



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Report:

Štěpánka Klečanská, "Anna Burns's *No Bones* and *Milkman*: Bildungsroman and Trauma," BA thesis

Choice of Topic:

Anna Burns' fiction provides a topical and rewarding subject area for a BA project.

Thesis statement / aims and objectives:

The aims and scope of the thesis are established in a basic but informative way at the outset. Ms Klečanská sets out to trace the lines of the Bildungsroman genre in the traumatic stories told by Burns in two of her novels. The central assertion proposed in the abstract and opening chapter is that these novels can be seen as "representatives of this genre [...] The common theme of these two novels is a main female character who grows up during a long-term conflict that impacts their development and identity formation." This has fine potential for development; approach is more analytic than argumentative, but this does not diminish the result.

Structure and development:

The overall structure of the work is straightforward and logical. The opening chapter is rather brief and staccato. It provides a clear, but minimalistic overview of the project. The paragraphs here are rather underdeveloped and the phrase "mainly based on" is repeated several times. The chapters that follow contrast positively with this beginning, being much better developed and generally more fully written.

Chapter 2 provides a capsule history of the Bildungsroman genre, offering a solid sense of its origins and development. The chapter offers a competent summary of work by Manfred Engel, Franco Moretti, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, and Soňa Šnircová – demonstrating a nice investment in researching the trajectory of the genre and its social significance. Ms Klečanská then pivots to Irish fiction and the enduring presence of coming-of-age narratives in this context. Here, she paraphrases work by Gerry Smyth, Liam Harte and Michael Parker, and James M. Cahalan primarily. Again, much ground is covered via these sources that is significant for her focus. Two small points regarding this chapter: in addition to summarising the ideas of others, it would have been interesting to dig into some of the debates among these scholars. Second, the matter of gender and genre is treated almost neutrally. There is some awareness of the politics of genre, but it might have been handled in a more nuanced way, especially as this is a vital aspect of the two novels under discussion.

Chapter 3 valiantly adds trauma as a key term to the matter of genre and formation. Given the over abundance of critical material on trauma and literature, the issue is handled selectively



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using work by Oona Frawley and Jenny Edkins, Stefanie Lehner and Graham Dawson among others. This is judicious, as it would be easy to get lost in a vast scholarly and theoretical terrain.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to the novels. There's some good foregrounding of key details in both narratives. In particular, the unknowability of peace in *No Bones* and in *Milkman* the resonant ambivalence around names and naming. On the whole, both chapters demonstrate an intimate knowledge of both novels alongside some excellent close reading. I found the slight detour into discussion of subsidiary characters in *No Bones* somewhat unproductive in moving towards a coherent argument about gender, trauma and genre, however the main discussion compensates for this blurring of focus. The analysis flows well, is lucid and engaging to read.

To conclude, the thesis touches on some rewarding conceptual material and demonstrates a capacity to apply some of these ideas to the work. Some tantalising questions arise from the combination of Bildungsroman and trauma that might be discussed at the defence:

1. A key feature of the Bildungsroman is social formation and integration – if these key features are effaced or absent, can we still consider a narrative as 'belonging' to this category?
2. What about the issue of narrative linearity and progress – it seems that trauma narratives might actually be the antithesis of 'Bildung' – could you address this conundrum?

Research:

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

Use of sources:

The use of secondary sources is clear and stylistically quite well framed. There is a rather heavy dependence on paraphrasing. Research materials have, however, been cited appropriately throughout. Well done.

Stylistics and language:

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

Format:

Footnotes and bibliography are well formatted.



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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.

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Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD