

Wednesday, June 17, 2009

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

Report on Bakalářské Práce(Oponentsky posudek): **Moral, Social and Psychological Issues in the Works of Robert Louis Stevenson**

**Vedoucí bakalářské práce: PhDr. Zdeněk Beran**

**Oponent: Colin S. Clark MA**

**Zpracoval :Michal Macura**

**Moral, Social and Psychological Issues in the Works of Robert Louis Stevenson**

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General Remarks:

Aside from minor spelling, phraseology(Page 4. Features the anodyne claim that “They are essentially simple and stunningly readable, yet each word is precisely selected to either flow harmoniously with the rest, or leave an impact”) and formatting niggles, this Thesis is well written, logical and convincing prose. I find the omission of George Levine’s *Realism, Ethics and Secularism* and Julia Reid’s *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the Fin de siècle* to be key omissions in the Bibliography.

1. A human voice in Victorian literature

The student’s comment in Paragraph 1 that: “An honest critique of social illnesses is worth a great deal more than mere show of goodness, prudence and morality often required by the publishers and expected by the reading public of Victorian era” is perfectly correct but would have been lent more weight by the inclusion of supporting examples of such performative virtue in Victorian Literature and by mention of works which condemn the polarity of values in the new economic and social order; as evinced by the character of Wemmick in Dickens’ *Great Expectations* or in the excoriating social catalyst that *Bleak House* became, or indeed in the form of Grandcourt in Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* .A fuller analysis of this aspect may have been obtained by a reading of *Realism, Ethics and Secularism* By George Levine.

Mention of the Wrong Box is misleading ( I accept that it is mentioned as being not in line with his art)as “scandalous”,since it was not actually written solely by Stevenson but also by Lloyd Osbourne and is really a black comedy rather than having any intention to be treated seriously.

## Section 1.2

Page 6. “ambiguous pieces, “The Pavilion on the Links” (called by Arthur Conan Doyle “the high-water mark of [Stevenson’s] genius”<sup>1</sup>), “A Lodging for the Night: A Story of Francis Villon”, “The Sire de Malétrait’s Door” and “Providence and the Guitar”.”

It is interesting that the student has failed to grasp the fact that Stevenson’s ambiguousness and duality,his *contingency* need not be read as predicated upon any genre or movement in “the literature of the British Isles” ( as the student also terms it) but may rather be seen as a facet of his Scottishness and his alliance to its literary traditions. The Pavilion on the Links is widely regarded as the beginning of the short story in English Literature, but the scottishness of this tale has not yet been fully analysed.Additionally, Conan Doyle was himself yet another Scottish Victorian who became a pillar of the British Empire(and a knight thereof). “A Lodging for the Night: A Story of Francis Villon”may also be read as a wry swipe at imperialism and its aristocracy .*The Ebb-Tide*, as the student points out does also explore moral ambiguity and *Treasure Island* is a tour de force in this regard.It may also be read as a rendition of the auld alliance in terms of the Scots Literary Heritage(Villon was a 15th Character whose works flooded into Scots via Dunbar,Henryson and Douglas(the Scottish Chaucerians who wrote in a mix of Scots/French and latin).This is not to mention Stevenson’s extended stays in France and his travel writing which details this period also.

The student has fallen victim to the venerable trap of reading Victorian as English Victorian when in fact Stevenson is more profitably read as Scottish (Victorian).A reading of *Narrating Scotland* By Barry Menikoff would have been beneficial in this regard.

Section 2.1 The student remarks that :“In 1883 the Society of Authors was founded in Britain which united the writers who strove for the public acknowledgement of the status of their occupation as on a par with other professions such as the doctor’s or lawyer’s.”

This is true but again ignores Stevenson’s powerful domestic legal/familial qualifications and the fact that writers in Scotland already had such status and Stevenson owes much to the role of Scott and Hogg in educating a reading public in their task of consumption of popular literature and supporting the artist

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thereby..he is also contributing to what has been called *Scotland's Historic Fragmentation* (Catherine Spooner, Emma McEvoy)which is an integral part of the Scottish Gothic Discourse.

2.2 and 4.1 The student comments that :“Hyde also came to symbolize many of the moral, social, political and economic threats which the Victorian public dreaded. As we shall see in the chapter dedicated to *The Strange Case*, the principal terrifying moment of the novella consists in the fact that Mr Hyde, who would essentially be indentified with the immoral (if not criminal) lower classes, is an inalienable part of Dr Jekyll, the respected public figure. Victorian audiences would surely recognize their own fears and problems in the dualistic protagonist of Stevenson’s novella.”

The analysis of Jekyll and Hyde is incomplete without reference to the Psychosexual(Kelly Hurley in *British Gothic Fiction 1885-1930*),Science,Reason,Law and Order (Fred Botting ) and crucially, hypocrisy(Julia Reid).

#### 4.1 Dr Jekyll, Mr Hyde and criticism of the middle class morality

This section ends abruptly and has the notable omission of a discussion of “A humble Remonstrance” which Stevenson published in *Longman’s Magazine* and which lays out his triangulated attitude to various views of realistic and elevated art ( in the form of Henry James and Walter Besant).The Essay is reprinted in Stephen Regan’s *The Nineteenth Century Novel-A Critical Reader*.

On Page 29, the student embarks on a discussion of Victorian (London) sexual morality, which I feel is rather lightweight. The student refers to Tim Middleton’s text whereas Steven Marcus’s *The Other Victorians – A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in mid-nineteenth century England* (New York: Meridian 1974) (1-33) is a far better study.

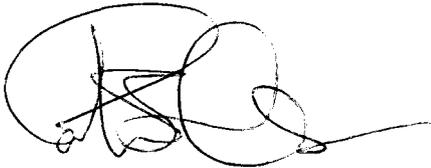
4.4. The discussion of alcohol in the narrative is cast into doubt when read against Julia Reid’s analysis of the same phenomenon, where she debunks the temperance/Calvinism theory behind Hyde’s behavior; that he is a personification of the evils of drink and its effects on the social fabric of society and empire. Scotland’s relationship to alcohol is much more complex and again, a reading which is cogniscent of Burns, Hogg and Scott would be rather different. Also the concept of Caledonian anti-syzygy would be welcome into the student’s vocabulary although I appreciate that it was not in use at this time, but would be handy as a critical tool.

5.1 I find much to commend here and this section is convincing in its argument and analysis, but it understates Stevenson’s trailblazing role in setting a precedent for such narratives from the margins of the empire(effectively presaging certain aspects of postcolonial fiction in the process).

5.4 The analysis of Stevenson's views on Missions and Religion is incomplete without a reading of the The Adventures of *David Balfour or Kidnapped*, as it is better known..based on an The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge( an Edinburgh(Williamite) missionary /imperial organ in Scotland).

The conclusion is well stated and makes its points confidently, although I note that most are highly derivative from other texts. Taken as a whole however they are a useful survey of the critical reception/context of Stevenson's work. All told I would recommend that this Thesis be passed .I would say that it is ,despite its obvious limitations in terms of scholarship and a failure to embed Stevenson in a Scottish Victorian context rather than as a British imperial Product(which is partially true but not exclusively by any means), that it nonetheless holds the reader's attention and competently addresses its chosen subject matter which I simply happen to disagree with in some respects.

I recommend a grade of Vyborne(1)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'C. S. Clark', written in a cursive style with a long horizontal tail extending to the right.

Colin S Clark MA