

Opponent's Report

Veronika Briatková

The Creation of the Mad Scientist in the Works of H.G. Wells

As suggested by the dissertation title, Veronika Briatková primary focus is the character of the mad scientist in H.G. Wells' scientific romances *Invisible Man* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. In addition to these principal sources the dissertation contains occasional references to the time travel story "The Chronic Argonauts" and the author also resorts to other fantastic stories by Wells, whenever she identifies a fitting illustration for her points.

Surveying the formation and transformation of this character type across various cultures and eras, Veronika Briatková builds on the work of scholars who covered the topic of the mad scientist before (Haynes, Goodrich). Against this background she offers her own interpretations and analyses, aiming at allowing "us to see the depth beyond the surface level characterizations based on dichotomies such as good/bad, mad/sane, social/antisocial, emotional/unfeeling". (132) Another book by Rosalyn Haynes, *H. G. Wells: Discoverer of the Future* (1980), forms the main source of information concerning the author and his times.

The main theoretical vantage points are David Herman's notions of the basic elements of narrative, the work on conceptual metaphors by Lakoff and Johnson, Panther and Thornburg's paper "A Metaphor and Metonymy in Language and Thought", Lisa Zunshine's evolutionary cognitive approaches to literature and Rabinowitz' "complications", which enter the processes of "mind-reading" and "mind-writing" among the characters.

The above approaches and notions are used to cast a fresh look at the novels, especially regarding the narrative construction of the characters – the mad scientists, as well as their companions - and their respective interactions. For instance, if Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphors represent entities that can be inferred or implied, then, we are told, we can use them as tools "for analyzing the narrative elements of *what it's like*, and also *world/making and disruption* (David Herman's terms - TP), because they relate to the characters' experience" (24). Two key conceptual metaphors - LIFE IS A JOURNEY and WAR IS A GAME - pervade the analysis, shedding more light on the characters and the situations they are set into.

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The principal focus on conceptual metaphors and metonymies, as they inform the various processes of mind-reading and mind-writing by (and of) the characters, is further extended by the “approaches to categorization and prototype construction by Patrick Colm Hogan” and Noel Carroll’s discussion of the nature and narrative structure of the horror genre.

This survey of theorists and critics whose concepts are brought to bear on the novels is by far complete as many other influential personages in philosophy, cultural studies, linguistics, cognitive literary studies, game studies, archetypal literary theory, and psychoanalytical theory are referenced, and their ideas are used. Despite the at times sketchy nature of these references, their wide breadth belongs to one of the positive features of this interdisciplinary work.

Veronika Briatková is at her best when engaged in minute close reading, for instance when offering us various interpretations of the scientists, their companions, or the locations they find themselves in. These passages, marked by a good ratio of paraphrase and quotes, and keen theoretical awareness, provide the reader with most convincing analytical insights and apt illustrations of the argued points.

Yet, despite these unquestionable strengths, there are also problems. While Veronika Briatková quotes Monika Fludernik, who characterizes literary studies up to 1980 in the following terms: "The formula could be summarized as no history, no ethics, no themes no aesthetics, and no context—period" (19), thus suggesting a support for the contrary, her text is not particularly strong on the issues of history or context, either. We may be thoroughly informed about the history of alchemy and the development of conflicts between religious dogmas and modern science, but we are spared much more relevant information about Wells himself and the culture he is responding to a writing for. To be sure, some points suggesting this are present, but never in any systematic manner.

For instance, on page sixteen Veronika Briatková promises to put Wells’s writings into some perspective and compare him with another founding father of the sci-fi genre, Jules Verne. This appears to be a most valid decision, promising a wealth of information about the respective methods of these two influential writers. Yet instead of a thorough comparison of both writers and their respective approaches, we are only offered two brief quotations from secondary sources, and the discussion moves elsewhere. And so, the resulting text, although rich in reference, at times suffers from relevant context, leaving the reader in the dark about Wells the writer, his career, his sources of inspiration, the debates he has been involved in, and the reception of his work.

Nowhere in the dissertation do I find an attempt at justification for the selection of the texts selected for analysis. The dissertation is marked by an important word: saliency. Obviously, to the author of the dissertation, *The Invisible Man* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and "The Chronic Argonauts" appear more salient than *The Time Machine* or *The First Men in the Moon*. But the reader is never told why Dr. Nebogipfel from "The Chronic Argonauts" represents a

better case study than the Time Traveller from *The Time Machine*. Would it not have been a good idea to share the reasons?

Given the fact Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction* happens to be one of the major theoretical vantage points, its presentation in the text is not entirely developed. It would have been useful to incorporate a passage summarizing the basics of her "theory of mind", and the relevance it bears for the field of literary studies. Unfortunately, such survey is nowhere to be found and the ensuing analysis at times deteriorates into a stylistic exercise of sorts. Are we seriously supposed to believe that phrases such as "mind-reading cravings" (curiosity, inquisitiveness) or "occlusion in Griffin's mind writing" (lack of expression due to invisibility) "his mind-reading absorbs the information" (he learns, finds out or gets to understand) enable us to gain a clearer idea about the novels, their characters, and their possible meanings?

Chapter ten covers the cultural images of madness. Here very scant attention is paid to the thought of one of the central figures in the field, Michel Foucault. Even if the way the French philosopher describes the nature and history of madness is not deemed useful, in a chapter devoted to the topic of madness and its images, there should have been a more thorough discussion covering Foucault's contribution, then possibly followed by an explanation why his work is less relevant for the project at hand. If some voices criticizing Foucault have been quoted (Feder), it would have been only fair to provide Foucault with some space of his own, as well.

If the chapter eleven, entitled "Revisiting the Mad Scientist", were shifted forward, most probably to the position between the current chapters three and four, it would have been much more logical. In its current position it only serves as a kind of afterthought, which is a pity.

The dissertation is not entirely devoid of mistakes and some incorrect formulations, whose density increases toward the end of the text (see p. 41, 42, 64, 67, 99, 106, 108, 111, 115, 125, 127, 128).

It is beyond doubt that a lot of serious intellectual effort has been invested into the submitted dissertation and the standard of Veronika Briatková's writing meets the requirements associated with academic production at the doctoral level. That is why I recommend it for a successful defense.

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