

Petra Vašendová: *Ethics and Religion in George Orwell's Novel A Clergyman's Daughter*

BA thesis

Opponent's Review

This BA thesis focuses on one of the least known Orwell's novels *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), a story of an individual's transformation resulting in her loss of faith. As Orwell proclaimed himself to be an atheist never having fully suppressed his religious education, his novel reads as a critical study of the role Christianity plays in modern British society of the early 20th century.

The student researched the background facts which prompted Orwell to write such a novel and frequently refers to his personal experience reflected in various motifs applied in the text. Her method consists basically in a detailed presentation of each of the five chapters, which in fact represent five stages in the development, or *bildung*, of the protagonist, Dorothy Hare. She tries to comment neatly especially on the way in which religious, moral and most of all social aspects are integrated in Dorothy's story. The problem of this method lies in its largely *reproductive* character – there are long passages in which we learn about the particular circumstances Dorothy finds herself in, with occasional comments on her sustaining integrity or growing religious scepticism, or examples of a pretentious use of religious faith in local communities. These comments are accurate enough, yet the method more or less precludes other than purely realistic reading, sometimes making an impression of taking the novel for a social document rather than a work of fiction. Though Orwell's propensity to be a journalist rather than artist transpires through many parts of the novel, he also experimented, as the student rightly points out, with contemporary modernist forms, inspired by Joyce, and thus the realist reading seems limiting in this case. Is it possible to interpret Dorothy's story as an allegorical spiritual journey, in which e.g. Mr Warburton, the worldly artist, could be seen as a not so successful seducer in the biblical sense (he is an infamous seducer in the sexual sense, but he also asks about Dorothy's view concerning the existence of Hell)? Is Dorothy's story just an inevitable social experience she must go through to achieve maturity, which in this case means her loss of faith presented as dropping off childish illusions about the world in which she lives? Or is it all a dream, an existential nightmare, from which she wakes up purified but not liberated from the complexities of life? To sum up, the novel's potential seems to be greater than Orwell himself perhaps saw it and the student is able to admit. It

shows an ordeal through which one's consciousness is tested in the social as well as spiritual sense; but the very fact that the particulars of her entry into the realm in which this ordeal takes place are left unexplained (how she ended up on a street in London and why she lost her memory) indicates that the realistic semantic plane is not adequate to provide the full meaning of this novel. I expect the student's response to this problem during the defence.

As to the formal properties of the thesis, I find no obvious inconsistencies. The student's language is rich, with only very occasional inaccuracies – the most striking being the misspelling of Orwell's name in the Czech version of the thesis title on the title page.

I recommend Petra Vašendová's BA thesis for defence suggesting a preliminary mark to be "very good" (velmi dobrá).

25 August, 2020

PhDr. Zdeněk Beran, Ph.D.