

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)

CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication

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"NICE WORK": A NOVEL OF DICHOTOMIES AN ANALYSIS OF THE MIRRORING ELEMENTS PRESENT IN THE NOVEL WOMAN VS. MAN, ACADEMIC WORLD VS. INDUSTRIAL WORLD

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to show and discuss the dichotomies of the novel, showing what draws them apart, but also what is the final aim towards which they lead. A close look will be taken at the female and male characters (Robyn and Vic), at the different manners in which the two talk, act and respond to external and internal factors and at the two opposed worlds whose representatives they are: the academic world (Robyn) and the industrial world (Vic).

Keywords: academic, industrial, dichotomies, female, male

The novel *Nice Work* written by David Lodge is rich in dual elements – people, styles, attitudes, lives - that are presented from two perspectives, giving the impression that they contradict one another, when actually they only show the necessity of having more points of view in order to understand the full picture of life. As Merritt Moseley observes, "Lodge has always been interested in the contrast and opposition, but also in the similarity and interplay of apparently contrasting positions and personalities."¹

1.) Robyn Penrose and Vic Wilcox

1.1. Robyn Penrose

Robyn is the main female character, an assistant lecturer and Rumridge University. She is a woman who has well-defined ideals and aspirations, as well as a quite strict life lived according to these ideals and aims. She teaches literature and focuses mostly on Victorian literature and feminist studies. She is passionate about her work, eager to grow and develop, willing to wait until opportunities arise and determined to keep on doing what she likes. Robyn can be seen as the exponent of a modern, independent woman who does not rely on anyone from any point of view. She seems to be the person who has feelings and is not immune to them, but she is also sensible and objective when taking decision, not allowing feelings to stand in her way.

One of Robyn's major qualities is her determined and down to Earth nature. Nevertheless, she is also an idealist when it comes to the world she lives and works in, as she keeps on

¹ Moseley, M., *David Lodge: How far can you go?*. USA: Van Volumes Ltd., 1991, pp. 97-98

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dreaming of an ideal and fair society, in which people work in normal conditions and every one is respected. Although she has a well organized life (based on her own requirements and principles), Robyn does not conform to social expectations.

Robyn is courageous and tough, but she also proves to be weak and coward when she tries to escape her affair with Vic by running to her parents' home. Therefore, the novel does not only display a dichotomy between two types of characters, but also one between features of one and the same person. According to Philip Tew, Robyn does show a variety of characteristics which portrait her as a modern, independent, self-reliant woman, but it is not difficult to be so when you know you have a family and small fortune to go back to. He states that: "Robyn's life charts a new kind of secularization, that of a middle-class aesthetic, a politically liberal anti-Thatcherism, a commitment to progressive causes, and a comfortable elitism in a house deposit supplied by her academic father."²

The visit to the factory has a major impact on Robyn, who is not pleased what the labour conditions and tried to influence Vic's approach regarding the workers. She even dares to speak up during a meeting she was supposed to attend only as the shadow, and criticizes the way in which things are handled. According to some critics, her interest in the hardships endured by the workers from the factory is not genuine, as Moseley states that "Robyn Penrose has hardly even seen a factory and knows nothing about the lives of the proletarians for whom, as a sort of trendy socialist, she 'cares'."³

Through the eyes of an outsider, Robyn is a woman who possesses many qualities, but she also has flaws. Through the eyes of Vic, on the other hand, "she was the most independent woman he had ever met" and he considered that "the goddess needed no male protector". Although annoyed at the beginning by her presence, he gradually falls in love (or so he thinks) with her and adorns her with all the beautiful traits possible. His image about her is under the influence of the impact she has had on his life and is caused by the fact that she was the one who helped him open his eyes to the world.

1.2. Vic Wilcox

Vic is the representative of the industrial world, a man whose life seems to be in a clear balance and on a secure, fulfilling track. At a closer look, he proves to be the man, who goes to a job he neither hates, nor loves, who is happy to leave his house in the morning in order to leave behind the family he does not like. He has a wife whom he does not love or appreciate and three children who are not becoming what he would want them to. He is somehow blocked in this life full of pre-established patterns, a life in which everything is always the same and never what he would like. He does the same things and lives like a robot, being very much aware of the fact that he is miserable, but too weak or unmotivated in order to make changes. Vic does not dare to look outside the box and seems to be frozen at a certain point, having no desire or chance to evolve from any point of view.

² Tew, P., *The Contemporary British Novel*. 2nd edition. London: Continuum, 2006, pp. 73-74

³ Moseley, M., *David Lodge: How far can you go?*. USA: Van Volumes Ltd., 1991, p. 98

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His job is basically the only thing that Vic does with the conviction that he does is what should be done. He is responsible and organized, leading the workers as well as he can in order to make them produce what the managers want.

Vic is the practical man, the one who appreciates the things and people that produce some with utilitarian purpose. He is a man of action, as opposed to Robyn, who is very much concerned with mind and spirit. Taking into account the differences between the two, it goes without saying that Robyn's opinion about Vic was somehow intriguing. She calls him "artful tyrant". The dichotomy is present in this situation as well. On the one hand she considers him a tyrant because of the way in which his employees work and of the manner in which he manages production at his work place. On the other hand, she considers him artful due to the fact that she appreciates his intelligence and wittiness.

Robyn is very much aware of the fact that Vic represents an antithesis of everything she stands for and is not afraid of making it crystal clear to him that she does approve his attitude regarding study and what is important in life.

At the beginning of the Shadow Scheme, Robyn was very determined to point out all the flaws in Vic's behaviour and personality, but after the time spent together she starts to see the positive side as well. He starts to win her admiration when Robyn realizes that he uses the Socratic Method to analyze problematic situations. What is even more important, she acknowledges his merit (and the merit of men like him) into helping women like her to do what they do. That is, he helps her understand that there is also need of men who work hard, who do practical things, in order for other people to be able to focus on literature, reading and teaching for example. Just as Robyn has preconceived ideas about industry and working class, so does Vic have his misconceptions related to university and the academic world. "Vic Wilcox has nothing but contempt for the lives of university staff and students, who in his view perform no vital service, create no wealth, but enjoy a soft life at the expense of those who do."⁴

1.3. Robyn and Vic – interplay and consequences

After analyzing Vic and Robyn separately, it goes without saying that a study of the relationship between the two characters and the manner in which they influence each other is necessary.

Robyn herself is the one who best defines Vic and her, when she states that "we are from two different worlds". She is the one who clearly sees that there is a clash between the academic world, whose representative she is, and the industrial one represented by Vic. The idea of the different worlds does not refer only to occupation and class, but also to their view upon the world and the manner in which they react and take action.

Vic appears suddenly in Robyn's life, as she is taken by surprise by the Shadow Scheme, of which she only found out at short notice. Their first encounter is under the sign of prejudice, as each of them judges the other according to his/her own perspective on life and ideas of what is right and wrong. Physical appearance, clothes, language, gestures – all are analyzed and interpreted in a very biased manner.

⁴ Moseley, M., *David Lodge: How far can you go?*. USA: Van Volumes Ltd., 1991, p. 98

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The two characters start to accept one another and this is actually the key to the future relationship they start. Spending more and more time together and communicating without the fear that the other would judge help both Vic and Robyn to get closer and to discover that they actually enjoy being together. The trip to Frankfurt is the occasion on which the two discover that the other one is much more than each of them assumed. On the plane Robyn realizes that it is men like Vic and his workers from the factory that create things (such as kettles or coffee machines) that enable people like her to spare time and focus on the things they want to do. Moreover, Vic is the one who helps her understand better social and financial decisions and the importance of money (or lack of it). Vic, on the other hand, is very impressed by Robyn's intellectual capacity. She speaks German and thus helps him sign an important contract. He realizes that the mind and the spirit can also be useful, although they do not produce utilitarian goods.

The manner in which the relationship between Robyn and Vic develops is very nicely described by the critic Merritt Moseley, who claims that "the clash of preconceptions and misconceptions produces some comedy but, more important, a softening and complicating of positions, an advance in sympathy, a rejection of stereotypes, a humanization of both partners in the shadow scheme."⁵

Vic falls in love with Robyn (or at least he develops a very strong attachment to her and a great admiration) and is even more influenced by her. At the beginning of the novel the reader is faced with a man who does not read and who lacks any other knowledge except for the domain he works in. Under Robyn's influence he discovers the pleasure of reading and even understands and uses notions such as "metonymy" and "metaphor".

Due to the fact that Vic's wife is a housewife who is only preoccupied about trivial matters (cooking, shopping), he is deeply impressed by a woman who talks about completely different subjects and who is also hard-working and financially independent. Robyn fascinated Vic through the contrasts she displays, firstly in relation to his wife and secondly in relation to himself. She is something else, like a breath of fresh air, and allows himself to be led in a new world of books, interpretations and ideals by a woman who helps him get out of his comfort zone.

Regardless of the fact that the two characters manage to accept each other and their corresponding worlds, none of them undergoes a total change. Vic starts to read and accepts the use of university, but he will not be able to understand truly the purpose of literary criticism for instance. During the second part of the Shadow Scheme, after one of the lectures held by Robyn, the following dialogue takes place:

V: "Then how are they supposed to learn the right answers?"

R: "There are no right answers to questions like that. There are only interpretations."

V: "What's the point of it, then? What's the point of sitting around discussing books all day, if you're not wiser at the end of it?"

R: "Oh, you're wiser"⁶

⁵ Moseley, M., *David Lodge: How far can you go?*. USA: Van Volumes Ltd., 1991, p. 98

⁶ Lodge, D., *Nice Work*. London: Penguin Books, 1988

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This exchange clearly shows how Vic still believes that simply discussing literature does not meet a clear purpose, being thus pointless. For him, exchanging ideas about texts can only be useful when the process ends with some answers and clear conclusions, failing to perceive the fact that the actual discussion and analysis make readers wiser and richer (mentally and spiritually). As an engineer, he needs to see concrete results, answers that are labeled as right and wrong.

Robyn was the means by which Vic changed his perspective without making him a completely new man. He understands that remaining by his family is what he needs to do and surpasses the unemployment better than he would have done it in other circumstances.

Taking into account the fact that neither Vic, nor Robyn are completely absorbed by one or the other and that they carry on with their lives after their encounter, the reader understands that none of the two worlds manages to “conquer” the other, but that it is a matter of acceptance. Vic is not better than Robyn and neither is she superior to him. They are different, but understood that each of them has his/her own positive and negative aspects and that judging is not a means of evolving, but acceptance is.

2.) Academic world vs. industrial world

2.1. The academic world

Knowledge and study are matters on which people can have totally different opinions. There are the ones who consider them indispensable for a fulfilled life, the persons who are eager to learn daily and whose purpose in life is to enlarge their horizons by reading and constant learning. There are also the ones who appreciate a good education and a high level of theoretical knowledge, even though they might not possess one. Last but not least, there are the persons who do not appreciate theoretical education and who consider academics as a loss of time, something that does not bring any productive outcomes to society. In the novel “Nice Work”, Robyn is the representative of the first category, of the academic world. According to her, “universities are the cathedrals of modern age. They shouldn’t have to justify their existence by utilitarian criteria.”⁷ Robyn is the one who regards education as fundamental to the life of man, understanding that shaping one’s ideas and thoughts is necessary for the evolution of mankind.

In the novel, life in the university is at a point when various difficulties need to be overcome. Insufficient funds, inability to hire new people, inappropriate organization and an outdated syllabus are just the major obstacles the academic world is faced with. The passion and enthusiasm of people like Robyn still keep things working, but it takes serious commitment and dedication in order to be efficient and productive when almost all decisions and laws seem to be against you. When budget cuts take place and the dean starts using all sorts of abbreviations, when sending messages, in order to save paper and time, communication problems appear (the message about the SS was almost lost due to such problems). People like Robyn, totally dedicated to their job, are afraid that they might not have a job in the future because universities are not allowed to hire new people.

⁷ Ibid.

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The intra-academic relations are represented by the community working at Rummidge University and their colleagues from America who come and visit them. These relations are based on common views and passions, but are also influenced by the administrative difficulties experienced by the academic world

In such a world, Robyn manages to survive and struggles to do what she loves and to enlighten the students who are willing to learn more about literature and who still believe that interpreting texts is useful and necessary. At the end of the novel, the fact that she is offered a stable job at the faculty is a sign of the fact that her work and seriousness have not been in vain.

2.2. The industrial world

England's economy and industry has developed constantly, and the image of the country, as well as the lives of the inhabitants, have been under the influence of this development.

The industrial world is presented as a dark, dirty and cold world, in which products are made, but the well being of the ones who actually produce them is not taken into account. Thousands of persons work hard, in bad conditions, on low salaries, under the command of bosses who are only concerned with the deadlines they have to meet and the budget cuts they need to make. The desire to produce as much as possible with very low costs and with few workers leads to angry, low class people, who are exploited by the industrial world. Robyn is impressed by all these aspects and condemns Vic and the world he represents, trying to make justice. Thus, she speaks up during a meeting she was supposed to attend as a simple shadow.

3.3. Merging academic and industrial world

The contact between the academic world and the "real" one, the industrial world, is represented by the Shadow Scheme (SS), implemented as a means of linking the two worlds. The differences between them are seen in the way the representatives of each of them interact – offensive, ironic, and judgmental.

Each of these two worlds has its own advantages and flaws. One might be too theoretical and the other too focused on material things. At the same time, academia develops minds and brains and the society needs well educated, wise and mentally capable persons. On the other hand, all these thinkers and critics could not lead the life they know if it had not been for the existence of the products created by the ones who use their physical abilities more than their mental ones.

In the end, both Robyn and Vic understand that none of them holds the ultimate truth and that there is an essential need for both worlds to exist, in order for mankind to survive. Lodge manages, with great style, to be impartial and not to make any of the parts a winner. "It must be tempting, in constructing a dialectical plot such as this one, to weight one or the other side of the equation, to let one side 'win'. It is part of Lodge's honorable liberal balance, his acceptance of muddle, his ability to see both sides of questions and his willingness to do justice to them, that this contrast is so even."⁸

Every reader of the novel understands that differences do not mean that one world is better than the other, but that both are useful and need to accept one another.

⁸ Moseley, M., *David Lodge: How far can you go?*. USA: Van Volumes Ltd., 1991, p. 99

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Conclusions

The novel “Nice work” puts side by side antithetic elements, showing how far they can go from each other, while also presenting their interconnecting parts. As Allan Massie says, “David Lodge is a comic master who flirts with categorization, but says no at the last minute.”⁹ Apart from this, he is “endlessly playful without ever being less than serious.”¹⁰ The comedy of manners and the irony and sarcasm present in the novel are important techniques that show how manner can influence a certain response.

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⁹ Massie, Allan, *The Novel Today*. London: Longman and the British Council, 1990, p. 68

¹⁰ Ibid. p.69