

Evaluation form for PhD dissertation

Evaluation form

Title of the thesis

Madwomen Out of the Attic: The Rise of Catastrofemales in Contemporary North American Literature

Affiliation of the reviewer

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Report

Report

The doctoral dissertation submitted for review spans 351 pages, including an extensive, well-prepared bibliography and meticulously researched footnotes. The work is an attempt to complete several interrelated research tasks, clearly resulting from the choice of subject matter and reflected in its title. The primary goal is to demonstrate the possibility of analyzing and interpreting the female protagonists of the novels selected by the Author through the category of "catastrofemale." Inextricably linked to this task is the assumption that examining this category requires integrating it into the circulatory system of contemporary reality. Consequently, the dissertation attempts to theoretically frame a new formula for defining the female protagonist, who, over the first decades of the 21st century, has increasingly come to the forefront not only as a representative figure of a certain literary trend, but also as a keystone connecting the extra-literary sociopolitical and economic contexts of late capitalism with the lived experience of the individual immersed in them. After reading the work, it can already be noted at this point that the Author has achieved both of these goals.

The titular term "catastrofemale" was introduced by Sara Batkie in her article "2020 Is the Year of the 'Catastrofemale'" (2020) and, as a perfect "umbrella term" was taken up by Carlotta Ferrando. Her dissertation offers a multifaceted definition of (an-)heroine/catastrofemale, well-crafted in terms of its content. The Author, having revisited typical representations of the (anti)woman—mad, isolated, sometimes mute, sometimes masculinized, but invariably a monstrous being, with a metamorphic, unstable identity, existing in realms of liminality and "always anchored in dissentient responses to patriarchal power and violence (p. 40)" - proves that recent cultural and social changes have influenced the formation of female protagonists who are both a response to and a challenge for the

socioeconomic environment of which they are, at the same time, a part. They are constructed and then interpreted also as cultural measures of fears, an (in)visible Jungian shadow, emanation of civilizational threat and ultimately, a metonymic representation of late capitalistic reality, centered on alienating urban spaces.

However, the analysis of the term lacks a thorough exploration of the semantics and connotations of the term "catastrophe." The Author discusses the concept rather superficially in one paragraph (p. 42), but—and yet it is the crucial component of the term that forms the basis of the dissertation—no in-depth analysis is provided. The concept of catastrophe is usually attributed to Aristotle, but despite the presence of its semantic components in Poetics, it was probably introduced by a Roman critic, Donatus (the fourth century C.E.) The final act of a tragedy was described as a cata-strophe: kata (down), strophien (turn, turning point). Today, we tend to see only the negative aspects of catastrophes, however, ancient Greeks, as the very idea of the Greek tragedy confirms, always looked for the positive consequences such as a new balance in the world established thanks to the self-sacrificing defeat of the tragic hero, or new sources of life-giving water after the earthquake. (Cf. Bryan S. Turner, *A Theory of Catastrophe*, de Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2023). In research on the history of the concept in the context of gender studies, it is worth consulting, among other bibliographic sources, the "Introduction" to *Catastrophe, Gender, and Urban Experience 1648-1920*, ed. Deborah Simonton, Hannu Salmi (Routledge, New York, 2017). The word "catas-trophe" carries meanings associated with monstrosity, madness, power, and, most importantly, "new" knowledge, epiphany. I recommend Matthew Gumpert's excellent book, *The End of Meaning: Studies in Catastrophe*, (Cambridge, Newcastle-upon-Thyne, 2012), as a source. In his study of the concept and phenomenon of "catastrophe" Gumpert discusses its ecstatic qualities, but also the revelation of knowledge in a situation where catastrophe becomes a sign of transcendence, belonging to the genre of the apocalyptic, which transcends semiotics. Ultimately, it affects the whole community, its relationships, institutions, its social order (Cf. Gumpert, p. xvi). In this view, catastrophe heralds a sudden suspension of meaning, paradox, a profound sense of monstrosity, revulsion, fear and fascination, and at the same time a premonition of suddenly revealed knowledge, or even truth. Discussing these networks of signification would be useful in the analyses, since, according to Ferrando, the final "act" of the narrative is described as the stage in which "[t]his newfound knowledge /.../, grants them a vantage point from which they can reclaim their position of otherness without entirely submitting to the status quo (p. 44)." In my opinion, when preparing the dissertation for publication, it is worth expanding it to include an exploration of the concept of catastrophe and utilizing it more effectively in research.

The methodological approach presented in the dissertation is well-thought-out, and its usefulness is demonstrated in the analytical sections of the work. By conducting her research, the Author intertwines discourses of literary criticism and gender studies and ultimately steers it toward posthuman feminist thought, with particular emphasis on Rosi Braidotti's concept of subjectivity as "embodied and embedded," allowing for a valid interpretation of both the narrative arcs of the novels under discussion and the subjectivity of their protagonists immersed in the fabric of social reality. The relational nature of this sub-jectivity, as porous, interactive, and consequently vulnerable, susceptible to madness, allows the Author not only to develop an insightful portrait of the titular 'catastrofemale,' but also – as in the case of Eddie's self-portraits, the protagonist of the novel *Luster* – to preserve its openness and processual, transformative character. The posthuman feminist perspective adopted in the work provides appropriate research tools for answering the research questions posed by the PhD Candidate.

Seeking to accomplish all her research goals, and considering their diversity, the Author also decides to employ a diverse methodology on the analytical level. While remaining within the broadly understood hermeneutic method, she also employs synthetic-analytical methods in reference to source publications, comparative techniques, particularly in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, and descriptive ones.

When discussing the Author's presentation of methodology, I would like to add a few

comments regarding the structure of the work. The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters, and final conclusions, with the first chapter serving to build a theoretical framework for the remaining sections devoted to the interpretation and analysis of selected corpus of novels. Thus, the organization of the content fully meets the requirements for a doctoral dissertation. Nevertheless, I would like to devote a little more space to reflecting on the importance of the introduction to Ferrando's dissertation.

The introduction begins with an explanation of the Author's personal motivations for taking up the topic, which complements the emotional impact of the work and undoubtedly attracts the reader's attention. Its main advantage, however, is a condensed presentation of the narrative structure of the work, an outline of the main line of argument and its justification, as well as a description of the substantive content of the individual chapters. The Author also provides an outline of the methodology used and a general definition of the term "catastrofemale," the aspects and elements of which are to be verified in the analytical chapters. This basic information appears crucial because subsequent chapters are presented in a rather relaxed manner in terms of argumentative rigor, since the Author combines various conventions, multiplies digressions and freely delves into secondary themes, through which methodological assumptions emerge, sometimes in unexpected places, as if added later.

Generally, this results in an impression of a certain unpredictability in the text, and while preparing the monograph for publication, I would recommend a more explicit elaboration of strictly methodological issues, especially in the last subsections of Chapter I. It is also worth considering whether footnotes are the appropriate place to highlight the key aspects of the terms fundamental to the work (e.g., footnote 33 regarding the concepts of "embedded" and "embodied"). Also, the introductory information on methodology, while being substantively correct, is often scattered throughout the text, such as the first indication of the need to use new, alternative methods, which appears on p. 37. In the overall essay-like style of the dissertation, the presentation of methodology would benefit from greater formal discipline.

At the same time, I should emphasize that, in my conviction, the style adopted by the Author provides a richness of thought, the opportunity to examine the topics under study from different perspectives and allows to place the catastrofemale figure within interconnected orbits of contexts. A perfect example is the exceptionally interesting discussion of the role of urban spaces of large metropolises, primarily New York, in constituting new types of subjectivity represented by the protagonists, in line with the posthuman feminist paradigm. I should also mention a brilliant analysis of sleep as "yet another commodity /.../ never allowed to be just rest (p. 170-171)."

Ferrando, skillfully and with exceptional sensitivity to the complexity of the discussed phenomena and literary characters, takes the reader (in this case, the reviewer) on an engaging journey. It begins with a new perspective on feminist thought – especially on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), and posthuman feminism, and then leads us into the "thicket" of thorough analyses of selected novels: *The New Me* (2019) by Halle Butler paired with *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) by Ottessa Moshfegh, *Severance* (2018) by Ling Ma, and *Luster* (2020) by Raven Leilani.

In planning the analytical chapters, the Author uses a framework based on the existential experiences and socioeconomic status of the protagonists under racialized capitalism, which allows for insights into the socio-psychological paths available to white, relatively affluent women (White and with Money) depicted in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The New Me* and the survival strategies developed by racialized catastrofemales such as Candace Chen in *Severance* and Eddie in *Luster*. The experiences of madness, withdrawal, and/or repetitive attempts at self-betterment as a path to future "happiness" experienced by the white protagonists are juxtaposed with the attempts of the non-white characters, Candace and Eddie, to incorporate their subjectivity into the fragmenting currents of their environment, where they struggle to find a way to survive, accepting the lack of coherence, precarity, the volatility of short-term goals, and the need to constantly navigate life. The

other option – as in post-apocalyptic narration of *Severance* – seems to be the decision to participate in the fluid fabric of reality; despite the challenges posed by (in)visibility, a sense of alienation, and excessive productivity it allows the protagonist to finally seek the seeds of trust in the promise of a new life.

I consider this juxtaposition of protagonists not only valid, but above all a way to highlight the consequences of the fundamental interrelationships between an individual's race, gender, and economic status and the social reality in which they are embedded. As a result, the Author has obtained a complex picture of the catastrofemal, in which the common, archetypal elements are clearly outlined, while the distinguishing features allow for a more in-depth analysis.

Reaching the conclusions, Ferrando demonstrates that the attic door is already wide open, and madness, as it turns out, has become a transformative force in the course of the narratives. "Catastrofemal" proves key to understanding the ways in which contemporary neoliberal culture constitutes a dynamic and seemingly chaotic system that traps individuals—in this case, the protagonists of the selected novels—in the loops of their structural and economic conditioning.

Summing up, in my opinion the dissertation is a valuable voice in the discussion on the topic of the female figure in contemporary American literature. By skillfully situating literary phenomena embedded in the alienating reality of American neoliberal capitalism within a well-orchestrated theoretical discourse, Ferrando offers us a comprehensive analysis of processes unfolding at the intersection of socioeconomic trends and the ways individuals respond to their consequences, i.e. fragmenting meaning, disturbance of both the potential for self-development or self-betterment and the purposefulness of actions. A new definition of madness, which has transcended the dark space of the attic and constitutes the province of women, as a way of participating in the reality of large metropolises (as metonyms for the contemporary world), constitutes an insightful diagnosis that has the potential to become the basis for further, perhaps broader, research. After all, similar processes are occurring today in the visual and performing arts.

The question remains whether the doctoral dissertation presented by the Doctoral Candidate constitutes a significant contribution to literary studies and interdisciplinary research rooted in sociology and cultural studies. The answer to this question is positive. Considering its originality, methodological coherence, the maturity of the argument, and its contextualization within the extensive literature on the subject, the dissertation should be assessed very positively as an interesting and, in many respects, innovative attempt to examine and interpret the topic posed in the title.

The dissertation constitutes an original solution to a scientific problem and demonstrates the Candidate's general theoretical knowledge, allowing for further academic development. I evaluate the dissertation positively and request that Carlotta Ferrando be admitted to the next stages of the doctoral process.

Prof. Maria Korusiewicz

Confidential report (it will not be shown to the candidate)

All the comments are included in the Report

Evaluation file (optional)

Presentation and clarity

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☒ Good ☐ Excellent

The reviewer should be able to read the text without difficulty. This implies that the dissertation is clear and 'user friendly', without duplications or repetitions.

Integration and coherence

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☒ Good ☐ Excellent

The manuscript should present logical and rational links between different parts of the thesis.

Introduction to scientific background

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The text should contain a satisfactory introduction to the scientific background which is relevant to the research, preparing the reader to the exposition of the problem.

Review of relevant literature

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The candidate must have a detailed knowledge of original sources, have a thorough knowledge of the field, and understand the main theoretical and methodological issues.

Statement of research problem

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

A clear statement of the research problem should be made, together with specific hypotheses, predictions, or questions which the research is designed to address.

Originality

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The research must be the candidate's own work. The degree of independence may vary according to the research topic.

Contribution to knowledge and scientific relevance

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The dissertation should be substantial enough to be able to form the basis of two articles on refereed journal, a book or research monograph.

Mastery of the English language

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The candidate must be proficient in written English and show mastery of appropriate scientific/technical language.

The thesis can be considered for a 'cum laude' award

☒ Yes ☐ No

A major goal of the review process is to evaluate if the present version of the thesis is:

- 1) adequate as is
- 2) require minor revision
- 3) require major revision

for admission of the candidate to the defense of the work in front of a national evaluation board.

☒ Accept as is ☐ Minor revision ☐ Major revision

Date: 8/13/2026

Reviewer: Korusiewicz Maria