

## **Posudek oponenta**

### **na bakalářskou práci Zuzany Nováčkové „The Development of Mimetic Desire towards Latent Conflict in the Work of Katherine Mansfield“**

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As a frequent reader of student essays I have developed a suspicion against studies that explicitly state their commitment to analyse literary texts “in order to demonstrate the development of” a theory. In this case, the abstract explicitly mentions that the stories will be used to test René Girard’s concepts of mimetic desire. Would it not be better to start from the opposite perspective, and use a theory in order to analyse fiction? Of course, it is poignant that in this case, Zuzana Nováčková is actually following Girard himself with his notion that literature provides an insight into the human condition.

René Girard, one of the French ‘immortals’ is an influential thinker in anthropology, social studies, comparative religion, who has entered into intriguing debates with Derrida, Durkheim, etc., and whose position as prominent and influential post-structuralist thinker has exerted an influence on several novelists (e.g. Coetzee). And I must at the outset that Zuzana Nováčková has persuaded me that her approach to Katherine Mansfield can indeed be fruitful and inspiring. She does not limit the potential of Mansfield’s stories, actually presents them as reaching “beyond” theory, as rich in meaning and offering alternative possibilities. Zuzana Nováčková’s readings do not limit or foreclose these possibilities.

Since the theory becomes such an important source for interpretation, it may have been useful to provide a theoretical contextualization of Girard’s own concept (his theory is sufficiently explained throughout, but not his influences, intellectual debts and similarities with e.g. Tocqueville, Levi-Strauss or post-structuralists). It may also be argued very easily that other forces obviously influence human behaviour in Mansfield’s stories (esp. social and gender roles). Does Girard’s theory account in any way for gender differences?

I have several questions pertaining to what I see as important issues in Girard’s theory, but which may not have explicitly found a place in the thesis. If I understand it well, René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire or mimetic rivalry presents an account of human relationships based upon the imitative nature of desire. We learn what to desire by copying the desires of others. The desires we mimic can take many forms, from an acquisitive longing for products to that which we “lack” as part of what it is to be a complete human being. Here, the other exists simultaneously as model and obstacle. Consequently, to an external viewer, the rivals can take on the form of doubles: in taking each other as a model, each creates a mutual obstacle for each other. Doubles invariably lock into a reciprocity of escalating frustration and antagonism, and this mimetic exchange becomes violent. Thus, since the key subject in Girard’s theory is rivalry and the possibilities of violence which lie at the root of our desires, it seems to have little space for beneficial imitation or positive mimesis, as some critics claim. How would Zuzana Nováčková dispell such criticism?

Although Girard devotes himself to the role of ritual in his other writings, on religion and sacrifice, ritual does seem to play an important role in at least some of the analysed Mansfield stories (as a way of channelling, enacting etc. our desires?). Can we have a brief look at some of the social rituals at work in e.g. Miss Brill, The Garden Party etc.

To conclude, the thesis is well presented, structured logically and consistently. Its ideas are formulated in excellent language. Sometimes rather repetitive and not easily readable, it nevertheless refers to its sources in a useful and insightful manner, analysing significant passages and arguing forcefully. More attention could have been given to a critique of Girard's concepts and the exact nature of what his theory allows to see in literature, yet what all it can foreclose (see e.g. the role of gender, ethnicity, class, form - no attention to narrative perspective, possible irony etc.) Despite these remarks, I can only recommend the thesis for defence with the preliminary mark of excellent (výborně).

V Praze dne 31.8.2011

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