

# Wojciech Klepuszewski

---

## Knights and pages of academia in David Lodge's Campus Trilogy

---

Acta Neophilologica 18/1, 87-96

---

2016

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

**Wojciech Klepuszewski**

Wydział Humanistyczny  
Politechnika Koszalińska

## KNIGHTS AND PAGES OF ACADEMIA IN DAVID LODGE'S *CAMPUS TRILOGY*

**Key words:** David Lodge, *Campus Trilogy*, academic fiction, hierarchy, conflict

Writing about academic fiction, Angela Hague observes that it “often appears to be a study in self-hate and self-castigation, an attempted exorcism of the doubts and fears of the inhabitants of the academy” (1985, 173). To do this, writers, usually academics themselves, dissect various ailments afflicting the academic milieu. The manner used to achieve this end is not homogeneous, but much of fiction centred on the proverbial groves of academe is inhabited by characters who are preoccupied with what one might call academic *self*-consciousness – the inherent awareness of being part of a hierarchical system in which one focuses mainly on *self*-creation. The emphasis on the *self* here is not accidental, for identity is, by definition, a realm that involves an individual within the context of a group, a combination which is bound to generate conflicts and competition. This is so in a variety of social groups and applies to individuals who belong to them, or deny such an affinity. Among the multifarious groups which an individual can belong to, identify with, or remain in conflict with, there are those that comprise professional life, the fraternity, as it is often referred to, be it medical, banking, or as in the case of this article – the academic world, a microcosm which, in its own specific way, combines the personal with the institutional.

This article focuses predominantly on David Lodge's campus fiction and the way it presents the academic community, hierarchical and prone to personal frictions, where hostility and careerism thrive. The rationale behind the choice is simple: Lodge offers an elaborate narrative of the campus in his trilogy<sup>1</sup>,

---

<sup>1</sup> Consecutively *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (1975), *Small World: An Academic Romance* (1984), and *Nice Work* (1988).

relevant within the context, particularly as some of Lodge's protagonists migrate, as it were, from one novel to another, thus creating an additional sense of permanency in the depicted environment.

The academic world, certainly in its literary depiction, is the epitome of modern feudalism, where the knighted are the elite, and all the others throng the middle and lower levels of the academic universe. The *rungs of the ladder* incorporate all feudal ranks: from nobles and knights with their squires and pages, all the way down to simple serfs, an army responsible for the every-day academic toil. These feudal layers are perceived and accepted as an organic whole by all academics, including such innocent novices as Persse McGarrigle:

'Who else is speaking?'

'Michael Tardieu, von Turpitz, Fulvia Morgana and Phillip Swallow.'

Persse registers surprise. 'Is Professor Swallow in the same league as the rest of you?' (*Small World*, 316)

What the academic hierarchy means to those at the top level is mostly the savouring of the benefits and pleasures, and to those of lower ranks a constant striving for their chance to join the academic upper-crust and partake in the 'repository of privilege' (Connor 1996, 70). At the same time, it reveals fundamental dissonance between the lofty ideals and the mental make-up of those who are delegated to implement them. As David Lodge observes, the academic community is peculiar, for it sets beside each other two conflicting elements:

The high ideals of the university as an institution – the pursuit of knowledge and truth, ..., are set against the actual behaviour and motivations of the people who work in them, who are only human and subject to the same ignoble desires and selfish ambitions as anybody else. The contrast is perhaps more ironic, more marked, than it would be in any other professional milieu. (quoted in Edemariam 2007, 155)

Lodge's observation seems to be an acknowledgement of what has otherwise been discussed in numerous works, even as distant in time as Plato's *Republic*, a work which gives a rather grim picture of an academic:

academic persons, when they carry on study, not only in youth as a part of education, but as the pursuit of their maturer years, most of them become decidedly queer, not to say rotten; (quoted in Cornford 1908, 3, unknown translation)<sup>2</sup>

Much in the same vein, though centuries later, in the preface to his *Biathanatos*, John Donne makes the following comment: "Contemplative and bookish men, must of necessitie be more quarrelsome than others..." (quoted

<sup>2</sup> Optional translation by Benjamin Jowett is as follows: "the votaries of philosophy, when they carry on the study, not only in youth as a part of education, but as the pursuit of their maturer years, most of them become strange monsters, not to say utter rogues." See <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/plato/republic.pdf>, p.169.

in Williamson 2001, 51). Another good example is provided by Cornford in his 1908 *Microcosmographia Academica*:

While you are young you will be oppressed, and angry, and increasingly disagreeable. When you reach middle age, at five-and-thirty, you will become complacent and, in your turn, an oppressor, those whom you oppress will find you still disagreeable, and so will all the people whose toes you trod upon in youth. (1908, 3)<sup>3</sup>

And finally, and most importantly in the context, the iconic *Lucky Jim*, in which Kingsley Amis superbly reveals the game of “survival and adjustment” (Connor 1996, 71) behind the academic façade, and which has become a literary template for other writers:

All academic satires echo in some way the conventions established by Kingsley Amis's best-known novel, *Lucky Jim*. Those conventions range from its bitter protagonist, Jim Dixon (bitter about his tenuous, untenured university position), to the social and structural hierarchies within academic departments to the awkward interactions they necessitate. (Green 2008, 177)

This pecking order in *Lucky Jim* is particularly well-pronounced in the relation between Jim Dixon and his superior, Professor Welch, a good example being the conversation between Jim and Welch's son, Bertrand, a despicable character, in which Jim clearly defines the affinity by calling himself disapprovingly one of his father's “underlings” (Amis 2000, 41).

If Amis's novel is to a large extent focused on academic hierarchy, Lodge's fiction, though it does follow similar lines, is additionally focused on what Shubha Tiwari labels as “narcissistic instincts of Professors.” Discussing campus fiction and its protagonists, Tiwari observes that they follow what seems to be the golden rule of academia: “Write about yourself; read about yourself; get the attention.”<sup>4</sup> Such an approach inevitably involves a conflict of interests, as other academics' achievement may threaten one's own work. What follows may at best be envy, or, as in the case of Morris Zapp, one of the protagonists of Campus Trilogy, mere disrespect and scorn for other academics:

As is perhaps obvious, Morris Zapp had no great esteem for his fellow-labourers in the vineyards of literature. ... Their publications were vapid and amateurish, inadequately researched, slackly argued, and riddled with so many errors, misquotations, misattributions and incorrect dates that it was amazing they managed to get their own names right on the title page. (*Changing Places*, 47)

With Morris Zapp, regardless of his academic achievement, it is largely a matter of a self-inflated ego that boosts his overconfidence, fortified with

<sup>3</sup> In *Small World* (42), David Lodge also refers to Cornford, quoting the following line: “From far below you will mount the roar of a ruthless multitude of young men in a hurry. You may perhaps grow to be aware of what they are in a hurry to do. They are in a hurry to get you out of the way.” (originally, Cornford, 3).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=Content&sd=Articles&ArticleID=14195> [Dostep 14 II 2015].

the fact that, set beside his British counterpart, “Zapp was distinguished, and Swallow was not” (*Changing Places*, 15), a vital benchmark in the academic ranking.

In his 1989 interview, David Lodge, much in the spirit of *Small World* and the pursuit of the academic Holy Grail, discusses the phenomenon which he calls the “Round Table of professors: the elite group who get invited to conferences, who go around the world in pursuit of glory.”<sup>5</sup> A similar issue is dissected in Terry Caesar’s article “Flying high and flying low: Travel, sabbaticals, and privilege in academic life.” The title of Caesar’s article speaks volumes about what one could call academic prerogatives, which comprise a whole range of perquisites such as visiting academic institutions abroad, often in luxurious settings.

The academic concept of travel, or academic pilgrimage, as Lodge presents it, takes place, theoretically, solely in order to share the fruits of one’s research with the international audience, but in practice it often turns into pseudo-academic tourism, with some academics “for ever swanning around the globe” (*Nice Work*, 63), particularly if it involves exotic venues and lavish conference programmes. Thus, the typology proposed by Rosovsky of the jet-setting professors such as the “Pan American Professor of Sociology” or the “Swissair Professor of Physics” (1990, 166) can be found in Lodge’s fiction, in which travel becomes part and parcel of the academic paradise:

‘Travels a lot, does he – Professor Swallow?’

‘Lately he seems to be absent more often than he’s present.’ (*Small World*, 22)

Inevitably, such perks are subject to ever-present envy, as not all academics share the same privileges:

‘I had an invitation to a conference in Florida,’ says Philip Swallow wistfully. ‘But I couldn’t get a travel grant.’

‘Oh, dear, what a shame,’ says Robyn, without being able to work up much genuine compassion for this misfortune. (*Nice Work*, 63)

Robyn, who is a young lecturer, responds in this way not only because her position in the hierarchy has more limitations than advantages, but because she already shares one of the characteristics of academic mentality, that is the unceasing readiness to underscore the inefficiency of other members of the academic fraternity:

Rupert Sutcliffe declared. ‘A waste of time and money, in my opinion, those conferences. *I’ve* never attended an international conference in my life.’ Robyn nodded polite approval of this abstention, while privately guessing that Rupert Sutcliffe had not been embarrassed by a large number of invitations. (*Nice Work*, 63)

<sup>5</sup> <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/interview-with-david-lodge> [Dostęp 14 II 2015].

The very same propensity for denigrating fellow academics is mastered by Robyn's more experienced colleagues, seasoned both in academic terms, as well as in the field of peer criticism. Philip Swallow, mentioned earlier as a poor academic version of his American counterpart, Morris Zapp, tries to lessen his own lack of renown by pinpointing that other academics' rate of failure is much the same as his, a fact which does not improve Swallow's position as such, but at least offers consolation that his predicament is shared by others. When discussing their areas of research, Swallow says to Howard Ringbaum:

'Yours is Augustan pastoral, I believe,' Philip returned evasively.

Ringbaum looked pleased. 'Right. How did you know? You've seen my article in *College English*?'

'I was looking through the Course Bulletin the other day...'

Ringbaum's countenance darkened. 'You don't want to believe everything you read in that.' (*Changing Places*, 76)

Such verbal duels are most vicious when they take place within the realm of "intellectual territorialism" (Rossen 1993, 146), where academics can undermine each other's authority and credibility. Clashes of the kind in Lodge's fiction are particularly ample during conferences, which display as much academic research as resentment. Conference environment, apart from being an arena of relevant scholarly discussion, is also a perfect ground for gossip and venomous disparagement aimed at other academics:

"But you never did have much time for linguistics, did you Swallow?"

"Can't say I did, no. I never could remember which came first, the morphemes or the phonemes. And one look at the tree-diagram makes my mind go blank."

"Or blanker," said Dempsey with a sneer. (*Small World*, 22-23)

Robin Dempsey, a caustic commentator, is relentless in his censure, generally devoid of any self-reflection. This is exactly what he does while remarking about the conference organised by his former university:

"God!" said Dempsey, looking around the room. "What a shower! Why did I come?"

The question sounded rhetorical, but Dempsey proceeded to answer it at some length, and without apparently pausing for breath. "I'll tell you why, I came because I have family here, it seemed a good excuse to see them. My children, actually. I'm divorced, you see. I used to work here, in this Department, believe it or not. Christ, what a retarded lot they were, still are by the look of it. The same old faces. Nobody ever seems to move. Old Sutcliffe, for instance, been here forty years, man and boy. Naturally I got out as soon as I could. No place for an ambitious man. (*Small World*, 6)

Ringbaum's deficient article, Swallow's linguistic ignorance, or Dempsey's false belief that, unlike his colleagues, he has genuine academic potential, all reveal a sense of academic failure, and mirror another problem within the academic world that campus fiction pertains to, namely academic performance and output, which can boost or retard promotion. As DeBono puts it:

an academic seeks academic promotion and needs to demonstrate an output rather than a failed attempt to tackle an important but difficult problem. So the academic tailors his problem to suit his talent, and this becomes an end in itself. (1990, 5)

In Lodge's trilogy, a perfect embodiment of academic inability is a young Australian, Rodney Wainwright, working on his paper on the future of criticism. The opening line of the article "The question is, therefore, how can literary criticism..." (*Small World*, 140) is never finished, despite Rodney's numerous attempts to come up with a coherent continuation. Rodney Wainwright's problem can be defined, to use another quote from *Small World*, as a "long-preserved virginity" (334) of the academic sort, a common problem among academics, typical of pages rather than knights, the latter ones no longer in need to provide any proof of their academic ability, and interested more in the academic politics, which often consist in denigrating fellow academics, while securing a better position for oneself. As David Lodge observes, personal advancement in academia is almost as important as frustrating one's colleagues (cf. Lodge 2007, 263). This is mirrored in Lodge's campus fiction, where one's fiasco becomes someone else's success and, reversely, the success is envied and expected to end up in failure by those who have not succeeded themselves. This is particularly transparent when promotion is concerned, something which can happen owing to the academic advancement, but can also result from departmental politics, often based on the personal rather than professional grounds. A perfect example can be found in *Changing Places*, in an epistolary exchange between Philip and his wife, Hilary, in which Hilary gives an account of her meeting with the wife of Robin Dempsey, who, before returning to the scene as a conference participant in *Small World*, was Swallow's rival at the department:

I met Janet Dempsey at the supermarket and she said that Robin was determined to move if he doesn't get promotion this session. But surely they can't give him a senior lectureship before you, can they? He's so much younger. (*Changing Places*, 122)

This detailed report of the meetings with the wife of Swallow's potential rival for the promotion continues in much the same vein in another letter:

I saw Janet Dempsey again this morning (we seem to have fixed on the same day for supermarket shopping) and she said Robin knows he's definitely on Gordon's list of nominations for senior lectureships. Are you on it? I think what gets me is the way Janet implies that I'm naturally going to be fascinated by her husband's career as she is. Also the pointed way she never refers or asks about yours, as if it were a dead issue. (*Changing Places*, 130)

Swallow's reply perfectly fits the mood of Hilary's letters, one of a seemingly matter-of-fact report, but tinged with an oblique animosity towards his rival:

I've no idea whether I've been nominated for a Senior Lectureship and I'd rather keep it that way, since I shan't then have the mortification of knowing that I was definitely turned down. If Dempsey wants to poke his nose into such matters, let him. (*Changing Places*, 133)

Hilary's letters touch upon an important element of academic life reflected in Lodge's fiction, namely the fact that the world of academia knows no interregnum, once a place is vacant there is a *victor ludorum* awaiting to take it. In euphemistic terms this is simply academic competitiveness, but in a more drastic extension it takes the form of what Morris Zapp delineates bluntly in *Small World* as a form of academic cannibalism:

You know Freud's idea of primitive society as a tribe in which the sons kill the father when he gets old and impotent, and take away his women? In modern academic society they take away your research grant. (*Small World*, 42)

As has been said, academic success or failure is particularly transparent in the dimension that involves competitiveness in the academic rat race for promotion and rank. The winner's podium is what Morris Zapp defines as "the beauty of the academic life" (*Small World*, 151), elaborating his point in the further rumination:

To them that had had, more would be given. (...) In theory, it was possible to wind up being full professor while doing nothing except to be permanently absent on some kind of sabbatical grant or fellowship. Morris hadn't quite reached that omega point, but he was working on it. (*Small World*, 151-152)

In *Small World* this "omega point" is an extraordinary concept called the "chair of literary criticism" to be announced by UNESCO. A number of the academics in the novel are more than keen to win the position. Two of the potential contenders, Jacques Textel and Rudyard Parkinson, discuss the chair, thus revealing the very key element that draws various academics to the position soon to be offered, namely the fact that a successful candidate is expected to engage in little work while receiving a huge salary:

'What is this chair?' Rudyard Parkinson persisted.  
Textel told him. 'Interested?' he concluded.  
'Oh, no,' said Rudyard Parkinson, smiling and shaking his head. 'I'm quite content.'  
'That's nice to hear,' said Jacques Textel. 'In my experience top academics are the least contented people in the world. They always think the grass is greener in the next field.'  
'I don't think the grass anywhere is greener than in the Fellows' Garden at All Saints,' said Rudyard Parkinson smugly.  
'I can believe that,' said Jacques Textel. 'Of course, whoever gets the UNESCO chair won't have to move anywhere.'  
'Won't he?'  
'No, it's a purely conceptual chair. Apart from the salary, which is likely to be in the region of a hundred thousand dollars.' (*Small World*, 163)



This “modern comedy of academic manners”<sup>6</sup>, to use Lodge’s words, continues throughout the novel and engages more academics, who, though poker-faced, become real academic predators who drop the diplomatic manner when the tension grows among those who compete for the chair. All this is set in an environment which is extremely hostile, and which Lodge describes as follows: “When the time comes for your tenure review, half your colleagues will be trying to stab you in the back, and not speaking to the other half” (1989, 360). This is very much in line with Lodge’s claim that academic mental topography is dominated by one particular determinant – “the will to power” (2007, 262). What follows is a deep resentment harboured against the more successful colleagues, but, more importantly, the awareness of the prominence of one’s position in the academic hierarchy.

## Conclusion

When discussing academic fiction, one cannot omit the fact that much of what it depicts falls under the *academicus academico lupus est* rule. Academic fiction reveals a habitat “thick with the possibilities of intrigue” (Connor 1996, 69), whose inhabitants breed and fuel hostility. Simmering jealousies, tenures under threat, inter- and intra- departmental resentments, and the ever-present competition power the drive to achieve a leading place in the pecking order. All these issues, as McKenzie puts it, “preoccupy the academy and propel its fiction” (2006, 757). What seems particularly inspirational for academic fiction writers are clashing personalities, opposing interests, and the “tribal behavior” (Hazard 1988, ix) of the academic community:

Academic fiction almost always takes this competitiveness as part of its basis, showing its characters’ ambitions to gain more stature within the profession and often dramatizing this in terms of professional rivalry. (Rossen 1993, 4)

Obviously, as Lambertsson adds, any representation of academia, as “an isolated community peopled mainly by pathetic clowns” (1993, 9) is an intentional distortion used in academic fiction, but nevertheless it pinpoints something that is undeniable, namely an area of life and professional activity that is particularly prone to generate conflict, to a great extent based on the competition within the academic hierarchy. And this is exactly what campus novel amplifies, an inevitable conflict between academics, and an individual’s struggle in a habitat where sound academic work can easily transform into a combat zone, and where, as Bevan observes, “personal advantage rather than the pursuit of learning” (1990, 4) is often the genuine drive behind the façade of scholarly ethos.

<sup>6</sup> <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/interview-with-david-lodge> [Dostęp 14 II 2015].

Although it all appears rather disquieting, David Lodge in his fiction manages to render it in a decidedly light-hearted manner, spiced with a solid dose of humour. One cannot and should not forget that at least in the case of David Lodge's fiction it is more "fun-poking rather than denunciation", as Lodge puts it himself in an interview with John Haffenden (1985, 161). However, with the comic dimension prevailing, between the lines his fiction does encapsulate a more serious tone, dispelling, to use Lambertsson's expression, "the myth of the Ivory Tower" (1993, 9). To some extent, Lodge's campus fiction dissects the nature of what Gombrich labels as "academic misery" (2000, 55), much of which is based on, as this article has attempted to underline, the feudal hierarchy of academia.

### Bibliography

- Amis Kingsley. 2000. *Lucky Jim*. London: Penguin Books.
- Bevan David (red.). 1990. *University Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Caesar Terry. 1999. *Flying high and flying low: Travel, sabbaticals, and privilege in academic life*. "Style" Vol. 33, No 3: 443-461.
- Carter Ian. 1990. *Ancient Cultures of Conceit: British University Fiction in the Post-War Years*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Connor Steven. 1996. *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Cornford, F.M. 1908. *Microcosmographia Academica: Being a Guide for the Young Academic Politician*. Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes Publishers Ltd.
- De Bono Edward. 1990. *Wordpower: An Illustrated Dictionary of Vital Words*. Penguin Books: London.
- Edemariam Aida. 2007. *Who's Afraid of the Campus Novel?* Red. Moseley M. Chester: Chester Academic Press: 154-163.
- Gombrich Richard F. 2000. *British Higher Education Policy in the Last Twenty Years: The Murder of a Profession*. Lecture given on 7 January in Tokyo at the Graduate Institute of Policy Studies.
- Green Charles. 2008. *The Drones of Academe*. "The Missouri Review" Vol. 31, No 3: 177-188.
- Haffenden John (red.). 1985. *Novelists in Interview*. London: Methuen.
- Hague Angela. 1985. *The Academic World in Modern Literature*. "Midwest Quarterly" 1985: 171-187.
- Hazard Adams. 1988. *The Academic Tribes*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Lambertsson Björk Eva. 1993. *Campus Clowns and the Canon: David Lodge's Campus Fiction*. Umeå: University of Umeå.
- Lodge David. 2007. *Robertson Davies and the Campus Novel*. Red. Moseley M. Chester: Chester Academic Press: 261-267.
- Lodge David. 1978. *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses*. London: Penguin Books.
- Lodge David. 1989. *Nice Work*. London: Penguin Books.
- Lodge David. 1995. *Small World*. London: Penguin Books.

- McKenzie Alan T. 2006. *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (review). "Modern Fiction Studies" Vol. 52, No 3: 757-759.
- Moseley Merritt (red.). 2007. *The Academic Novel: New and Classic Essays*. Chester: Chester Academic Press.
- Rosovsky Henry. 1990. *The University: An Owner's Manual*. New York: Norton.
- Rossen Janice. 1993. *The University in Modern Fiction: When Power is Academic*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, London: The Macmillan Press.
- Scott Robert F. 2004. *It's a Small World, after All: Assessing the Contemporary Campus Novel*. "The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association" Vol. 37, No 1: 81-87.
- Williamson George. 2001. *Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

### Summary

#### KNIGHTS AND PAGES OF ACADEMIA IN DAVID LODGE'S *CAMPUS TRILOGY*

Academic fiction, in general, touches upon a variety of issues concerning the groves of academe. One of the most prominent areas comprises the university staff, particularly the professoriate, and the lower ranks, whose predominant target is to become upgraded in the academic pecking order. In this respect, academic fiction depicts a world that is highly hierarchical and prone to personal frictions. The aim of this article is to analyse how these problems are dissected in David Lodge's *Campus Trilogy*.

Kontakt z Autorem:  
klepuszewski@poczta.pl