readers are certainly not only homosexuals since he has become a mainstream writer. The most fitting term for Cunningham seems to be the last one, i.e. assimilative literature. Cunningham not only brought homosexual themes into the mainstream literature, but he also lets his homosexual characters assimilate and integrate with the surrounding heterosexual society. Although the assimilation is not perfect in *A Home at the End of the World* yet, it appears to be more so in the other two novels, *The Hours* and *By Nightfall*.

The practical part explains that homosexuality is not the main theme in the novels *A Home at the End of the World* and *The Hours*, but only in *By Nightfall*, and even in the case of this novel, it is problematic to view it so since the novel offers several other interpretations. However, the practical part explores the relationship between homosexuality and other themes since homosexuality is an important theme in all of the three novels. The theme of growing up and coming of age is present in all of the chosen novels and is always connected with the main characters' sexuality. Childhood as a theme is most dominant in *A Home at the End of the World*, which depicts the effeminate Jonathan. There are mentions of childhood in the other two novels as well, but they are not related to sexuality in any way. Puberty is crucial in *A Home at the End of the World*, when Jonathan and Bobby start a homoerotic relationship, also in *By Nightfall*, when Peter realises that his brother Matthew is gay, and completely omitted in *The Hours*. On the

other hand, the theme of adolescence is the most important in *The Hours* because Clarissa and Richard, both homosexual, have a heterosexual affair with each other, which has a huge impact on their future. In *A Home at the End of the World*, adolescence ends the relationship between Jonathan and Bobby and enables Jonathan to move to New York and become familiar with the gay subculture. Similarly, Matthew in *By Nightfall* leaves for New York after high school and experiences a number of homosexual encounters, but adolescence of the main character, Peter, is not described.

The thesis also deals with Cunningham's perception of human sexuality. He prefers to see sexuality rather as a variable process than an unchanging state, and therefore he does not divide people into categories as hetero, bi or homosexual. Naturally, such a conception is reflected in all of the three discussed novels. The main protagonists of all of them have had erotic or sexual experience with people of both sexes, or at least have contemplated it. In *A Home at the End of the World*, and especially in *The Hours*, the gender of a loved person is not a source of a problem. Clarissa in *The Hours* is living with a woman, yet thinking about a relationship with a man, but, in fact, if she was living with a man or thinking about a woman, it would make no difference. On the contrary, the main character of *By Nightfall*, Peter, views his sexuality as a problem since he has been heterosexual all of his life and now falls in love with a man, which makes him question his sexuality. It only supports Cunningham's attitude to sexuality, which may change at any moment of anybody's life.

The Hours is the only one of the three novels which does not focus on homoerotic encounters and relationships. *A Home at the End of the World* reflects this theme on the relationships between Jonathan and Bobby, and Jonathan and Erich. *By Nightfall* concerns with Peter's platonic eroticized infatuation with Ethan, which results in a single kiss, and is actually never fulfilled. In fact, homosexual sex, which is never described explicitly in the novels, is always closely connected with the AIDS crisis in New York in the 1980s. In *A Home at the End of the World*, it is Erich who suffers from AIDS, and potentially also Jonathan, in *The Hours*, it is Richard who commits suicide rather than to stay alive, and in *By Nightfall*, it is Peter's brother Matthew who dies of AIDS at the age of only twenty two.

Interestingly, Cunningham gives a chance of happiness and to change their destiny only to women. In *A Home at the End of the World*, Clare abandons her life with Jonathan and Erich to start a new one with her child Rebecca. Also, Jonathan's mother, Alice, discovers a new, more content way of life after her husband's death. In *The Hours*, Laura Brown finds the strength to leave her husband and children, although whether she becomes

happier after she did it, is not stated in the novel. At the end of *By Nightfall*, Peter is surprised that not only him but also Rebecca, his wife, has been thinking about divorce, even more than he has. She is ready to start a happier life. On the contrary, Cunningham treats homosexual men or men with homosexual or homoerotic desires more harshly. Erich is going to die of AIDS soon and Jonathan might also be infected. Richard commits suicide. Matthew died of AIDS very young and Peter, who is broken after being let down by Ethan, is hurt again when he finds out that his wife wants to divorce him. Nevertheless, Cunningham leaves, at least, a slight hint of hope for them. At the very end of the novel *A Home at the End of the World*, Jonathan seems to be reconciled with his life for the first time. Richard no longer has to face the eponymous hours because he has escaped from his miserable life. In *By Nightfall*, it is insinuated that Peter and Rebecca might stay together despite everything they have been through.

Works Cited

PRIMARY SOURCES:

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

---. *By Nightfall*. London: Fourth Estate, 2011.

---. *The Hours*. London: Fourth Estate, 1999.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

Printed sources:

Fischer, Petr. Cunninghamovo krásné zjevení. *Za soumraku*. By Michael Cunningham. Praha: Odeon, 2011. 216-220.

Putna, Martin C. et al. *Homosexualita v dějinách české kultury*. Praha: Academia, 2011.

Trušník, Roman. "A Drag Queen in Your Living Room: Michael Cunningham's Revision of Assimilative Gay Fiction." *American and British Studies Annual: Volume 1*. Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice, 2008. 97-103.

---. *Podoby amerického homosexuálního románu po roce 1945*. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2011.

Ulmanová, Hana. Kdo se nebojí Virginie Woolfové. *Hodiny*. By Michael Cunningham. Praha: Odeon, 2004. 181-188.

---. Touha sdílet. *Domov na konci světa*. By Michael Cunningham. Praha: Odeon, 2005. 391-398.

Woodhouse, Reed. *Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction, 1945-1995*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

Woods, Gregory. *A History of Gay Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

Internet sources:

Brockes, Emma. "Michael Cunningham: A Life in Writing." *The Guardian* 5 February 2011. 22 June 2013 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2011/feb/07/michael-cunningham-life-writing>>

Halterman, Jim. "1-on-1 with Pulitzer Prize-winning Author Michael Cunningham." *Jim Halterman* 25 October 2010. 12 June 2013 <<http://jimhalterman.com/interviews/interview-1-on-1-with-pulitzer-prize-winning-author-michael-cunningham/>>.

La Force, Thessaly. "Michael Cunningham." *The Paris Review* 14 October 2010. 15 June 2013 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2010/10/14/michael-cunningham/>>

Leavitt, David. "Out of the Closet and Off the Shelf." *The New York Times* 17 July 2005. 15 June 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/17/books/review/17LEAVITT.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>

Moore, Chadwick. "Catching Up with Michael Cunningham." *Out* 30 September 2010. 7 June 2013 <<http://www.out.com/entertainment/books/2010/09/30/catching-michael-cunningham>>.

Murphy, Tim. "Michael Cunningham: Time's Arrow." *Out* 29 September 2010. 15 June 2013 <<http://www.out.com/entertainment/books/2010/09/29/michael-cunningham-times-arrow?page=0,0>>

Shapiro, Gregg. "The Art of Fiction: An interview with Writer Michael Cunningham." *Wisconsin Gazette* 8 September 2010. 13 June 2013
<<http://www.wisconsin Gazette.com/interview/the-art-of-fictionbreakan-interview-with-writer-michael-cunningham.html>>

Winterson, Jeanette. "Sibling Rivalry." *The new Yorker Times* 1 October 2010. 15 June 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/03/books/review/Winterson-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=3&>

YouTube interview: Kecia Lynn interviews Michael Cunningham. "Conversations: Michael Cunningham." 2 November 2010. 15 June 2013
< <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJSk4RR2QO4>>