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## University or Universal? : Revaluating the Academic Novel

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## **University or Universal? Revaluating the Academic Novel**

In *The Wissenschaft File* Malcolm Bradbury admits that while writing his first book he was utterly unaware of the fact that his work is to be categorized as a university novel. Misled by his experience as an academic teacher and by his professional life which consisted mainly of visiting libraries, collecting file cards in shoeboxes, writing articles and giving lectures, he assumed that the world outside the university, together with its plumbers, barmaids and other professions, is also engaged in academic work. Therefore, he was convinced that his first novel was, what might be called, a universal novel and surely not, as had been implied by his publisher, a university novel.<sup>1</sup> Elaine Showalter defines this genre as *Professorroman*, using a term coined by Richard G. Caram. She also claims that for most critics such novels

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, "The Wissenschaft File," in *Liar's Landscape: Collected Writing from a Storyteller's Life*, ed. Dominic Bradbury (London: Picador, 2007), p. 154.

are mainly satirical.<sup>2</sup> Brian A. Connery seems to concur since he writes about academic satire whose core is the clash between the academic world and that outside the university.<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Womack also states that “academic novels often satirize and problematize the contradictions and sociological nuances of campus life.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, if combined, these three definitions coalesce into one which stresses the corrective function of the university novel – a satire on a professional group (academics) and its struggle not only with university life but also with exigencies of life outside the university. It may appear that this is a light genre, rarely thought-provoking, designed merely to amuse a reader with its “scathing representation of professors and institutions alike ... as figures of deceit, duplicity and falsehood...” (Womack 2002: 1)

In an attempt to override such a misguided notion, Sally Dalton-Brown claims that the campus novel, in order to achieve the status of “a highly thoughtful genre must struggle against its own template.”<sup>5</sup> Quite certainly, the authors go a long way to do so: for example, Zadie Smith adds the issue of ethnicity, discrimination, and racial and social affiliation to *On Beauty* – a novel about an aging academic facing serious problem in his marriage and family life. A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* at one point becomes an epistolary novel, and David Lodge, playing with the structure of his novel, blends together press clippings, letters and even a screenplay in his *Changing Places*. Nonetheless, the university novel appears to be generally disregarded by the critics, despite its apparent capacity to become, as a biting satire on academics, a respectable genre. The academic fiction must

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<sup>2</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers. The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Brian A. Connery, “Inside Jokes: Familiarity and Contempt in Academic Satire,” in *University Fiction*, ed. David Beran (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Womack, *Postwar Academic Fiction: Satire, Ethics, Community* (London: Palgrave, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Sally Dalton-Brown, “Is There Life Outside of (the Genre of) the Campus Novel? The Academic Struggles to Find a Place in Today’s World,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, 41:4 (2008), p.592.

strive for critics' attention, much greater than it has received so far, but to do so must also break with the stereotype of light literature produced mainly for entertainment.

The purpose of this article is to approach the campus novel from an angle that would expose the qualities latent in a genre and to "struggle against its template" by pointing to the theme of conflict. Hilary P. Dannenberg writes, quoting after Marie-Laure Ryan, that the plot relies on the interaction of "virtual and actual worlds: the 'private' worlds of characters constituted by their wishes, knowledge, intentions, and obligations can deviate from or conflict with the 'reality' of the actual world of the text, thereby generating conflict and tellability – the stuff of interesting narrative."<sup>6</sup> Tellability is, in other words, the chief attractiveness of the text and it is conflict, either external or internal, that constitutes the novel's value.

### 1. Town and gown

When in his interview with David Lodge, Jerzy Jarniewicz reproached the novelist for contradicting himself in terms of literary theory, Lodge answered that instead of approaching the given issue from only one standpoint, he would rather "sit on the fence." That is why "the structure of his novels is of binary character and is based upon the conflict, or rather on a confrontation of two antithetical ideologies, professions, standpoints or cultures."<sup>7</sup> These "ideologies, standpoints or cultures" might refer to the protagonists, as well as to the professional circles or spheres which the characters in the novel are spokesmen for.

The conflict between the university world and that outside the academia was a focal point of numerous plots which organize the campus novel. Mortimer R. Proctor highlights the fact that the early university novels were marked by "a town-and-gown row, and often a

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<sup>6</sup> Hilary P. Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality. Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Jerzy Jarniewicz, *Lista obecności. Szkice o dwudziestowiecznej prozie brytyjskiej i irlandzkiej* (Poznań: Rebis, 2000), p. 253, trans. mine.

duel,”<sup>8</sup> and Showalter mentions that “the academic novels of the nineteen fifties depict a society with its own rules and traditions, cut off from the outside world, a snug, womblike, and, for some, suffocating world” (Showalter 2005:17).

The town and gown conflict can be caused by various factors. Richard Sheppard calls the academics members of “the learned caste” and suggests that the simple townsmen could have feared the university teachers who were in possession of knowledge reserved only for scientists, alchemists or psychologists and as such they were “tricky opponents”.<sup>9</sup> This fear and anxiety resulted from the townsmen’s puzzlement as the academic work was completely incomprehensible to them. The academic world was restricted only to the academic associates initiated into what gives the impression of being almost secret sect practices: giving lectures, attending conferences, publishing articles but also being involved in more prosaic actions like undermining the authority of other teachers or adultery. On the other hand, this puzzlement and incomprehension might have resulted in the conviction that academic work is not work at all, since its product is not clearly visible, and thus the academics might have been perceived to be superfluous. In *Porterhouse Blue*, a satire on outdated academic values written by Tom Sharpe, Sir Cathart seems to hold a similar opinion. He says that if he were allowed he would “kick every damned scholar out of the College and put in some athletes to run the place properly.”<sup>10</sup>

The whole conflict is vividly presented in David Lodge’s *Nice Work*, with its “confrontation of two antithetical ideologies and professions” (Jarniewicz 2000:253, trans. mine). As a motto to the novel Lodge chose an extract from Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil* about two conflicting nations and Robert S. Burton points out that the

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<sup>8</sup> Mortimer R. Proctor, *The English University Novel* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Sheppard, “From Narragonia To Elysium: Some Preliminary Reflections On The Fictional Image Of The Academic,” in *University Fiction*, ed. David Beran (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Sharpe, *Porterhouse Blue*, (London: Arrow Books, 2002), p. 67.

epigraph “seems intended to apply ... to the separation of town and gown in modern Britain.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, thematically the campus novel does treat of a division between the academic and non-academic world, each with its own values and principles. James Acheson relies on Lodge’s own opinion that the university world acts as a representation of the society per se, with its regulations, morals, desires and disagreements. In such micro-society they can be easily arranged and exposed to a reader’s view.<sup>12</sup> Each society has its own representatives – spokesmen or spokeswomen for these principles and it is the author’s task to endow these individuals with virtues or follies that are characteristic of the group they stand for.

In *Nice Work* Vic Wilcox is a representative of the world of factories, chauvinistic workers and tricky business negotiations. Robyn Penrose, on the other hand, embodies the academic values but also voices leftist feminist ideas. They both become engaged in the so called “Shadow Scheme” – they are to spend some time together (Robyn in the factory and Vic at the university) observing work so different from what they do on a daily basis. Conflict seems inevitable. Wilcox is a person who would subscribe to Sir Cathart’s opinion on the uselessness of education, especially the humanities. Robert P. Winston and Timothy Marshall mention that, in Vic’s opinion, the only thorough evaluation of education is the money one can earn through his hard work. Hence what should be studied is mainly engineering.<sup>13</sup> Robyn, on the other hand, naively imagines the possibility of brotherhood between representatives of the working class and the academic elite, with education available to everyone. She believes that even if the only thing they are taught is creative thinking and not methods of making money, it will still be worth studying. Her

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<sup>11</sup> Robert S. Burton, “Standoff at the Crossroads: When Town Meets Gown in David Lodge’s *Nice Work*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 35:4 (1994), p. 239.

<sup>12</sup> James Acheson, “The Small Worlds of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge,” in *The British and Irish Novel since 1960*, ed. James Acheson (Basingstoke: Macmillan Academic and Professional LTD, 1991), p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> Robert P. Winston and Timothy Marshall, “The Shadows of History: ‘The Condition of England’ in *Nice Work*,” *Critique*, 44:1 (2002), p. 7.

observations lead to a conviction that “higher education should not have to defend or justify itself in utilitarian terms, but should be more democratic and open to everyone” (Showalter 2005:105).

The conflict serves here as a key to recognizing the intertextual quality of the novel. Both Vic and Robyn are guides of some sort who assist the reader in discovering references to the nineteenth-century industrial novels smuggled into the pages of the book. Of course, Robyn herself specializes in this genre but she also personifies Margaret Hale, a character from *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell. Wilcox resembles John Thornton, the owner of the mill from Gaskell’s novel, and the whole conflict between them resembles that between Margaret and John. In other words, *Nice Work* is modelled by *North and South* and, generally, revives the genre of the industrial novel. Winston and Marshall claim that “by creating protagonists who are both teachers of sort – Robyn introduces Vic to cultural and literary theory, whereas he explains to her his version of industrial reality – Lodge simultaneously creates characters who instruct the reader” (Winston and Marshall 2002: 4). Not only do they instruct the reader about the state of industrial England and utilitarian education, but also, as Winston and Marshall point out, they direct “the reader’s attention to a series of structural devices and thematic elements present in the narrative.” (Winston and Marshall 2002:5).

## 2. Teacher versus teacher

Or, as will be argued, versus the university as an institution flaunting norms and habits. It is this component of the template which recurs frequently in the academic novel. It marks and emphasizes, as stated by Dalton-Brown, “the academic’s struggle for survival in an often surreal scholarly world” and questions “whether such survival is worth the cost” (Dalton-Brown 2008:592). In Sharpe’s *Porterhouse Blue*, for example, the author presents a disagreement between the new Master of Porterhouse (a college in Cambridge where outdated values and principles are still being cherished) and other members of the staff: the Dean, the Senior Tutor or the Chaplain. The use of the names of their professions instead of their surnames proves that their

individuality has been reduced to their occupations. They are part of the outmoded system with its prized dinners in the College Hall for the whole staff or rowing tournaments. The college also accepts new students for money because of the budget deficit. The only characters from the staff whose surnames appear regularly are Sir Godber Evans (the new Master), who struggles with old principles and endeavours to introduce progressive changes to the system, and Skullion, but then again, his profession is similar to that of a household servant (a scullion) – he is the College Porter. Those who stand guard over the conservative values “struggle to survive”, since the new Master threatens them that if the proposed changes are not accepted, he will be forced to make public all known to him details of bribery in the College. The whole conflict, although spiced with several comic situations, presents rather a grim picture of the college “as a place for the scholastically crippled and intellectually deprived.”<sup>14</sup>

Another novel, and better known, that touches on the subject is Kingsley Amis’ *Lucky Jim*. Published in 1954, the novel attacks the tight-knit and closed university community. The novel centres on Jim Dixon, a lecturer in the department of history. The reader follows his endeavour to keep the position at the university since the end of the year approaches inevitably and Dixon is afraid of losing his job. In order to do so he must, in accordance with the “publish or perish” rule, have his dull and derivative article printed. But not only this. Only when Dixon presents a lecture on “Merrie England” and attends a tedious and characterless party organized by his superior, Professor Welch, will he manage to keep his job.

The attraction of Amis’ novel lies in the possibility of reading it as “a fable or fantasy garbed in realism.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, as Richard Fallis seems to suggest, this novel, like the university novel in general, is not only a satire on scholars but, when read carefully, it can yield a certain dose

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<sup>14</sup> Raymond G. McCall, “The Comic Novels of Tom Sharpe”, *Critique*, 25:2 (1984), p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Fallis, “Lucky Jim and Academic Wishful Thinking,” *Studies in the Novel*, 9:1(1977), p. 66.



of profundity: "I would suggest ... that much of Jim's hold on us comes because we see him as a fantasized version of our unrealized selves and because we recognize the novel to be a version of heroic fantasy cast into superficially realistic situations" (Fallis 1977: 65-66). The academics, the target audience of the university novel, may feel tempted to identify themselves with Dixon. For them Jim becomes a person who manages to break with the restraints imposed on him by the scholarly world in which a puzzled lecturer finds himself ill-treated, yet overcomes his fear of losing the job and expresses his anger and scorn of his superiors. Ultimately, he may be a hero not only for the academics but also for the "regular" readers – surely numerous oppressed employees would love to be able to stand up to their employers at least once in their lives. On that account, Fallis calls Dixon a hero, but a hero who is unwitting or unaware of his heroics. And, since he considers *Lucky Jim* a fantasy or a fable, he suggests that, of course, the hero must face his enemies - "Margaret, woman as destructive temptress, Bertrand, the ogre who guards the realm of sexual success, Ned Welch, the ogre who blocks him from, the realm of professional success, and a host of minor frights ..." (Fallis 1977:70)

Dixon's struggle to keep the job does, in fact, resemble a heroic quest through the consecutive levels of academic life. Curiously cast among members of academia and not particularly fond of academic work, Dixon makes an attempt to survive, finds his own space in the crowd of the academics and strives to fit himself in, even though he rebels against it. He is convinced, however, that he will not be able to find another job and so he must attempt to stay in (Dalton-Brown's "academic's struggle to survival"). Does it then make him a hero, even if only involuntary? Heroes are by definition courageous and it is precisely courage and self-confidence that Jim lacks. David Lodge writes:

For most of the novel's action, Jim's rebellion against bourgeois values and institutions is purely mental, or physically expressed only through the pulling of grotesque faces when he thinks he is unobserved. His desire to take violent action

against those who oppress him is discharged in harmless private fantasies of a childish nature...<sup>16</sup>

There is definitely nothing heroic about pulling faces or fantasizing about inflicting violence on one's employer. In spite of these embarrassing aspects of Jim's personality, Amis himself appears to defend his protagonist. In a letter to Mademoiselle Haimart he writes that Jim's "objection is not to the system as a whole, but to the particular part of it in which he finds himself. If he could find a way of doing his job properly, he would adopt it ..."<sup>17</sup> It may seem then that Dixon would have been more truly a hero if he had managed to keep his job instead of taking an opportunity in the shape of Uncle Julius (who, according to Fallis, functions as "the god and father-surrogate" to Jim) (Fallis 1977:70) and flee to London where a new job was waiting for him. And maybe it is true that if Dixon "could find a way of doing his job properly, he would adopt it" though, in fact, he did not try to find it. When asked by Julius if he is ambitious, he answers: "No. I've done badly here since I got the job."<sup>18</sup> He wants to keep it because he is afraid of not being able to find another one. But when miraculously a lucrative one is offered to him, he suddenly becomes capable of revealing his scorn towards the Welches. Thus, there is nothing courageous about the protagonist. He is merely a lucky coward.

Another protagonist in conflict with other teachers is Howard Kirk, a character from Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*. Kirk is also engaged in another conflict, namely that of

### 3. Teacher versus student

In *Welcome Back to the History Man* Bradbury describes Kirk as "always radical, always seductive, always seducing" and "eternally on the side of the students against the fascistic institution that paid his

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<sup>16</sup> David Lodge, *The Practice of Writing* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 92.

<sup>17</sup> Zachary Leader, ed. *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), p. 746.

<sup>18</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 214.

salary, and always against those who were over thirty, even if he was himself thirty-five.”<sup>19</sup> Howard, together with his wife, is enormously popular, especially among the radical spheres, since his approach towards life is up-to-date and fashionable. For Kirk a turning-point in his life happened when his wife cheated on him with one of their friends – an event which freed them from the conventional bounds of the institution of marriage. They started to, as Howard would put it, cross the boundaries of reality – taking illegal substances, organizing parties and widening the circle of their friends. Kirk found a job at the university (he used unconventional methods of teaching, he even took his students to witness his wife giving birth to their child) and, most important, began to gradually cut himself off from his conservative roots.

It may strike readers as unlikely that someone who is “eternally on the side of students”, who encourages the freedom of speech among them and who enjoys their respect thanks to unusual ways of conducting his classes can be in conflict with any of them. Inconceivable though it may seem, it is actually quite plausible. Kirk is an individual who cherishes a certain vision of the world, adopted by him together with the new eccentric lifestyle, where the working class, which he identifies himself with, struggles against the middle-class. He becomes a part of this world by assuming a liberal mask and, in this way, manages to blend in with the history times he lives in. However, as stressed by Robert A. Morace, “Kirk is ... considerably less liberated than he believes” and “blind to the limitations and factitiousness of his sociological point of view.”<sup>20</sup> When something or somebody does not correlate or is not consonant with his vision of the world, he simply eliminates them in a ruthless way. This he does with George Carmody, who is one of his students. George does not suit the sixties with his university blazer, clean-shaven face, polished shoes

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<sup>19</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, “Welcome Back to the History Man,” in *Liar’s Landscape: Collected Writing from a Storyteller’s Life*, ed. Dominic Bradbury (London: Picador, 2007), p. 143.

<sup>20</sup> Robert A. Morace, *The Dialogic Novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), p. 66.

and orthodox values, “he is a glimpse from another era; a kind of historical offence.”<sup>21</sup> Unlike Kirk, he lacks the ability to accommodate to the new times in which conservatism is slowly declining. As a metaphor of how Carmody diverges from the world in which he has to live, Bradbury creates a scene in which George presents an essay to the rest of Kirk’s group, which he does in a traditional form by reading from sheets of paper – apparently a crime in Howard’s classes. But the author does also something more here: reveals Howard’s real face, his false liberalism and hypocrisy. While preaching liberal values and promoting broad-mindedness, Kirk does, in fact, something completely opposite – he does not tolerate difference in behaviour or opinion. Carmody uncovers Kirk’s real personality in front of other students:

Of course you all *do* have a conflict model. Everyone’s interest conflicts with everyone else’s. But better not conflict with Dr Kirk. Oh, no, it’s not a consensus model for his classes all right. I mean, we’re democratic, and we vote, but no dirty old conservative standpoints here. (Bradbury 1984:134)

Carmody looks behind the curtain and notices Kirk’s hypocrisy. For this he has to be punished and Kirk fails him, doubtless with pleasure. But while Kirk is dishonest self-righteous and even slightly priggish, Carmody, on the other hand, is a blackmailer. He threatens to disclose the fact that Kirk shows favouritism towards those students who generally do not oppose him. And when that fails, he goes to see the Vice-Chancellor to reveal that Kirk sleeps with his students.

The conflict between these two characters is once again the struggle to survive. The character who wins is, of course, Kirk, a trickster and master of manipulation. This is readily visible when he controls a party organized by him and his wife which serves as a symbolic micro-society. His guests are a peculiar mixture of individuals from different social spheres – hippies, mothers with children, students, and young university teachers. They all come from separate groups which, due to changes introduced by Howard during the party, become gradually intermingled. His ability to manipulate

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<sup>21</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man* (London: Arrow Books, 1984), p. 131.

people is also noticeable when Kirk persuades his colleagues into inviting to the university a lecturer who has earned a reputation as a fascist only to inspire his students to organize a manifestation against the lecturer's speech. Being capable of such manipulations makes him a formidable opponent for George Carmody. Not only does Kirk prevail, having Carmody expelled, but he also earns the reputation of a "martyr of Carmodian persecution" (Bradbury 1984:218).

Kirks turns out to be an opportunistic, cruel and, above all, deceitful individual, ready to destroy anyone who threatens his vision of reality. In fact, when he characterizes Carmody as a haughty individual who demands that the whole world dances to his tune and when it does not, he is ready to destroy it, he portrays himself. And when he refuses to call Carmody a human being, he actually refuses to call himself one. But in the academic world Howard remains respected and admired by his students, perceived as a leader always eager to advise on important sociological issues.

The campus novel, as already stated, is usually a comic novel, a satire on dons and academia in general. Andrew Monnickendam, however, asks whether these novels are produced just to amuse us "or whether, behind or beyond the laughter, there is an underlying concern for the subjects and institutions which are ridiculed."<sup>22</sup> The analysis of moral conflicts, in fact, leads to yet another conflict – the struggle of the university novel against its own template, a template which conceptualizes the university novel as a story about representatives of a certain profession (academics) finding themselves in a particular setting (the university), but which reaches out to something more, something beyond *Professorroman* or a satirical novel. Dalton-Brown mentions that David Lodge in his *Write On* "has argued that inside, as outside, the 'academy,' the principal determinants of action are sex and will to power, and that campus fiction might be based on a consideration of the relative dominance of these two drives in the story" (Dalton-Brown 2008:593). Quite certainly sex and will to

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<sup>22</sup> Andrew Monnickendam, "The Comic Academic Novel," *Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies*, 2:2 (1989), p. 153.

power are prominent elements in academic conflicts. But these conflicts, as stressed by Lodge, are not only visible inside the academy but also, or mostly, outside of it. The university in the campus novel presents the micro-society of teachers and students but its image is exploited by the authors even further – it serves as the representation or the symbol of the society as we know it, in which the “regular” individuals, like plumbers or barmaids, live. So if the campus novel satirizes certain behaviours, follies or vices, by incorporating the image of the university, it, in fact, mocks the world existing outside the university. The will to power (as demonstrated by Kirk, Sir Godber or Welch) and sexual desire (noticeable, for example, in Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*) is what some readers may experience in their everyday life. This, together with the comic elements, widens the circle of recipients of this genre. They are not only academic teachers anymore but representatives of other professions. Once other elements of the campus novel (as discussed in this paper) are distinguished from its generic pattern, the template itself remains only a suggestion on how the novel should be produced. But as such, the novel would be simply a book written by the academics on the academics for the academics, which may lead eventually to the disappearance of the genre. Luckily, the process of broadening the template is still being stimulated by the authors, who constantly add new elements (for example, the influence of the past on the present, which is the core of the plot in Byatt’s *Possession*) even if they only recreate elements already used by other novelists (the conflict between Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps in *On Beauty* resembles that between Kirk and Carmody). With those new features and themes, the campus novel gradually becomes an appealing genre for the general reader and becomes valued by the critics (*Small World* was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1984 and *Possession* actually won it in 1990). Together with the weighty matters discussed under the veil of the academic environment (though, as has been already pointed out, these matters are ubiquitous), this makes the campus novel into a truly universal one.

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