

## Supervisor's Report on M.A. Thesis by Simona Milotová

### “Agents without Agency: A Study of Archetypes and Society in Works of Edith Wharton”

Ms. Simona Milotová explores in her thesis work the problem of the agential dimension or lack therein of the human subject vis-à-vis the archetype and the circulation of the power of society in social relationships in fictional texts by the U.S. writer Edith Wharton (1862–1937). The thesis contains iii + 102 pp. across some preliminary matter, and the following units of composition:

1. Introduction 2. Wharton and New York 2.1. New York's Gilded Age 2.2. Wharton as Naturalist and Feminist Writer 3. The Structuralist Theory and the Archetypes 3.1. The Structure and Its Relations 3.2. “The Fated Heroine” Archetype 3.3. “The Cowardly Rebel” Archetype 3.4. “The New Man” Archetype 3.5. “The Rule Keeper” Archetype 4. Capitalism as the Ruler of the Society 4.1. Gilded Age Capitalism 4.2. The Archetypes and Capitalist Values 5. Conclusion Bibliography Appendix Abstract Abstrakt.

Four richly interesting and valuable charts constitute the aforementioned Appendix.

All in all, the prose is of a good standard. Ms. Milotová also exhibits a capacity to retain her own critical voice and independent mindedness within the various critics and theorists she engages and cites. There are, however, some glitches and typos in the prose style. For example: “more sensible comparison” (3) should read “a more sensible comparison”, “inquire critics” (6) should be “inquire into critics”, “member” (9) should be “members”, “the of novel” (14) should be “of the novel”, in a quote from CL-S “ever conceivable” (20) should be “every conceivable”, “why is” (24) should be “why is the most”, “myth” (26) should be “myths”, “Such notion” (27) should be “Such a notion”, “where it Ellen” (27) should read “where it is Ellen”, “have specified” (36) should be “has specified”, “no manner” (38) should be “no matter”, “hat” (39) should be “that”, “attainting” (40) should be “attaining”, “that who” (54) should be “one who”, “has significant” (64) should be “has a significant”, and “such notion” (83) should be “such a notion”.

All the same, the thesis overall is written in highly readable and articulate English. One other very minor technical point (so minor that it does not really constitute an “error” as such) but worth noting anyway is that in footnote 20 on page 9 there is a quote from Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* where the candidate could have noted more precisely that this comes from the *Preface to the Third French Edition* by Debord.

Centrally, early on in her account, Ms. Milotová articulates an accurate and forceful purview of the basic kernels of fact and objects of focus of the diploma thesis:

I believe that there is no individuality whatsoever in Wharton's text, as everything revolves around and succumbs to New York's leisure class, the society in the texts, and that while, at first, certain characters might be perceived as originals, with an in-depth analysis it can be proven that there

are only four types which Wharton implemented in her fiction to depict the strength of society as such. Moreover, society of the late 19th and the early 20th century was interwoven with capitalism and consumerism, and these tendencies have a prevalent nature within the description of the social practices of the novels as well. Her works in question for this thesis are *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence*, and remotely also *Old New York* and some of her short [2] stories. (1-2)

I find this both compelling and lucid. A little later on, the candidate supplements this with another summary account of matters, which well articulates the trajectory of the thesis as, namely, a

dissection and description of the particular archetypes based on the recurrent characters in Wharton's works, and that namely "The Fated Heroine," "The Cowardly Rebel," "The Rule Keeper," and "The New Man." A subchapter is devoted to each of these archetypes, to thoroughly analyze the similarities between the characters in each of the categories, constructing four new studies based on Lévi-Strauss's theory, even going as far as creating charts for the three primary sources, *The Custom of the Country*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Age of Innocence*, and, just like Lévi-Strauss, producing one conclusive chart that comprises all the archetypes, and establishes a starting point for the conversation that will ensue in later chapter. Furthermore, the discussion will be enriched with other characters from Wharton's lesser-known novellas and short stories, formulating an empirical analysis of the archetypes. (20)

To be sure, the thesis rolls in for critical use not only the theories and texts of the aboveindicated Claude Lévi-Strauss, but also of such other notables as Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, and a bevy of critics in *Edith Wharton Studies*. Northrop Frye is also given an interesting critical discussion and treatment. This syncretic conviviality all combine for a rich and unusually interesting thesis work full of notable aperçus from one chapter to the next one. One of the finer critical discussions of the thesis occurs in Chapter 3:

Unlike what many critics say, Lily is not a character obsessed with marriage and the idea that marriage is a simple business deal; had it been so, she would have married Rosedale the very first time she had met him.[en.126] This is the main reason why Selden is wrong in his impression of Lily and why his competence to read people is not as extraordinary as he postulates, because, ultimately, Lily wants to be loved for who she is, and it is the one thing Selden is incapable of giving her. While he believes that their marriage is impossible because Lily expects too much from it, it is, in fact, his fear of something real and tangible that eradicates the possibility of a happy relationship for him, strengthening the long-standing argument of Selden comfortably sitting in his bachelor apartment, letting Lily die.[en. 127] Despite his emotional immaturity, Selden, just like all the other "Cowardly Rebels" feel the need to try and prove their identities are not linked with the society by rebelling against the traditional ways, either successfully or not. (46)

The present writer finds this cogent. Further excellent discussion occurs on the next page when we read:

The relationship between Selden and Lily remains platonic, mainly because Selden is too prone to accept rumors about Lily rather than seeking the truth from her directly. His love is superficial, and while he is often given the agency of being an independent man rejecting Lily because he is too aware of the traps of marriage and the expenses Lily would expect him to do, the truth is [48] that it is his cowardice and emotional distance that put all of his relationships in jeopardy in the book. (47–48)

This is crucially interesting, not least because it shows how hoodwinked Selden is by the spectacle that words themselves constitute in the social world of the novel's luminous sociality. Another interesting aspect of the thesis is the candidate's emphasis on the matriarchal dimension of Wharton's artistic-social universe. This occurs for example in the below, which contains a fascinating discussion of the remarkable phenomenon of the matriarchal power system:

Matriarchy is portrayed everywhere in Wharton's texts, going as far as *Ethan Frome* [italics added E.R. even, but especially in the luxurious and claustrophobic environment of New York City, the reader sees the tendency of women being the outspoken parties in the family dynamics. Wharton's tendency to involve women in the decision-making process probably stemmed from the fact that the turn-of-the century literature was indeed filled with up-and-coming women. (65)

In the light of the foregoing, I ask the candidate the following questions: 1) is there a sense in which this state of affairs is preferable to a more patriarchal system in control in these same regards? 2) If so, why and how? If not, why and how? 3) Or: Should there rather be a kind of egalitarian civility between these various power systems or even another system yet to be innovated? Yet another compelling part of the equation in the thesis work is this:

The last piece of capitalism protruding into the daily life of the wealthy was sociability [84] and its impact on both finances and the general status of the elements of society. Sociability is described by Baudrillard as a crucial part of the exchange market and also its inevitable part.

It is the production of communication, of human relations in the service sector style. What it produces is sociability. Now, as a system of production, it cannot but obey the same laws as those of the mode of production of material goods. It cannot but reproduce in its very functioning the social relations it aims to transcend. [en. 230]

The production of sociability in the Gilded Age comes in the form of dinner and wedding invitations, conjoint holidays in Europe, or sharing a carriage. (83–84)

This constitutes an incisive and nuanced account. A further provocative and creative-critical moment in the thesis, occurs when we register that

Erik S. Roraback argues in his book on Balzac and James, “[i]n these contrasting nineteenth-century cultural texts, genuinely divine love extra-capital by contrast, constructs feminine worlds of progressive and resisting counter-power, of subversive if not only revolutionary minded non-power.” [en.235] Thus, by adhering to the extra-capital insistence on love, the character, and also Wharton, picture the feminine power in the capitalist society, which, [86] however, is oftentimes fruitless, as Wharton portrayed all of “The Fated Heroines” as unsuccessful in their seeking for the ultimate merriment. “The Rule Keepers” are seemingly the only ones with any capitalist power within the society, as they hold the reigns of the sociability as consumer goods within the particular circle, but it is “The New Man” who is the leading capitalist of all books. (85–86)

This is a convincing transposition for this reader of a move, from Balzac to James to Wharton, of a certain kind of transnational literary-cultural continuativeness and line of autopoietic development. The concluding words of the study sum up matters well, in capsule form, as far as the writer’s principal strategy for the thesis goes:

This thesis offers a naturalist, determinist, and capitalist reading of Edith Wharton’s New York fiction, believing that all three of the descriptions are crucial for Wharton and the analysis of her work, in which her characters have no say over their lives. They are all mere archetypes and categories of the real society in the Gilded Age, never straying from the structure society had inflicted on them. (89)

All in all, this is trenchant material, and displays work—which may also be found wall-to-wall in this illuminating thesis—that is to be lauded.

In light of the foregoing mentions, I hereby recommend the pre thesis defense mark of a 1 (výborně) for the thesis work.



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