

David Robbins, thesis director

M.A. thesis evaluation

Tereza Tersova

Emerson's Influence on Women in Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne

This thesis sets itself the ambitious task of examining the works of nineteenth-century American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson, which both during his lifetime and subsequently have offered inspiration to many and diverse readers, particularly due to their advocacy for empowerment of the individual. In Ms. Tersova's view, due to its emphasis on the concepts of self-reliance, inner guidance and the aboriginal Self, Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy elaborates theses that favor the individual over community, such as the superiority and sanctity of self-definition, as opposed to definitions constructed by society and imposed on the individual. It is possible, then, she argues, to perceive his philosophy as important for the formation of the Women's Rights Movement and for emerging feminism. In his four romances, Ms. Tersova centrally maintains, Nathaniel Hawthorne creates female protagonists who advocate for women's right to self-reliance as Emerson describes it. Hawthorne's heroines can be understood and interpreted, she asserts, as contemplating the Emersonian principles, thus illustrating the connection between Emerson's philosophy, and themes and motifs present in Hawthorne's romances. In addition, she undertakes to demonstrate that, related to Hawthorne's portrayal of the heroines' reflections on the concepts of inner guidance, the aboriginal Self, moral dereliction and self-reliance, is Hawthorne's attitude toward the relationship between "womanhood" and "femininity" on one side, and "manhood" and "masculinity" on the other side. The ambivalence of woman, as depicted by Hawthorne, she concludes, consists in the discrepancy between attributes traditionally associated with "femininity", such as devotion, affection and humility, and the will to self-reliance, self-assertion and independence.

In this undertaking, Ms. Tersova has produced a balanced and nuanced treatment of both Hawthorne's and Emerson's attitudes toward and handling of women and the "woman question." The core issue for both writers, as it appears, was women's capacity to be "self-reliant" (morally autonomous, self-constructing) as Emerson (and, from Emerson, Hawthorne) understood that phrase. That they had a right to engage in that liberating process, there was (as was the case, in Emerson's view, with African Americans, as well) no question; the issue was their capacity to undertake and sustain such a life-process. This issue, which forms an on-going central theme in the works of Emerson's and Hawthorne's great admirer Henry James and beyond, forms the main theme of Ms. Tersova's insightful examination of Hawthorne's four great romances.

While, as is normal among scholars, I have certain disagreements in detail with a few of Ms. Tersova's emphases (she might have said more about Margaret Fuller's complicated interaction with Emerson and their mutual influence, and might usefully have drawn a bit more on the work of, for example, Judith Butler), I happily acknowledge that, within my area of particular research competence, her premises and historical background are sound and consistent with current scholarly consensus, and her conclusions based on them often point in valuable new directions not at all incompatible with the current trajectory of exploratory scholarship

Ms. Tersova demonstrates a wide and fluent knowledge of the principal works of Emerson and of Hawthorne that address the "woman question.". The points that she makes about the contents, and about

the "feminist" as well as literary significance, of the highlighted essays and romances are always relevant and helpful in understanding the works, their writers, the tensions between both the works' and the writers' philosophical and psychological/sociological preoccupations, and the resulting societally- and historically-conditioned conceptual and temperamental "blockages."

This is, in my view, an excellent master's thesis, and I strongly endorse the quality of its expository style, the literary analysis that it presents, and the philosophical and cultural conclusions that it offers.

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne"

Signed:

Prof. David L. Robbins, Ph.D.
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures
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If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at [drobbins22@netzero.net](mailto:d Robbins22@netzero.net).