The BA thesis sets out to discuss two classic late 20th-century novels which represent transgressive fiction and the literature of addiction, namely Junky by William Burroughs (1977) and Trainspotting by Irvine Welsh (1993). It maps the transgressive potential in both texts in narrative and thematic terms, while also pointing out the contextual dynamics of contemporary politics in the USA and the UK at the time of each text’s writing and publication, drawing some parallels and contrasting the respective socio-political climates that influenced the writing and moulded the various transgressive authorial choices we are faced with. The thesis sets up a comparative line of enquiry, tracing the build-up of transgressive agenda in Burroughs’ quasi-autobiographical text in its socio-cultural and political context, drawing on interesting detail from the novel’s publication history; less contextual detail is supplied in the analysis of Welsh’s text – however, the focus lends itself to a degree of insight into the novel’s transgressive form and ethos in relation to British politics of the 1980s and the Scottish context. The thesis also highlights, as the title suggests, the gender aspects of these predominantly male-centred narratives, interrogating the usurping role of heroin on a formal as well as thematic level.

The strength of the thesis lies in its keen engagement with the socio-political contextual intricacies of these two very distinctive transgressive debut novels that are in formal, thematic and psychological dialogue with the overarching theme of addiction, but also in complex, often violent, transgressive interaction with the reader’s own ethical and moral standards. The candidate’s interest in and engagement with the topic is discernible. The candidate’s choice of secondary material is relevant, her employment of it into her own argument adequate.

The thesis’ weakness lies in its somewhat imbalanced engagement with the ways in which our reading of the primary texts tends toward various moral boundaries, or the socio-political context of addiction, sometimes at the cost of a more detailed debate about the literary and ideological aspects of transgression rather than its clinical or sociological impact. However, the overall reading of the formal and thematic role of heroin in the selected texts does present lucid points and delivers a line of argument throughout.
I have a question for the candidate to respond to during her viva voce examination, on a point that could have been discussed in more detail in the thesis:

In what ways is the use of heroin more, or less, transgressive in literary terms than in the socio-political context it is embedded in in these two novels – and does the fact that the novels are written by men play a significant part in the gendering of heroin as a literary device?

To conclude, I am happy to recommend the thesis for defence and propose a preliminary mark of ‘very good’ (velmi dobře), depending on the candidate’s performance on the day.

29 August 2019

Mgr. Miroslava Horová, PhD.