



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

--Supervisor's Report on Pavlína Černá's Diploma Thesis:

**“Ethics of the Self as an Aesthetics of Existence in
Wharton's ‘The House of Mirth’ and ‘The Age of Innocence’”**

Ms. Pavlína Černá states her project thus, “ I will argue that reading Wharton's work from the perspective of Michel Foucault's ethics of the self presents the possibility of free will for the characters within the social entrapments of American literary naturalism” (2). In so doing she attempts to burst the bounds of the conditions of possibility for what a female protagonist may do in the artistic universe and in the ideological world of the naturalist paradigm, generic attribution, movement, and cycle in the aesthetic tradition of the novel form.

The body of the thesis contains sixty pages; in addition, there is a six-page bibliography and an eleven page summary of the thesis in Czech.

As for the prose style, the thesis is generally very well written devoid of any significant number of errors and is a pleasure to read.

Indeed, the thesis is very well researched and contains work to be commended. PC wheels in Rachel Bowlby, Guy Debord and Thorstein Veblen to help her formalize the dynamic of the composition of a self in a world of power. Her use of Foucault is especially effective and convincing. All in all, her narrative arguments are cogent and well documented in offering up textual supports and highly intricate footnotes, from time to time, to outfit a work that shows a good deal of background research in the area not only of Wharton- but also late nineteenth-century and cultural theory-studies.

The candidate begins her conclusion thus, “I have argued that reading Edith Wharton's novels *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* through the lens of Michel Foucault's ethics of the self defies its deterministic interpretations and opens a space to allow free will for the characters in American literary naturalism” (58).

- 1) Would the candidate add anything more to her argument about how and why Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska “living according to their ethics of the self (‘the ethics-oriented morality’), stand for the possibility of the re-creation of one's life into a work of art” (59)?
- 2) Also what else can be said about how for both of the foregoing female protagonists, “Michel Foucault's ‘techniques of the self’ were the means of creating a different identity from that of the non-productive, ornamental lady. In other words, for them, the ethics of the self became ‘an aesthetics of existence,’ the way of their self-transformation” (59). I mean more precisely how can we imagine different forms of identity irreducible to a self outsourced by normative ideologies?



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- 3) In what other senses is this under 2) true, e.g. for any of the male characters in these novel texts or others? This would perhaps be the most radical point in deepening the relationship between identity and selfhood: to put in the center of the thematic the notion of new forms of identity that mark the explosion of self as desire as communal as individuated as cosmic.

Last not least, in what other ways not broached by the candidate are these novels meant to strike us in this field of concern of the composition of an effective aesthetics of existence in a world of redoubtable power? Are there any super-impositions or super-impressions here to incarnate for interpretative commentary?

Pre oral exam mark: výborná-

ESR

**Erik S. Roraback, D.Phil.
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