

Opponent's Report

Šárka Homolková, "Another Way Out: Women in Kate O'Brien's Fiction" (MA Thesis)

The topic of Ms Homolková's thesis is very apt, as her work discusses the selected novels of a fine writer who has up till very recently suffered from the neglect of critics. The specific focus is on the development of female protagonists in O'Brien's work, and it is the examination of these by subtle close reading that forms the chief strength of Ms Homolková's project. Not only does she highlight the most important features of the principal women in O'Brien's fiction and outline their journey towards independent selfhood in the respective novels, but she also produces a plausible argument concerning the development of the female protagonist in O'Brien's work as a whole.

Given the ambitious scope of the thesis and its aim to place Kate O'Brien's work in the broader context of Irish culture, it is regrettable that the candidate does not enter into a conversation with those representative treatments of the Irish novel that have appeared in the last decade or so. Most remarkably, John Wilson Foster has written about O'Brien with some admiration in the magisterial 2006 *Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, making a comparison with the work of her contemporaries such as Elizabeth Bowen, Pamela Hinkson and Margaret Barrington. Moreover, the same author included a chapter on women novelists, 1922-1940 in his acclaimed study *Irish Novels 1890-1940* (2008), again awarding a representative place to O'Brien in a comparative context with other Irish women writers of the period. On the other hand, the virtual absence of O'Brien from other recent studies of the genre, such as Derek Hand's *A History of the Irish Novel* (2011), surely merits attention as well, albeit for a different reason. As much as the bibliography of critical essays and studies on Kate O'Brien in Ms Homolková's work is almost complete, the lack of any attempt to discuss her place in the canon of Irish literature is disappointing. This is an issue that should be addressed at the defence of the thesis. (As far as the bibliography is concerned, the reader's appetite is whetted by the introductory acknowledgment for the permission to use Kate O'Brien's papers lodged at the University of Limerick; sadly, it turns out that their use in the thesis is minimal.)

As for language and style, the thesis would benefit from more careful copy editing: some passages make for a rather awkward read, there are occasional linguistic and typographical errors, while the final Czech summary demonstrates a hasty approach at best (why translate some titles of the novels into Czech, and not others? Why the basic errors of grammar?). The use of the term "pieces" in reference to literary texts, and novels in particular, is inadmissible in academic prose; this is a recurrent issue throughout the thesis.

As stated above, the structure of the work is clear, and the general argument also. My only critical reservation in this respect concerns the use of the term “feminist”: while Ms Homolková dedicates a considerable amount of space to an introductory summary of which critic has used the term in relation to which of Kate O’Brien’s novels (pp. 1-3), a conclusion on the issue is absent. This obscures the meaning of subsequent statements such as “*The Land of Spices* is [a!] purely feminist novel.” (p. 40) Again, the issue of O’Brien’s feminism may perhaps be further elaborated upon at the thesis defence.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade it as “very good”.

Prague, 9 May 2013

doc. Ondřej Pilný, PhD