

**Nice Work** is a contemporary novel written by David Lodge and published in 1988. It is part of what today goes under the name of “campus novel”, which is a novel set in an academic environment, based on the pretext of an exchange between the world of work and of university.

*Nice Work* is considered the parody of *Hard Times*, C. Dickens’s Victorian novel. The leading characters are: Vic Wilcox, who works as the manager director of an engineering firm, and Robyn Penrose, who is a temporary lecturer at the fictional University of Rummidge.

In the extract I am going to analyse, which deals with her introduction as a character, Robyn is characterised by contrast with Vic: she is of a different gender, she comes from and works in a different environment. Their *Weltanschauung* is also different. Indeed, the narrator states “[...] let us leave Vic Wilcox [...] to meet a very different character” and tells the reader that Robyn does not believe in the concept of character. On the contrary, she holds that it is a bourgeois myth, created to reinforce the ideology of capitalism. After that, during one of her lectures she explains that the rise, the triumph and the deconstruction of the classic novel coincided with the similar steps in the development of capitalism.

Comments of the narrator are present between brackets and contribute to Robyn ‘s characterisation. Indeed, he lets the reader know one of her frequent interjections while she is working: “that is to say”, an expression commonly used by teachers and lecturers. Only after that, the narrator tells the name of the character: Robyn Penrose. Her name reminds of a male name, and generally, Robin Hood’s, so suggesting she is a natural fighter, one who fights for her convictions. Vice versa her surname sounds really feminine and hints at her love for reading and writing.

She is later presented by her social role: she is a temporary lecturer in English Literature at the University of Rummidge. The adjective “temporary”, referred to her job, contributes to the postmodern concept of relativity and unsteadiness.

In the second paragraph, the narrator goes into detail explaining why Robyn believes that the concept of character (a relevant structural element of the traditional and Victorian novel) is an expression of capitalism. Both the novel and capitalism are the result of a Protestant ethic, considered that they both “depend on the idea of an autonomous individual self who is responsible for and in control of his/her own destiny, seeking happiness and fortune in competition with other autonomous selves”. It is worth noticing that capitalism rests on competition. A character is to be seen only as a myth. Indeed, from the 17th to well in the 20ieth century characters were a fundamental assumption, one of the pillars of fiction but they soon will be put into question by the revolutionary ideas and theories of philosophers and scientists of the Postmodern world.

The common aspect of all their theories is the relativity associated to every aspect of life and thought. As a result, the world has lost its accepted certainties, and the idea of defined truths is no longer a landmark. The novelist is compared to “a capitalist of the imagination”, one who transforms a form of art into a form of mass production.

As Robyn goes on lecturing her students, she presents two novelists who contributed to making literature a mass-produced cultural artefact: Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson. Indeed, Victorian novels were published in monthly instalments that allowed the writers to satisfy readers’ curiosity after keeping it high for a month, every time creating needs that readers did not know they wanted. At this point, the narrator comments on Robyn’s gestures, saying that even though she acts as if to imply that there was nothing more to say and that her words were just self-explanatory, to tell the truth she always has more to say.

In addition, she keeps on explaining “there is no such thing as the ‘self’ on which capitalism and the classic novel are founded”. Before letting Robyn clarify her words, the narrator introduces the concept of identity, saying that Robyn’s way of thinking (just like everybody’s) is a product of those who have influenced her thought. Robyn herself states that “there is only a subject position in an infinite web of discourses”. To tell the truth, the message the narrator wants to send is that Robyn’s vision of the world has been influenced by they who and what she has read. This means that, the unique identity so dear to Victorians does not exist. Such illusion made Victorians believe in the concept of the self-made man, an individual who is aware and in control of what he/she says and of other people’s interpretation. To tell the truth, an individual like this does not really exist as unique identities do not exist rather, individuals have all got multiple identities.

According to tradition, the author is he who creates a work of fiction from nothing. The author, conceived by the traditional form of the novel, does not exist because every text is built from quotations from other texts. It is a product of multiple texts which interweave. This implies there are no origins but only productions and there is nothing outside the text to say it in Jacques Derrida’s words “il n’y a pas de hors-texte”. This applies to people as well, since they produce their ‘selves’ in language.

The idea that individuals are what speaks them, rather than what they speak is the fundamental idea of “semiotic materialism”, a philosophy relying on the laws of semiotics for the analysis of reality.

It follows that textual interpretation is one of the most relevant topics of Postmodernism, a trend of thought the resulted of the multiple changes occurred in the second half of the 20th century: there are no longer well defined truths and therefore, we all live in a world characterised by instability.

Finally, the last lines present Robyn as both a feminist and a dreamer: “she seems to have ordinary human feelings, ambitions, desires, to suffer anxieties, frustrations, fears, like anyone else in this imperfect world, and to have a natural inclination to try and make it a better place.”