

Opponent's Report on B.A. thesis by

Ms. Barbora Tomášková

“The American Notion of Freedom: Freedom as a Central Element of American History and Its Reflection in Literature”

In her B.A. thesis, Ms. Barbora Tomášková gives a critical account of the concept of freedom in US History and literature.

The thesis document contains sixty-three pages across an Introduction, six general units as chapters, a Conclusion and a Bibliography. All in all, the thesis is well-structured and organized, and clear in its presentation as the titles of the individual units of composition suggest: 1 Political Freedom, 2 Transcendentalism, 3 Abolitionism, 4 Anarchism, 5 Pragmatism and 6 Beat Generation (save for the chapter on ‘Pragmatism’ each of these chapters contain subunits). Stylistically, the thesis is well written. All in all, the study is also well argued, although I do have some questions below in this regard.

The strength of the thesis lies in its vast coverage of the freedom concept in a bevy of writers from Thomas Paine down to Jack Kerouac and multiple big names in between that includes such figures as Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Stowe, Josiah Warren, Lysander Spooner, and Ginsberg. I have one question about this passage from the Conclusion: “The thesis, for the most part, observed the works and theories of white male authors which led to a finding contradicting the notion of freedom’s being a right. In the historical periods covered, race and gender played an important role as factors influencing the amount of freedom people had. White men were the only people who had their rights more or less granted, whereas the rights of women were greatly limited and subordinated to those of men. However, the situation of white women was not as helpless as the situation of slaves, whether they were women or men. We have seen that slaves, African-Americans, could only dream about having any rights, and their situation did not significantly change even after the abolition of slavery” (57). **How does the candidate herself assess this state of affairs? Does it seriously damage canonical accounts of freedom in American literary and cultural history?**

Not only this, but on the same topic area we read, “This is not to say that the analyzed authors endorsed this unfair situation; to the contrary, most of them promoted equal rights for all. Still, white males, including these authors, already had the advantage of certain granted rights, and consequently were sometimes less active in practice for their extension than they might have been in theory. Given these conditions, the notion of freedom in many cases diverted from its original definition, as what had originally been a right, to become a privilege. The existence of slavery itself, and the attempts to justify it, then left an indelible stain on the belief upon which the United States built its own existence: The belief that all men were created equal and that liberty belongs among their unalienable rights” (57–58). **In this light, what are we to make of the notion of the freedom of equality and of its possibility in the USA hitherto? Why are not more non-white writers included such as Harriet Jacobs, Nella Larsen, Harlem Renaissance figures, Ralph Ellison, or James Baldwin? Can you add some nuance to what you have written?**

The candidate also adds, “This thesis, however, did not aim to disparage this belief. It aimed to demonstrate that this belief had always been a keystone of all efforts to attain such comprehensive freedom, which people felt was absent. Even though reality has not always reflected this belief, it still became one of the most characteristic features of the American spirit” (58). **Therefore, what contradictions or holes in the logic of the understanding of freedom can you articulate with reference to for example the notion of equality?**

Overall, I recommend the pre thesis defense mark of between a 1 (výborně) or a 2 (velmi dobře) for this thesis work; the final grade depends on the performance at the thesis viva.

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