Nice Work by David Lodge

*Nice Work* is a contemporary novel written by David Lodge and published in 1988. The extract under analysis is taken from Chapter two. Its function is to introduce a new character: Robyn Penrose. She is one of the main characters of the novel along with Vic Wilcox, who is mentioned at the beginning of the extract.

Robyn Penrose is introduced by a third person omniscient and intrusive narrator, whose presence is visible thanks to comments added between parenthesis. The narrator draws the reader’s attention to characters and settings, the latter is quite unclear.

The character’s introduction is built on different categories and does not follow the rules of a “traditional” introduction (e.g. the introduction is opened by the character’s name).

First of all, the narrator focuses the attention on the character’s way of thinking. Robyn, who is a character herself, doesn’t believe in novel characters - Robyn’s idea will be explained in-depth after the character’s introduction -.

Secondly, the narrator focuses on the character’s language: it is interesting to point out the association between language and thought. In particular, the narrator focuses on her spoken language: the character is introduced with one of the phrases she often uses during conversations – “that is to say”.

The narrator now reveals the character’s name: Robyn Penrose. Her first name is a man’s name that seem to recall Robyn Hood, but the narrator has already made clear that she is a woman. Her surname is made of two words: “Pen” recalls the character’s job and “rose” that might be a reference to the character’s nature: the reader may hypothesize that Robyn is a nice person who has negative sides, just like a rose is beautiful and has thorns.

“Temporary Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Rummidge” is Robyn’s occupation. It is made of different elements: the “University of Rummidge” is a fictional place created by Lodge for his novel, “Temporary Lecturer” is Robyn’s job which seems to be affected by instability: indeed, economy cuts funds for schools and Universities and Robyn fights to make things better, “English Literature” is the main focus of Robyn’s work as a Lecturer: as the reader will discover, she is particularly interested in industrial novel. Her interest may be justified by her working conditions.

Moving on, the narrator draws the reader’s attention on her body language: Robyn gestures to convey better her ideas or to convey her listener something she does not say out loud.

Later in the text, the narrator provides some information about her culture and reading interests: “Jacques Derridà is famous to people like Robyn, anyway”.

The reader’s attention is once again drawn on Robyn’s philosophy. It can be summed up in the quotation “we produce ourselves in language”, which refers to the previous association between language and thought.

After providing the basic information about the character’s identity, the narrator explains better Robyn’s non-belief in novel characters: she does not believe in characters because they are a product of capitalism. Such idea raises a question: whether or not the author/narrator agrees with Robyn’s point of view. Indeed, the author himself is writing a novel and he is introducing a character who does not believe in characters; in order to understand the narrator’s position, the reader has to focus on his comments.

At the beginning of the second paragraph, the narrator reports Robyn’s thoughts using her own words: “Both are expressions of a secularized Protestant ethic, both dependent 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.” The sentence is reported without being introduced by a phrase like “Robyn thinks that…”. The following sentence is opened by “This is true”: the narrator’s judgment suggests that he may agree with her.

Moreover, Robyn’s ideas of a character are conveyed to the reader by means of a strictly logical and rigorous argumentation. The narrator explains the role and function of each piece of information in Robyn’s argumentation.

The character’s introduction is closed in a circle: the reference to Vic Wilcox recalls the beginning of the extract.

The extract is an interesting example of meta-narrative, which is particularly spread in postmodern Literature.

At the end of the extract the intelligent reader discover Robin’s philosophy : “semiotic materialism”. She reflects upon the concept of multiple identity (Changez) and thus “you are what speaks you”. On the top of that Robin affirms “we produce our ‘selves’ in language”, that is to say, we are products of our origins.