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FACULTY OF EDUCATION

Department of English Language and Literature



BACHELOR THESIS

**The Notional Concept of Childhood in the Work
of William Saroyan**

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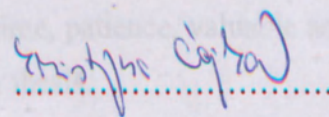
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Prague 2009

Declaration:

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis, titled “The Notional Concept of Childhood in the Work of William Saroyan”, is the result of my own work and that I used only the cited sources.

Prague, April 10th 2009


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Abstract

This bsc thesis is concerned with the concept of a child and childhood in the work of William Saroyan. It also outlines the features of Saroyan's prose which constitute the fact of duality of the worlds of children and adults and make the literature readable both for children and adults. The analysis is divided into five chapters. Each chapter consists of several sections and deals with one of the aspects of the picture of a child and childhood as inferred from the Saroyan's books. These are the merging of the world of children and adults, the concept of a child character as such, an approach of a child character to the institution of school, mother relationships and Armenian background of a child character. Special attention is paid to the relationship between children and their parents, particularly to the one of sons and their fathers, and to the duality of mentality of children characters stemming from their Armenian background. The thesis demonstrates the ideas on two short novels and numerous stories by the author.

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá pojetím dítěte a dětství v tvorbě Williama Saroyana. Pozornost je věnována i znakům Saroyanovy tvorby, které zaplétají realitu dvou odlišných světů dětí a dospělých a způsobují, že je tato literatura přístupná dětem i dospělým. Saroyanův анализ je rozdělen do pěti kapitol. Každá kapitola se skládá z několika podkapitol a věnuje se jednomu z aspektů obrazu dítěte a dětství tak, jak je vyobrazen v dílech Williama Saroyana. Jedná se o prolínání světa dětí se světem dospělých, pojetí dětského hrdiny jako takového, jeho přístup k instituci školy, jeho vztahy a zejména hlavní dětského hrdiny. Velká pozornost je věnována vztahům mezi dětmi a rodiči, zejména vztahu synů a jejich otců, a duality mentality dětských hrdinů, která vychází ze světa armenické a americké kultury. Téma bakalářské práce jsou dokládány na dvou novelách a četných povídkách autora.

Key words

Child, childhood, concept, age, family, father, school, immigrant, duality

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Klíčová slova

Dítě, dětství, koncept, věk, rodina, otec, škola, imigrant, dualita

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Introduction

William Saroyan was a prolific author whose writings cover drama, prose and autobiography. His work is diverse both in genre and subject matter and can be analyzed from many different aspects. I have chosen the theme of the picture of childhood and a child in the work of William Saroyan since children are main characters of many of Saroyan's books and it is the childlike vision of the world which is so powerful and captivating about Saroyan's work.

At the beginning I will briefly reflect on Saroyan's prose as such, particularly on the lack of dichotomy of the worlds of children and adults. I will also try to find the features of Saroyan's prose that make the literature readable both for children and adults, which closely relates to the previous issue. As far as child characters in the work of Saroyan are concerned, I have chosen four areas which appropriately characterize his fictional world of children. The thesis is divided into five chapters, one relating to Saroyan's prose as such and the others relating to the chosen areas. Each chapter consists of several sections which convey the particular topic. I will focus mainly on the surroundings children live in, on the relationships which determine children's lives and on the values they learn from their culture, family, their surroundings, and experience. I will also describe Saroyan's approach to a child character as such and try to define the status of a child as inferred from the Saroyan's books.

Considering the large number of Saroyan's publications, I will only use several prosaic works which I consider the most suitable, to demonstrate the thesis. These are a short novel *Tati, tobě přeskočilo*, which is a Czech translation of a short novel *Papa, You're Crazy* published in 1957, several stories chosen from a Czech translation of stories called *Léto na krásném bílém koni* published in 1981, an English selection of stories called *The Best Stories of William Saroyan* published in 1942 and two crucial publications concerning the world of children, a short story collection *My Name Is Aram* published in 1940 and a short novel *The Human Comedy* published in 1943.

1 Saroyan's prose

Saroyan's stories are based on dailiness and everyday life experience. There are no major dramatic actions and no unexpected turns of events. The characters are no larger-than-life heroes but ordinary people. Most of them are outcasts and impractical dreamers who exist in a limited world where it is not possible to realize their romantic visions. However, they always at least try to fulfill their dreams and live as if every day could be the last one. They are charming, naive, spontaneous, emotional and amusing. And so is the prose of William Saroyan. It is a kind of sentimental, optimistic, sometimes even idealistic writing. It is fresh, vivid and highly imaginative. Saroyan wanted to charm the reader, he wanted him/her to see the beauty and magic in ordinary things and everyday life. He wrote about the world as he observed it and he observed it through the eyes of an innocent child. This is a virtue of Saroyan's work. The childlike vision of the world which gives the reader hope that all the problems will be solved and everything will be all right again.

Saroyan's prose resembles literature for children in many ways. The main character is often a child who is discovering the world little by little and finds the magic in ordinary things around him. He/she establishes relations which determine his/her thinking about life. The story is always based on a certain situation or action. It is straightforwardly said what has happened and nothing needs to be presumed and inferred by the reader. Everything is clear and obvious as it is in the world of children. Saroyan's prose is not particularly sophisticated. There is a simple unified plot without any excursions. He uses perfunctory characterization with only few attributes the characters are defined by. The language is simple rather than figurative. Yet it is never banal. However, with all these signs the prose of William Saroyan is not intended for children primarily and can be read by adults too.

As Howard Floan explains when analyzing a short novel *The Human Comedy*: "Indeed, the entire adult world of the town is presented as if it was seen through the eyes of a child, yet the reader is always aware of the author. This omniscient voice narrates the story and the effect is not that of reminiscence but of retrogression from maturity" (Floan 126). When commenting on a book *My Name Is Aram*, Floan points out that the main character, Aram, learns nothing about himself through the action and it is always an adult who comes to the final recognition (Floan 84). Yet, if he learnt

something, he would not be mature enough to realize it. Only grown-up characters understand the values implied by the action. Sometimes these values are communicated to the children. However, more often the message is insinuated rather than demonstrated literally. That is why the prose of William Saroyan with a child in the role of a main character is appreciated by adults as well. The world of children and adults is not dichotomized. Children are often in the spotlight, but the adults are always present, mostly in the role of a go-between of a true delivery of the stories which cannot be understood by children, neither by the child characters nor the child readers. The books where the lack of dichotomy of two worlds is present are difficult to classify in terms of division into the literature for children and the literature for adults. They definitely prevail in Saroyan's work. These are for example the short novels *The Human Comedy* and *Papa, You're Crazy*, the collections of stories *My Name Is Aram* and *Little Children* and many others. There are also works of Saroyan with an adult in the role of a main character, which can be undoubtedly included within the literature for adults. Two of the most famous ones to be mentioned are a short novel *Tracy's Tiger* and a play *The Time of Your Life*.

2 The Merging of the Worlds of Children and Adults

2.1 The Concept of a Child

In general, there are two basic approaches to a child. The first one shows a child as an imperfect and incomplete form of an adult. According to this concept, a child possesses qualities such as spontaneity, carelessness, irresponsibility, credulity and others which are contrary to the qualities of an adult. He/she is not considered to be a complex person and has to grow up to become such a person. The second approach sees a child as an individual, a complex creature. He/she is not a possession of adults, but a subject for himself/herself. He/she exhibits qualities akin to an adult and develops them by virtue of his/her character, temperament and life experience. A child in Saroyan's prose represents the latter approach. As D.S.Calonne explains in the study *My Real Work Is Being*: "Children are human beings for Saroyan, not just symbolic representatives of some ideally beautiful world. As such, they are as vulnerable to the

errors of adulthood as they are capable of achieving its ecstasies" (Calonne 62). Alexej Zverev shares the same opinion and elaborates the idea in the study called *William Saroyan*. According to Zverev, the children of Saroyan's books live in the same world as adults and experience similar conflicts and failures, similar joys and pleasures, with only one difference. They feel it with much more intensity, since they experience it for the first time (Zverev 71). When reading an opening chapter of the short novel *The Human Comedy* it becomes apparent what Zverev suggested.

The chapter depicts the adventures of a four year old boy named Ulysses wandering around the house. First, he watches a gopher. Then his attention shifts to a bird on a tree. After a while he sees a train passing the town. Ulysses waves to a black man on the train and the man waves back. Ulysses is amused and fascinated by all these little things, little miracles. Finally, Ulysses waves to an old man who does not reply. However, Ulysses is not disappointed since he has seen so many wonderful things this day. He knows that these little things constitute a life. Adults do not realize it any longer, because they have no time to perceive such trifles around them or they are too tired and exhausted. However, Ulysses is still a little boy with his eyes wide open and he is still aware of the basic fact that there is an essential being and beauty in simple things. The last sentence of the chapter describing the way in which Ulysses' acts after having found an egg only proves it: "He looked at it a moment, picked it up, brought it to his mother and very carefully handed it to her, by which he meant what no man can guess and no child can remember to tell" (Saroyan, *The Human Comedy* 13). Ulysses feels awe, respect and unity with universe and all creation, even an egg, a symbol of birth and life.

There is an omniscient narrator who precisely describes all the feelings of Ulysses. However, he describes it as if he himself was a little boy observing the world around him. This might suggest that Saroyan himself remained half a little boy the whole life. And so did many of Saroyan's mature characters. When reading about the eccentric, impractical and idealistic men of Garoghlanian family it is evident that not only a child possesses qualities and wisdom of adults but an adult sometimes thinks and behaves like a child because he/she has never lost a childlike vision of the world. The young age does not stand for young soul at all times and, simultaneously, to be old in terms of age does not always mean to be old in one's heart and soul. That is a basic concept the characters of Saroyan's prose are based on. Floan formulates this in the following statement: "Recognizing no essential difference between youth and age, it

presents many adults who are forever childlike and some children who are never young” (Floan 83). The characters who impress the reader most are just these amazing childlike men and wise children.

Floan puts the issue into a larger literary context: “..., American writers have postulated a division between youth and age and have generally assumed the essential goodness of children and their superiority and incorruptibility because of this innocence” (Floan 82), a concept which can be traced at least as far back as 19th century Romanticism. Then he expresses what exactly makes Saroyan’s approach to a child different from the approach of many other American authors: “The difference relates to the conflicts in his stories, which do not derive from adult-child polarities but from contradictory impulses within the heart of man” (Floan 82). Indeed, Saroyan does not seem to draw any distinction between a child and a mature man who sees the world through the eyes of a ten year old boy. He also does not distinguish between a deep sorrow of a child and a deep sadness of an adult. It is the same “heart of man” (Floan 83) as Floan calls it.

2.2 Innocent Carelessness and Profound Wisdom of the Children

The children of Saroyan’s world are innocent, full of dreams and full of energy and the pluck to fulfill these dreams. Homer from the book *The Human Comedy* aspires to become the best messenger of the town of Ithaca, although he is only fourteen and in fact he should not do this job at all at his age. In a story *The Circus* the main character plays truant in order to be able to visit a circus although he knows that he will be whipped after coming back to school. In another story Aram wants to become the most powerful man in the world. He does as much as he can to win the money that is needed for a special brochure that will teach him how to achieve the target. Another time he accompanies his cousin Mourad who stole a horse. Both are aware of the fact that stealing is a forbidden and unacceptable offence in their family. However, they excuse themselves and do not consider it a real theft since they do not want to sell the horse and to fulfill their dream to ride the horse is more important than anything else at this moment. The life for these children is dynamic, exciting, unique and wonderful and they take up every challenge that is offered.

As Zverev pointed out the children feel everything more intensely than the grown-ups (Zverev 71). They are more sensitive to happiness and joy but also to sadness and injustice. Some of the child characters of Saroyan's prose display thoughtfulness and understanding far beyond their age. They feel unity with all people and are willing to tolerate much more than adults since they are not preoccupied with prejudice the way adults are. This is an example of a boy from a story called *The Only Guy in the Town*. The boy is just eleven years old but he is the only person in the story who feels empathy towards an old Greek who drinks too much alcohol and is therefore sometimes aggressive. The Greek is looked down on by the people of the town. Only the boy can see the root causes of the man's decay and finds a way to understand him and to see the goodness in his heart.

Some stories of the book *My Name Is Aram*, dealing with various whims of Aram's uncles, also demonstrate the wisdom of a child, which is the main character Aram in this case. In a story called *The Pomegranate Trees* Aram's uncle Melik decides to grow pomegranates in a desert, just because he loves this fruit which reminds him of the country he comes from. Aram realizes the harmful consequences of his uncle's action but does not oppose him. Nona Balakian describes Malik's "madness" and Aram's insight in the study *The World of William Saroyan* in the following way: "Uncle Melik's stubborn resistance to reality – a prototypical situation Saroyan would repeatedly exploit in his future work – is affectionately rendered here by the boy Aram, who all along has known better but has had the sensitivity not to destroy a dream" (Balakian 158). Floan is more specific when commenting on the story. He regards Aram as a sceptic whose youth enables him to feel "a boyish sense of the grandeur of his uncle's struggle" (Floan 87). Saroyan uses mostly indirect characterization in his work and therefore Aram's scepticism is only implied. He knows that something is wrong but the respect for his uncle does not allow him to say anything aloud. However, the scepticism "provides an important ballast" (Floan 87) and prevents the story from being only a funny and shallow one.

In conclusion, Aram does not have to agree with a person to tolerate him/her. If he/she does not harm other people he/she always deserves respect and the acceptance of his/her own truth. And many child characters of Saroyan's prose are as open-minded as Aram is. They are only too young to be able to express it in words.

2.3. The Metamorphosis of a Child

The children of Saroyan's books are also characterized by a certain metamorphosis they go through. E.H.Foster points out that Saroyan is "obsessed in most of his fiction with problems of identity – personal, familiar and cultural" (Foster 11). Indeed, the quest for identity is one of the main concerns in Saroyan's books. Saroyan's parents came to America from Armenia and William was their first child to be born in the New World. Three years later his father died and William and his brothers and sisters remained only with their mother (Legget 5). As a child of immigrants growing up without the father William had to find his own way of coping with the cultural heritage. These two factors, the death of his father and his Armenian roots, fundamentally influenced and formed the development of Saroyan's personality and made the process of self-consciousness, which everyone has to go through, more difficult.

The origin of Saroyan's family and the early death of his father are reflected in Saroyan's writing in different ways and various forms. The children of Saroyan's world are as unsure and seeking as Saroyan probably was in his childhood. They sometimes go through the change in a short period of time. They are defined by interpersonal relationships and experience which is not always positive. Many of them encounter death and sorrow at an early age. Although understood from a point of view of a child they perceive problems with a deep sadness as if they were not children but mature persons, as Zverev points out (Zverev 80). In *The Human Comedy*, the voyage of the main character, Homer, from childhood towards maturity is most evident. In the study *My Real Work Is Being*, David S.Calonne analyzes the theme of the development of Homer thoroughly and comes up with several suggestions. According to Calonne, one of the symbols of Homer's transition is a messenger's coat which is too big for him to wear. It implies that he has to grow up into manhood and a role of a house-holder (Calonne 103). Calonne also suggests a possible parallel between a painful journey of the ancient hero Ulysses and a struggle of Saroyan's main characters to find the way to maturity, experience and integration (Calonne 100). Furthermore, Calonne emphasizes a connection between the developments of two brothers. Ulysses keeps asking typical questions of childhood and his little world is not clouded by ugliness. Homer becomes a messenger and is full of energy and excitement and sees only positive aspects of the job at the beginning. However, both boys are soon faced with death, Ulysses in the form of Mr. Mechano, the mechanical man, and Homer in the form of messages of death he has

to deliver to people (Calonne 103). All of a sudden, they both are confronted with the larger truth of life and they both search a reconciliation and explanation in the members of their family. However, some of the children of Saroyan's books who have to cope with the problems not adequate to their age are not so lucky as to have such a sensitive and understanding mother as Mrs. Maculay, Homer's and Ulysses's mother, is.

A boy from a story *The Oranges* is forced to sell oranges on the street so that the family has money to buy food. However, nobody stops to buy an orange and moreover, nobody returns his smile back. This boy cannot look for consolation in the family since he has got no parents and his only relatives have just sent him into the street to sell the fruit. He feels desperate and cannot find any reason to live. The story serves as a reference point for broader human conflicts since the little boy may symbolize all the little children of the world who have grown up prematurely due to the conditions they live in.

There were examples of the cases in which the children lose their carelessness and become aware of the other side of life in a rather drastic way. In other cases this kind of recognition is gradual, fluent and achieved through many different encounters in the long-time period. Calonne generalizes the issue, explains the naturalness of such development and applies it to the work of Saroyan: "The moment the permeable membrane of imaginative freedom is violated by the constraints of the "real world" the child must begin to move towards a new interpretation of experience. To be troubled is to grow. Saroyan at once celebrates the pristine innocence of childhood and affirms the natural rhythms of existence which necessarily push the young soul into spiritual crises" (Calonne 60). The main character of the book *My Name Is Aram* goes through such a natural crisis, which moves him gradually to maturity. Although the book does not show a chronological narrative of Aram's life, the contrast of his concern in the first and the last story demonstrates a progress of his thinking and therefore sets a framework of the whole book. In the opening story called *The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse* Aram has to decide whether the adventure of riding a horse is worth breaking the law. In this case to have fun is more important for him than to obey the rules. In the final story called *A Word to Scoffers* he reflects on the quest of faith and deals with a question of what man should believe in. Aram, just like many Saroyan's little characters, experiences adventures and conflicts which make him think about life more profoundly and look for the answers to the questions concerning metaphysical truths.

2.4. The Eternally Young Men

When talking about the concept of childhood in the work of William Saroyan, the forever young mature men cannot be omitted. They are admired by young boys the most because, as Homer in the book *The Human Comedy* says, “[...] a child looks for a child in everyone else he meets. And if he finds a child in somebody grown up, I guess he likes that person more than he likes the others” (Saroyan, *The Human Comedy* 134).

The eternally young men are omnipresent. There is Mr. Spangler who believes an egg will bring him luck. There is uncle Jorgi who is sent to sell water melons in a neighbouring village. Coming there, he decides not to work and dwell in the rented house, occupying himself only with playing and singing. He returns with no money at all. There is uncle Melik who tries to grow pomegranate trees in a desert just because he loves them. There is uncle Guko who turns to yoga and healthy lifestyle instead of heavy drinking he had indulged in so far. Few days later he gives up and turns back to being “a gay man, drinking and having a good time” (Saroyan, *My Name Is Aram* 41). There is an Indian whose impulsive and spontaneous manners make people of the town think he is a lunatic. There is an uncle who hires a group of Mexicans, although he does not need any other labour. In fact, the Mexicans persuade him to do so and eventually, he is happy since he believes the new labour brings him luck. And there is a man who borrows a car for a test run and goes to a nearby town in it. He just wants to have fun and does not consider the consequences of the action.

There are many other male characters who follow intuition and spontaneity rather than reason. They “can do anything” (Saroyan, *My Name Is Aram* 41), as uncle Jorgi says after both his and his nephew’s failure. His statement does not seem to be logical since it is not usual to retain a positive attitude towards oneself just after having made a mistake. However, these characters do not think in a logical way. They live in a permanent conflict with the society and deny some of the values essential for other people, for example the value of money. They also live on the edge of a dream and reality. They do not make a difference between these two because nothing is impossible for them and they always find a way of adjusting reality to a dream. They have not lost childish faith, freedom, spontaneity and authenticity. Nona Balakian describes those eternally young men, Aram’s relatives in this case, in the following fashion: “They remain unconditionally themselves, not because they are alienated from their environment but because, in fact, they are out to improve it, if possible. In one story

after another Aram pays tribute (even as he gently ribs) the innocent trust and faith that motivates these earthy/spiritual people who have a vested interest in being fully alive, guided without embarrassment by their sometimes “foolish hearts” (Balakian 157). She also adds that “their innocent faith, as in the case of uncle Melik verges on absurdity” (Balakian 157). However, those almost absurd stories are still believable since these people seem to live in their private world. In the world where the poetic and spiritual surpass the materialistic.

In a story called *The Three Swimmers and the Grocer* three boys, all the children of immigrants, come to a shop to buy some food and drink after they have swum in a cold river in the month of April. The shopkeeper does not marvel at the whim of the boys to go swimming when it is cold. Instead he gives them more food and drink than they can afford. He talks to them as if they were equal in age and education, although the young boys scorn the school whereas the grocer has accomplished a degree. He also diversifies the dialogue with a poetic, dreamlike language. All of this make the boys think the grocer must be crazy. They are not aware of the fact that he is not crazy but he has simply retained the childlike vision of the world and this is the reason they like him so much. He is “one of them in spirit, and is himself in retreat before implacable forces of another kind” (Floan 88). He keeps the shop not to earn money since he gives away more than he sells but to meet different people who will invigorate his inner world which is rich in spirit and imagination rather than in money and materialistic things. He has remained his own man in spite of the pressure of society as many of Saroyan’s mature characters have.

3 The Role of the Institution of School

3.1 Saroyan’s Attitude towards the Institution of School

The life of a child is inseparably connected with the institution of school. Many of the stories about children in Saroyan’s books therefore either take place in school or are somehow related to this institution. Saroyan had never assumed a positive attitude towards school and that is notably reflected in those stories. He considered compulsory education a punishment. He did not believe that he could benefit from it in any way and that the teachers could teach him more than he will learn himself without any help. He

scorned most of the teachers and some of them scorned him for being a child of Armenian immigrants and not being able to adapt to some of school's rules. This caused conflicts and it was not easy to solve them since some of the teachers believed in a superiority of an authority whereas Saroyan was not willing to obey such an authority (Legget 12).

A story called *A Nice Old-Fashioned Romance, with Love, Lyrics and Everything* from the book *My Name Is Aram* depicts such a clash between a teacher and a child. Aram's cousin Arak writes a childish poem about the love of his teacher and a headmaster. The first problem is that the teacher does not sympathize with the children's sense of humour and therefore is not able to react brightly. The second problem is that she seems to be absolutely sure that Aram has written the poem since he, not Arak, is the villain of the class. She insists on it even though the handwriting on the board does not correspond to Aram's handwriting. She is only biased towards Aram and does not want to compromise with him even after it has been proved that it was not him who wrote the poem. Aram's opinion of his teacher is demonstrated when he protests against the accusation: "Any poem I wrote wouldn't be about Miss Daffney, it would be about something worthwhile" (Saroyan, *My Name Is Aram* 42). Aram is naughty and cheeky, but in fact he exhibits moral supremacy over both good Arak and the teacher in a way because he does not tell the real name of the writer even though he is threatened with corporal punishment. It is more important for Aram not to betray a friend than to pursue his own benefit. He holds different values from those that apply in school. He is often misunderstood by teachers. At the same time he does not want to give up his attitudes and therefore stays in a permanent opposition to the institution of school and so do many of Saroyan's child characters.

3.2 The Image of a Teacher

The institution of school is not portrayed only in a negative way, but this picture definitely prevails in Saroyan's prose. In a story *The First Day of School*, even the interiors are described as dark, gloomy and unfriendly environment which cannot appeal to either children or adults. The housekeeper who takes little Jim to school does not feel comfortable in the building and the narrator describes her impression as

follows: "The school building was very ugly to her and to the boy. She didn't like the way it made her feel. And going up the steps with him she wished he didn't have to go to school. The halls and rooms scared her, and him, and the smell of the place too. And he didn't like Mr.Barber, the principal" (Saroyan, *The Best Stories* 155). The school building resembles a ghost castle rather than a place where children should go to every day and learn. The teachers perfectly fit into the school's atmosphere. The headmaster appears to the housekeeper to be arrogant and Jim's teacher is described as a dried out woman. In Saroyan's stories a physical appearance of a teacher often corresponds with a child's opinion of his/her character. The teachers that children come into conflict with are usually described as ugly and not very nice people. This is rather a childlike simple view of an author which shifts those stories near to the literature of children. However, Saroyan wanted to portray the evil in teachers and by means of a description of a repulsive physical appearance he achieved a complex characterization. The teacher in a story called *When Friends Fail* is said to be a bearded and skinny person. Another teacher from a story called *The Sunday Zeppelin* wears thick glasses, has pimples on his face and looks sick according to a narrator. And there is a teacher from the story called *A Nice Old-Fashioned Romance, With Love, Lyrics and Everything*. She is described by a headmaster who falls in love with her in a following way: "I think Miss Daffney is not only ugly, but on the contrary attractive" (Saroyan, *My Name Is Aram* 45).

Not only are those teachers unattractive and unfriendly but they do not seem to exhibit a tiny bit of understanding for the troublesome pupils. This is the most serious and dangerous problem which lies beyond the conflicts. Those teachers do not try to feel themselves into the role of children and understand their needs and worries. They are in opposition to the forever young mature men since they have lost the childlike faith and enthusiasm. They are not keen on teaching any longer and are not willing to accept different individualities among their pupils unless they behave according to the regulations of the school. However, not all the pupils are disposed to follow the rules. They want to find out about the world beyond the school building and experience adventures which the school cannot offer them. This is the case of the boys from the story *The Circus*. The boys run away from school to see a circus which came into a town. After coming back to school they are given strapping as a punishment but the final sentence of the story shows that they are not restrained at all: "We were happy because we knew everything would be all right till the County Fair opened in

September” (Saroyan, *My Name Is Aram* 75). No sooner were they punished than they are looking forward to another opportunity to play truant.

The children of Saroyan’s stories experience different adventures in real world also thanks to their immense imagination. It is demonstrated for example in a story called *Around the World with General Grant*. Here two brothers travel around the world only browsing through the books about foreign countries. Their infinite and unlimited imagination enables them to feel free within the walls of the house. The children of Saroyan’s stories also want to cultivate free spirit and the institution does not allow it. In an autobiographical story *When Friends Fail* young Saroyan shocks teachers and a headmaster by an attempt to introduce a new way of teaching and learning when not only teachers but also students will ask questions. Young Saroyan is not satisfied enough with what is written in the course books and want to find out more. However, the teacher is not ready for a prompt answer and punishes him instead. In another story called *The Three Swimmers and the Grocer* a main character describes a school attitude of his friend Joe, who loves freedom more than anything else, in the following way: “School made Joe stupid. It embarrassed him. But once out of school, he was as intelligent, as good-natured, sincere and friendly as anyone could possibly be” (Saroyan, *My Name Is Aram* 75). Both young Saroyan and the character of Joe look for something different from blind following of teachers and memorizing the course books. Moreover, young Saroyan wants to change the way of teaching and suggests an interaction between teachers and students. However, he faces difficulties from the very beginning since the teacher is not willing even to think about such a possibility. There are well-established manners and there is no reason for her to change it. And this kind of teachers appears in Saroyan’s stories most often. The teachers who do not tolerate children’s lust for adventure, do not accept their ideas and do not realize that they could learn something from them as well.

There is one exception among those teachers and this is Miss Hicks from the book *The Human Comedy*. She is depicted as an extremely positive teacher by means of an indirect characterization. She is experienced, wise and empathic and possesses a natural authority. She understands children’s problems and she is not offended by their sense of humour which verges on cheek sometimes. She has often problems not to laugh at children’s jokes, which shows her affinity for the young. She encourages development of their spirit, imagination and individuality. She does not make difference between a good and naughty student. The only qualities she calls for are humour,

veracity, respect for other people and humanity first and foremost. She seems to be a prototype of an ideal teacher where good and strictness unite. Saroyan tended to portray only extremely good or extremely bad teachers. It again makes those stories more akin to the literature for children where the world is often black and white and easy to understand.

3.3 Children's Relatives and Their Attitude to the Institution of School

Saroyan's approach to the institution of school is demonstrated not only through the relationships of students and teachers but also through the attitudes and opinions of children's relatives. In *The Human Comedy* Mrs. Macauley expresses the whole concept of the institution in the eyes of the author in a single sentence, when talking to her son: "Schools are only to keep children off the streets" (Saroyan, *The Human Comedy* 34). The one who seems to scorn formal education the most is Aram's grandfather, the oldest member and a leader of the Garoghlanians's clan from the book *My Name Is Aram*. In a story *My Cousin Dikran, the Orator*, an eleven year old Dikran is said to be the brightest pupil at school and is chosen to give a speech in front of the audience. Everybody except the grandfather considers it a great success. The grandfather does not understand Dikran's ambition and would rather see him outside playing and laughing with friends than reading books and studying. Although he is eventually delighted by the speech and is proud of his grandson, he does not abandon his belief that all wisdom comes from within and cannot be learnt from any book. And so does little Aram who "feels a special affinity to the silent, brooding elders of the clan who are suspicious of the empty flow of words that pass for "education" and wisdom" (Balakian 164).

When commenting on the book *My Name Is Aram* D.S.Calonne remarks that: "Aram's unhappiest times are related to his unwillingness to be educated" (Calonne 64). They are not related to school as such because it is the institution of school where children socialize and meet their first friends. Sometimes it is the only reason they enjoy attending it. It is strikingly demonstrated in the story *The First Day of School*. Little Jim feels miserable at school until he befriends Ernest and Hannah who chew gums because it is forbidden and teach him jokes. After that he is not sure if he likes school but he definitely likes "the gum part of it" (Saroyan, *The Best Stories* 158). He is, just like

most of Saroyan's little characters, a rebel who knows at a very young age that school cannot teach him everything and proper education lies elsewhere – in life experience. However, he finds his own way of coping with it and having fun at school.

4 Relationships

4.1 The General Concept of Family in Saroyan's Work

A family seems to stand in opposition to the institution of school in Saroyan's prose concerning the world of children. In general, the family provides a haven for children who feel lonely and misunderstood in outside world. Some critics, such as Walter Shear or D.S.Calonne, say that such a need of protecting each other may be related to the social uncertainties stemming from an alienation from the environment since most of the characters are either Armenian immigrants or the offspring of the Armenian immigrants who came to the New World. Walter Shear states that "the stories show people taking care of one another in a psychological sense, a nurturing that is reflected figuratively in the concern for health and physical condition which is pervasive motif for the stories." Social estrangement is the most probable reason for such an understanding according to Shear (Shear 87). D.S.Calonne emphasizes the importance of the apprehensive family and gives the same reason as Shear: "After all, for the uprooted aliens in America, strangers in a strange land, is the family which provides an anchor and stability in an otherwise tough and forbidding environment" (Calonne 133). The relatives always show deep understanding and affinity for the children and give them support even if they do not approve of what the children are doing.

This is the case of uncle Khosrove and his cousins Aram and Mourad in a story *The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse*. Young boys steal a horse, although the act of stealing is an unforgivable sin in their family. However, neither the boys nor uncle Khosrove, not even the victim of the theft, admit they stole the horse even though everybody knows it. As Howard Floan points out when commenting on the story: "The story is well insulated against any shock of detection or punishment, for everyone is on the same side" (Floan 85). Nona Balakian explains the unusual situation referring to

uncle Khosrove's statement about the lost homeland which he compares to the loss of a horse. The loss of a horse appears to be an insignificant problem presented by uncle Khosrove, although the living of a farmer from whom the horse has been stolen depends on it. However, everybody, even a farmer, knows that "to uphold the established "honesty" of the tribe, of a people who have lost a homeland" is more important than to punish children (Balakian 157). Everybody protects the boys because everybody understands motives which made them do it and there is no reason to make a fuss about it. Another example of an extremely understanding member of the Garoghlanian clan is the grandmother. In a story *The Journey to Hanford* uncle Jorgi is supposed to bring a lot of money from a neighbouring village but he returns with no money at all because he was simply too lazy to find a job there. Aram's grandmother is the first to see him and Aram, who accompanied him, back home. She learns about the situation and does not ask any questions, as if she knew very well what has happened and why it has happened. Instead of asking or being angry about it she gives Aram money to give it to his grandfather so that he would not find out that his son came back without a single penny. Those and many other examples show the standards and values of the Armenian immigrants which are passed on their children and which determine the way in which these children are brought up. Trust, help and a belief in spiritual qualities of people are the most important ones.

Mrs. Macauley from the short novel *The Human Comedy* is the most demonstrative and exemplary character possessing such values. She lost her husband, and her oldest son is in the war. She lives with two younger sons and a daughter. Despite being a poor widow she does not complain about anything since she is conciliated with her fate and with the conditions her family lives in. She is "a central affirmer of faith in the goodness of life" (Calonne 112). Through the many talks to her son, Homer, she exhibits the profound wisdom and the belief in human values she constantly tries to pass on her children. Thanks to her gift of being able to listen to her children and understand their emotions she helps them to put up with crises they are faced with and to find their feet in the world. When Homer starts to work as a messenger she waits for him till the late at night every day and is willing to talk to him when he is troubled. She understands when he does not want to talk to her but whenever he wants she is ready to listen to him with compassion and explain everything she can. She expresses her concern after talking with Homer about the youngest son Ulysses: "Oh, I've had good luck, thank God. My kids are human beings, besides being children.

They might have been children only, and then my luck wouldn't have been so good" (Saroyan, *The Human Comedy* 135). She is an archetype of loving and caring mother who does not only possess moral qualities but also knows how to instill these qualities in her children.

4.2. The Role of a Father

Saroyan's writing is highly autobiographical. Most of the motives and themes of his work come from his experience. He wrote as he observed and perceived the world and that is why most of his characters are male characters. One of the motives which appear through his work is the death of his father. In a short novel called *Papa, You're Crazy* the father of the main character recalls a memory of his father who died when he was almost three. In the short novel *The Human Comedy* there are two characters who lost their father while still being children. It is the main character Homer who tries to substitute the role of a father by himself, since the oldest brother is in the war. And there is a thief who handles the situation in a different way. As far as the death of his father is concerned the thief is not as mature as Homer is. He has not put up with the death of such an important person as his father was. He is literally lost in the world and does not know what to do and what to believe in. Saroyan himself coped with the death of his father by creating fictional fathers who probably exhibit the qualities he imagined his real father would have or should have had. As D.S.Calonne states: "The fatherhood novels are spiritual communings with his own, unknown, dead, Armenian poet-father" (Calonne 132). This might be the case of Saroyan's stories concerning those poet-like, good-humoured and open-minded men. The most distinguished and admirable qualities are those which make the fathers and their sons friends.

The father of the main character in the short novel *Papa, You're Crazy* has little money, just like most of the characters who put spiritual above material values, but he remains optimistic at all times. He writes books and seems to live in his own world where poetry and game provide refuge from the materialistic world he is surrounded by. Saroyan's work is peopled with more fathers living the diverse and full-valued life which is not dependent on the furniture of their wallet. There is for example the father from a story *The Whole Voyald* who travels with his son around the USA. They might

only have little money left for food, but as long as they can afford to buy petrol they are content. It is essential for them to keep the car since it enables them to travel wherever and whenever they want and to be independent and free. They do not make plans, they just go wherever they want to go, they do not care about money and they rejoice at little things such as watching the ants working. They are at home nowhere and everywhere at the same time since they made traveling the sense of their life. The son loves this way of life because he loves his father. One of the reasons for his admiration and adhesion to his father is the fact that the father has retained the enthusiasm and spontaneity of a child.

The extreme example of such an optimistic father is the one from a story *The Man with the Heart in the Highlands*. He considers himself to be "one of the greatest unknown poets living" (Saroyan, *The Best Stories* 122) which means that he is unemployed and completely broke. Despite this, he does not hesitate to invite a guest and get him some food even though he and his family have nothing to eat. His son always goes to beg for food to a local shopkeeper. Instead of complaining about the situation or feeling humiliated, he transforms begging into a kind of a game with a shopkeeper. He possesses the same optimism and humour his father has. When he grows up he will probably assume a similar attitude towards life to the one of his father, because he already is his father in Saroyan's conception of relationship between father and son.

Saroyan considered the relationship between father and son a fragment of the never-ending continuance of human race. The father is a son and the son is a father. In the end of the short novel *Papa, You're Crazy* the father and his son change the roles when playing a game. The father becomes a ten year old boy and the son turns into his forty-five year old dad. They draw a circle and guess what the other one is thinking about. They both guess it right because they are a part of each other and it is not difficult for them to feel themselves into the role of one another. The game symbolizes the whole conception of the relationship between a father and his son in Saroyan's eyes. Son and father are "metaphysically connected in his imagination," (Calonne 132) which means that they share not only joys and pleasures but also the sorrow and misery of life. The symbolic title of the story called *The Whole Voyald* reflects the duality of life both the fathers and sons perceive. The father in the story pronounces some words in a wrong way as if he was still a child. One of these words is a word world. According to Zverev the pronunciation itself is not as important as a similarity between three English words

which are included within the word voyald. These are words voyage, world and void. The word voyald might therefore imply that to live means to wander, explore and discover the world which is always connected with pain and sorrow (Zverev 77). Zverev's interpretation of the title of the story might be only an assumption but it still corresponds with the content of this and many other Saroyan's stories. The characters wonder, seek and suffer, but the main concern of the author is to show that in most cases they can cope with challenges and difficult situations. The disillusionment does not depress either the little or the mature characters so that they would lose their belief in good.

4.3 The Female Characters Interfering With the World of Children

Most of Saroyan's main characters are men, most of relations concern men and most of the adventures are experienced by men. As a whole, Saroyan's fictional world can be perceived as a man's world. However, the man's world is connected with the world of women and is always somehow affected by it. As far as the world of children is concerned the mothers are the women who should be closest to their children. In general, Saroyan's fictional mothers are wise women with a sense of duty. They keep the house and family going and this is their main concern. They seem to stand in opposition to their childlike idealistic husbands. They think in a realistic way and know their place in the world. They do not try to interfere with man's business, but in fact it is them who hold the household together. The status of women is taken for granted in Saroyan's fictional world and no character would argue about it.

The other female characters who affect the life of Saroyan's little boys the most are their lovers or rather dream-lovers. There are many of those lovely, angel-like girls in the children stories. There is the charming Helen Eliot from the book *The Human Comedy* who is described as the most beautiful girl in the world and a snob at the same time. And there is Emma Haines from a story *Coldest Winter Since 1854* who, at least according to the little boy, looks like an angel with soft eyes and brown hair. These and many other girls are characterized by immense beauty, wealth and inapproachability. They are spoiled and self-conceited but the boys often do not admit it since they think that they are in love with these girls and cannot see any mistakes about them. However,

the beauties are aware of their and the boys' social status. They look down on their admirers and express their superiority in different ways.

As love and sex themselves were never Saroyan's concerns, these love-crossed boys and their dreamt-of girls probably stand for larger truths of life. As if the world of children was already divided between the wealthy and the poor and these worlds were separated by an impermeable wall. The girls are already corrupted by money, in spite of still being children. The little boys, often sons of poor immigrants, face the cruel reality of the world at a very young age. The realization of the fact that they are predetermined to live a certain way of life and that they will probably never reach the social status of their beloved girls and therefore their love will never be fulfilled is a great shock and disappointment for them. However, they soon recover and get on their feet gaining the old self-confidence again. They become aware that they possess different and more genuine and precious qualities from those of the wealthy girls. They are smart, witty and adventurous and they have a great sense of humour. No fortune can substitute this. Their life is diverse and rich in spirit, not in money, and that cannot be taken away by anyone.

4.4 The Utmost Importance of the Family Relationship

As far as the world of children is concerned, the relationship between brothers and sisters and the relationship among friends should also be mentioned. However, in Saroyan's work those are rather minor issues and there is nothing distinctive about that. There are brothers and sisters such as Homer and Ulysses from the book *The Human Comedy* who love, respect and protect each other from a very young age. And there are brothers and sisters such as those from the book *Papa, You're Crazy* who cannot stand each other. Both of these examples reflect the conditions in the family. Although fatherless, the Macauleys are happy family whose dead father lives in their hearts while the parents of the other family live no longer together. The parents create certain atmosphere which has an impact on their children and helps cultivate mutual respect among the children.

Regarding the relationship of friendship, Saroyan's children, just like all people, seek the friends who are similar in character and spirit to them and with whom they

have fun. In Saroyan's conception the children of immigrants befriend mostly the other children of immigrants who have the same nature and life experience. Another aspect which drives children of immigrants to look for peers in other children of immigrants is the marginalization of Armenian people in American society which Saroyan mentioned both in his fiction and in autobiography several times. The children will naturally befriend those children who will not look down on them.

Nevertheless, family relations were Saroyan's main concern, especially those between children and parents. As Calonne points out: "Having had no stable family life himself, Saroyan set out to create a world of loving fathers, mothers, grandparents, cousins, sisters, and brothers. An orphan in reality, he sought the love, warmth, and closeness he had missed within his imagination – through creating his generous-hearted characters" (Calonne 132). In general, the members of a family have very close relations. They love each other and care for each other. They do not need to speak to communicate because they understand each other without words. When the hard times come and everything goes wrong, there is still the family to help, support and protect the child.

5 The Children of Immigrants

5.1 The Introduction

When writing about William Saroyan, the theme of immigrants and social minorities in his writing has to be mentioned since it appears throughout his work. Saroyan's parents came to America from Armenia in 1905. They were forced to escape from a massacre of the Christian Armenian nation by Turks which begun in 1896 and continued during World War I (Legget 3 – 4). Despite being the first child to be born in the New World and not having experienced the incident himself, William Saroyan kept the horror of it deep in his Armenian soul and consciousness (Legget xiii). The call for humanity and brotherhood in his work might at least partly stem from this awareness of what happened in his ancestors' homeland

Saroyan's experience of being a child of Armenian immigrants is also projected into his stories concerning the world of children. The little characters themselves are

often the children of immigrants, which predetermines and shapes their lives. As the first generation of a clan being born in America they acquire the American way of life but can not suppress the Armenian heritage at the same time. Compared to their relatives they feel like Americans, which is demonstrated for example in the story *The Three Swimmers and the Grocer* from the book *My Name Is Aram*. Here the shopkeeper asks three boys, two of them the children of Armenian immigrants and one the child of Portuguese immigrants, about their race, meaning their descent. All of them answer that they are Californians because they were born in California. The conversation shows the depth of a generational gap between the boys and their parents. The parents will probably never consider America their home because they spent most of their life in a different country and it is hard for them to get accustomed to the life in the New World. Their children do not seem to have such problems to adapt to the American society. However, there is a certain barrier which separates them from the Americans. It is their Armenian soul, temperament and also the dark skin which causes the discrimination and difficulties they sometimes come across.

5.2 Aram as a Go-between

Regarding the world of children and the question of immigrants, Saroyan's main concern seems to be to show the dividedness of the children of immigrants and the process of becoming Americanized, while retaining the Armenian heritage at the same time. This also closely relates to the distinction between those children and their parents who will probably never be able to assimilate in the way their children, already born in America, are. The book called *My Name Is Aram* is the pivotal Saroyan's publication dealing with these issues. The main character Aram is a child of Armenian immigrants. However, he was born and raised in America. He exhibits the duality of mentality which characterizes all the children of immigrants in Saroyan's work. He possesses many qualities inherited from the Garoghlanian's clan, such as endurance, a sense of humour, sense of justice, credulity and an ability to dream (Zverev 104). At the same time he seems to be somehow detached from the unlimited idealism of his uncles. He is much more realistic. Compared to his uncles he knows that not only the spiritual but also the material background is important to a certain degree.

It is illustrated in the story called *The Presbyterian Choir Singers*. On the one hand, Aram and his friend Pendro sympathize with an old lady who wants Aram to sing in the choir because of his beautiful voice. On the other hand, they bargain for money she should pay him for the singing. Moreover, they force her to pay Pendro as well, although he cannot sing at all. However, Aram wants his friend to earn some money too, if he himself can. Otherwise he refuses to sing. Finally, their manners verge on the kind of blackmail of the old lady, for the purpose of winning some money. In this sense the story can be taken as a symbol of the corruption of young boys by the materialistic world they were born in. Aram's relatives do not care about money. They live in extreme poverty but they do not regard it as a tragedy. Sometimes they even aggravate their financial difficulties by illogic behavior. This is the case of uncle Jorgi from the story *The Journey to Hanford* and uncle Melik from the story *The Pomegranate Trees*. The first one decides not to work and hang around, although his family needs money urgently. The second one does not want to give up growing the pomegranate trees although nobody buys the fruit and it is going to ruin him. These men would probably never act the way Aram and Pendro did because money is nothing more than a piece of paper for them.

However, the fact that Aram does not try to stop the uncles or comment on the absurd situations shows his understanding which stems not only from the affinity for the uncles but also from the Armenian heritage he bears in mind and soul. Walter Shear calls Aram a go-between and outlines the attributes defining Armenian and American society and therefore Aram himself: "As a boy, Aram is still spontaneously a member of both Armenian and American societies and thus can function as a kind of understanding go-between. From his Armenian background, he has inherited a feeling for the personal world. But he also understands how the official world operates on its non-Armenian rationality. Most often Aram is not a protagonist, but rather a witness to the drama of the fears, dreams, and inclinations of others" (Shear 88). Indeed, Aram is both Armenian and American and it is not possible to state which nationality prevails in him.

5.3. The Generational Gap between Aram and His Relatives

Aram's link to the Armenian background - Armenian culture and past is the older generation of the Garoghlanian's clan. In fact, they have never abandoned the

past. They speak the native language and will never be able to learn English properly and they respect and keep the tradition of Armenia (Calonne 16). They will always yearn for “the lost motherland” (Saroyan, *My Name Is Aram* 10) as uncle Khosrove calls Armenia because their hearts are there. Their hopes and dreams are not realizable in the New World. In the story *The Pomegranate Trees*, Uncle Melik and his attempt to grow pomegranate trees in an American desert might stand for all the immigrants who remain trapped in the past and whose hopes and dreams will probably never be fulfilled. He does not plant figs, oranges or other fruit which grows well in California. He impractically chooses the pomegranate trees which are completely unknown there and nobody is willing to buy them. However, it is a reminder of his homeland where this fruit grows and that is why it is worth planting (Zverev 107). In a certain sense uncle Melik is not such an underachiever as it could seem. According to Nona Balakian his “success lies, paradoxically, in his very failure” because the negative experience does not break him down (Balakian 159). It shows that “the power to dream begins and ends in the quest itself” for those Armenian immigrants (Balakian 159). As D.S.Calonne states: “They are poets whose hearts hear an unheard and lovely music sounding far away” (Calonne 66).

The world of their homeland and the New World where the immigrants moved involuntarily differ in many ways such as the respective ways of life, traditions, values and relationships among people. This must be reflected on the children of immigrants who were born in America but grow up in Armenian families that pass the Armenian heritage on them. The children assimilate both the American and Armenian culture which results in a duality of their personalities. They do not realize it yet but in the future it might be difficult for them to find their own identities since they live on the boundary of two different worlds. This boundary is implied in many stories through Saroyan’s work, especially in the book *My Name Is Aram*.

Many immigrants came to the New World to seek for better living conditions than the countries of their origin could offer them. They wished to extricate themselves from poverty and followed the American dream of success and wealth. The dream that enables all people to reach material prosperity and their goals. Aram, compared to his relatives, is also influenced by those idealistic visions, which is aptly demonstrated in the story called *The Fifty Yard Dash*. Here Aram longs to become the strongest and most powerful man in the world by device of a guide provided by a certain Mr. Strongfort. Aram works hard but still does not have enough money to purchase the

manual. There is another character in the story whose behavior creates a kind of parallel to Aram's acting. It is his uncle Gyko who does not yearn for muscular body but for living in piece and harmony. That is why he turns to yoga and healthy life style. He keeps refusing to give Aram money for Mr. Strongfort, whom he considers to be only a cheat. Aram and his uncle Gyko represent two different conceptions of what success means. Gyko stands for all the Aram's relatives of older generation who prefer the spiritual qualities over the physical and material ones. They want to retain spiritual freedom, honour and pride and therefore reject anybody to interfere with their lives. Though Aram adopted all of these qualities, he was born and grows up in a society abiding by different values and rules from those of the society his relatives grew up in. Although he is as honest, independent and pride as his relatives are, the impact of the materialistic world which surrounds him is apparent. He, just like many others, allows to be deceived by a man who is a part of a system concerning mainly the question of money. There are only his relatives to restrain him from becoming a part of that money machine which they scorn heavily.

Aram differs from his relatives also in his conception of God and his attitude towards Church. The motive of Church and faith is not elaborated in Saroyan's prose and the reader is given a rather loose conception of children's approach to it. However, a story *The Presbyterian Choir Singers* is one of the few stories dealing with the theme quite a lot and demonstrating Aram's attitude. Aram is not devoted to one particular Church as his relatives, who all profess Catholicism, are. He does not associate God with the institution of Church in a similar way as he does not connect education with the institution of school. He is rather open-minded on this subject and his conception corresponds with the idea of Saroyan's children characters being free, tolerant and independent on any institution. He prefers that everybody should find his/her own way to Omnipotence without any help from the Church. He lives in a country where "people move from one religion to another, or from no particular religion at all to any religion that happens to come along..." (Saroyan, *My Name Is Aram* 56). Yet it does not mean that he despises the religion of his ancestors. He can not deny his Christian roots. He just grows up in a world where people of different religions can live next to each other without hatred and respect each other. Besides that Aram's tolerance might be enhanced by his ancestors' experience of slaughter of their nation partly because of a different religion and a subsequent expulsion from the homeland. Seeing the consequences of the

act Aram resorts to his own approach to God, rather than embracing the sectarian one which can lead to such a tragedy.

As far as the contrast between the two generations is concerned, D.S.Calonne suggests that the crucial moment referring to this issue is when Aram is browsing through the magazines of popular culture while his grandfather sits with an Arabian immigrant in the next room (Calonne 69). They rarely talk and communicate rather through a kind of telepathy or a secret language of their souls. The Arab keeps coming to visit Aram's grandfather and they enjoy the beauty and understanding without words together. Aram cannot comprehend that situation when the two men spend so much time with each other without actually saying anything. However, his mother explains to him that sometimes words cannot express what occupies your mind and soul and to keep silent is better than to talk. Calonne juxtaposes these two contrasting images – Aram reading a mass-circulation American magazine full of vivid colourful pictures and his grandfather contemplating about the lost homeland and lost past with his Arabian friend. "Present and past, youth and age, America and homeland, wealth and poverty – all are starkly contrasted in a single tableau" (Calonne 69). Aram is a part of a different world from the world his grandfather and his friend lived in and even the grandfather realizes it. Yet Aram tries to comprehend the art of silence his grandfather and the Arab share, since he still respects the Armenian traditions and habits of his relatives. Nona Balakian comments on Aram's role in the story as follows: "...without ever turning his back on the ancient well of loss and silence, the youthful "rebel" in Aram works his way – with hope and humour – into the American mold" (Balakian 167). He simply assimilates two strikingly different cultures, the Armenian one from within and the American one from outside, and does not seem to have any problems with it.

Calonne regards the picture of Aram reading the magazine and his grandfather communicating with his friend without words as the most important one in the whole book. As far as the issue of the chasm between the generations is concerned, it is definitely one of the crucial scenes. It is a symbolic image of the developing gap which the grandfather also sees (Calonne 69). However, there is another scene in the book, particularly in a story called *Locomotive 38, the Ojibway*, which shows not only the difference between two generations but also the duality of Aram's personality and nationality which he himself is not aware of yet. In this case the issue is not only implied but expressed literally by means of a dialogue between Aram and an Indian. When Aram says that he is not American, the Indian replies in the following way:

“I know. You’re an Armenian. I remember. I asked you and you told me. You’re an Armenian born in America. You’re fourteen years old and already you know you will be able to drive an automobile the minute you get into one. You’re a typical American, although your complexion, like my own, is dark” (Saroyan, My Name Is Aram 87). The Indian is also a member of a social minority. He thinks about Aram’s case and realizes the ambivalence within Aram’s individuality. At the beginning his speech seems to be an approval of what Aram has said. However, it’s gradually changing its meaning until it reaches its climax when the Indian starts to talk about the automobile. Aram’s confidence in himself to be able to drive an automobile shows his status of a member of new generation. In conclusion, this story demonstrates again that Aram is not pure Armenian. He is an American with the Armenian heritage.

5.4 The Racial Discrimination

In general, the troubles of children in Saroyan’s work seem to be similar to those of most children. They argue with brothers and sisters and friends, they long for things they cannot get, they come into clashes with the teachers, etc. However, the last point refers to a broader issue since there can be another source of the disputes beyond seemingly innocent causes such as the chewing gum or the writing of a poem on the board. The school is the second place for a child to be socialized. The child accepts a new status of a student, meets new people and has to deal with many joys but also problems arisen from that. For Saroyan, one of the biggest problems he could not cope with was the racial discrimination he encountered there. Surprisingly, as far as the issue of the children of immigrants is concerned, this had never become a main subject of his fictional work, although he went back to that problem permanently in his autobiographical work. He might have wanted to protect his fictional children from a marginalization he himself was faced with as a child and thus balance his painful memories by means of writing. This might be the reason that the children of immigrants only rarely suffer from discrimination in Saroyan’s work. However, Saroyan inclined to depict the world in a realistic way and therefore the issue of discrimination is not eliminated completely from his work.

There are several stories concerning that problem. However, the discrimination is never expressed in a straightforward fashion, but rather by means of hints and allusions. It causes a kind of tension which "remains consistent in his writing, beginning in the early works and trickling into the very last ones" (Bedrosian 61). This tension caused by the race prejudice against the children of immigrants is perceptible for example in the stories *When Friends Fail* and *One of our Future Poets, You Might Say*. In the first story young Saroyan tries to introduce a new way of teaching and learning by asking a teacher additional questions to the subject. Particularly, he asks the teacher how she knows about the age of the Stonehenge. As a result, he is summoned to the headmaster's room and subsequently told that such a question could be only asked by an Armenian. The headmaster's contempt for the Armenian minority is evident from that incident. The other story describes a check-up of the children from an Armenian district who are supposed to suffer not only from mental defectiveness but also from several physical defects according to an unknown document. Although the adults do not seem to feel any racial hatred towards the children of immigrants, they certainly dispose a kind of a latent racial racism in those two stories. It is evident that the children of immigrants are looked down on because of a different culture which is not valued but rather criticized there. Unfortunately, the adults do not realize the consequences of their actions. Those children are not guilty of anything. However, sometimes they are treated as if they were, which is absurd, considering their age. Although Saroyan's little characters retain a fair amount of optimism, pride and honour in these situations, the negative approach to their differentness might stigmatize them for life.

In conclusion, Saroyan, himself a child of Armenian immigrants, managed to render the feelings of people who lost their homeland. He paid tribute to those who preserved optimism, idealism and hope and did not let the pain and despair break them down. Without commenting and explaining anything, only by means of various situations, dialogues and symbols, he allowed a reader to learn about the hardship of those immigrants and their courage to endure these hardships in an alien country. He also showed the growing gap between those immigrants and their children who were already born in America. He defined these children particularly by the duality of their mentality and personality since they assimilate both the Armenian and American culture. They are too young to be aware of that matter and apart from racial prejudice they sometimes come across, it does not seem to be a problem for them. Yet the

Armenian blood circulates in their bodies and no-one takes their free spirit and inner strength away.

Conclusion

The target of this thesis was to define the concept of a child and childhood in the work of William Saroyan. Considering a plenty of Saroyan's publications, a selection of appropriate prosaic works was done. Five major themes were determined after an analysis of the selected texts and Saroyan's fictional world of children was characterized.

William Saroyan created the entire inimitable children's world based on his own life's experience. The children characters of Saroyan's prose are complex creatures, yet under the influence of a family and the institution of school. Their exceptionality does not consist in experiences and problems they go through but rather in certain distinctive features and factors which exercise influence on the way how they feel about and how they respond to what happens around them and what happens to them.

One of the major factors which characterize those children is the close relationship with their family, when special attention is paid to the relationships between sons and their fathers in Saroyan's prose. The family tends to care for children and give them support and help whenever they need. In return, the children characters respect the members of their family. They obey and listen to the elders and it is highly probable that they will instinctively follow their way of life. This kind of loyalty relates to the second important feature which defines Saroyan's children characters. It is the duality of their mentality and personality. Most of children characters are descendants of immigrants, which means that they were born and live in America but they are brought up in Armenian families. The clash of two different cultures, the American one and the Armenian one, causes a kind of disunity, affects the way of their thinking and acting and creates a generational gap between them and their relatives who were born in Armenia and have not adapted to the American society.

Saroyan's concept of a family contrasts his concept of the institution of school. The family provides a shelter for children while the institution of school does not satisfy their needs and interests at all. In most cases children's dislike for school is not based

on an experience but rather on their character and temperament which drive them to be their own men, to be free and independent and therefore not to obey any rules and commands which they do not associate themselves with.

Apart from the dividedness of mentality stemming from the cultural background, Saroyan's children characters also display a kind of duality relating to the degree of their maturity. On one hand they retain the child innocent, faith, vitality and fascination by all new things. On the other hand they exhibit deep thoughtfulness, understanding and sympathy with other people. The childlike vision of the world, along with wisdom which goes beyond their age, are the properties which also influence the way of their thinking and acting.

Saroyan's fictional world of children is vivid, diverse and colorful. It is full of joy and happiness because the children characters love and enjoy life. They are playful, curious and astonished by every new thing and experience. From time to time they come across difficulties but they are always able to overcome them. Suffering and sorrow is balanced and softened by the good and humour and therefore the short novels and stories end on a cheerful note most of the time.

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Summary in Czech

Tvorba amerického autora Williama Saroyana je tématicky i žánrově velmi rozmanitá. Jeho dílo pokrývá prózu, drama a autobiografii a lze jej analyzovat z mnoha aspektů. Jedním z nich je zobrazení dítěte v autorově próze. William Saroyan vytvořil celý dětský svět založený na jeho vlastní zkušenosti. Mnoho hrdinů jeho prosaických děl jsou děti a je to právě jejich vidění, vnímání a prožívání světa, které činí Saroyanovo dílo výjimečným a působivým.

Saroyanovi dětští hrdinové jsou na první pohled obyčejnými dětmi, které žijí v úplných či neúplných rodinách, chodí do školy a prožívají podobná dobrodružství a podobné problémy jako všechny jiné děti. Po bližší analýze ale čtenář zjistí, že tito Saroyanovi dětští hrdinové disponují určitými vlastnostmi, které je odlišují od ostatních dětí a které ovlivňují způsob jejich myšlení a jednání. První z těchto vlastností je rozpolcenost jejich osobnosti založená na rozdílnosti kultury, ve které se tyto děti narodily a vyrůstají, a kultury jejich rodiny, ve které jsou děti vychovávány. Většina Saroyanových dětských hrdinů je totiž prvními potomky přistěhovalců, kteří se narodili v Americe. Ačkoli si to ještě neuvědomují, musí se vyrovnávat s mnoha těžkostmi, které střet dvou naprosto odlišných kultur způsobuje. Jejich příbuzní, nevyrůstali v Americe, se nedokáží přizpůsobit americkému způsobu života a to vytváří znatelnou generační propast mezi nimi a jejich dětmi

Druhou příznačnou charakteristikou Saroyanových dětských hrdinů, která má vliv na způsob jejich uvažování a jednání, je jistý rozpor související se stupněm jejich mentální vyspělosti. Snoubí se v nich totiž dětská nevinnost, důvěřivost, vitalita a okouzlení vším novým s jakousi předčasnou moudrostí, která přesahuje jejich věk. Dokáží být velice rozumnými, chápajícími a empatickými a mnohdy v tomto předčí i dospělé hrdiny knih.

Dalším faktorem, který určuje dětský vztah ke světu, lidem i sobě samým, je silná a pevná vazba k rodině. Rodina v Saroyanově podání představuje útočiště, do kterého se může dítě kdykoli uchýlit a bude mu vždy podána pomocná ruka, pokud ji potřebuje. Děti na druhou stranu respektují členy své rodiny a v mnohém následují ty starší a zkušenější. Vzájemná úcta a láska může částečně souviset s pocitem vykořeněnosti a odcizení vyplývajících z odlišnosti kultury, ve které jsou imigranti

nucení žít, od kultury, která je jim vlastní. Rodina potom představuje jediné porozumění v cizím světě.

Posledním rysem Saroyanových malých hrdinů je odpor k instituci školy, který ve většině případech není založený na bezprostřední zkušenosti, ale spíše na povaze a temperamentu dětí. Saroyanovi dětské hrdinové jsou totiž hraví, vynalézaví a plní nápadů a jejich hrdost nedovolí nikomu omezovat jejich svobodného ducha.