

Opponent's Report on B. A. thesis
LITERARY, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL INFLUENCES IN THE WORKS AND
BELIEFS OF OSCAR WILDE
by Alex Lorenzů

This is an excellent thesis and I have no hesitation in recommending the grade of **výborně**. The student displays a maturity of judgement and breadth of knowledge that is unusual at this level, and has impressively marshalled a wide range of materials into an integrated whole. The writing and argumentation is at all times clear and to the point. I thought the discussion of Walter Pater, the cultural contexts of Greece and Rome, the coterie dynamic of non-heterosexual works, exemplary. It is a mark of my respect for the thesis, and not any low opinion of it, that I make the following criticisms.

Despite the wide brief indicated by the title of the work, the student dwells for the most part on sexuality in *Dorian Gray*. There is a healthy awareness of the pitfall of intellectual anachronism, that is, of applying twenty-first century concepts to the *fin de siècle*. Nevertheless, and despite the caveats stated in the thesis, I found a general drift towards such anachronism, especially in the student's reading of Wilde as subversive (a frequently used word in the thesis). One of the ways that Marxism has affected literary criticism is in the way that it encourages us to make our favourite writers subversive (thus, for instance, Jane Austen is a subversive element in Regency Britain), and damn our least favourite writers for their conservatism or imperial sympathies (for instance, Kipling). This is especially unhelpful in the case of Wilde, as a strong case could be also made for seeing him as deeply conservative, both on aesthetic and ethical levels. For Wilde's art (from the children's stories to the great dramas, neither of which are discussed here) makes things ethically right in its conclusions. Granted, there remains moral ambiguity (as in *An Ideal Husband*), but we do Wilde a disservice by presuming that such conclusions--as Henry James described them as they appear in Victorian fiction, 'a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks'--are somehow 'tacked on', not integral to the works and, ultimately, not to be taken seriously. Thus, when discussing the end of *Dorian Gray*, the student writes: 'Emphasis here is placed more on shock than on driving home a forceful moral pronouncement, and it is significant that after the initial charged discussions, critics have approached this text as a much more nuanced and even ambivalent entity' (p. 50).

Anyone can create a scandal, but few can create a literary *succès de scandale*, as Wilde did: that demands more discerning intellectual abilities, specifically, it demands that one is not too scandalous too suddenly; it involves the incorporation of conservative elements (both ethical and aesthetic), but their slightly surprising transformation. Now, the student might want to say that Wilde incorporated such elements in order to mollify the staunch Victorian burghers in his audience, but what is the point of such speculation? This seems motivated by a desire to maintain Wilde as an LGBT icon for our time. In my view, it is more critically profitable instead to admit that we have, across the range of Wilde's works, a conservatism that is central to his artistic imagination (the shaping of his plots and the outcomes of his characters). Wilde engages forcefully with this conservatism: after all he does want to scandalize his audience, but if he doesn't entertain them at the same time, all is lost. At several points in the thesis, the student seems aware of this dynamic (e.g., on p. 22: 'Already we can see the central thesis of Wilde's approach to being risqué while remaining within the boundaries of conventional acceptability'), but is pulled away repeatedly to a subversive reading of Wilde.

Of course, here Wilde himself jumps to the assistance of the student, with his apothegm: 'An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.' But, in my

opinion, the picture in Wilde's own attic was of an arch moralist, who believed in the redemptive paradigm of Christianity. I look forward to arguing the point at the defence.

Some details:

It would have been helpful if the student had engaged the context of Uranian writing in the period; this would have been especially germane to the discussion of modes of non-heterosexual being and how they affect cultural work.

On p. 14, the student refers to the UK, which is an anachronism (the United Kingdom was only used after 1927). 'Go-to' is used *passim* as adjective: while not incorrect, this is the wrong register for academic writing.

doc. Justin Quinn Ph.D.

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