

Title: The Bohemian Des Esseintes: Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Against Nature* and Jiří Karásek's *A Gothic Soul*

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Karásek's novella *A Gothic Soul*, the most famous Czech decadent prose work, was praised upon its publication in 1900 for capturing the pessimistic mood of the Czech nation, weary and disillusioned after decades of struggling for a greater degree of political and social equality in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Yet the work is fascinating not only as a document of its time, but also as an aesthetically consummate work of Czech decadence. In this paper I shall concentrate on one aspect of the novella's aesthetics: its dialogue with Joris-Karl Huysmans, the father of French decadence. *A Gothic Soul* takes a number of scenes from Huysmans's 1884 novel *Against Nature*, the "breviary of the decadence," and rewrites them in meaningful ways. Like *Des Esseintes*, Huysmans's protagonist, Karásek's unnamed main character, for instance, has a great love for exotic flowers, which are described in detail, as in Karásek's source. However, they are not associated with venereal disease, as in *Against Nature*, but with imagination and death, two of the author's central preoccupations. In addition, Karásek employs ephrasis to describe not Salomé dancing for the head of John the Baptist, but Mary Magdalene meditating before a skull, thus yielding an entirely different set of meanings that concord with his view of the world and of the Czech nation. Significantly, his description of the painting illuminates his view of Catholicism, which in some ways contrasts with that of Huysmans, as elaborated in *Against Nature* and subsequent novels. Furthermore, both protagonists attempt to take a trip to escape their surroundings and recover their health, but they both return prematurely. The trip serves a unique purpose in Karásek's novella, however—it allows the protagonist to come into contact with an alluring male stranger and meditate on his secret attraction, thus developing the theme of homosexuality that runs just below the surface throughout much of the work. This motif is treated very differently here than in *Against Nature*, as Karásek, the first Czech poet to openly explore homoeroticism in verse (in 1895), here becomes the first to explore at length his own homosexuality, and the feelings of guilt and alienation that surround it, in a significant work of prose. It is this exploration, his treatment of Catholicism, and his lengthy exploration of the nihilistic essence of "Czechness" and the decadence of Prague and the Czech nation, that most distinguish *A Gothic Soul* from *Against Nature*. I will bring out both Huysman's profound influence and Karásek's originality in my discussion of these two major works of the decadent movement. My approach is literary-historical and cultural-historical, and also consists in close reading and comparison of texts.