Aneta Miczková, *The Question of Social and Class Relationships in the British Social-Problem Novel*

BA thesis

Supervisor's Report

The thesis focuses on an important contribution to the history of English realistic fiction, the mid-Victorian social-problem or, more specifically, industrial novel. The student chose to discuss the three most prominent works representing this sub-genre, Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley* (1849), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-55), and Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854).

The topic is introduced from a historical perspective. In the opening part the student presents the growing social tensions connected with the progression of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, from the Luddite riots caused by the introduction of machinery in the textile industry (the theme of Bronte's novel), through the Chartist movement to the Hungry Forties and the implementation of laissez-faire economy and the rise of trade-unionism. Her account is detailed and provides a necessary background for the understanding of the new tendency in the British realist novel, its turn to the situation of the working classes in the time of industrialization.

Equally detailed is the student's treatment of the three texts. Her method includes exploration of the authors' motivations to include the working-class topic in their work, their personal experience with the social issues, their views of society and human character at large, their education. The textual analysis is amply supported by the reflection of critical reception of the studied texts across time. This method seems to work best with *North and South*, where Gaskell's Unionism provided the writer with fundamental humanist ideas which helped her to solve the conflicts the novel presents. Due to this focus the student is able to see the interconnection of the two thematic planes of the novel, Thornton's changing attitudes to the striking workers (and vice versa) and the emotional development of Thornton and Margaret's relationship.

With the other two novels the student's approach is less convincing. Only the last paragraph of the *Shirley* chapter admits rather tersely that "[on] the story of Shirley and Caroline, Bronte highlighted the similarity between them and the working-class men. Both were repressed by middle-class men who considered women and their employers as their inferiors". I believe that this parallelism should have made the central point in the interpretation of the novel and as such should have been paid more attention in terms of text analysis. Similarly, in the *Hard Times* section Dickens's childhood experience does not explain his concern sufficiently; more should have been said about his later activities as a public intellectual, who made speeches in north England's industrial cities and who learned much about social issues in connection with industrialism in the United States. The biographic and interpretive parts seem somewhat disconnected due to this and the discussion of the novel tends to be more descriptive than with the previous texts.

In conclusion, I consider Miss Miczková's thesis to be a noteworthy attempt to present the character of the British social-problem novel, especially thanks to very relevant research concerning the status of the discussed works, and I recommend her thesis for defence. My preliminary suggestion of the mark, reflecting my reservations expressed above, is very good (**velmi dobře**).

June 8, 2022 PhDr. Zdeněk Beran, Ph.D.