



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Report:

Kateryna Trompak, "Society and Solitude in Mary Lavin's Short Stories," BA thesis

Choice of Topic:

The motifs of social and personal isolation in Mary Lavin's work provides an interesting subject area for a BA project.

Thesis statement / aims and objectives:

The aims and scope of the thesis are conscientiously established at the outset. As mentioned in the abstract, the main "argument is that Lavin's female characters do not experience a mere feeling of loneliness, but rather a state of mental and emotional disengagement from themselves and society which is enforced by the oppressing social conventions and Catholic church. This leads to a substantial chasm between the female characters, often discouraging them from communication, and perpetrating stigmas around womanhood." This agenda has potential, although it becomes blended with associated concerns in the course of the thesis; in particular in chapter 1 the concern for assessing whether Lavin's work should be regarded as feminist or as recognizably Irish (p.8) seems to draw attention aside from the more central concerns around society and solitude. On page 10 Ms Trompak attempts to resolve these possibilities by promising an assessment on Lavin in relation to "universal values". Which begs the question, what universal values are meant here?

Structure and development:

The overall structure of the work looks solid, with a systematic focus on specific concerns in three stories: "Sarah" (1943), "The Nun's Mother" (1944) and "In the Middle of the Fields" (1967). The opening chapter works through the different perspectives on Lavin's work quite coherently, demonstrating a substantial knowledge of the secondary literature on Lavin. It highlights the way Lavin's (often middleclass) female characters are rarely heroic, but rather are hemmed in by the patriarchal conditions of everyday life. Useful here is D'hoker's engagement with and critique of Frank O'Connor's comments on the short story and its purpose. This reveals a bias within perceptions of what experiences might serve literary ends that are quietly and consistently challenged throughout Lavin's writing. As Ms Trompak observes solitude need not always be negative, and she does a good job unpacking ideas about solitude as disengagement via the work of Philip Koch (*Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (1997)). With this framework in mind, she goes on to suggest that: "Lavin's female characters do not experience a mere feeling of loneliness, but rather a state of mental and emotional disengagement from themselves and society." (p.12). My question here would address the



FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

matter of agency – disengagement seems self-chosen, yet the female characters in each of these stories seem bounded by the norms of the conservative (Catholic) context – to what extent do these characters choose solitude/disengagement, to what extent are their situations predetermined?

Chapter 2 provides some fine insights into “Sarah” and the differing attitudes to female sexuality and motherhood at work. Given what we now know about the policing of women’s sexuality and the cruel treatment of unmarried mothers in Ireland at this time, this is clearly a provocative work. What is less clear is how this story is to be approached in terms of solitude, at the defence it would be interesting to hear more about why solitude is of key relevance. Chapter 3 on “The Nun’s Mother” returns concern to the available respectable roles for women within Irish society mid-century. There are some apt details here, however I am not convinced that Maud Latimer sees her daughter as merely “an extension of her youth” (p.33). Rather she seems to be wrestling with her daughter’s retreat from the world and coming to terms with the ending of certain hopes and expected pleasures, that her daughter’s decision brings. Angela has chosen social withdrawal as a response, it is implied, to predatory male sexuality, but in doing so she cuts herself off from her family too. Maud mourns all the loss of potential life this decision implies. Again, there is something quite provocative here – Maud cannot possibly criticize her daughter’s higher calling (religious and infinitely respectable), even when she is deeply ambivalent about it. The incorporation of Nancy Chodorow and Adrienne Rich’s work here, and “lesbian continuum” (p.35) seem a rather forced upon the story with mixed, speculative results. Chapter 4 deals with a story most immediately fitted to the motif of solitude and it is in this analysis that the critical framework works most effectively. There is a considerable temporal gap between the period in which the first two stories were published and when the last one appeared. Has the social space altered? Are the issues the same?

To conclude, the thesis touches on some rewarding conceptual territory – especially Philip Koch and Henri Lefebvre. It demonstrates a capacity to apply some of these ideas to the work, which is also discussed in detail, but at times the pertinence of the critical framework needs more substantiation, and the focus becomes slightly blurred by subsidiary issues.

Research:

Research for the project is strong and shows nice scholarly initiative.

Use of sources:

The use of secondary sources is clear and stylistically well framed. Research materials have been cited appropriately throughout. Well done.

Stylistics and language:



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Generally, expression is clear and articulate. There are some minor grammar errors and occasional typos, but these do not mar the work as a whole.

Format:

Footnotes and bibliography are well formatted.

I would propose to grade the work “Excellent” 1 or “Very Good” 2, depending on the supervisor’s report and the result of the defence.

9.6.2021

Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD