

Reviewer's Report of the Master's Thesis "A Critical Semiotic Study of Finnish, Latvian and Czech Myths" by Bc. Inese Pintāne

This extraordinarily ambitious thesis compares the "myths of Finns, Latvians, and Czechs," which "might reveal some differences in beliefs, values, norms, and customs of the given nations" (P. 2). The thesis "aims to study stories that fulfill the following criteria: 1) explain the emergence of something that is still a part of human culture and 2) reflect upon the change in a state of affairs." (P. 2–3). However, "the master's thesis does not aim to study the communicational process itself and the form in which a message gets passed. On the contrary, it seeks to detect the values and the hierarchical structure of a narrator's community which he introduces to his audience." (P. 7)

While I have no substantial objections regarding the first "theoretical" part, several problems are to be addressed regarding the second "practical" part, which - to some extent - negates the theoretical arguments of the first one.

The first problem arises once we realize that the submitted thesis does not specify what it involves for a myth to be "**still** a part of human culture." The thesis only vaguely states that "the simplified version of Liszka's theory or transvaluation helped one reveal **something** about Finns" (P. 49, emphasis mine), or that "the author has decided for further study to select various myths to create a **detailed picture** of Latvians" (P. 50, emphasis mine), but such detailed picture is missing. However, even if the thesis did say "something about Finns," without the thorough analysis of the survival of the myth(s), such notions would not meet the requirements of the academically relevant result.

Leaving aside that comparing the Finnish, Latvian, and Czech Myths is a goal way too demanding for the magisterial thesis, the author goes astray already on the level of methodology. Generally speaking, the author strips the myths both of their historicity and prehistorical dimension, not to mention their anachronic relations and multi-layered dynamic structure.

See also P. 6: "The mother concluded her story. Without knowing that the mother's story is the myth passed from generation to generation, the little girl observed similarities between the mythical realm and her one. The discovery of these similarities led her to conclude that the story has something to do with the existing state of affairs. The little girl liked the story so much that she asked for more. The mother felt relieved knowing that she had managed to communicate the story to her small daughter" (see also P. 11). These inappropriate literary paragraphs do not seem to be a pure coincidence, regarding the fact that the myths are – despite the indicated distinctions – treated prevalently as the authorial fictions out of time. See, for example, the methodological "confession" on P. 42 or P. 16, emphasis mine: "Since myths, the same as Umwelts, change together with their **authors**, the only way to uncover what was considered by them valuable and purposeful at some point in time is to study their myths **synchronically**." Alternatively, see P. 20 (emphasis mine): "Even though one can look at myths as **literary texts**, one should keep in mind that **myths are creations of an individual** who is a member of a community and, as a such, is **forced to obey** its rules to be heard and understood." Naturally, these statements are not principally wrong: yet the essay reduces their problematic aspects (or the aspects they problematize) into the most straightforward causal relations.

Consequently, this unification of myths (and myths with recorded stories) problematizes the comparison itself. When the author says that “Some of the Czech myths are not their own creation but are derived from somebody else” (P. 59), how would she specify the “purity” of a myth when myths generally tend to be of a highly composite nature? In fact, the author presupposes both national identity and the limitedness of a myth where both these qualities should come under scrutiny. So, when the author concludes that “the norms being passed among these nations from generation to generation are similar. For that reason, also, the world perception of these nations could be alike”, she is presenting an outcome that is, in fact, an optical illusion due to the simplification of the analyzed material.

Plus, the author seems to invert the analysis by choosing the stories that would match Liszka’s theory, which, given the level of simplification, could be only successful. Thus, when the author says after reviewing just one myth that “as one can see, Liszka is right when saying that an integral part of a story is a crisis, which in the course of a story, gets overcome” (P. 17) or that “once more, one finds in the Finnish myth the confirmation of the truthfulness of Liszka’s assumptions” (P. 19), she, in fact, confirms neither Liszka’s theory, nor some general qualities of the myths, but solely the ability to pick up the confirming examples. See P. 41, where the author explicitly states that “Even if the author of this Master’s thesis wanted to select stories that only partly fulfill Liszka’s criteria, she faced new challenges.” However, the “partly” is subsequently compensated by subsuming the story into Liszka’s scheme. To sum it up, the author seems to have decided beforehand that the myths would match the theory: and so she picked up and simplified examples that actually did.

To give the jury some specific examples (of the simplifying generalizations), see for example P. 51, where the author says: “The moral of the whole story is that if one decides to violate the norm, he or she shares the same qualities as the Devil and sooner or later will get caught. One can assume that the given nation expects its members to identify with God and not with the Devil.” Yet the very same sentences are used for another myth (see P. 44: “The moral of the whole story is that if one decides to violate the norm, he or she shares the same qualities as the devil and sooner or later will get caught”). The proper analysis is replaced by projective intuition.

Or see P. 52: How does the “Sun become the symbol of obedience,” if Sun is reported to punish Moon due to its infidelity? What leads the author to claim that “It is expected that the members of the given community choose to identify with the Sun and not with the Moon”? To ask most simply, were there no cheaters that could have identified themselves with the Moon? Even P. 58 does not offer any explanation that would support the author’s interpretation.

Or see P. 54: What makes the author say that God “acts as a voice of the given society” (no evidence for such a statement is presented)? What makes the author claim that “One can assume that the norm encoded at the agential level is that people get what they deserve?” The story says nothing about recompense or retribution, at least not regarding the highly simplified relation “obvious crime – deserved punishment.” The story does explain the lot of men and women indeed, yet it simply narrates how it happened, without any explicit moralizations. Contrary to, for example, Adam and Eve, in which story Eve is punished for the explicitly defined transgression.

Or see P. 61: What makes the author say that “one assumes that the norm encoded at the agential level is that the ruler can be just one,” when the story, as it is reproduced here, seems

to present a narration of finding (and founding) new home and Lech's subsequent jealousy, without mentioning any conflict regarding the reign? By the way, the very same sentence is repeated in the case of Přemysl and Libuše (P. 63).

In this case, one cannot, without further evidence or interpretation, "presuppose that Czechs before Libuše were used to have a male ruler" and it is also rather doubtful to state – even on the level of the methodological binary opposition – that "the qualities assigned to Přemysl outweigh those of Libuše." The story (even as it is reproduced here) does not imply such a conclusion.

I preliminarily recommend the grade "3".



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