

# La Poétique de Houellebecq : réalisme, satire, mythe

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Akademisk avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i romanska språk: franska vid Göteborgs universitet, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Humanistiska fakultetsnämnden kommer att offentligen försvaras lördagen 14 maj 2011, kl. 10.00 i Lilla hörsalen, Renströmsgatan 6, Göteborg.

*Handledare:* Christina Heldner, professor emerita i franska vid Göteborgs universitet.

*Bihandledare:* Eva Ahlstedt, professor i franska vid Göteborgs universitet

*Opponent:* Anne Cousseau, lektor i fransk litteratur vid Universitetet i Nancy 2.

*Betygsnämnd:* Gro Bjørnerud Mo, professor i fransk litteratur vid Universitetet i Oslo, Ken Benson, professor i spanska vid Göteborgs universitet och Katharina Vajta, lektor i franska vid Göteborgs universitet.

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## Abstract

**Title:** La Poétique de Houellebecq: réalisme, satire, mythe

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This thesis sets out to explore French writer Michel Houellebecq's poetics of the novel. It is advanced in the introduction that Houellebecq's work could be read against the novelist's 1997 suggestion that "if somebody today was able to craft a mode of expression that was at once honest and positive, they would change the world". A poem where Houellebecq expresses a need for "unseen metaphors" ("métaphores inédites") is also put forward as an example of the author's aspirations within this area.

In order to provide a background to Houellebecq's quest for an honest literary discourse, the thesis first presents the writer's world view, exploring Houellebecqian ideas about sexuality, metaphysics, aesthetics, religion and the arts – in particular in relation to Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Auguste Comte and French poetry theorist Jean Cohen. This account takes place in chapter 2 and the material here consists of Houellebecq's whole work, i.e. his poetry and his essays as well as his novels. One important point made in this chapter is the difference, as stated by Houellebecq himself, between literary and religious discourse.

The core of the thesis, however, is chapter 3 and 4, where Houellebecq's first four novels *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, *Les Particules élémentaires*, *Plateforme* and *La Possibilité d'une île* serve as material for the analysis.

Chapter 3 attempts to capture Houellebecq's poetics in relation to literary genre by comparing his novels to the French 19<sup>th</sup> century realist novel, Menippean satire and Novalis' unfinished novel *Henry of Ofterdingen*.

Finally, chapter 4 presents an analysis of what is defined as the poetic "dense" structuration of Houellebecq's novels. Each of the four novels is studied with particular focus on the metaphorical interpretation of their titles as well as on the motifs of sun and light. In this context, Riffaterre's concept of the "poetic matrix" is loosely used to characterise Houellebecq's novels as *romans poèmes* ("novel-poems"). The chapter ends with an analysis of some of the mythical elements found in Houellebecq's novels, in particular Plato's Myth of the Androgyne and its relation to the Houellebecqian yearning for love and purpose in life.

Both chapter 3 and chapter 4 can be seen as an investigation into the manner in which Houellebecq's pursuit of "honesty" relies on traditional elements of Western literature such as the three literary genres studied in chapter 3 and the literary imaginary of motifs and myths put forward in chapter 4.

**Keywords:** Michel Houellebecq, poetics, metaphysics, Arthur Schopenhauer, Auguste Comte, positivism, Jean Cohen, aesthetic categories, lyricism, literary genre, Erich Auerbach, literary realism, Mikhail Bakhtin, satire, Menippean satire, cynicism, Novalis, Michael Riffaterre, motif of light vs. darkness, motif of the sun, myth, literary myth, myth of androgyny, symbol, romanticism.