

MUDr. Kristýna Šejvlová

‘Space and its Connection to the Characters in Thomas Hardy’s Novels’

BA thesis

Opponent’s Report

The BA thesis explores the complexities of the relationship between space and selected central characters in three novels by Thomas Hardy – *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* – which the author himself has termed ‘Novels of Character and Environment’, indicating the key importance of settings in these works. The thesis embarks on a detailed line of enquiry into this central Hardyesque element tied intrinsically to both narrative and characterisation. Although structured coherently and divided helpfully into subchapters, the individual logical steps of the thesis do not altogether present a coherent argument overall. On a scope limited by the format of the BA thesis, the candidate’s analysis is somewhat disjointed at times, while being well-informed, it is also rather unhelpfully wide-ranging (including a brief discussion of the relationship between selected characters and the elements of fire and water); a certain tendency of slippage in terminology is another issue throughout the thesis (e.g. p. 7 ‘The first subchapter will speak about the two religions that greatly influence the story and the characters – Christianity and paganism’, where ‘paganism’ is taken at face value without much discernment; or p. 9 ‘not only the actual physical space in the topological sense of the word, but also the imaginary, abstract space of literature’ – where exactly do we draw the line of this ‘imaginary, abstract space of literature’?). The conclusion, relatively short, repeats the main points of the thesis and offers a general summary of the importance of space in Hardy’s fictional universe.

The strength of the thesis lies in its detailed and keen engagement with the uses of space in these three novels and its tracing of Hardy’s preoccupation with the intricate laying-out of individual spaces to predetermine or move the plotline along at key moments in the narrative, and in its relevant primary material cited as points of reference, although the close reading does not always make the most out of the cited passages. The candidate’s choice of secondary material is relevant, though her employment of more theoretical lines of enquiry into the chosen topic and the selected passages from Hardy might have benefited the thesis overall. However, the thesis shows adequate academic competence and testifies to the candidate’s knowledge, understanding, and critical thinking.

There are several weak points, however – the candidate has chosen a particularly complex topic without opting for a methodological framework to support the argument

throughout. The chapters are ostensibly well-planned but somewhat less meticulously structured upon reading and the individual argument per chapter does not always appear highlighted in sufficient clarity. The candidate's attention to detail distracts from the main line of argument which is, as a result, not entirely balanced.

On the level of language and style, the thesis is mostly well-written, but there are some minor stylistic issues throughout (e.g. p. 12 'he had an amazing opportunity', p. 16 '*Far from the Madding Crowd* has two important differences to the other two novels chosen for this thesis'), occasional errors (e.g. p. 18 'Gabriel Oak would have never come to Bathsheba's farm, hadn't he lost all of his sheep', p. 56 'These two religions are also what majorly shapes Tess's story'), a few superfluous articles (e.g. p. 55 'Together, they arrive to the final destination, the Stonehenge'), and occasional typos (e.g. p. 14 'Hardy had an outstanding capacity for drawing on the world of reality yet covering his tracs almost impenetrably'; p. 18 'the one's that live a small-town life'). Formatting is mostly in order, which is commendable (barring the consistently missing full stops at the end of footnotes, or the occasional superfluous bibliographical detail, e.g. p. 15 n. 16 'John, Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move*, Chapter 5, 130'). The bibliography, without differentiating between primary and secondary sources, is formatted somewhat carelessly (missing full stops, the occasional letter sans italics, missing capitals in titles) and is a trifle short, but it covers the main concerns of the argument in a manner sufficient for a BA thesis. The Appendix (not 'Appendices', since there is only the one) is a helpful addition to the argument.

I have a couple of questions for the candidate to respond to during the viva voce examination, on some of the points that might have been discussed in more detail in the thesis:

- 1) How is time connected to space and spatial symbolism in these novels by Hardy?
- 2) In your opinion, what unites these three novels most emotively in relation to Hardy's concept of space?

To conclude, I am happy to recommend the thesis for defence and propose a preliminary mark of 'very good' (velmi dobře), pending the candidate's performance during the viva voce examination.

1 February 2022

Mgr. Miroslava Horová, PhD.