FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Report on B. A. Thesis

SOUTHERN GOTHIC AND THE UNCANNY: NATURE SYMBOLISM IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *AS I LAY DYING* AND CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *BLOOD MERIDIAN*

by Lucie Šrámková

This thesis offers a comparative reading of two twentieth-century American novels, *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner and *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy. It focusses on stylistic and thematic staples of Southern Gothic literature, including the sense of estrangement, depictions of violence, and the elements of the grotesque and the uncanny, with the aim of unpacking the role of landscape and non-human nature in these narratives. The proximity of human and non-human characters, processes and environments, the thesis argues, is a defining feature of both texts. Importantly, it feeds into how the two novels incorporate one of the main conflicts of Frontier literature, that is, the clash between the individual and the chaotic social norms of the region's multiple and fluid communities, based on arbitrary systems of affiliation and on principles of classism, racism, and speciesism. The thesis' central argument is that nature and specific kinds of landscape, such as the river in Faulkner and the desert in McCarthy, do not serve as mere backdrops to human agency. Rather, they need to be considered an independent (though constantly intervening) force, almost a character in its own right. At the same time, however, the landscape and its animal inhabitants are shown to fulfil a structural role in providing foils for the human characters' complex emotional states and psychological development. This focus on the predominantly natural or rural settings enables the candidate to comment on the similarities and differences between Faulkner's and McCarthy's fictional representations of the American Frontier. One of the thesis' general findings is that while Faulkner and McCarthy were indeed part of the same tradition, and although they both contributed to the myth of the Wild West, each also forged his own way to critique some of the trope's cliches and contradictions. As the thesis successfully argues, even though they differ in terms of the plot, motifs and atmosphere, both works achieve their effect by way of irony, hyperbole and excess, all present at the level of language and in the thematic elements of the macabre and the grotesque.

The thesis is divided into four chapters: an Introduction, two main chapters, each of which is dedicated to one of the novels, and a Conclusion. The Introduction makes the case for Southern Gothic's use of non-human nature as a mirror and a shaping element, in terms of its representation of individual human psychology and the specifics of the social structures associated with the Frontier. The main chapters both follow a similar ark of development. Divided into a sequence of logically ordered subsections, each starts with the discussion of nature as a 'sentient force' and ends with a summarizing section that focusses on the element of the uncanny in either of the narratives. These last subsections are particularly well-informed and intriguing and enable the candidate to uncover some important aspects of the two authors' methods. As the Conclusion aptly

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argues, '[b]oth novels use the uncanny to unsettle the reader. *As I Lay Dying* does so through "animal magnetism", non-verbal communication and subconscious forces, and *Blood Meridian* through primal grotesque violence, ambiguity and the monstrous figure of the Judge'. (p. 39) Despite its focus on non-human nature in the two narratives, the thesis does not venture into an eco-critical analysis of either of the two texts. Instead, it sets out to explore the macabre or uncanny dimensions of the non-human 'existents' and to unpack their impact on the psychology of characters and their relevance for the socio-critical and meta-fictional aspects of these narratives.

In sum, the candidate has chosen a relevant topic and used adequate critical tools in delivering it. The presentation of ideas is persuasive and the thesis applies a logical structure and relevant methodology to incorporate its findings and ideas. The candidate's close readings of the primary texts, as well as her apt choice and proportionate use of secondary sources and theory, surpasses the expectations of a B. A. thesis (see, for example, the discussion of McCarthy's concept of 'optical democracy' as an ontological – and narrative – sphere 'where distinctions between animal, human, and matter lose their relevance' /p. 35/, or the introduction of the related concept of 'natural equality' on pp. 20-21). Sufficient care has been taken in formatting the references in the footnotes and bibliography. The writing is good, using appropriate register and fulfilling the formal requirements of academic prose. More care could have been taken to eliminate occasional typos (for example, Faulkner's name in the Czech abstract) and slight stylistic imperfections (such as unnecessary repetition of words). On the whole, however, this is an original, well-written and skilfully executed study.

The thesis fulfils the formal requirements of a B. A. thesis. I therefore recommend it for defence and propose to grade the work 'excellent' (1) or 'very good' (2), depending on the opponent's report and the candidate's performance at the defence.

Suggested topics for discussion during the defence:

- Your analysis of both novels focusses on the prevalence of non-human nature as both a structural and ontological feature. Is this something you would associate specifically with Faulkner and McCarthy or do we find similar tendencies also in other authors who could be subsumed under the rubrics of Southern Gothic or Frontier literature?
- Would you say either of the two novels you analyse in your thesis could be read through an ecocritical lens? Do other works by Faulkner or McCarthy lend themselves to such an approach?

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