

Prof. David Robbins, Ph.D., thesis opponent
David Kudrna
The Comic in Henry James' Fiction
BA thesis evaluation
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The subject of this thesis is the study and interpretation of the interlacement of the world of comedy in several works of Henry James and the reflection in these fictions of certain specified problems and challenges of modern society which assist to bring forth the social ambience therein. To this end, the thesis looks at the following works of James: *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, "The Turn of the Screw" and "The Beast in the Jungle." In addition to a brief consideration of several critical approaches to the comedy in James's works, the thesis also similarly examines the currency of James's social consciousness, international social differences in James's works, their portrayal of the American and European social scenes, and socio-cultural and economic developments with negative effect on modern society, including the following: consumerism, materialism, moral abasement, objectification, commodification, commercialization, predatory financial acquisitiveness, rampant egotism, the interpenetration between the public and private spheres, and performativeness.

With respect to the four long works of Henry James (*The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors*), Mr. Kudrna's necessarily circumscribed consideration primarily of secondary analyses of the subject tends to affirm that comedy, to the extent that it can be understood to characterize James's works, resides there primarily in and for the purpose of critical (i.e., disparaging) examination of certain specified problems and challenges of modern society

In this consideration, Mr. Kudrna demonstrates a good general knowledge of the relevant critical literature, history, and controversies. The resulting conclusions are generally on point, but they and much of the analysis that supports them are derivative, based mostly on secondary, not primary, sources. Those sources are appropriately credited and acknowledged, but this diligence serves even further to confirm and emphasize the derivative nature of the principal substance of the exposition in these chapters.

With respect to the two shorter works ("The Beast in the Jungle" and "The Turn of the Screw"), Mr. Kudrna undertakes to demonstrate that, lacking, as they do, attempts (or perhaps even possibilities) for James to develop insights into the social scene, James's locus (and even motive) for comedic presentation is lacking, as is comedy in the resulting products. In a number of ways, Mr. Kudrna's exposition of these shorter (although not necessarily any more peripheral) works is better, more-wide ranging and independent than that on the novels, where he generally sticks close to authorities and authoritative opinion (although he does occasionally and conspicuously insert his "own opinion," usually without sufficient development of his positions where they "differ" from authoritative ones or "choose" between or among authorities).

I would also caution that, in Mr. Kudrna's exposition of the novels, virtually no account is taken of significant chronological, historical contextual, stylistic, and focal/purposive differences in production between the "early"/"youthful" *The Portrait of a Lady* (1882, and

much closer, in many of the categories listed above to *The American* and *Daisy Miller* than, to take the most comparable example, to *The Ambassadors*) and the other much later works of the "mature," "master," or "third" period (1900-1916)

In many places, Mr. Kudrna's rhetoric is repetitive, even mechanically repetitive, such as in reprising his findings at the end of each subchapter, in the conclusion, and in the abstract.

Finally, both in terms of idiom and style, there is a very noticeably overemployment of the indefinite article, among various other, but less disruptive and pervasive, grammatical, syntactical, and stylistic problems.

There are valuable insights here, but the reader is frequently left wondering to what extent these insights are Mr. Kudrna's and to what extent they are those of the various critics whom Mr. Kudrna has so carefully studied. It is, of course, the partial fate of all students of literature to come, sooner or later, to the point where the student is no longer sure which is which; but in the case of Mr. Kudrna's exposition, one has the feeling that this state is being brought about prematurely in both reader and writer.

Despite these concerns and caveats, the fact remains that this is a B.A. thesis, that a B.A. thesis is primarily designed as a learning experience, and that, if the lessons to be learned from its shortcomings are learned, then the purpose has been satisfied, and the writer has considerable time and opportunity still available to him for remediation and improvement. That is, I believe, the case here. Both Mr. Kudrna and his thesis show sufficient promise of such outcomes, and, based on that promise, I am led to conclude that this thesis merits an evaluation of "2, velmi dobre."

Thesis evaluation: "2, velmi dobre."

Signed:

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If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at drobbins222@gmail.com.