



POSUDEK OPONENTA BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk a literatura – Německý jazyk a literatura**

Název práce: **Feminism in *The Scarlet Letter* and comparing Hester Prynne with Margaret Fuller's writings in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century***

Autorka práce: **Tereza Konopková**

Vedoucí bakalářské práce: **Einat Adar, M.A., Ph.D.**

Oponentka bakalářské práce: **doc. PhDr. Mariana Machová, Ph.D.**

Quality of Research

1) Please rate the following statements about the thesis on a scale of 1 (insufficient) to 3 (excellent)

The topic of the thesis is suitable for the scope and well defined: 3

Sets clear goals or questions for research: 3

Demonstrates conceptual clarity and accuracy: 2

Demonstrates a good understanding of the literary work(s) discussed: 2

Engages with the subject critically and analytically: 2

Uses relevant scholarship meaningfully: 2

2) Comment shortly on the quality of the research presented in the thesis:

The topic of the thesis is well chosen and the goals are clearly stated. The framework of feminist thought is clear, however, the focus tends to wander away from the main line of argument to unnecessarily detailed historical and biographical chapters. The discussion often remains on the descriptive level without delving deeper and creatively engaging with the problems and the works discussed. The scholarly sources used are relevant and appropriate, but too often there are claims and statements that lack any reference to an authoritative source and it is not clear where they come from.

Quality of Writing

1) Please rate the following statements about the thesis on a scale of 1 (insufficient) to 3 (excellent)

Has a clear and suitable structure: 2

Employs appropriate register and academic style: 3

Uses correct and relevant terminology: 2

Adheres to academic thesis guidelines, format and MLA style guide: 3

Written in correct and fluent English (both grammar and vocabulary): 2

Carefully edited with few typos or mistakes: 3

2) Comment shortly on the quality of the writing presented in the thesis:

The thesis is written in standard academic style, the level of English is good, but there are more than a few stylistic and syntactic mistakes, particularly in the longer and more complex sentences. The structure is clear and logical, however, it does not quite work as an organic whole, the thesis has a tendency to fall apart into the individual chapters (see more on that below).



Overall Review and Assessment

(short description of the thesis and its findings, what has been achieved, and areas for improvement)

This is a good and diligently written thesis on a clear and relevant topic – the question of feminism of Nathaniel Hawthorne's most famous work, *The Scarlet Letter*. The thesis puts the novel in the highly relevant contemporary context of the early women's rights movement in the U.S., and relates it specifically to the works of Margaret Fuller. The central focus is on the character of Hester Prynne, seen through the prism of Margaret Fuller's key proto-feminist work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. The declared goal of the thesis is to answer the question whether Hester Prynne can be interpreted as a feminist character.

The idea of reading the character of Hester Prynne side by side with *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* makes good sense and has the potential to offer interesting fresh insights into one of the strongest female characters of 19th-century American literature. This potential is not met to its full in the thesis, but it must be said that the goal set was not easy, and that the works discussed are quite difficult for interpretation. The student did not face an easy task, and she clearly worked hard to fulfill it. The result without doubt fulfils the requirements for a BA thesis, despite the fact that I do not find it completely satisfactory on various levels. In the following assessment I will limit myself to a more detailed discussion of two of these problematic areas.

The first problematic area is the main line of argument. The research question is whether Hester Prynne can be seen as a feminist character. However, most of the thesis does not really deal with the question or with the search for the answer. A large part focuses on very general contextual information. The informative overview of the historical context seems unnecessarily broad and detailed, disproportionately so for such a short thesis, too many names and works, which are not particularly relevant for the topic (how are all the early women's rights activists and their many works relevant for the discussion of the feminism in Hawthorne's novel apart from the fact that he was quite probably aware of them?). The biographical information on Fuller and Hawthorne also lacks a clear connection to the topic of the thesis. This does not necessarily mean that the context is unimportant – quite the contrary – but the thesis fails to demonstrate its essential importance for the topic. It remains on the descriptive surface without drawing clear and explicit lines between the historical situation and the work analyzed. One result of this shortcoming is that the thesis tends to fall apart; rather than a clear line of logical argument supported by references to historical facts and to literary and critical texts it is a pile of isolated chapters, each with its own topic and focus, many of them merely summing up rather basic information. Given the weakness of argumentation the final negative answer to the topical question comes as a surprise. I did not see the arguments strong enough to support this conclusion. Many of the crucial claims do not seem to be firmly grounded in the text of the novel. For example, we read in the thesis that at the beginning of the novel Hester "is determined to stay and change the perspective of all the people who punish and look down on her for breaking out of the norm" seems problematic – is this really the reason she stays in Boston? Is Hawthorne clear about her motivations? What does he say in the novel that warrants this reading? – and, again, I am not saying the reading is not possible, I only do not see enough arguments in the thesis that would justify it. Similarly, the argument that Hester fails to change the people's perspective by the end of the novel (which is one of the key reasons for rejecting her potential feminism) seems dubious – at various points in the novel Hawthorne is quite explicit about the fact that people gradually started viewing Hester differently, to the extent that the letter A itself had lost its original meaning and was interpreted in new ways. Is that not a clear sign of a change of perspective? An, even if she really did not



achieve a major social change – does that really mean that she cannot be read as a proto-feminist character?

This last question brings me to another problematic area: some basic conceptual foundations of the thesis seem a bit shaky. The thesis does not satisfactorily define the key concepts and therefore some essential points are not quite clear – one of them is the question of what constitutes a feminist character or a feminist novel or a feminist reading. It would have been a good idea to refer to a sound scholarly work on feminism in literature and on the history of the women's movement. It is actually not clear at all what sources the chapter on the feminist context is based on. That is a major problem, which can be seen already in the first sentence of Chapter 2.1: "Feminism in general is a movement of women as well as men who aspire to gain equal rights for all genders." – while the definition is not necessarily incorrect, it is only one possible definition and not the most universally accepted one (for one thing, and especially in the earlier development of the movement, it is the equality of sexes, not genders, that is the conceptual basis of the movement; gender is a much later concept and is more directly related to the LGBTQ+ movement, rather than the feminist movement). When defining a crucial concept in a thesis – such as feminism here – it is important to refer to a particular authoritative source, which does not happen here or later in the chapter. The chapter refers to one source (Alison M. Parker's review of *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Woman's Rights Movement* by Sally G. McMillen), which is, however, not listed in the "Works Cited", and it is a book review, not an original scholarly work. Similar lack of reference to sound authoritative sources can be seen elsewhere in the thesis (e.g. in Chapter 3.2, the opening claim about the two traditional representations of women lacks any kind of explanation or support, while clearly the whole paragraph cannot be a result of the students own original research – if it were, it would need a whole chapter developing and explaining such research; also elsewhere it is not clear what the source of the often detailed biographical or historical contextual information is). Some works, which would have deserved to be used as sources, are quoted only second-hand despite the fact that they are available online (e.g. Louise DeSalvo book of feminist readings of Hawthorne – quoted second-hand through Nina Baym's article in the thesis on p. 22 - is easily accessible through Open Library). At the same time, a lot of weight is given to high-school students' opinions on the novel discussed in an article about teaching methods. That said, the thesis works with some relevant sources and cites them adequately and correctly.

Overall, as I have already said in this report, this is a fine thesis which is clearly a result of diligent and hard work and fulfills the criteria for a BA thesis. However, it does not meet the criteria for an excellent BA thesis and I propose the grade "velmi dobře".

Questions for Defence

(please provide two questions for the student to answer during their defence)

1. One area I painfully missed in your discussion of the character of Hester is her mind, her ideas and thoughts as shown by Hawthorne. These seem to me more relevant for the potential feminist interpretation of the character than her actions. Could you discuss them from the 19th-century feminist perspective and relate them to some of Fuller's ideas? (You can focus on one of the crucial chapters in this respect, Chapter 13 "Another View of Hester").
2. Your conclusion is that Hester is more of a transcendentalist than a feminist. How are these two worldviews related (or were in Fuller's and Hawthorne's times)? Are they mutually exclusive?



Filozofická
fakulta
Faculty
of Arts

Jihočeská univerzita
v Českých Budějovicích
University of South Bohemia
in České Budějovice

Práci doporučuji k obhajobě.

Navrhovaná klasifikace: **velmi dobře**

19. 8. 2023

Datum

Podpis