

Shaping the American National Identity: Reality and Myth of the Western Frontier

B.A. Thesis by Valeriya Biben

Opponent's review by doc. PhDr. Mariana Machová, Ph.D.

Valeriya Biben's BA thesis examines the representations of the Frontier myth in the United States in the 19th century. The thesis is divided into three parts of about twenty pages each; the first one discusses Turner's seminal lecture on the historical significance of the America frontier as a foundational text of the frontier myth, then moves on to offer an overview of the tragic history of the destruction of Native Americans, and it ends with a brief general summary of the main features of the frontier myth. The second part focuses on the concept of manifest destiny, its role in the context of the frontier myth, and its visual representations in the 19th century art. Four paintings representing manifest destiny (by Emanuel Leutze, John Gast, Asher Brown Durand, and George Caleb Bingham) are discussed offering the context of the genesis of each of the paintings, a detailed description and some commentary. The last part of the thesis is dedicated to Mark Twain's satirical frontier travelogue *Roughing It* as an early example of a literary representation that undermines the frontier myth. This part starts with a general (perhaps too much so) introduction to western local-color literature and the folk tradition of "tall tale", followed by a slightly school-bookish intro to the life and writings of Mark Twain, and finally a discussion of *Roughing It* and the ways it ironizes and satirizes the myth of the West. The Conclusion sums up very broadly the role of the American frontier myth and its representations in art and literature in general and in the particular works discussed in the thesis.

The topic of the thesis is clearly (albeit broadly) defined, the thesis is well structured, even though the individual parts and chapters could be more closely and organically interconnected – as it is, the thesis tends to fall apart into the individual chapters; the chapter on Native Americans seems slightly disproportionate in the context of the thesis – while it is true that the genocide of the Natives was misrepresented in the frontier myth, I am not sure it is necessary to sum up the facts of the history of the destruction on the space of three pages here; it might be more interesting to discuss the roles the Natives have played in the myth. The thesis is written in a clear and pleasant academic style (with occasional minor errors – some typos, some mistakes in articles – notably, there should be no article with "manifest destiny"). The student uses a broad range of good and relevant sources; apart from academic books and papers on her topic she also works with primary historical documents (letters, speeches, newspaper articles), which she took the trouble to look up not depending on the secondary sources only, which I appreciate.

One of the problems the thesis encounters is the broadness of its topic – the thesis would benefit from focusing on a more narrowly defined issue, which would allow the student to discuss the problem in more depth. The vastness of the topic makes her remain on the level of the general facts for most of the thesis. A large proportion of the thesis consists of informative passages, offering rather basic historical facts (however skillfully summed up and well organized), which involve necessary simplifications and generalizations (sometimes verging on error, as in the case of identifying the Vietnam War as the New Frontier), there's hardly any space left for details and nuances.

Partly because of the clear potential of the student, the reader of her thesis wishes for more of her own insights and interpretations, and for her delving into the more difficult and interesting questions – is there an actual objective solid factual history on the one hand, and an “unreal” imagined (falsified perhaps) version of it that petrifies into a dogmatic myth? Are both history and the myth not more multi-faceted and flexible and “vibrant” (p. 28) than that? Or – was politics and ideology the main force behind the forging of the frontier myth? What other forces were at play there? Similarly, in the chapters on the paintings representing manifest destiny, one would appreciate a somewhat bolder and more developed commentary; the conclusions of this part (under the title of “Afterword” even though it’s not at the end of the thesis, but only one of its parts, adding to the sense of the three parts not holding together) – that manifest destiny was an important ideology and that the representations of the West depended on perceptions of the East-Coast audience – are certainly valid, but somewhat disappointing; one would expect some more insight here. The part on Mark Twain, which should be the climax of the thesis is rather disappointing: after a series of general introductory notes which read a lot like entries in a dictionary of writers and literary movements, we are offered some examples illustrating the point that Twain debunks the romanticizing myth of the frontier, but not much more than that. Twain text would have deserved a deeper analysis and a more complex discussion of its relation to the myth. The “Conclusion” once again features some of the problems that have come up throughout the thesis: too broad and vast a scope leading to the lack of a deeper insight.

That said, there is certainly no doubt at all that the thesis fulfills the requirements for a BA thesis. I recommend the thesis to the defence and propose the grade “very good” (velmi dobře), and I look forward to the defence and I’m open to the discussion of some of the issues mentioned in this report.

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