MUNI ARTS

Faculty of Arts, Master's Thesis

Thesis Reviewer's report

Thesis Title:	The Victorian Novel and the Development and Problems of British Modernity
Field of Study:	FF N-AJ_ FNAJpJ [sem 4, cycle 2]
Department:	Department of English and American Studies
Author:	Bc. Daniel Čermák
Supervisor:	Stephen Paul Hardy, Ph.D.
Reviewer:	doc. Michael Matthew Kaylor, PhD.

Reviewer's recommendation for overall mark: passed with excellent results

1. Evaluation of central idea, thesis, focus and purpose: passed with excellent results

2. Evaluation of organization, logic and arrangement: passed with excellent results

3. Evaluation of topic development, support and evidence: passed

4. Evaluation of language, style, standard usage, citation and bibliographic standards: passed

Comments and/or topics and questions for the thesis defence:
Daniel Čermák's thesis, *The Victorian Novel and the Development and Problems of British Modernity*, examines the Victorian novel as both a reflection of and a grappling with the historical formation of British modernity. The study situates Victorian fiction within a broad historical framework extending from the seventeenth century through industrialization, imperial expansion, secularization, and the emergence of liberal and utilitarian thought. The thesis argues that the Victorian novel "not only represents social problems but also contributes to the formation of a modern understanding of society" by dramatizing how "individual experience is shaped by broader economic, social, and cultural structures."

The opening chapters establish the political and intellectual foundations of British modernity through discussions of the English Civil Wars, the Glorious Revolution, the fiscal-military state, and the rise of the public sphere. Drawing upon historians and theorists including Christopher Hill, John Brewer, Jürgen Habermas, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson, the thesis traces the emergence of industrial capitalism and new forms of social organization. It emphasizes that industrialization transformed Britain into "a society increasingly organized around industrial production, urban concentration, and wage labour," producing intensified class division and social inequality. The study also follows the movement from religious to secular forms of explanation through the Scottish Enlightenment, utilitarianism, and Darwinian thought.

The literary chapters proceed chronologically through major Victorian novelists. Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* are read as critiques of institutional cruelty, utilitarian rationalism, and industrial dehumanization. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South* are interpreted as attempts to mediate class conflict while acknowledging structural inequality. The thesis then turns to gender and social mobility in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and finally Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and George Gissing's *The Odd Women*. The thesis concludes that the Victorian novel records a movement from comparatively hopeful visions of reform toward a darker understanding of modern society in which individual effort is constrained by impersonal social structures.

This is an ambitious and intellectually serious attempt to synthesize literary criticism, social history, political thought, and intellectual history into a coherent account of Victorian fiction as an expression of British modernity. Its principal strength lies in the breadth of its historical framing. Rather than isolating Victorian novels as autonomous aesthetic objects, the thesis situates them within a *longue durée* history of political, economic, and intellectual transformation extending from the seventeenth century through late nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. This approach gives the project unusual conceptual scope for an M.A. thesis and demonstrates substantial independent reading across disciplines.

One of the thesis's strongest achievements is its effort to connect literary representation with transformations in social thought. The chapters on the Scottish Enlightenment, utilitarianism, and secularization are especially effective because they establish the intellectual framework through which the later literary analyses become legible. The discussion of Adam Smith's account of sympathy, for example, anticipates the thesis's later interest in social interdependence and moral responsibility in *Middlemarch*. Likewise, the treatment of Habermas's "public sphere" and Williams's "knowable community" provides a useful conceptual vocabulary for understanding the Victorian novel as a form mediating between private experience and collective social life.

The thesis also demonstrates a strong grasp of historical process. Industrialization is understood not merely as technological change but as a transformation of social relations. Particularly effective is the discussion of urbanization and class formation, where industrial society is described as producing "a society increasingly organized around industrial production, urban concentration, and wage labour." Throughout, the study emphasizes the relation between economic systems, moral thought, institutional structures, and individual lives. That emphasis gives the project thematic coherence.

The literary readings themselves are often perceptive and clearly argued. The analysis of *Oliver Twist* succeeds because it links Dickens's institutional critique to broader structures of social administration and economic logic. The reading of the famous "Please, sir, I want some more" scene correctly identifies how Oliver's request becomes treated as "an act of defiance" rather than a legitimate expression of need. The thesis perceptively notes that "the response is not merely punitive but disproportionate," revealing how the workhouse operates through discipline and deterrence rather than charity. Similarly, the discussion of *Hard Times* effectively interprets Coketown as a quasi-organic industrial organism whose "interminable serpents of smoke" symbolize the self-perpetuating violence of industrial capitalism.

The chapters on gender are likewise among the strongest sections of the thesis. The treatment of *Jane Eyre* demonstrates sensitivity to the unstable and conditional nature of female autonomy within Victorian society. The contrast between Jane and Bertha Mason is handled thoughtfully, particularly when the thesis observes that Bertha is "repeatedly described as 'mad' or a 'lunatic,' a label that reduces her to her condition and supports her continued confinement." The analysis also recognizes that Jane's apparent independence remains materially contingent, since her eventual autonomy depends upon inheritance no less than perseverance.

The discussion of *Middlemarch* is perhaps the thesis's most intellectually mature section. It recognizes that Eliot's novel differs structurally and philosophically from the more direct social critiques found in Dickens and Gaskell. The thesis convincingly argues that Eliot presents society as "a network of social relations, where their actions are influenced not only by personal values but also by expectations, obligations, and the presence of others." Particularly effective is the treatment of unintended consequence and limited social knowledge, especially in the observation that Eliot's characters remain morally responsible even when they cannot fully foresee the effects of their actions.

At the same time, the thesis's ambitions generate some of its principal weaknesses. The most significant problem is methodological overextension. The study attempts to cover an immense range of historical and intellectual material alongside readings of several major Victorian novelists. As a consequence, many sections become compressed exposition rather than sustained argument. Entire intellectual traditions occasionally appear in simplified form. The discussions of Max Weber, Habermas, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx are generally accurate, yet they sometimes function more as contextual survey than as analytical frameworks rigorously integrated into the literary readings. This problem is particularly evident in the historical opening chapters. Although the material is consistently competent, the thesis occasionally risks becoming a survey of British history rather than a literary argument about Victorian fiction. Large portions of the early chapters could be condensed without weakening the literary analysis. The extensive treatment of the English Civil Wars, the fiscal-military state, and imperial finance sometimes feels disproportionate relative to the later discussions of fiction. The connection between seventeenth-century constitutional development and Victorian narrative form is asserted more often than demonstrated.

The thesis also tends toward explanatory determinism. Social and economic structures frequently appear to shape literary texts in relatively direct ways, while the formal complexity of literature receives less sustained attention. Although the thesis repeatedly insists that literature does more than merely “reflect” society, several analyses nevertheless revert to a reflection model in practice. Dickens becomes the novelist of industrial cruelty, Gaskell the novelist of mediation, Eliot the novelist of interdependence, Hardy and Gissing the novelists of pessimism. These categories remain heuristically useful, yet they can flatten contradiction within individual works.

Relatedly, the literary analyses would benefit from greater attention to narrative technique, genre, irony, voice, and structure. The thesis is strongest when discussing thematic and ideological content, but it devotes comparatively little space to the formal means through which novels produce meaning. Dickens’s grotesque exaggeration, Eliot’s narratorial intrusions, Hardy’s symbolic landscapes, and Gissing’s late realist pessimism are discussed primarily as vehicles for ideas rather than as literary techniques possessing historical significance in their own right.

The argument concerning historical progression also becomes somewhat schematic. The thesis proposes a movement from relatively optimistic early Victorian reformism toward increasingly pessimistic late Victorian determinism. While this structure gives the dissertation coherence, it risks oversimplifying both periods. Dickens himself can be profoundly pessimistic, while Eliot’s moral vision remains more hopeful than the thesis sometimes allows. Conversely, Hardy’s fiction contains moments of ethical resistance that complicate a wholly deterministic interpretation.

There are also moments where the prose moves too quickly from quotation to interpretation without fully unpacking textual detail. The thesis frequently identifies the general significance of passages correctly but occasionally stops at paraphrase rather than sustained close reading. Greater attention to diction, imagery, syntax, and narrative perspective would strengthen the literary criticism considerably.

Nevertheless, these weaknesses arise largely from intellectual ambition rather than conceptual confusion. The thesis demonstrates substantial interdisciplinary reading, serious engagement with major critical traditions, and a sustained effort to synthesize history and literary criticism into a unified account of Victorian modernity. Its central insight—that the Victorian novel progressively registers the tensions and limits of British modernity—remains persuasive throughout. Particularly commendable is the project’s insistence that Victorian fiction participates actively in the formation of modern social consciousness rather than merely documenting social change from the outside.

Overall, this is a thoughtful, wide-ranging, and intellectually engaged M.A. thesis. Its strongest qualities are its historical breadth, conceptual coherence, and sustained attention to the relation between literature and social transformation. Its principal limitations arise from excessive scope, occasional schematic thinking, and insufficient attention to literary form. Even so, the thesis demonstrates strong scholarly promise and a sophisticated understanding of Victorian literature as a historically embedded mode of social analysis.

In Brno 20th May 2026

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doc. Michael Matthew Kaylor, PhD.