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**Faculty of Arts and Philosophy**

**Women Issues in Fanny Fern's Work**

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## ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

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### Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

Studentka s využitím relevantní sekundární literatury nejprve uvede do širšího historicko-kulturního kontextu dílo zvolené autorky. Dále uvede zvolené dílo do literárního kontextu. Jádrem práce bude analýza zvoleného díla především z hlediska toho, jak zachycuje otázky postavení ženy ve společnosti, manželství, mateřství či vdovství. Literární analýzu studentka opře o relevantní kritické zdroje a své závěry vhodně doloží odkazy na primární díla. Dílo také pojedná s ohledem na jeho kritickou recepci (především ze strany feministické kritiky) a vliv. Závěrem studentka shrne svůj rozbor a pokusí se vyslovit obecnější závěry o literární podobě boje za ženská práva.

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the issues of women in the nineteenth century. The aim of this thesis is to analyze selected examples of Fanny Fern's fiction, especially her novel *Ruth Hall*, with respect to the historical and cultural context. The paper characterizes the Victorian period and its values, attitudes and stereotypes determining women's subordinate place in society dominated by men. The thesis concentrates especially on the way Fern presents her female protagonist Ruth, describing her in an unconventional manner, portraying a critical view of the accepted nineteenth century interpretation of womanhood.

## **Key words:**

Position of women; feminism; Ruth Hall; economic independence; widowhood; motherhood; criticism

## **Souhrn**

Tato práce se zabývá analýzou žen v devatenáctém století. Cílem této práce je zanalyzovat prózu Fanny Fern, především román *Ruth Hall*, na pozadí historicky-kulturního kontextu.

Část práce charakterizuje hodnoty, morální předsudky a postoje Victoriánské doby, které určovaly tradiční roli ženy ve společnosti, kde měli rozhodující slovo převážně muži. Práce se zaměřuje především na způsob, jakým Fern zobrazuje hlavní hrdinku Ruth a popisuje jí neobvyklým způsobem, ukazujíc kritický pohled na tehdejší ideál ženství.

## **Klíčová slova:**

Postavení žen; feminismus; Ruth Hall; ekonomická nezávislost; vdovství; mateřství; kritika

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# 1. Introduction

Sara Payson Willis Parton, writing under the pseudonym Fanny Fern, is considered to be one of the most successful newspaper columnists of the nineteenth century, whose controversial style of writing and revolutionary topics attracted a wide range of readers, especially middle-class women. Fern wrote about subjects that would have been of interest to women, often focusing on problems that worried the women of that period. The rights of women, domestic problems, equality between the sexes and the problems and status of female authors are obvious Fern themes. She was not afraid to write about issues such as women's economic independence, children's rights, birth control and prostitution.

As the title of this thesis indicates, its aim is to deal and analyse women issues in Fern's best-known work, the largely autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall* (1854). This bachelor paper characterizes a period of American history with a view to the social position of women in the second half of the nineteenth century. The novel *Ruth Hall* was highly inspired by her own life, she created the characters of the book based on her own family background and experiences. It tells the story of a woman who faces much sorrow and many obstacles in her life; but she is strong and courageous enough to struggle and change her life, eventually making a living as a writer.

Theoretical background is an essential point to gain an awareness of the vision of women's conditions at that time, as well as their traditional roles that were determined by Victorian society, which was generally dominated by men.

Therefore, the first part of the paper focuses on the position of women in the nineteenth century. The chapter generally and briefly describes women's basic rights, educational and working opportunities and limited women's status. Stress is put on the woman's role in society and the family, as well as on attitudes, and stereotypes, prevailing at that time, because the role of the woman was to take care of her husband and children.

The following part of the chapter relates to the history of the women's rights movement. This part of the thesis analyzes the changes and reforms that have been achieved to improve women's subordinated position in the male dominated world. Women

just wanted to prove that to be a woman does not necessarily mean to be worse, or indeed inferior, than a man.

One of the ways of supporting this struggle was to write various books, essays, stories or articles relating to women's issues and thus encourage other women not to be subordinate to men. The novel *Ruth Hall* has become a favourite of feminist literary scholars, because it suggested that women should become financially independent in order to overcome the male-dominated power structure of society.

The analysis is the next important chapter in the paper, which is subdivided into several smaller parts. Firstly, the plot of the novel and main characters and their relationships are introduced. The main theme in *Ruth Hall* is women's economic independence, which is openly advocated by Fern. Fern's recognition of the necessity of economic independence was also a result of her change in class status. Her descent into poverty after the death of her husband showed her the hardships as a life of widow, and she realized that her survival depended on financial independence and knowledge of the world. The novel is invaluable because it portrays the life of a widow in the nineteenth century, based on Fern's own experience. She portrays the widow's vulnerability, poverty, and lack of job opportunities.

One of the most crucial relationships which Fanny Fern mentions in her novel is the special bond between children and mother. Fern influenced her readers with the emotional connection that she created through her use of sentimentality and her ability to understand the needs of both parents and children.

Another part of the paper is devoted to Fern's criticism of society. Fern undoubtedly belongs among the most important American women writers of the nineteenth century who were not afraid to write about themes concerning female inferiority. Her columns, which contained writing about daily life, attracted mostly middle-class women who worried about their children, current fashion, and family relations, but she was not afraid to express her anger and addressed such issues as women's economic independence, children's rights, birth control, and prostitution.

Because she was so independent, she was subjected to unending criticism. Reviewers attacked her conversational style and spontaneity. She was strongly criticized by

her contemporaries for writing about her family in public and about her personal success, and her writing was considered “unfeminine”, but most of the criticism of *Ruth Hall* was directed at Fern, rather than the novel itself.

The conclusion summarizes and highlights the most important points that appeared in the analysis and were crucial for Fanny Fern’s work.

## 2. American Women in the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century is often called the Victorian Age, taking that name from England's Queen Victoria who ruled for over 60 years. It was an age where the influence of the industrial revolution evoked a differentiation between the gender roles, especially of the upper and middle classes. It was a time of great changes and reforms.

The nineteenth century brought new ways of thinking into American society. On the other hand, there were a lot of strong beliefs and values in society. These values and beliefs influenced the position of women in various contexts.

### 2.1. Social Status

Generally, the social status of Victorian women was difficult because they had few legal rights and nearly everything was predetermined. The property of a woman automatically became her husband's after the marriage, and if she worked the money she earned belonged to her husband as well. A Married woman in nineteenth-century United States did not have an identity separated from her husband. As William Blackstone wrote in *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1779): "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage." (1:430). Tapping Reeve wrote in *Law of Baron and Femme* (1793): "The husband, by marriage, acquires an absolute title to all the personal property of the wife..." (p.49).

McDowall adds that, even if wives could be companions to their husbands, they were not equal. Women were argued out of going to work if not economically necessary and a wife was legally man's property until nearly the end of the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, it was almost impossible for a woman to divorce her husband. This was the reason why a lot of women were locked up in bad marriages. (McDowall, 1989, 136 - 137)

As O'Donnell adds, a woman was a piece of property, she belonged first to her father and then to her husband. The man held control over the woman's property and children. (O'Donnell, 1993, pp. 231-233)

Even though McDowall and O'Donnell analysed the legal position of women, resulting from the tradition in England, their logical arguments are quite applicable to the situation in America as well.

At the beginning of the century, women had few of the legal, social or political rights: they could not vote, could not sue, could not testify in court, had limited control over personal property after marriage, and were rarely granted legal custody of their children in case of divorce. Victorian society was a society based on the values of the Bible. Women were not supposed to have any sexual contact before marriage, especially if they were from the upper or middle-classes. The majority of women learned about sex from their husbands on their wedding nights. All property was her husband's and most areas had laws which guaranteed a husband his rights to his wife's body which ensured him that the offspring would be legally legitimate. (Wayne, 2007, 1-6)

The nineteenth century brought many economical changes into American society. One of the changes was mainly the movement of male employment from agriculture to industry, business, or services. As time progressed, men had to commute to their work and leave their wives and children at home. That is why the most common traditional women's roles of the nineteenth century were as housewives and mothers.

Even after the laws took a step forward, a conservative judiciary continued to apply common-law principles. The courts ruled that, unless a wife was abandoned by her husband, her paid labour was housework, or work done to benefit the household, and her earnings belonged to her husband. (Basch, 1982, pp. 206-223)

Women were supposed to be more pure, innocent, subordinate and dependent upon men. A historian Barbara Welter calls that process of conformity of women to this ideal "The Cult of True Womanhood." According to Welter women in this time were pious, pure, submissive, and domestic (1966, 152). The ideal of "True Womanhood" was early imprinted in young girls, who were trained to be devoted and exhibit great self-control. Young girls were taught to value her virginity "as the 'pearl of great price' which was her

greatest asset.” (Welter, 1966, 172) Women were not supposed to have sexual contact before marriage, especially if they were from the upper and middle-classes. They were preparing for marriage by keeping themselves modest for their husbands and they learned any necessary skills for managing a household. Women were expected to take care of their husbands and fathers. Their occupational choices were extremely limited. Middle and Upper-class women could help with a family business, but generally remained at home, taking care of their children and running the household. They could study, as long as it did not interfere with their housework.

## **2.2. Women’s Rights Movement**

Despite the idea of a “True Woman,” the nineteenth century brought an increasing number of women who did not want to accept the status which society assigned them. They were focused on gaining equal property rights for women and the opposition to ownership of married women and their children by their husbands.

Demand for women’s equal rights arose in as a part of a struggle to democratize Western countries in parallel with the fight against slavery and the struggle for workers rights. The movement is generally said to have begun in the nineteenth century as people increasingly adopted the perception that women are offended in a patriarchal society.

Feminism detached itself from abolitionism in the early 1830s, with campaigns for women’s rights and interests. Feminism focused on the promotion of equal property rights for women and ownership of married women and their children by their husbands. They were trying to draw attention to the position of women, female education and employment. It gradually became the subject of public discussion.

The early feminists criticized contemporary marriage laws, which made women dependent on their husbands. Men and women were defined as a fundamentally divergent entity, and men had the final decision in matters relating to economic and family issues. They requested the possibility of education and employment, which was a way to become more independent. (Mountjoy, 2007, pp. 22-27)

The Seneca Falls Convention held in July 1848 had passed resolutions proclaiming that “woman is man’s equal.” (Stanton et al., 1970, 1:72) At the meeting in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1850 it was asserted that all “avenues of civil and professional employments” are open to women and it was stated that:

The laws of property, as affecting married parties, demand a thorough revisal, so that all rights may be equal between them; that the wife may have, during life, an equal control over the property gained by their mutual toil. (Stanton et al., 1970, 1:821)

Before married women’s property acts (1882) were passed, upon marriage a woman could own no property that she owned before the marriage. She had no right to acquire property during marriage. A married woman could not keep control over her own wages, transfer property or sell it. Beginning in 1839 in Mississippi, states began to establish the rights of women that enabled them to “enjoy the profits of their labour, to control property, to be parties to lawsuits and contracts, and to execute wills on their own behalf.” (www.britannica.com)

Women did achieve a number of changes to their social status during the nineteenth century. However, the struggle to win the right to vote was slow and frustrating. The well-known American Suffragist Movement intensively fought for the social, civil and religious rights of women.

While some states granted women the vote, beginning in 1869 in Wyoming Territory, the Eastern states resisted. Finally, the National American Women’s Suffrage Association won the right to vote for all American women in 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment was finally ratified. (Mountjoy, 2007, pp.136-137)

### **2.3. Female Writers**

Most often, depictions of the lives of nineteenth-century women are portrayed in negative terms, concentrating on their limited sphere of influence compared to that of men from similar backgrounds. American women were supposed to become good housewives and mothers and education was perceived as meaningless for them. Nevertheless, a couple of academies and schools for women were opened at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although practical education was taught in the first place, there were various academic courses. Literature was also accessible to women, who were encouraged to write diaries, recipes, tales, letters and short poems. However, writing for the general public was strongly criticized, because it was an inadmissible activity for women.

The position of women novelists was really difficult, because the world of publishers and critics was male dominated. Women were criticized for their lack of education and experiences.

Ann Wood points out that during the nineteenth century, the “woman question,” concerning a woman’s position in art and society was hotly debated which led to a rise in female writers. A lot of women writers refused to write the prescribed way, and focused on writing about undesirable themes in the society they lived in. They wanted to draw the public’s attention to women’s issues. In their writing, they began to express their dissatisfaction with gender relations. Many movements led by nineteenth-century women, such as religious revivalism, abolitionism, and suffrage, gave female writers inspiration to express their views. They were trying to highlight the hardships suffered by women, and expressed their individualism. To begin with women such as Lydia Maria Child, Sarah Grimke, Angelina Grimke, Margaret Fuller, Fanny Fern, and other writers, who became publicly visible in the first half of the nineteenth century, influenced the age’s expectations for women. Through their writings they portrayed the expectations prescribed to them by society. They wrote about independent and changed literary themes. Women were urged towards children’s literature, books about child care and household management, and works of sensibility. The feminine writers responded to this call, and wrote such works in

enormous numbers to the delight of their reviewers, who smugly praised their piety, lack of energy and resolute disregard of conflict. (1971,7)

Despite women's success in publishing and selling their works during the later nineteenth century, their work was often detracted by both men and women who sneeringly referred to female writers as "scribbling women." So it is hardly surprising to find one woman author after another from Lydia Maria Child to Harriet Beecher Stowe, subscribing in large measure to the Hale doctrine, no matter how outspoken or male subversive her own work might be. One woman, however, refused to accept it. This woman was Fanny Fern whose novel *Ruth Hall* Hawthorne so much admired, and she built her work openly on the defiance her fellow authoresses laboured to conceal. (Wood, 1971, pp.12-13)

### 3. Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*

Without any doubt, Sara Payson Willis Parton, writing as Fanny Fern, belonged among the most famous of American female writers. Fanny Fern was one of the most popular American writers of the mid-nineteenth century. In her largely autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall*, Fern make private matters public by exposing her own life's trials and documenting her success.

The story of Fanny Fern portrays a mid-nineteenth-century woman, who rises from a horribly traumatic series of events and achieves great wealth and success through her own talent and self-belief. *Ruth Hall* was a radical story for this period, because women were not supposed to write about their families in public, or to celebrate their personal success. It was a revolutionary book, in that Fern had deviated from the role prescribed for women at that time.

The novel can be divided into three parts: Ruth's happy marriage, her distressful widowhood, and her rise to financial independence as a columnist. The novel begins on the night preceding Ruth's marriage, young Ruth sits in her room and thinks about her life so far. Ruth has not had happy childhood, her mother died and she was sent to the boarding school. Her father is a rich man but there is no love between them. Her brother, Hyacinth, is a selfish, cold-hearted man who ignores her because of her overtures of affection.

Her husband, Harry, is a good, loving man. He brings her to live with his selfish and hard-shell parents, Dr. and Mrs. Hall, who try to intervene in Ruth's freedom and criticize her all the time for her natural impulses. They find fault with her constantly, and both in-laws meddle in her life. Mrs. Hall even blackens her and she is jealous of Ruth's good looks and sense of style. She constantly laments her son's affection for Ruth and does not even like her family, even though her father is a wealthy man:

Well, what beauty he can find in the pale, golden hair, and those blue-gray eyes, I don't know. I can't say I fancy the family, either. Proud as Lucifer, all of 'em. Nothing to be proud of, either. The father next to nothing when he

began life. The son, a conceited jackanapes,.... Well, well, we shall see; but I doubt if this bride is anything but a well-dressed doll. (Fern, 1988, 18)<sup>1</sup>

Ruth moves from one unhappy home to another unhappy home of Harry's parents, where she has no control over her life in the household. She is under the hawkish scrutiny of Mrs. Hall, who is upset, for example, that Ruth had not learned the art of housekeeping before her marriage:

“It is a great pity you were not brought up properly,” said she. “I learned all that a girl should learn, before I married. Harry has his fortune yet to make, you know. Young people, now-a-day, seem to think that money comes in showers. Whenever it is wanted, ...[sic] he is, like me, naturally of a very generous turn; he will occasionally offer you pin-money. In those cases, it will be best for you to pass it over to me to keep; of course you can always have it again, by telling me how you wish to spend it.” (RH, pp.18-20)

This case highlights her possession and control of money. Other example of her avarice is that she does not want Ruth to engage a nursery girl for her first daughter, Daisy.

After recognizing his parents' tyranny, Harry and Ruth move to a new house that is about five miles from the city. Outside of the city and away from her oppressive in-laws, Ruth enjoys a perfect domestic idyll. The house is very old and damaged, but Ruth says: “All better for that.” (RH, 28)

The home has a regenerative effect on Ruth and she is able to express her natural state: “It was blessed to see the love-light in Ruth's gentle eyes; to see the old spring come back to her step.” (RH, 28) The house provides her a shelter from a hostile exterior world. Ruth acquires domestic skills thanks to African-American woman, who helps her to carry out her housekeeping. But the idyll does not last long. Ruth's mother-in-law visits her home in Ruth's absence, inspects all the space and passes judgment upon it. She considers Ruth to be a terrible mother because she lets Daisy play in the creek and they pick wild flowers together. (RH, 27)

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<sup>1</sup> All citations from *Ruth Hall* thereafter quoted in text as RH

It shows the inability of Ruth to maintain her independence, and she is still held subordinate to her parents-in-law. This partial freedom from her husband's parents is irrevocably destroyed by her daughter, Daisy's, death, followed by the death of her husband. Daisy becomes ill in the winter and dies of croup, because Dr. Hall, refuses to help her in the cold night and to attend to the child immediately. Then Harry contracts typhoid fever and dies. After her husband's death Ruth comes face to face with a cruel world that Fanny Fern describes with graphic bitterness.

Ruth and Harry have two more daughters, Katy and Nettie. After Harry's demise, Ruth is exiled from the home and left with no money and has to apply for financial support, for her and her daughters. Ruth's in-laws wish to assume control of their grandchildren. Her father, brother and cousin do not wish to be identified with her because she can not be of benefit to them, financially or socially, and they only provide her with a tiny income. It shows that the family relations are weak and unstable. Her cousin requested her children not to address him as "Cousin John" (RH, 98) in public and her brother advised her to find "an unobtrusive employment," (RH, 116) with her cousin wishing she would move away.

Her relatives, and in-laws, expect that she will fail and will not survive because of her lack of experience in the real world. These expectations are seen throughout the entire novel, even before Harry's death. Mrs. Hall says to her neighbour:

I shouldn't be surprised if Harry was taken away from her; a poor, miserable thing she'd be to take care of herself, if he was. She couldn't earn the salt to her porridge. Thriftless, Miss Jones, thriftless. (RH, 47)

And after his decease, Mrs. Hall continues with her criticism of Ruth's abilities:

"She's fit for nothing more than a parlour ornament," said the doctor, "never was. No more business talent in Ruth Ellet, than there is in that chany image of yours on the mantel-tree, Miss. Hall. (RH, 130)

Mrs. Hall, also, does not want Ruth to use Harry's last name thus denying her relation to, and moreover responsibility for her and her daughters.

Ruth owns no property, not even an inheritance. Now she is a widow, according to law, she owns herself and her children, while as a wife this would not have been this case. After Harry's death, an agent of her father-in-law comes to claim Harry's property, in this case Ruth hesitates to comply:

Ruth perused the letter, and handed it back with a trembling hand, saying, "tis true the clothes are of no use, but it is great comfort to me, Mr. Develin, to keep everything that once belonged to Harry." Then pausing a moment, she asked, "have they a legal right to demand those things, Mr. Develin?" (RH, 78)

Mr. Develin is conscious that, according to law, Ruth is the lawful owner of the property, but his hope that he will gain a part of the inheritance from Dr. Hall, prevails. Ruth trusts in his knowledge of the law and supposes him to be honest and impartial; therefore she goes along with his judgement.

Being widowed, financially insecure, and although owning herself and her children, being unable to support herself she is entirely dependent upon the generosity of her father and in-laws. When Katy falls ill, Mrs. Hall makes her hand her over into her cure, because Ruth cannot feed her. Her financial funds begin to decrease and this forces her to move into a boarding house, in a slum part of the city, where she and Nettie live on a bread and milk. Nettie requires food all of the time, and this is a turning point for Ruth, who understands that she needs to assert herself in the marketplace. She wants to gain independence and earn some money. She is forced to seek various low paying means of employment. She looks for a job as a teacher, or dressmaker. Her hunt for employment is not successful. By this, Fern shows the limited paid employment available to women at that time. Eventually she makes the decision to become a writer. Ruth turns to writing as the last chance of earning money.

She sends a sample of her writings to her brother Hyacinth, who is a newspaper editor, but she meets with refusal in his contemptuous letter informing her that she has no talent and that her writing "never will be heard out of her own little provincial city."

It is at this moment that Ruth's life changing experience takes place. In an extremely significant line, we learn that a "bitter smile disfigured her gentle lip"(RH, 116) her transformation has begun and she resolves:

"But they shall be heard of;" and Ruth leaped to her feet. "Sooner than he dreams of, too. I can do it, I feel it, I will do it," and she closed her lips firmly; but there will be a desperate struggle first," and she clasped her hands over her heart as if it had already commenced; „there will be scant meals, and sleepless nights, and weary days, and throbbing brow, and an aching heart; there will be the chilling tone, the rude repulse; there will be ten backwards steps to one forward. Pride must sleep! But“ and Ruth glanced at her children- „ it shall be done. They shall be proud of their mother. Hyacinth shall yet be proud to claim his sister. (RH, 116)

This was Ruth's first outburst. This scene shows Ruth's resolution and self-assertion.

As the narrator remarks on Ruth after several failures: "Ruth could not but acknowledge to herself that she had thus far met with but poor encouragement, but she knew that to climb, she must begin at the lowest round of the ladder."(RH, 121) Ruth faces her obstacles bravely, and without complaint. She is strong, courageous; she fights against society and she realizes the importance of being able to economically support herself. She is ready to do her best to reach her goals. She is "steering with straining sides, and heart of oak, for the nearing port of Independence." (RH, 133)

Finally, Ruth is offered a position at "The Household Messenger" by its editor Mr. Walter, and thanks to him, she achieves financial stability. Ruth is an independent, assertive woman in a male-dominated world, but she is also an obedient mother. She realizes that she cannot be dependent on others. She rescues her daughter from her greedy parents-in-law and plans to move into a different part of the country. Her money helps her to distance herself from her family. She gains this independence through her determination and endurance.

### 3.1. Independence

Fanny Fern's novel *Ruth Hall* is one of the most important feminist documents of the nineteenth century. In this autobiographical novel she deals with women's economic independence and portrays a woman who realized the American Dream. Contrary to other fictional heroines, for whom marriage is the only way to receive economic improvement, Fern's Ruth gains success and financial independence through her own sedulity and self-action. The fact that her brother and father did nothing to help her in her literary career is undoubtedly Fanny Fern's greatest notoriety.

The protagonist of *Ruth Hall* seeks to achieve economic independence, as did Fern herself. When her brother, Hyacinth, refuses to help her, she swears that she will succeed on her own: "I can do it, I feel it, I will do it." (RH, 116) *Ruth Hall* does not end with the Ruth's marriage; there is not even a man on the scene. The novel does not finish with the picture of a new husband but with the picture of acquisition of shares of the Capital Stock of the Seton Bank.

In her article "The Women of 1867", Fern is frankly urging women to write both to compensate themselves for male cruelty and to reproach the men who exercise it.

Write! Rescue a part of each week at least for fading, and putting down on paper, for your own private benefit. Your thoughts and feelings. Not for the world's eye, unless you choose, but to lift yourselves out of the dead-level of your lives; to keep off inanition; to lessen the number who are yearly added to our lunatic asylum from the ranks of misappreciated, unhappy womanhood, narrowed by lives made up of details. Fight it! (RH, 344)

She commanded women to push female gender boundaries into what traditionally was male territory.

The most revolutionary viewpoint of Fanny Fern is that she believes in financial and social independence even after the marriage. Many nineteenth-century novels written by women show a poor young woman who wants to have her own life and career, however, in the end of the novel, she always gives up her independence for marriage and motherhood.

Fern, however, does not see marriage consistent with economic independence. She said that it might be difficult to combine career and marriage, but she believed that independence in marriage was not only possible but preferable to dependency. On 18 September 1869 she wrote in the *New York Ledger*:

Woman, be she married or single, being able to earn her own living independent of marriage — that often hardest and most non-paying and most thankless road to it — will no longer have to face the alternative of serfdom or starvation, but will marry, when she does marry, for love and companionship, and for cooperation in all high and noble aims and purposes, not for bread and meat and clothes. <<http://www.enotes.com/american-history-literature-cc/ruth-hall>>

Fern described the situation of a dependent woman in a society that would not permit her to help herself in the *New York Ledger* on 26 June 1869, “I want all women to render themselves independent of marriage as a mere means of support.” (Fern qtd. in Ward, 1991, 75)

There are few people who speak approbatively of a woman who has a smart business talent or capability. No matter how isolated or destitute her condition, the majority would consider it more “feminine” would she unobtrusively gather up her thimble, and, retiring into some out-of-the-way place, gradually scoop out her coffin with it, than to develop that smart turn for business which would lift her at once out of her troubles; and which, in a man so situated, would be applauded as exceedingly praiseworthy. (RH, 318)

In her sketch “Male Criticism on Ladies’ Books,” dating back to 1857, Fanny Fern related to a quotation from the *New York Times*, which said:

Courtship and marriage, servants and children, these are the great objects of a woman’s thought, and they necessarily form the staple topics of their writings and their conversation. We have no right to expect anything else in a woman’s book. ( *New York Times*, in RH, 285)

In response to this, Fern wrote,

Is it feminine novels only that courtship, marriage, servants and children are the staple? [...] Would a novel be a novel if it did not treat of courtship and marriage? and if it could be recognized, would it find readers? (RH, 286)

In her essay, "Independence", Ferns writes about 4. July and she says that she does not feel patriotic:

I don't feel patriotic. Perhaps I might if they would stop that deafening racket. Washington was very well, if he couldn't spell and I'm glad were all free, but as a woman I shouldn't know it, didn't some orator tell me! (RH, 314)

In this sentence she expresses her true feelings and makes her point by comparing herself, a bright woman to the first president of the United States. She could never be the president, however well educated, because she is a woman, but George Washington just because he is a man, who maybe could not even spell, could be. She wants to open every woman's eyes and speak her mind.

According to Fern, a woman should be independent, and she claims that true independence comes only with financial freedom. Women could be self-reliant and self-sufficient. Ruth Hall gains independence and success through her own talent; she realizes the American Dream. As Warren notes, "Ruth Hall was revolutionary because it threatened to subvert the male-dominated power structure of society by suggesting that women get some money for themselves." (RH, xxi) Fern was not afraid to say what she believed, in public, including her belief in financial independence for women:

When you can, achieve financial independence. Freedom from subjection may be gotten by the fruits of your own labours, and by your own efforts you can learn to conquer yourselves. When you have done all this, you may rightfully demand-even the right to vote, as vote you certainly will some day. (Adams qtd. in RH, xxiii)

Fern saw her novel as a hope for women; she showed the example of a woman who had achieved financial independence on her own. In an article "A Word on the Other Side", she prompted women to leave their husbands if necessary, averring that "the toil of self-support" will never be so degrading than a dehumanizing marriage. (RH, 292) She had realistic and critical view of marriage and approved divorce if necessary.

Fern portrays independence as a necessary and desirable goal for women and recognized it as way for freedom.

### **3.2. Widowhood**

Fern's novel is valuable because she portrays the life of a widow in the nineteenth century. Fern's own experiences as a widow, led her to advocacy of women's rights.

As Mink notes, there are three social factors in portrayal of widowhood in *Ruth Hall*: "the widow's vulnerability, her poverty of opportunity, and her powerlessness." (Mink qtd. in Ward, 1991, 77)

Vulnerability is one of the most important characteristic in *Ruth Hall*. After the death of Ruth's husband, she is economically and personally vulnerable. She found out that after her husband's death, the widow had no identity. She is mainly vulnerable to the machinations of her relatives, one of the examples is the arguing between her father and in-laws about her future; and their support after Harry's death. (RH, 65-72) Fern's relatives want her to remarry to support herself, but another reason to remarry her is a settlement of her status. She is also vulnerable to sexual advances by men. In chapter XXXVI two men, Jim and Sam, discuss Ruth as easy prey. (RH, 73) Another example of her vulnerability is when Mr. Develin, executor of her husband's estate, concludes that it would be to his advantage to give her husband's clothes to Mr. Hall, and expected his help in business, rather than to Ruth, who is legally entitled to them (RH, 73-74) All these aspects of vulnerability are derived from Fern's own experience as a widow.

Another problem that Ruth has to solve is the poverty of opportunity. Ruth's search for work as a teacher or a dressmaker is unsuccessful. Her family relations make her

finding work more complicated, because although everyone supposed that her family should help her, she cannot succeed without people in high places helping, or at least recommending her. As we can see in chapter XL, when Tom Herbert, the owner of shop is speaking with his wife Mary about Ruth's misery. Marry opposes his feeling sorry for her, because her family is wealthy and lives in prosperous circumstances. But Tom soon sets the record straight:

„Yes, wife, I know it; and that makes it all the harder for Mrs. Hall to get employment; because, people knowing this, take it for granted that her relatives help her, or ought to, and prefer to give employment to others whom they imagine need it more.” (RH, 80)

The same attitude toward her is seen in chapter XLI, where two women standing before her lodgings are talking about her cruel fate: “Tis a dreadful change for her, I declare; if it were me, I believe I should cut my throat.” (RH, 81), says the first. And her companion replies: “That is probably just what her relatives would like to have her do.” They closure their dialogue by the conclusion: “It is clearly none of our business to take her up, if her own people don't do it.” (RH, 81)

Fanny Fern urged that more and more job opportunities could be opened to women. As she wrote in the *New York Ledger* in 1863, she was always glad to see “any new and honest avenue of interest or employment open for women” (Fern qtd. in Ward, 1991, 70)

Finally, Fern wrote about women's powerlessness. Ruth's relatives do not want to be connected with her after she is widowed. Her brother does not want to “lose caste” by associating with her. (RH, 82) Her father insists that she is the responsibility of her in-laws: “I don't know why I should be called upon. Ruth went out of my family, and went into yours, and there she was when her trouble came.”(RH, 71)

Ruth is powerless to give her children a comfortable home and they have to live in an old garret in a boarding house. She is not able to pay the doctor when Nettie is sick. She is also powerless to protect her children from the cruelty of their relatives.

She is powerless to command more money for her articles. The editor, for whom she writes, exploits her because she is a woman, and when she asks for money, they use her

status as a woman to denigrate her (RH, 131, 147). He knows that this is her only choice and that she desperately needs the money. She has only fifty-cents for an article in spite of the fact that her articles increase the profit of her editors.

She is powerless to provide her children a comfortable home. It is visible in Chapter XXXVIII, she sits with Nettie in their poor room in the boarding house, looking out of the window, when Nettie suddenly asked her: "Why don't we go home?"

Fern also portrays sympathy with the poor widow. In chapter XXXXII, Millet's servants are talking about Ruth and her relatives: "if I lived in such a grand house as this, and had so many fine clothes, I wouldn't let my poor cousin stand every Monday in my kitchen," (RH, 82), and in chapter XXXXIII Johnny Galt brings the apples and bouquet of flowers to her.

Fern portrays the feelings that she felt during her own widowhood. It was hard for a widowed woman to retain the status she had gained from her husband, or to continue activities that maintained her status. She often lost friends if marriage to her husband was the connecting link. She also lost the financial support that could lead to movement into another place and community, which was difficult for both her and her children. Her family was not obliged to support her. All these changes affected her and her children after the death of her husband.

Fern's own experience of widowhood brought her to a strong belief in women's rights. She believes that if she wanted to keep her autonomy, she would have to become financially independent.

### **3.3. Motherhood**

As has been already mentioned, traditional women's roles of the nineteenth century were housewives and mothers.

Fern is often recognized as one of the leading women authors of her time for her extensive writing on feminist issues. She also addressed the closely related theme of

children's rights. Fern described in her newspaper articles how parents should treat their children, how society should educate children, and how society should care for orphans.

Fern influenced her readers with the emotional connection that she created through her use of sentimentality and her ability to understand the needs of parents and children.

Grace Greenwood, one of Fern's contemporaries, explains Fern's interest in children: "Her motherhood, a true motherhood of the heart, has given her the clue to the most mysterious, angel-guarded labyrinths of a child's soul. She is the faithful interpreter of children" (1988, 72)

Greenwood explains that her love with children is real and unaffected. Fern achieves a success among her readers by using sentimentality and her concern for the children.

Fern describes Ruth as a "pattern mother", who is doting of her children and raises them at her best. Her child rearing seems to be almost innate. Ruth provides an environment that allows her children to explore their world and grow at their own pace, she let the children behave like children, rather than to be subjected to adult rules, which are unintelligible to them.

When told that her own life may be put in danger by her husband's illness her only comment is: "My husband has the first claim" (RH, 53) Ruth is willing to sacrifice herself for her husband, and later she will be willing to sacrifice herself for her children, even going without food. She is forced to give up one of her children to her in-laws, who dispose of financial resources to force her to give up all claim to her children.

Fern insists that women may write but that it does not detract from their maternal function. In her novel, she demonstrates that a woman could turn to writing as the highest expression of maternal duty in the support of her children. Writing and domesticity are for Fern inseparable. Women writers cannot be separated from their maternal function, which differentiates their practice of literacy from men's. Fern's early columns demonstrated that women writers did not practice their craft at the expense of their housewifely and motherly duties, concluding that no self-respecting woman would become a writer if it mean that she would neglect the duties expected of her. (Tonkovich, 1997, 26) As Ruth Hall avers, "No happy woman ever write" (RH, 175)

When Ruth refused to give up her children, her father and father-in-law resolved to withhold support to force her to comply with their wishes. They hoped to starve her into submission. Ruth is forced to submit Katy to her in-laws, because she is unable to feed both of her children. Fanny Fern is seen as the desperate widowed mother, forced to write for paid publication after she had exhausted socially respectable ways to feed her fatherless children. Ruth writes incessantly, by moonlight, because she has no money for candles, to ensure the retention of accommodation for herself and her children in the dingy boarding house. Ruth is first and foremost a mother to her children. Such a sentiment is evident in her wish for Nettie to never learn to be a writer, since the ability to do so comes, at least in Ruth's mind, with a disruption of the home. (Tonkovich, 1997, 27-29)

It is evident that Fern loved children and therefore she wrote a lot of children books. In her book- *Fern Leaves*, she wrote: "I like children much better than grown-up people" (*Fern Leaves*, second Series, 1854, 397). Fern refers to an importance of spontaneity in education and says that teachers and parents have no right to burden children in "ill-ventilated school-rooms."

Fanny Fern knew better. She knew that the pretty trees and flowers, and bright blue sky, gave your little souls a thrill of delight, though you could not tell why; and she knew that great big man's soul was a great deal smaller than yours, to sit there and read a stupid political paper, when such a glowing landscape was before him, that he might have feasted his eyes upon. (RH, 246)

Readers have recognized Ruth as a woman who feels as a woman should feel, because Fern associates her with flowers and piety. Therefore she was seen as deeply feminine and was qualified as a heroine who can be accepted by the general culture. This recognition was also evoked by her maternal solicitude that marks her as a woman who knows that her most important function lies in her nurturing duties. (Harris, 1990, 116)

## 4. Fern's Criticism

Fern wrote as a social critic, expressing what she viewed as social evils. She was deeply engaged in all aspects of injustice towards women, maintaining a passionate plea that women were to secure financial independence from men. She wrote about taboo subjects and her heroines were usually fighting against society.

*Ruth Hall* was a shocking book for this period because women were not supposed to write about their families in public, nor to celebrate their own success. And, unlike other novels of this generation, *Ruth Hall* does not end with the heroine's marriage.

Fern was criticized for her lack of femininity and for her vulgarity, because she showed criticism of her family and in-laws. Fern did not hide her anger, nor romanticize the position of women and the role of men. A woman was supposed to be deferential towards her male relatives, but Fern did not. These criticisms were personally directed at Fern, not the book. But without Fern's unconventional qualities, the book could not be revolutionary. *Ruth Hall* was revolutionary because it portrayed the possibility of escaping the subordination of male-dominated power in society, by indicating that women could grasp some power for themselves.

Ruth is an independent, assertive woman in the male-dominated world, but she is also an obedient mother. She realizes that she cannot be dependent on others.

Fern used several topics of her own life in her book: her marriage to Charles Eldredge, the death of her first child, her widowhood, her disunion from her family, and her difficult fight to make a career as a writer. Like Fanny Fern, Ruth writes for small periodicals, later collects her articles into a book, and begins to be successful in the career of a writer.

Fanny Fern bases *Ruth Hall* on her own life and experiences and uses real models of her family for characters. The book became a best seller because so many people were eager to read about her family, mainly about her famous brother, Nathaniel Parker Willis, the editor of *The New York Home Journal*. She was castigated for her negative representation of her family that turned their backs on her when she was living in poverty.

Critics insisted that this critique was not appertaining to a woman. The book was described as “abominable”, “monstrous”, and “overflowing with an unfemininely bitter wrath and spite.” (Warren in RH, xxxiv)

Ruth Hall is a woman who endures many hardships. Ruth endures the death of a child, then her husband. She endures a rejecting family and economic struggle. But despite all the odds which act against her, she is able to overcome her obstacles and become successful as a writer and a mother. This theme reminds women that they are able to overcome their hardships, without the help of men. “Fern demonstrates how the relation of writing women to home, school, and community changed as formal education for women became more generally available.” (Tonkovich, 1997, 35)

Fern’s writing addresses an ubiquitous but invisible male gaze. Her awareness of the expectations of public discourse is visible especially in her early work. Her work masterfully portrays cultural and behavioural expectations of that time.

In her column “The Model Husband” wittily demonstrates double standards between the sexes, and portrays what Fern regarded as the ideal husband. (RH, 215)

In her essay “To Gentlemen: A Call to Be a Husband,” argues that men’s selfishness can destroy women’s lives. She attacks male control of the household economy as degrading to women. (RH, 280-282)

Then, many more essays of the same kind followed. “The Model Wife” shows a sarcastic portrait of what the ideal wife would not be like. More of her columns, such as “The Model Minister” and “Deacons’ Daughters and Ministers’ Sons”, describe her own incidents and are based on the tension between “reality” and the pressure of ideal stereotypes. (RH, 218-219)

In her other columns uses the conception that women could be interested in sentimental issues, and they are portrayed as “light-minded gossips, dutiful daughters, and nurturing wives” (Tonkovich, 1997,45)

Fern concludes that no self-respecting woman, who neglected her obligations to her children and households that are expected by others, would become a writer. As Ruth Hall points, “No happy woman ever writes” (RH, 175). Only after her reputation was

established, Fern publicly advises women not marry and to gain financial independence through their own efforts. (Baym qtd. in Harris, 1990, 121)

In addition to women's rights, Fern wrote about other common social issues, such as poverty, crime, prostitution, venereal diseases, and prison and education reform. She showed strong feeling towards the suffering she saw, she sympathized with ordinary people, and believed that society had a responsibility to the poor. Her experiences gave her multiple perspectives about the life of women in varied circumstances. She understood unhappy marriages, widowed and divorced mothers and she understood both middle and lower economic class life.

In her weekly columns Fern mentioned such topics as equal pay and more employment opportunities for women. She showed understanding for women who had turned to prostitution because of the lack of paying jobs.

Another important topic of Fern's columns was the question of children's rights. She advocates less repressive educational methods, physical exercise and comfortable classrooms. She also cautioned parents to appreciate the individuality of each child.

She became so popular because she did not obviate the popular domestic subject matter as childrearing, housekeeping, and fashion, as well as the more serious themes, such as women's rights. She dealt with the issues concerned everyday life and presented those common subjects in an entirely unique manner. It was her controversial style, humor, and talent that enabled her to stand out among all other popular newspaper writers of her time.

## 5. Critical Reception

While readers today generally find *Ruth Hall* as a striking example of a feminist heroine who achieved independence through her success in writing, contemporary readers had mixed reaction to the novel. The novel sold well, partly due to the disclosure of the Willis family and because of the advertising campaign of the *Mason Brothers*. But, in general, critics reacted adversely.

Fern's reputation was harmed by a scathing article, "The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern", in *True Flag* on December 30, 1854, written by William Moulton, in which he discovered her true identity and described her as a "shrewd, self-serving opportunist," rather than a hardworking widow who is the main character in her autobiographical novel. The book was described as "monstrous," and "unwomanly." (Warren in *Ruth Hall*, xvii )

In 1855, Nathaniel Hawthorne showed strongly unfavorable views of „damned mob of scribbling women“ who were, in his opinion, both capturing and corrupting the literary market. There was a common set of prejudices as to why women should write and what kind of literature they could write which Hawthorne disliked, and which Fanny Fern confronted and even attacked in her novel about *Ruth Hall*. In a letter to his publisher William Ticknor, he made an exception to the allegation of his feminine rivals in favour of Fanny Fern who had just published a novel *Ruth Hall*. He commented not only why he admired her, but why he disliked many of her scribbling contemporaries:

In my last, I recollect, I bestowed some vituperation on female authors. I have since been reading "Ruth Hall"; and I must say I enjoyed it a good deal. The woman writes as if the Devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading. Generally women write like emasculated men, and are only distinguished from male authors by a greater feebleness and folly; but when they throw off the restraints of decency, and come before the public stark naked, as it were—then their books are sure to possess character and value. Can you tell me anything about this Fanny Fern? If you meet her, I wish you would let her know how much I admire her. (Hawthorne, in *Ruth Hall*, xxxv)

Other conventional critics agreed with Hawthorne's appreciation of the shock value of the novel, but their reaction was hardly like his. Hawthorne was insisting that Fanny Fern unlike her feminine competitors was daringly true to her fundamental experience as a woman, and he obviously appreciated Fern's original style and viewpoint, while her critics indicted her of betrayal and accused her to be unfeminine.

Although Fred Lewis Patee agreed with Hawthorne's assessment of female writers, he could not understand Hawthorne's view of Fern. Her popularity led him, in *The Feminine Fifties*, to proclaim her as "the most tearful and convulsingly female moralizer of the whole modern blue-stocking school" (1940, 110).

Fanny Fern describes some of her fictional characters who have wronged her in an irreverent way. The novel was convicted because it furiously satirized Fern's brother and her father. In February 1955, *Peterson's Magazine* commented that:

Much as we see to praise in the work, we cannot, however, keep down a suspicion that it is intended to pay off certain old scores of fancied neglect or insult; and this, we confess, we are sorry to see. We do not mean to say that the author has not been badly treated; but only that the public does not and cannot know the merits of private controversies. (qtd. in Harris, 1990, 111-112)

Fern broke the unwritten law in nineteenth century American society that women should not criticize men. As it is Ward quoted in *Joinings and Disjoinings*:

"The principal reason why Fern's novel was so shocking to her contemporaries was because she revealed the reality behind the myth with respect to male protection and also with respect to the dependency of women."(1991, 74)

However, even the female critics did not sympathize with Fern. A newspaper reporter, Caroline Healey Dall, who wrote for the suffragette journal, *The Una*, criticized Fern for her satirical description of her relatives: "If it was true that they had treated her cruelly", said Dall, Fern should have maintained a "noble self-restraint" and kept silent. Moreover, Dall accused Fern that she had lied about herself, which only proved "how unfit any

woman is to write her own life when it has been a succession of passionate struggles against circumstances. ” (in Tonkovich, 1997, online article) Dall was offended by Fern’s cynical and bitter views of men.

The editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, Sarah Josepha Hale had the same approach. She refused to review the novel because of Fern’s satirical treatment of her relatives. She claimed that she did not want to interfere in family affairs. Previously she had warned Fern not to go beyond the bounds of feminine propriety. Ellen Louise Chandler, who wrote for the *True Flag* at the same time as Fern complaint about her vulgarity and unladylike expressions, and said that it caused a “pain at her heart, that any lady should so far forget herself. ” (in Tonkovich, 1997, online article)

It is difficult to determine how readers perceived her opposing writing. Reviewers, on the one hand, criticized Fern’s exposure of family quarrels, on the other hand, applauding her sentimental episodes. But as Nina Baym points out, it is necessary to read between the lines to determine exactly which values reviewers are supporting and which they are opposing. It is clear from the reviewers’ response that the public expression of women’s anger meant a direct attack to the preservation of unequal gender roles. Like much woman’s rights literature, Fern initiated an angered confrontation between the sexes that was considered unavoidable. (qtd. in Grasso, 1995, online article)

There were objections to whether a woman had the right to publicly express anger at men and still be regarded respectable, and capable of rational authorship.

In 1855, the prime author of the Declaration of Sentiments, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, responded to criticism directed against Fanny Fern. Stanton praised the appearance of the novel because it challenged the conception that women can rely on men for. Stanton perceived *Ruth Hall* as a useful model of fearless expression. (qtd. in Grasso, 1995, online) For contemporary readers, who find nineteenth-century culture conservative, Fanny Fern can seem, courageous, disrespectful, and funny.

According to Warren, Fanny Fern was far in advance of her day, in advocating women’s economic independence because most women’s rights activists supported married women’s property rights, but even they were divided on the issue of women’s economic independence, particularly after marriage. Similarly, women writers, even those who were

economically independent, did not plead for such a role for women in their published work because women's financial independence was associated with sexual promiscuity. (qtd. in RH, xxxiii)

There were many nineteenth-century writers, whose feminism made them hatable to the general public for example; Lydia Maria Child. But unlike these writers, Fanny Fern was popular. Her 1853 *Fern Leaves From Fanny's Portfolio* sold seventy thousand copies, and her success continued with her writings for the New York Ledger, two novels, five collections of articles, and three children's books. For American feminist scholars focusing on the nineteenth century, sentimentalism has been central issue. Twentieth-century critics may have this opinion partly because of her *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, which contains a number of her sentimental writings. Fern's writings both embody and appeal to the common understandings of sentimental culture.(Warren, 1992, 109)

But the majority of her work is far from sentimental. Her work is successful because of a combination of funny and progressive critiques. For this reason, Fern was regarded as unfeminine by her contemporaries. It is sometimes difficult to detect irony in her articles.

Other early critics, such as Fred Pattee and Helen Papashvily were offended by her use of language. They seen Fern's mixture of sentimental with the cynical as a sign of debased or manipulative emotion. However, recent critics have seen it as a mark of the novel's "bifurcated sensibility." Nina Baym sees Fern's duality as deviation from the generic norm of the nineteenth century female novels, but Ann Wood studies novel within the framework of women writing. She understands her usage of feminine language as "a facade that helped the authors to write, to produce, without facing the social and psychological consequences of doing so. " (all qtd. in Harris, online) Linda Grasso also sees in Fern's writing a strategy and notes:

Fern used sentimental imagery and language patterning as means, first, of disguising her goal to project a woman who grows into self-definition and verbal power and, second, of bringing the worldview implicit in the sentimental mode into doubt. In exploiting and subverting a rhetorical mode not only closely associated with women's writing but also commonly held to be reflective of women's nature itself, Fern was actively challenging the prevailing nineteenth-century view of ideal women. (1995, online article)

Fern's innovative thinking and unusual style made her one of the most eminent writers to come out of nineteenth century America. Her sense of humor, as well as her critical eye attracted a lot of readers, and nowadays her works are valuable, because they bring a realistic portrayal of people and events of her time.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude this paper it is necessary to say that when Fanny Fern's novel *Ruth Hall* was first published, it created a sensation. Nowadays, in this post-feminist society, it seems highly unlikely that a book such as *Ruth Hall* would even raise an eyebrow, never mind making tabloid news; nonetheless, at the time that it was written, for a woman to show such independence in public was rather like blasphemy, breaking all ten commandments in one foul swoop. Such were the issues raised by its publication.

*Ruth Hall* is a magnificent novel that includes complicated plots and extraordinary characters that urge the reader to think about the lives of women in earlier times.

The novel describes the struggle of women for freedom and independence. At the time of the American Revolution, American women were an oppressed and subordinated group. If they earned money, they had no control over it. Married women were legally dominated by their husbands and completely dependent upon them. Many women accepted their unequal status without question, but there were also others who took an active interest in political life and who became increasingly dissatisfied with their exclusion.

This work was written in order to provide a detailed analysis and description of the social position of women in the nineteenth century. In the analysis it was proved that The Victorian era represented a kind of femininity which was centered on the family, motherhood and respectability. The only role of women in the Victorian era was to get married, breed, and then look after the children. It was a time of separate spheres; while women were in the private sphere of the home, men engaged in the public sphere of business, politics and sociability.

Fern's main theme of the novel was the obtaining of economic independence of her heroine, Ruth. She strongly resisted traditional plot lines for her heroine. Instead of allowing her to be subordinate to men, she created an increased number of options for her life. She is able to remain independent and have a socially acceptable future. Fern believed

that women's economic independence could be continued even after marriage. Fern did not see marriage and economic independence as contradictory. She noted that it might be difficult to combine career and marriage, but she believed that independence in marriage was not only possible but preferable to dependency.

The next typical element of Fern's writing is the theme of motherhood. Ruth is portrayed as an autonomous and assertive businesswoman in a male-dominated world, but she is also described as a devoted mother, as she began to write to support her children in the first place. *Ruth Hall* demonstrates that a woman may turn to writing as the highest expression of maternal duty in the support of her starving children.

The matter of widowhood is the next important point that appears in the novel. *Ruth Hall* serves as a social document, because it portrays the life of widows in the nineteenth century. Fern shows the widow's vulnerability, the lack of opportunities to find employment, and her powerlessness. It was very hard for a widowed woman to maintain her status after the death of her husband.

It was a shocking reading at that time, because Fern openly criticized and satirized her relatives, who had not provided help to her when she was herself left a widow. Although writing under a pseudonym, and also representing people involved in her real life under various guises, William Moulton, the Boston editor, recognized his own satirical portrayal in the novel and decided to retaliate. He revealed her identity and the novel became a roman a clef. Fern was deeply wounded and chastised by critics for her unfeminine writing, and also her desire for revenge. She was also criticized for documenting her personal victories. However, at the same time, the book gained positive attention. For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had previously complained about the "damned mob of scribbling women," praised Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* for breaking the mould of nineteenth century women displaying the female world.

From this explosive start, Fern went on to write a further two well-known novels, bridging a range of socially sensitive issues, as well as her regular column. It is not for me to assume how many other women writers were influenced by her, nor how many women's lives she changed.

## 7. Resumé

Cílem této bakalářské práce je uvést čtenáře do problematiky postavení žen v devatenáctém století v díle Fanny Fern, a to především v jejím autobiografickém románu *Ruth Hall*. Práce se zaměřuje nejenom na tradiční role ženy jako manželky a matky, které byly zejména ve Viktoriánské době považovány za nejdůležitější náplní života ženy, ale také na základní práva žen a jejich celkově podřízenou pozici ve vztahu vůči mužům. První část práce se skládá ze tří tematických okruhů – postavení ženy v devatenáctém století, dále pak hnutí za ženská práva a ženské spisovatelky té doby. Druhá část práce je věnována analýze knihy *Ruth Hall* z pohledu života žen v devatenáctém století. Další část práce se věnuje kritice, kterou Fern mířila proti nespravedlnostem vůči ženám. Tím vzbudila jak pozitivní, tak negativní pozornost, a stala se terčem kritiky. Hlavním cílem této práce je poskytnout detailní informace o zkoumaných materiálech na základě analýzy již zmíněného románu a dále také seznámit čtenáře s tradičním postavením žen v americké společnosti devatenáctého století.

První část práce se zabývá obecným prozkoumáním života žen v devatenáctém století. Devatenácté století přineslo mnoho zásadních změn a reforem jak ve společnosti, tak v politice, průmyslu či v umění. Toto období je známé pro své nové názory, nápady, způsob myšlení a jiný pohled na společnost. Na druhou stranu zde stále převládala určitá společenská pravidla a hodnoty, které byly v mysli americké společnosti hluboce zakořeněny. Postavení žen ve Viktoriánské době nebylo jednoduché, protože ženy měly pouze málo práv a jejich možnosti v tehdejší společnosti byly omezené. Ženy v této době neměly stejná práva jako dnešní ženy, neměli volnou ruku ve výběru manžela, a proto bylo mnoho manželství uzavíráno z finančních nebo společenských důvodů. Ženy postrádaly nejenom právo volit, ale neměly právo dědit ani vlastnit majetek. Provdáním žena ztrácela mnoho svých práv a nemohla nijak disponovat svým majetkem, který po svatbě přešel na jejího manžela. Dokonce i peníze, které případně vydělala, patřily jejímu manželovi.

Tato situace odsoudila většinu žen k podřízenému postavení vůči mužům a ženy se tak stávaly soukromým majetkem svých manželů, kteří měli také výhradní právo o všem rozhodovat a byli považováni za nadřazené pohlaví.

Viktoriánská éra byla známá díky svým morálním předsudkům a to se odráží i v představách o počestné ženě. Viktoriánská společnost považovala manželství a mateřství za hlavní roli ženy. Úkolem ženy je vést domácnost a vychovávat děti, úkolem muže je rodinu hmotně zabezpečit. Být manželkou a matkou bylo považováno za potvrzení ženské identity, a pokud některá žena z jakýchkoliv důvodů nemohla nebo nechtěla tohoto ideálu dosáhnout, byla považována za nedostatečnou ženu. Žena byla tedy ceněna v souladu s jejími ctnostmi a její životní náplní bylo pečovat o domov a rodinu, nicméně existenčně byla naprosto závislá na muži. Další skupinu ohrožených žen tvořily vdovy. Muži z měšťanských vrstev se většinou ženili až ve vyšším věku, kdy měli zajištěnou existenci a dostatek peněz a mohli se postarat o rodinu. Dívky se naopak vdávaly mladé, protože pro jejich rodinu bylo velkou zátěží živit děti příliš dlouho. Mezi manželi byl často velký věkový rozdíl a stávalo se, že ženy brzy ovdověly a ocitly se i s dětmi bez prostředků.

Proto ve druhé polovině 19. století začaly sílit hlasy po emancipaci, tedy po zrovnoprávnění žen. V první řadě šlo o to, aby bylo ženám umožněno vzdělávání na stejné úrovni jako mužům a aby se mohly stejně jako oni uplatnit na trhu práce.

Toto období bývá označováno jako století boje za ženská práva, kdy ženy začaly vystupovat z pozadí a začaly vzdorovat mužskému útlaku. Ženy začaly pořádat demonstrace a shromáždění za svá práva; chtěly především zdůraznit rovnoprávnost a vyvrátit představu, že žena je horší než muž. Nebylo lehké se vymanit z tohoto postavení, ale i přesto však neustávaly ve svém boji, jak dosáhnou cíle, i když věděly, že to bude velice těžké.

Jedním ze způsobů jak vyjádřit nesouhlas s postavením ženy bylo psaní různých románů, povídek a článků, zmiňujících tuto problematiku. Spisovatelky chtěly projevit ženám svou sounáležitost v boji za rovnoprávnost v patriarchální společnosti a ukázat jim, že v této bitvě nejsou osamoceny.

Jednou z nejvýznamnějších amerických spisovatelek devatenáctého století, která se nebála vyjádřit svou nespokojenost s ženskou podřadností, byla bez pochyby Sara Payson

Willis, známá pod pseudonymem Fanny Fern. Tato americká autorka zobrazila toto období ve svém románu *Ruth Hall*. Jedná se o semi-autobiografické dílo, které je z velké části inspirováno jejími vlastními zážitky a zkušenostmi.

Tato práce je částečně zaměřena na studii autorčina již zmíněného nejznámějšího díla, které je postaveno na autobiografických zážitcích, a vypráví příběh mladé dívky, Ruth, která musí překonat mnoho překážek, aby dosáhla nezávislosti a mohla se postavit na vlastní nohy. Hlavním tématem tohoto díla je získání finanční nezávislosti žen. Fern nabádá ženy, aby se odpoutaly od mužů a spoléhaly se samy na sebe. Podporovala ženy, aby se vymanily z dobové společenské konvence a nebály se stát součástí tržní společnosti.

Dalším jejím rozsáhlým tématem je téma vdovství a mateřství. Román *Ruth Hall* je cenným dokumentem, protože zobrazuje život a postavení vdov ve Viktoriánské éře. Po smrti manžela se ženy staly zranitelnými, bezmocnými a téměř bez šance získat práci. Ruth je vdova se dvěma dětmi, bez práce a bez finančních prostředků. Fanny Fern popisuje svoji hrdinku jako oddanou matku, která by pro své děti udělala všechno. Právě její touha po zabezpečení svých dětí byla hnacím motorem k její tvorbě.

Tato americká spisovatelka se věnovala na tu dobu šokujícím tématům, jako například ekonomická nezávislost pro ženy, dětská práva, antikoncepce, prostitutky či pohlavní nemoci. Fern byla často kritizována za své “neženské” a vulgární psaní. Právě touto kritikou se zabývá další část této práce.

Autorky, zabývající se těmito tématy, byly kritizovány nejen muži, ale zároveň i jinými, více konzervativními, spisovatelkami, které stále ještě zdůrazňovaly tradiční zařazení ženy. Ženské autorky, které ve svých dílech popisovaly tato témata, riskovaly odmítnutí svých děl či dokonce zavrnutí společnosti. Čtenářská veřejnost zkrátka ještě nebyla připravena číst o nezávislých, energických, úspěšných a sebejistých ženách.

Ale až po vydání jejího prvního z části autobiografického a anonymního románu, *Ruth Hall*, získala Fern značnou pozornost. Brzy po jeho zveřejnění, jeden z novinářů odhalil její identitu, protože ho značně rozlítlo jeho zobrazení v jejím románu, což vedlo k velké kritice. Fern byla kritizována za odhalení vztahů ve své rodině a vystavení soukromých záležitostí, což bylo v té době neslýchané. Dále byla její kniha odsouzena za to, že dokumentuje její vlastní úspěch a nezávislost, navzdory tomu, že se k ní odvrátila její

rodina. Na rozdíl od jiných románů té doby, román *Ruth Hall* nekončí sňatkem hrdinky, ale jejím osobním vítězstvím a získáním finanční nezávislosti. Nicméně, moderní kritici tvrdí, že Fern předběhla svou dobu, nebála se projevit své názory a obhajovala své společenské zájmy.

Fern, ve většině své práce, vystupuje jako sociální kritik a odhaluje to, co považuje za křivdu a navrhuje způsoby jak tyto křivdy napravit. Byla hluboce znepokojena nespravedlností vůči ženám, a to jak doma, tak i v obchodní činnosti, což je důvod proč nutí ženy k finanční nezávislosti a odpoutání se od mužů. Zatímco její současnice psaly sentimentální literaturu, která byla považována za vhodnou pro ženy, Fern se nebála ve svých sloupcích psát o šokujících tématech jako je rovná mzda, rozvod, požadavek více pracovních příležitostí pro ženy a reformy ve vzdělávání dětí. Svou prací přispěla k boji za ženská práva a pomohla ženám nebát se zasadit se o svoji nezávislost.

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