



**University
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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MA (University of Victoria, 2009)

BA (University of Toronto, 2005)

**“Of Dogs and Idiots: Tropological Confusion in
Twentieth-Century U.S. Fiction”**

Department of English

Wednesday, September 5, 2018

1:30 P.M.

Clearihue Building

Room B007

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Nicole Shukin, Department of English, University of Victoria (Supervisor)

Dr. Christopher Douglas, Department of English, UVic (Member)

Dr. Nicholas Bradley, Department of English, Uvic (Member)

Dr. Margaret Cameron, Department of Philosophy, UVic (Outside Member)

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Dr. Colleen Glenney Boggs, Department of English; Women's & Gender Studies, Dartmouth College

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Dr. Michael Miller, Department of Computer Science, UVic

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Abstract

This dissertation examines dog and idiot tropes—and, specifically, the conflation thereof—in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, Or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985). In addition to illustrating the key roles the idiot/dog figure plays in canonical works of twentieth-century U.S. fiction, it argues that this conflation is too often presumed to signify denigration (i.e. a social, political, and ethical exclusion) and degeneration (i.e. a biological threat). Around the turn of the century, the idiot/dog emerges as an aesthetic figure in conjunction with contemporaneous practices of dog breeding and eugenics, as well as coextensive discourses of national progress and racial purity. In this context, literary idiot/dogs can be read as enciphering a violent historical subtext. Yet, rather than simply condemn this figure as a dehumanizing stereotype, this dissertation challenges such a reductive approach on the grounds that it risks reproducing a hermeneutic that is both ableist and speciesist. A new approach is proposed: reading for the tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity and the destabilizing affective and epistemological effects this poses for liberal subjectivity.

Reading for tropological confusion in the fictions of Faulkner, Steinbeck, and McCarthy not only develops new interpretations of three canonical works; it unlocks the idiot/dog figure as a site of textual excess. In so doing, this dissertation makes original contributions to twentieth century U.S. fiction scholarship, Disability Studies, Animal Studies, and biopolitical theory. The idiot/dog figure's in/determination—a paradoxical embodiment of humanized canine animality and animalized human mental disability—catalyzes hermeneutic and affective uncertainties. Ultimately, both impinge upon questions of readers' own abilities to: (i) fully parse the fictions idiot/dogs appear in, and (ii) self-reflexively understand themselves as autonomous, human(e) subjects. Each chapter carefully elaborates this figure's centrality to the textual operations of, respectively, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian* in terms of their narrative and meta-narrative dimensions; this reveals under-examined continuities. By arguing for idiot/dogs' disruptive potentials (i.e. affective, epistemological, and ethical), this dissertation bridges and extends previous Disability Studies and Animal Studies interventions that link literary representations to social and material contexts. Also, it further intervenes in these subfields by elaborating the biopolitical reasons

for and ramifications of the idiot/dog figure's emergence in twentieth-century Anglo-American fiction. Each chapter outlines how and why idiot/dog figures constitute a means for harmonizing readers' experiences, thoughts, desires, and feelings with the normative U.S. social and symbolic order—a national order that hinges on recognitions and denials of human subjectivity, as well as on the production of subjectivity in which fiction is implicated. Ultimately, by closely analyzing literary idiot/dog figures, this dissertation contributes a biopolitical critique of the ontological production and governability of readerly subjects themselves.

Keywords: William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Cormac McCarthy, Anglo-American literature and culture, twentieth-century U.S. fiction, idiot figure, dog figure, tropes, eugenics, dog breeding, hermeneutics, affect theory, biopolitics, liberal subjectivity, Disability Studies, Animal Studies.