

Posudek vedoucí na bakalářskou práci Bc. Petry Novákové

“Harry Potter: A Social Critique“

Chapter 17 of *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel* begins with the question: “Is fantasy the dominant mode of English twentieth-century fiction?” Surprising it may seem, but the question is not misguided at all. From the early 1900s numerous writers support a vision of the importance of this genre and the vast popularity of authors like J.R.R. Tolkien does indeed suggest an affirmative answer. Not to be viewed as a sign of the failure of the novel to treat the relation of art and society: Although fantasy has escapist aspects, in a way that seems to be a departure from the novel’s investment in realism, fantasy does (and always has done so) powerfully address contemporary life. By opening the door to unlimited imaginative possibilities, by contemplating the other side of history- the fantastic side - they can lead to action in the real world (cf. page251).

Such thoughts influenced the principal argument of the submitted BA thesis, which starts from the claim that the Harry Potter series of fantasy novels written by Rowling is a work of social criticism. After contextualizing the novels, placing them within the development of the fantasy genre and correctly mentioning its roots within the Gothic romance and the fairy tale, plus Victorian novels, Petra Nováková identifies a range of social issues that are explored in the novels and that become the backbone of her study: from racism, social and class prejudice, to nationalism, distribution of power etc. Unlike in most fantasy novels where the alternative world would be the only setting, claims Nováková, the Harry Potter series revolves around the interconnections between the worlds of wizards and muggles.

Petra Nováková bases her reading on drawing a series of analogies between the secondary world and our “real” world. One problem with this approach is that she takes the reality of the “real” world as a given, though she claims she is aware of the personal role of the author. There is little attempt the focus on the “real” as a representation, a fiction not a reality. Thus, for example, she is aware that the perspective of Rowling is subjective but does not very clearly indicate the specific politics of Rowling’s vision of the world (e.g. her essentially conservative approach). The politics of representation are marked by the choices made – who represents, what, for whom and how. The thesis is structured along interpretations of the allusions to reality. These may, of course, differ for individual readers, yet sometimes do verge on the speculative. Most of the time, though, Petra Nováková’s reading does make sense and is carefully supported. The conclusions and examples provided are mostly pertinent. (Although, surely, Arthur Weasley’s drafting of the Muggle Artifacts law so he could “tinker with Muggle rubbish” is not a very good example of the *abuse* of power and authority, page 30.)

Also, the readings of chapter 4, from page 37, could be more informed by UK migration policies (anti-migrant attitudes, institutional policies etc). Especially the pamphlet’s title seems to be a direct allusion to the dangers migrants cause, esp. those from Muslim countries. Therefore rather than a general historical allusion to the Holocaust, it is

contemporary conflicts (genocide, as correctly pointed out, but also possibly islamophobia etc). Arguably, Rowling alludes to contemporary realities and politics more frequently than may seem from the thesis.

Page 15 – reading the Latin spells is actually easier for English speakers than the thesis makes out.

Page 16 – I think the conclusion about runes is mistaken. Runes do not seem to be in general use in the wizarding world at all. Hermione attending an elective course devoted to them is an example of her academic interests and analytical mind (she prefers them to divination), they are meant to seem to the “normal” student as obsolete, ancient, incomprehensible, even a bit useless (a bit like HELL?).

From page 26 onwards, the concept of stereotyping is worked with in relation to representing various social issues (old age, ethnicity, even gender). It seems that JKR resorts to this representational device very often. How does this correspond with her social critique? Does she undermine stereotypes or actually perpetuate them?

In conclusion, I found the thesis fully in keeping with academic standards. It is mostly valuable for the thorough overview of social themes, which are thoroughly explored. In form and organization, the thesis is logical and appropriately structured. It could have benefitted from one more round of very careful proofreading as there are numerous language errors (grammar, spelling but also words missing). Ultimately, in its argumentation, there is a confusing movement between reading Rowling as an acute and original social critic (in relation to the character of her predecessors in fantasy hardly such an original novelty) and basically an observer of social ills. Harry Potter as social comment, perhaps, rather than a social critique?

I recommend the thesis for defence with the preliminary grade of very good

(v e l m i d o b ř e).

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Vedoucí práce

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