

Opponent's Review

Barbara Bindasová, "Narrative Strategies and the Themes of Bildungsroman Genre in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*?"

Barbara Bindasová chose to discuss in her thesis four acclaimed novels from or about Ireland, particularly in relation to their use of elements of the Bildungsroman. After a rather sketchy general introduction of the genre, the candidate provides a poignant summary of the use of Bildungsroman in Irish literature, stressing the characteristics that differentiate the Irish variety of the genre from other European manifestations, especially as regards the missing final moment of 'coming back to the fold' which tends to be replaced in Irish fiction rather by deliberate exclusion of oneself from the society as a sign of maturity. The only significant absence in the introduction is the lack of examples of English Bildungsromane which – the candidate claims – the Irish form of the genre tends to follow.

The most successful part of the thesis is the interpretation and comparative analysis of the four novels. The candidate demonstrates their numerous similarities, from all the texts dealing with dysfunctional families up to their setting within communities characterised by a wide range of problems. At the same time, however, no attempt is made at a forcible unification of the four texts in order to make claims as regards the current shape of the genre in Irish fiction: the differences among the texts remain acknowledged within what is a sensitive and perceptive comparison. Moreover, in the case of *Angela's Ashes* the candidate points out very well that despite obvious structural similarities with the other novels, the text remains ridden by clichés dictated chiefly by a concern about its target audience, i.e. Irish-American readers of a particular kind.

As regards the interpretation of the respective novels, it is quite refreshing to see an analysis of Deane's *Reading in the Dark* as a type of Bildungsroman, instead of yet another post-colonial reading of the novel shaped largely by an attitude to who its author is (an important post-colonial critic hailing from Northern Ireland). Deane's novel, however, does not sit easily with the genre, as it is partially acknowledged also by the candidate in her discussion. What may have been highlighted in addition to the listed differences which distinguish the novel from a typical Bildungsroman is the fact that the protagonist ends up as an outcast, while being ostracised does not exactly equal leaving the community of one's own volition in order to achieve maturity (as it seems to be implied on p. 58).

My reservations concern almost exclusively the use of language. Rather frequent grammar mistakes occur, especially in the introductory section of the thesis, where terminology is also used at times in a rather haphazard manner (“a strong leitmotif of the Bildungsroman representation in the novels;” p. 20) or dubious claims are made (“Bildungsroman represents the best possible literary form in order to shape the reader and direct him/her through the experiences and adventures of its heroes;” p. 10). I wonder as well about the musings concerning the meaning of the term “Bildungsroman” in German (p. 9): any dictionary will reveal that the meaning of “Bildung” relevant here is “education,” while the word “Bild” is immaterial.

Notwithstanding the objections raised above, Barbara Bindasová’s thesis represents a useful contribution to the study of recent Irish fiction, and certainly fulfils the criteria to be met by an MA thesis. I have perhaps just one issue to raise for the defence: given how detailed and perceptive the comparative analysis is, I wonder could the candidate say something about what the endings of the novels indicate about the politics of the respective texts, especially given the social contexts in which they are set.

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

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