

Posudek oponenta na diplomovou práci Bc. Martiny Hrbkové “Gender Consciousness and Representation in Virginia Woolf’s Writing in Light of Contemporary Feminism and Gender Theory”

Virginia Woolf is often thought of as a feminist – sometimes referred to as proto-feminist or first-wave feminist etc. Is her work relevant to feminist thought today? What are contemporary perspectives on her thought and how did Woolf contribute to current theories of gender? These are some of the questions asked in the submitted thesis.

The author does not present Woolf’s ideas as a unified monolith but perceives them in their variety, development, even contradictions. In her indeed “nuanced discussion” of the narrative style, social and political dimensions of the construction of gender and representation of gender, and the “questioning of gender categories” in Woolf’s texts, Ms Hrbková uses several theoretical strands: so-called French feminism (Cixous’ essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”), intersectional feminism (focusing on the triumvirate of gender, class and race) and Butler’s gender theory. In the process she discusses four major novels (but also does not forget the key essays).

First and foremost it must be said that the submitted MA thesis is an excellent piece of writing and critical analysis. It is well-structured, logically organized and written in highly readable idiomatic English (only very few examples of stylistic clumsiness, e.g. on page 39 “point out the points). It proves the author’s erudition and ability of literary critical analysis as exemplified on her treatment of difficult theoretical texts but also minute close readings of text passages from the novels. As all such writing it does not stifle the reader but provokes questions. Therefore, the comments below are not to be taken as disagreements but perhaps rather observations and questions inspired by the text of the thesis:

1. Page 7. Has Ms Hrbková read any of Dorothy Richardson’s works? Does she share Woolf’s enthusiasm about Richardson’s style and her “woman’s sentence”?
2. I very much appreciate Chapter 1 and the presentation of the striving for a fundamentally different approach to writing. Ms Hrbková is fully aware of the problems of the French poststructuralist feminist project and she is not blind to its taking risks with essentialism. She does not overburden the thesis with superfluous presentations of the influence of Lacan and other male theorists (extensive influence indeed and such an irony in this case). However, I would have welcomed at least an aside or a footnote on the female critics and the similarities and differences between such figures as Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva. Moreover, would not Irigaray’s concept of mimicry as developed in her *This Sex Which Is not One* be also useful for the discussion of Mrs Dalloway, Mrs Ramsay and even Orlando?
3. One of the points of French feminism is problematising the so-called “representational nature of language”. As the word representation appears in the title of the thesis, some

clearer indication of the questions surrounding this idea in contemporary theory would have been useful (perhaps in the transition from chapter 1 to chapter 2).

4. Page 13. While the author's overall analysis of *Mrs Dalloway* is amazingly perceptive, it strikes me as rather odd that she is willing to dismiss Clarissa as a mere "inoffensive socialite" "pandering to the tastes of the male-centred establishment" and trying to "gain the approval of influential men". True enough, male experience does indeed remain as a key framework of reference but surely Septimus Smith, who is Clarissa's narrative parallel (perhaps this is not a good word, but there is an echo and an affinity for Clarissa, perhaps even an indication of her own end) cannot in any way be understood as part of the heteronormative order.
5. The outline of problems with Cixous' writing could have engaged with some more contemporary feminist critiques. As such, the thesis relies in a large degree on Ann Rosalind Jones' text from 1981 and on Toril Moi (1985).
6. There is no doubt about Woolf's class prejudice. But I think that some of the chosen examples are understood in a way unfair to Woolf. Page 44 (the mind not able to grasp the difference between 4 thousand and 4 million dead Armenians) for me actually brings to full attention our current sentimental tendencies (one dog dying is presented as a tragedy), reason blunted by numbers (millions of dead Russians in World War II) and circumstance (such as several individuals killed in a terrorist attack in Europe matter more than the thousands killed every week in riots or attacks or wars in Kabul or anywhere in the Middle East).
7. Page 45. It can indeed be argued that Miss Kilman is the object of dislike due to her low-class origin. But it is questionable which is primary. Low-class origin or the fact that she is incapable of any creative poetic vision. In this latter quality she is actually at one even with e.g. prominent upper-middle class doctors.
8. Perhaps empathy should not be mistaken with sentimentalisation. The beggar woman's song is a kind of "art", coming indeed from an ugly hag (one that we ourselves look away from with a deep, even if hidden, disgust or embarrassment, and therefore wish she did not exist). Her acknowledged "grotesqueness" need not be a case of "reduction" and "dehumanization" (as is firmly claimed and asserted on page 46). However, only one page later, actually refuted (page 47). My criticism here is therefore directed first towards the oversimplified first reading, and, second, to the structural incoherence of the analysis which results in a downright contradiction in the understanding of the role of the beggar woman. Moreover, the subversive or at least problematising complex reading is dismissed.
9. Page 79. The chapter on Orlando displays a keen and perceptive understanding of the key issues of Butler's theory. I appreciate especially the ability to clearly formulate her opinions. The reading of the double edged role of the authority of Truth in proclaiming Orlando's sexual identity is brilliant.
10. And last: Most current critics claim that she tried to "escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness" (*A Room of One's Own*). Consequently she adopted the

Bloomsbury sexual ethic of “androgyny” and hoped to achieve a balance between “male” self-realisation and “female” self-annihilation. Clearly, the whole of the submitted thesis complicates such simplified notions. But for the sake of clarity, how does Ms Hrbková posit herself to the term “androgyny”?

In conclusion, I find the MA thesis more than fully in compliance with all requirements regarding such academic work and fully recommend it for defence with the preliminary suggested grade excellent (**v ý b o r n ě**).

V Praze dne 29. 8. 2017

.....

PhDr. Soňa Nováková, CSc. MA.

úalk

FFUK