

Alison in Front of the Looking Glass

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This work offers an in-depth analysis of the use of supernatural motifs in modern Scottish short stories. The author has chosen eight stories ranging in time period from 1881 to 1983. After defending her selection and providing the reader with a concise historical background, the author deals with the stories in pairs, investigating what light their similarities and differences shed on the position of folklore in modern literature and thus Scottish society. This is followed by a more general discussion of commonalities of the texts; from here the author draws conclusions about the place of language, aspects of society and Christianity in Scotland.

This thesis is clearly ordered and written with confidence, and the appendices comprehensive. The author has an excellent grasp of English, a particularly wide-ranging vocabulary and the grammar is only marred by a few repeated mistakes. A sensible decision is made to analyse the texts rather thematically than historically, as the author states on p.33, 'it is impossible to draw any conclusions about the development of a genre from a comparison of such a limited number of specimens.' Because of this the author is freed, rather than limited, by the comparatively small amount of material dealt with, and space is there for detailed work on each text.

Indeed the author shines when closest to the text, and the first part of the thesis contains some outstanding analyses, such as the study of cold/hot imagery in *Sealskin*, p.27, or the fallible language of Muriel Spark's narrator on p.47. The pairing of the stories according to common themes allows an original investigation of these themes, and the reader is convinced by the author's initial claim that folklore motifs often serve 'as a contrastive background against which contemporary social issues stand out' (abstract).

The thesis is weaker when it becomes more general, and moves away from the material it purports to be dealing with. Although folklore motifs and their capacity to highlight social problems are discussed, our focus should remain with the motifs rather than the problems. Conclusions drawn about the role of family, attitudes to sexuality and the role of the church seem hasty and overly dependent on the author's opinion. The use of the stories to draw sociological conclusions move the thesis away from its stated purpose (the analysis of folklore usage); furthermore eight short stories are insufficient material for a study of this sort. The direction of the work falters mid-way through; the sudden appearance of 'the crucial question: Is there something particularly and unmistakably Scottish' on p.94 is neither anticipated nor properly incorporated into the thesis as a whole. However, the work concludes with a well-written and relevant comparison of Scottish and Latin American 'magical realism' which brings it back to its stated goal.

Overall the thesis shows a great deal of hard work and a lively and personal involvement in the stated themes. Occasionally impaired by over-generalisation and lack of focus, nevertheless some careful and convincing conclusions are drawn that make for refreshing reading. I recommend this thesis for acceptance and propose it for a mark of 2.

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