

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

Università dell'Aquila

Report

Madwomen Out of the Attic: The Rise of Catastrofemales in Contemporary North American Literature offers a comprehensive, timely, stimulating (and ambitious!) attempt at a systematization of the “catastrofemale” canon—a strand of “millennial” literature that, the candidate argues, revolves around unlikable, self-sabotaging, and otherwise antiheroic women whose stories of female disaffection (verging often on mental distress) are to be read less as an individual psychological condition than as an endemic condition of our neoliberal age and its attendant fantasies. One of the main strengths of this dissertation is the formulation of the catastrofemale, a term that the candidate borrows, and adapts, from Sara Batkie, (and this should be made more clear: the candidate footnotes this in passing, p. 32), reconfiguring it as a critical and interpretive category to account for or describe a contemporary configuration of female subjectivity born at the intersection of neoliberal practices, late capitalism, racialization, and gender. A second crucial critical and interpretive category is “madness,” which, as the candidate argues, is to be interpreted as an umbrella term rather than as clinical diagnosis. Though I must say I find the indiscriminate use of the word problematic (at least without scare quotes, as it often, but not always, happens), I see its relevance in order to advance the notion (as the candidate does throughout her dissertation) that the kind of psychic distress visible (in very different ways and degrees) in the various catastrofemales is embodied and embedded within the material conditions of life in the 21st century. With these critical/theoretical premises, carefully laid out in the introduction and in the first chapter (on which more later), the candidate examines four catastrofemale novels, moving from the white, upper middle-class catastrofemale and her privilege of self-reinvention and/or withdrawal (Chapter 2), to the condition of racialized women to whom those privileged choices are precluded (Ch. 3 and 4). This is a brilliant move that allows the candidate to explore how racial difference reorients the catastrofemale paradigm, but also to posit alternative, if subtler, forms of resistance (as is the case with Severance, one of the more convincing, and original, readings of this dissertation). In this way, the dissertation effectively maps, as the candidate writes in the conclusion, the varying experiences of (catastro)female subjectivity depending on class, race, and material precarity, successfully and convincingly showing, as she writes, that

“rather than presenting a uniform portrait of generational despair, these literary works collectively demonstrate how late-capitalist alienation is unevenly distributed, showing that a protagonist’s structural position largely determines what forms of withdrawal, endurance, slackness or self-sabotage are available to her.”

This is a quite remarkable dissertation: impressively well researched, clearly structured, and beautifully written—although a little bit too verbose and at times repetitive. The latter I believe to be one of the weakest aspects of an otherwise fine work. The verbosity is not only a matter of style or readability but also occasionally affects argument itself. A case in point is the discussion around *The Madwoman in the Attic* in Chapter 1. Although I understand the candidate’s necessity, and the functionality for her overarching argument, of distancing herself from Gilbert and Gubar, I feel that the discussion is a bit overdone (unnecessarily so, given that the critical stance towards G&G is well-established, as the candidate herself shows), while the “antihumanist stance” that “posthuman feminism” offers remains, to the contrary, a bit underdeveloped. I take the resort to posthuman feminism to be one of the strengths of the dissertation as it allows the candidate to explore embodiment and embeddedness and the collapse of the Cartesian body/mind split (which is, however, less specific/exclusive to posthuman feminism than the candidate makes it to be), so a bit more rounded discussion of its tenets and of how it opens up the catastrophemales narratives in new ways could have taken up some of the space devoted to Gilbert and Gubar in the first chapter.

These are minor objections, however, that could render the candidate’s argument (already quite sophisticated) even more compelling. The dissertation is otherwise adequate as is: original and timely.

Typos: pag. 19, footnote #8, Betty Draper instead of Batty.

Mark Fisher does not appear in the final bibliography.

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

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: 8/14/2026

Reviewer: Martinez Benedi Pilar