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“And Never the Twain Shall Meet”?

Separate Worlds and Characterization in David Lodge’s *Nice Work*

English

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Abstract

This essay uses some tenets of structuralism as well as the concept of “discourse” to analyze David Lodge’s novel *Nice Work* (1988). The opposite discourses of Academia and Industry, as expounded through the life and character of the main protagonists, are analyzed as they are exposed throughout the novel through the involuntary mingling of the main characters. The governing idea is that three separate discourses can be gleaned as a basic structure in the novel, forming a triad that suggests the idea of a possible synthesis, which is shown to be what propels the plot of the novel onward. As in Hegelian dialectics the clash between a thesis and its antithesis makes the reader expect the third term, a synthesis, which is offered in the mediating discourse of the narrator. Further, this essay focuses on three levels of exchange within the novel and its protagonists: the intellectual, emotional and practical ones. The synthesis of discourses is shown to come to a halt in the end, and the opposites seem to stand unperturbed, even though an exchange of values, ideas and actions has occurred.
In *Nice Work* (1988), David Lodge investigates the relationship between two utterly separate worlds: the world of industry and the world of academia. Lodge’s book is a light-hearted attempt at showing how the two worlds of the story in essential ways remain separate, even though they are frequently in dialogue throughout the novel. An interesting opposition between them is expounded, hinged onto the main characters in the narrative and the spaces in which they belong: the dark filth of the industrial estates, “that wilderness of factories and warehouses and roads and roundabouts, scored with overgrown railroad cuttings and obsolete canals like the lines on Mars,” in contradiction to the lush greenery of the parks of the University premises, “alien, inscrutable, vaguely threatening” as its secret discourses would seem to the “people who worked at Pringle’s”(216). I will draw on the concept of “discourse” as well as some concepts in structuralism to show how the two worlds are depicted.

In this essay, “discourse” is used as a term with approximately the same meaning as that of “ideology,” referring to a whole set of ideas and assumptions about the world we live in. The term draws attention to the fact that ideology to a large extent is transferred via language (Tyson 285). Trying to shed light on a literary work from the point of view of discursive analysis is here taken to entail an effort to try to understand what kind of discourses are articulated within the work, and to do that one needs to be aware both of the discourses prevailing at the time the work was written, as well as the discourse oneself participates in and is influenced by as a literary critic. Therefore, some references will be made to extra-diegetic discourses\(^1\) pertaining to the theme of the novel throughout my analysis.

\(^{1}\) I.e. discourses outside of or independent of the story-world.
But no extensive analysis of these discourses will be offered, since my primary intention is to focus on the novel itself.

Apart from the concept of “discourse,” I will also make use of some basic tenets of structuralism. In structuralism, the founding idea is that human beings form their experience of the world by structuring it in a certain way. The apparatus of the human mind imposes its structures onto “an otherwise chaotic world,” thereby making sense of it (Tyson 211-216). In experience, we tend to understand the world through opposites, or “binary oppositions.” Clear examples of such binary pairs range from night/day, up/down, rise/fall, to nature/culture, academia/industry etc. The present essay will discuss the structure of *Nice Work* in terms of such binaries, and also make use of structuralism more generally, partly inspired by the idea that there are deep structures in all narratives, and that characters in fiction carry out basic roles, which A.J. Greimas has termed “actants” (Greimas 797). A basic tenet in Greimas’ narratology is that “all narrative [essentially consists] of the transfer of one object of value from one actant to another” (Lodge 1980, 6). My analysis will partly show that such a transfer in fact occurs in the novel.

My purpose in this essay is thus to analyze the discourses of the main characters – and how their respective worlds are portrayed – as clearly as possible. My analysis will also include a third character, that of the narrator. The three discourses at play in the novel are hence seen as that of the narrator “him/her/itself,” as well as those of the main characters. In discussing the discourse of the narrator, I will look at the tenor of narration and the rhetoric used in describing characters, discourses and events.

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2 I prefer to use a gender-neutral pronoun to signify the narrator, but to simplify things the pronoun “he” will be used in this essay.
When I speak of the narrator, I am thus mainly referring to the “mood” and “voice” of the narrator (Tyson 228-29), but I am not analyzing the “tense”, i.e. I will not look at the arrangement of the plot in terms of time. The mood of the narrator includes his degree of presence in the narrative – whether he interferes in it or whether the story seems to “tell itself” – as well as his perspective, or point-of-view (Tyson 229). The narrator in Nice Work often seems to see the story-world from the point of view of the character he is at the moment dealing with, at the same time as he through his “voice” indicates how he sees it. The “voice” of the narrator in short shows his attitude to the story world, which is often tinged with irony.

As has been hinted, the story in Nice Work concerns the involuntary mingling of the discourses of industry and academia, as represented by the main characters of the story, Vic Wilcox and Robyn Penrose. The characters are in fact forced to meet by circumstances beyond their control. The novel has a triadic structure, composed as it is of six parts which are each divided into three chapters, with the exception of part five, wherein a romance between the main characters is consummated on a business trip, and part six, which has only two chapters – signaling perhaps that no real synthesis between the two worlds is achieved. Overall, the triads consist of the “life” of the separate worlds and how they clash, mingle and influence each other in various ways.

This continuous exchange between the two worlds depicted in the novel occurs on a number of levels, among which I focus on the intellectual, emotional and practical ones. Regarding the first one, we quickly become aware that the pro-

3 This part includes four chapters. I refrain from dwelling on the possible significance of this, but it is not impossible that some meaning can be extracted from this arrangement. The fourth chapter sticks out, almost like an appendix. David Lodge as a well known structuralist may have alluded to archetypal criticism. In the structuralist studies of for instance Northrop Frye, the fourth phase of a cycle is the phase where things come full circle. (Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, passim.) In this fifth part of the book, its fourth chapter concerns Vic’s desperate attempts to try to get in touch with Robyn after the romantic interlude. But this fulfillment is denied him. No wholeness is achieved, ironically, from Vic’s perspective.
agonists are totally at variance, literature to Vic being nothing more than a diversion to enjoy for pure pleasure if anything. The protagonists’ ideas about the world are indeed different in many respects. Emotionally, they are equally at odds, as we shall see, whereas on a practical level the two seem to come to an understanding. They are affected by their encounters, one of them in fact being a romantic interlude, whose level of emotionality is not at all equal between them. Their comingling then, ironically, concludes in a mutual business venture. This somewhat ironic exchange of character and meaning is the main focus of this essay. My intention is to explore the movement toward some kind of fusion of the two worlds, or discourses – creating a dramatic charge which serves the purpose of fuelling the story onwards. The opposites turn out to depend on each other and exert quite an attraction, as in a magnetic field.

In chapter one we are confronted with Vic Wilcox’s world which is a world of material objects, be it his wife’s Valium-drugged, plump body in bed as Vic wakes up early in the morning – feeling like some “captain of a sleeping ship, alone at the helm, steering his oblivious crew through dangerous seas”(14) – or the “four toilets” of his house, the burglar alarm, a long wanted microwave on the wife’s list of desired objects, a brand new clock radio found in the wardrobe, or his superior Jaguar, which he enjoys immensely on his way to work. There is no doubt that the all-knowing narrator assumes a humorous stance in describing Vic’s world. When Vic wakes up and stands in front of the bathroom mirror, asking himself: “Who am I?”(17), the question is swiftly followed by a short-hand CV. “No identity crises, please,” he tells himself as he considers the fact that someone has to provide for the family, wife, daughter and two sons. The four toilets are noted to be just as good an “index of success as any” (16). As Vic comfortably glides to work in his Jaguar, he
passes the University – “a small city state, an academic Vatican” – and makes the mental note that a too comfortable college will not give students the incentive to do “proper work”(29), pointing out the uselessness of academia disconnected from base material reality. Vic’s main worries this morning all circle around various business options where he will have to take action.

Vic Wilcox’s world is contrasted in the second chapter by the one of Robyn Penrose. Humorously, the narrator states that Robyn herself does not believe in the concept of character, but sees it as a “bourgeois myth, an illusion created to reinforce the ideology of capitalism” (39). The narrator goes on to describe the academic jargon she uses to describe it – reducing personality to “a subject position in an infinite web of discourses”, nothing being “outside the text,” etc (40). It is in introducing her character that the narrator comes down from his, as it were, invisible spheres to make a strong presence for the first time in the novel, not only to state that her ideas are awkward for “me,” but also to conclude that she “seems to have ordinary human feelings, ambitions, desires” and that “I shall therefore take the liberty of treating her as a character” (41). This is quite ironic since the narrator himself is nothing but a textual function, and perhaps this is the reason why he takes care to point out that “he” has an opinion, just like “Robyn.” Within this fictional frame he can safely make his claims. The reader’s suspension of disbelief can remain undisturbed despite the intrusion of the narrator. Until now the narration has been quite unproblematic, and the reader may not even have been aware of the presence of a narrator. So, whoever this narrator is, it is important that he “person-
alizes” himself properly in order for the reader to think of Robyn as a real person, a real character, which is the main point that the narrator wants to make.4

The rest of this chapter consists of a biographical sketch of Robyn’s life, intermingled with a description of her morning routines and her making her way to the University to give a lecture on the Victorian Industrial Novel. We are informed that her main worries this particular morning are “her lecture on the Industrial Novel, her job future and her relationship with Charles [with whom she has lived together on and off for some years] – in that order of conspicuousness rather than importance,” as the narrator summarizes it (59). This quick, passing comment indicates that Robyn really does not see any of them as particularly important. We also get a brief sketch of life in contemporary U.K. with its tax cuts and following withdrawal of funding for Universities and education under Thatcher in the eighties.

Already from this brief description it is easy to see how different these worlds are, and how the characters themselves seem to produce separate, if not opposite, discourses about the worlds they live in – one being “matter of fact,” based on the idea that “proper work” has to be performed in order to make sure that material needs are taken care of, whereas the other one almost seems to deny the existence of such puny matters, since everything appears to boil down to ideas, and the proper understanding of them – granted of course that her discourse is influenced by Marxist ideas, which indeed emphasize material reality. From the point of view of the narrator this still looks like high-flown ideas opposed to the more down to earth discourse that Vic personifies. The narrator’s somewhat ironic stance indi-

4 Richard Walsh points out that the narrator is there to strengthen our willing “suspension of disbelief.” If the narrator is accepted as part of the fiction (which he must logically be) we can suspend our disbelief and accept the fiction as (conditionally) real. Walsh writes: “By conceiving of a fictional narrative as issuing from a fictional narrator, the reader has canceled out its fictionality, negotiated a mode of complicity with representation, and found a rationale for suspension of disbelief” (Walsh 496).
cates that (from the point of view of the narrator) both discourses are probably warped, distorted and in need of some correction – which is what the reader now may start to expect to be the purpose of the narrative at large. The discourse of the narrator will try to accomplish this synthesis. From a structuralist point of view, one may reduce the whole story to the simple structure of the sentence: “materialistic discourse confronts idealistic discourse, resulting in the synthesis of a more balanced world-view”, or even “X vs. Y → Z”. It is definitely a story of conflict and confrontation, but also of communication.

An example of a distinctive clash occurs early in the novel, as Robyn arrives at the premises of “J. Pringle’s & Son’s” to act as a “Shadow” in the “Shadow Scheme” of the “Industry Year.” She is assigned to follow Vic Wilcox one day a week for a few months. After having been shown around the factory, “the cultural heart of darkness”(141) as she later refers to it, her reaction is that of strong revulsion: “‘The noise. The dirt. The mindless, repetitive work. The … everything. That men should have to put up with such brutalizing conditions’”. Vic cannot understand what she means: “‘Oppression?’ He gave a harsh, derisive laugh. ‘We don’t force people to work here, you know’ ”(120). The incident ends by Robyn secretly telling one of the workers that the management plans to sack him – a piece of information she has overheard at a management meeting. In leaving the premises, quite sure she will not return, she cannot get her car started but is helped by Vic – making her feel slightly indebted to him.

The clash of perspectives, or discourses, here is strong but it is mediated by the ensuing action when Vic helps Robyn to get her car started. There is no mutual understanding, but some exchange of values, as she accepts the help of the more technical (materialist discourse) Vic. Evidently, this also brings to the forefront the
binary construction of gender, which is an important part of patriarchal discourse. One may of course stop to ask what would have happened with the story world if “Vic” would be a woman, and “Robyn” a man. That would change the nature of the other oppositions to quite some extent as well. I will return to this point.

As has been noted already, the narrator’s degree of presence throughout the narration is variable. Mostly, the narrator is distant and only rarely is his presence strongly felt. This non-presence of the narrator could be perceived as an assurance that he will not promote a particular view on the discourses portrayed. This of course is illusory. As was stated already by Wayne Booth in 1961, objectivity in fiction is quite problematic, since even when an author tries hard to be “impersonal,” the reader will always and “inevitably” form an image in his/her mind of “him” which will not be one of a neutral valueless observer (Booth 568). As has been shown already, the use of irony is recurring throughout the narrative, for instance when the characters are described – as when Vic’s house with all its various equipment is talked about, or when Robyn’s conceptual understanding of identity as “only a subject position in an infinite web of discourses” is touched upon, as opposed to the narrator’s need of “treating her as a character” (40-41). The narrator positions himself as a kind of mediator, as the clashes between the opposing discourses are being set up.

As the story goes on, Robyn finds herself increasingly engaged in the Shadow Scheme. The narrator explains much later in the novel that she has become attracted to the “self” she was at Pringle’s as if it was a part of her, an almost indispensable part:
The designation ‘shadow’, which had seemed so absurd initially, began to acquire a suggestive resonance. A shadow was a kind of double, a *Doppelgänger* but it was herself that she duplicated at Pringle’s, not Wilcox. It was as if the Robyn Penrose who spent one day a week at the factory was the shadow of the self who on the other six days a week was busy with women’s studies […]. She led a double life these days, and felt herself to be a more interesting person because of it (216).

At this point, far into the narrative, Robyn has become quite attracted to the other side, or opposite – as if it actually expresses another side of herself. This experience surely involves her on an emotional level. From a psychological perspective, this seems quite realistic. From a Jungian point of view, the archetype of the shadow often takes on traits that are diametrically opposite to how the conscious personality likes to see itself (C.G. Jung, 76). Psychoanalysis would say that the unconscious often takes on characteristics very strange to the conscious personality, though being a vital part of the psyche of the person (Freud, 542). This divided self has been talked about a great deal in Western cultural history, not the least during the last hundred and fifty years or so. In the passage above, it is rather clear that Robyn is dimly aware of this contradiction within herself, knowing that she needs this experience of the “other,” something we will come back to.

Vic’s unexpected attraction to her is another matter. At the level of surfaces she is indeed an attractive young woman, whereas he is the loyal husband in his late forties, of a wife whose favorite bedtime reading is *Enjoy Your Menopause* from which she regularly falls asleep. When the narrator predicts that Robyn and Vic will “end up in bed together” during a business trip to Frankfurt, the reader is not very
surprised (267). The reader is informed that Vic is aware of not being too attracted to his wife sexually anymore, which is portrayed humorously in a passage where he compares her to Robyn:

Even that arrogant, interfering women’s libber from the University was more of a turn-on than poor old Marjorie. If her ideas were barmy, at least they were ideas, whereas Marjorie’s idea of an idea was something she had about wallpaper or loose covers (165).

So, initially, a certain sexual attraction is hinted at, Vic being almost embarrassed to note the vividness of his recollection of Robyn as he lies in bed with his wife, even noting how “his penis stiffened” at the thought of Robyn (166). At a later junction in the story we follow Vic’s ruminations about her, as he realizes he is in love with Robyn: “She looked a man boldly in the eye, and he liked that … the most independent woman he had ever met, and this had made him think of her as somehow unattached and … chaste” (226). There is otherwise little to suggest much awareness on the part of Vic as to what his attraction to this woman, whose ideas seem to contradict most of the things he cherishes, really consists of. In this sense, he is more defenseless when the romantic dimension of his relationship to Robyn opens. This, like so much else, is quite in contradiction to Robyn, who has a very different attitude to the relationship – which she does not even see as a relationship. As noted previously, she is aware that Vic’s world exerts an attraction on her, and that her experiences there offer her the opportunity of conversing with her “shadow-self” as

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5 This is obviously a falsely veracious moment when the narrator pretends not to be in control of the action.
it were. She has it all neatly under control, whereas Vic is to suffer the trauma of unrequited love. This is quite a reversal of traditional gender roles, of course.

As has been claimed initially, there is a continuous exchange, and a magnetic attraction, between the two discourses and their characters, though the characters quite predictably handle it very differently. Robyn, used to looking at life almost as if she is analyzing a literary text, is then far more equipped to avoid the pitfalls of the story that could have been assigned to her character than Vic who is more liable to fall right into the trap. Here one may stop to ask what the overriding discourse really is, or what the arrangement of the gender opposites may suggest. Why is the academic woman of the story so “above” human sentiment, whereas the industrialist man is not? For Robyn, representing feminist studies, the ability to avoid falling into the “arms of the patriarchy” as represented by Vic, is part of her identity as a progressive young woman. To Vic, actually “falling in love” is a new experience, almost forgotten about.

If we stop for a moment to imagine the genders shifted around, making Robyn a man, and Vic a woman, things would appear in a quite different light – like many other things in the story for that matter. Would the young man Robin be tempted to go to bed with the older industrialist woman Victoria, for example? Not typically, perhaps. But the ideologically determined prejudice, or patriarchal view that a young woman might do just that with an older industrialist man, is quite prevalent in contemporary society. It may to some readers seem almost “natural”. However, the narrative does not really condone such a view. Robyn is, after all, “enacting” the role of the female secretary on Vic’s request and does

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6 The names of the characters indeed mirror the ambivalence of gender in the discourse of the narrative at large, or the overriding discourse: Robyn/Robin and Vic/Victoria, which is in fact pointed out early in the novel, when the management at Pringle’s await what they believe to be a man, Robin Penrose. The name “Penrose” suggests a “woman of the pen,” rose denoting more female than male gender qualities, whereas Wilcox really denotes male gender qualities: willpower and “cockiness”.

not really identify with it (271). As the two walks to her room to go to bed, this comment is passed by the narrator: “She is in control. Perhaps she feels a certain sense of triumph at her conquest: the captain of industry at the feet of the feminist literary critic – a pleasing tableau” (289). The narrator indeed keeps to his ironic, if not sarcastic stance.

The novel plays with our preconceptions a bit – and I think it is safe to say that “intellect” traditionally is more associated with male than female gender types, even though this has changed quite a lot from the twentieth century onwards. Think for instance of Tarzan and other male heroes for whom a strong and healthy natural body is central, or the ideal of men of action rather than reflection. Vic is quite in conformity with such role models, not to mention working class heroes. Vic definitely is a self-made man, rising from a working class background. On an abstract level, on the other hand, this whole dichotomy is quite reversed in the history of ideas and philosophy. The male has traditionally been connected with the abstract and ideal, whereas the female has been associated with body and matter.7

Then, again, this is a novel portraying academia and industry in the British eighties, and therefore of course draws on and depicts ideas that were around in those contexts at that time. Robert S. Burton remarks that David Lodge quite ingenuously combines the genre of the campus novel with that of the industrial novel in Nice Work, and Burton shows how the “crossroads” between the two genres are infused with the “use and appropriation of the word ‘work’ ” in Lodge’s novel

7 For Aristotle or Plato, “form” is surely superior to “matter”, just as the male is superior to the female. In this sense, Robyn being the intellectual and Vic the more “practical,” to some extent modifies the age-old image of the sexes, belonging to the Western tradition. Another interesting dichotomy with relevance to Lodge’s book has been explored by Pierre Bourdieu, who talks about the cultural versus the economic “capital” as sociological realities. Bourdieu argues that even knowledge and cultural experience is a kind of capital in society, conferring status on a group possessing it. In this sense, Lodge’s book portrays the rivalry between the holders of these two kinds of “capital” (Pierre Bourdieu 1986).
(Burton 237). As Burton shows, this single word is really at the heart of the novel. It is no surprise that work ethics really is and has long been a central concern to the British, along with many other North European people. Work is frequently referred to in the story, and the protagonists take it quite seriously, though their respective understanding of it radically differs. As Burton shows, Robyn and Vic finally “come to respect their two different versions of work, becoming aware of the similarities and mutual usefulness of the two communities that they represent” (239). I agree with Burton on this point, and this is where true communication between the opposite discourses really occurs. This is a process that comes about gradually, from the initial clashes referred to earlier, via the mutual accomplishment of buying a necessary upgrade to Pringle’s machinery during the “romantic” escapade/serious love-story in Frankfurt – to the help Robyn finally offers Vic at the end of the novel, by investing her unexpected legacy in a business project that the now unemployed Vic tries to realize.

Vic’s discourse around work is to begin with diametrically opposed to Robyn’s. Where Vic as mentioned looks at work as a necessary prerequisite for survival, Robyn sees it as an arena for personal development not in any way opposed to her personal life. In fact, Robyn makes no distinction between the two. For instance, when Robyn during Vic’s stay at the university tells him that “reading is work” and production of meaning (334), and clarifies that “work” never stops – we are made aware that these differences still pertain. Robyn’s statement is ironically juxtaposed by an ensuing coffee break. Robyn then explains that even the coffee break is not outside of “work”, but that important conversations would be taking place. The narrator comments that “it was unfortunate that at this moment the Professor of Egyptology, said very audibly to his neighbor, ‘How are your tulips this
Undoubtedly, Robyn’s and Vic’s views on “work” remain dissimilar, and Vic is cautiously at variance with the “lax habits” of University, arguing that “people would take advantage” (344). Some of his suggestions for improvement include “rationalization,” giving “management more muscle” and to adapt University more to the conditions of Industry: “There is only one surefire way to succeed in business: make something people want, make it well, and make it in one size” (350). His point is that “a repeatable operation is always cheaper and more reliable”, to which Robyn exclaims: “But repetition is death!” (351). Vic, on the other hand, finally recognizes that University must stick to what they are “good at” which he realizes has nothing to do with the marketplace and its demands.

The narrator keeps his ironic distance to the couple throughout. In showing Vic’s growing desire for Robyn during the business trip to Frankfurt when the “romance” is consummated, the reader is informed that Vic is inwardly listening to a cliché romantic sexy tune by Jennifer Rush that he also has been repeatedly playing in his car before. As the tune in his head waxes, the events in the luxurious hotel where the couple stays also move toward a climax, ending in Robyn’s bedroom. As Vic declares his love for Robyn, the latter tells him that “romance” is merely a bourgeois myth, and a fallacy:

'When I was younger’ she says, ‘I allowed myself to be constructed by the discourse of romantic love, for a while, yes.’

‘What the hell does that mean?’

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8 I do not personally think that her indignation is really representative of “Academia” in a larger sense, but the narrative in fact uses this as a significant opposition between the world views discussed. There is obviously quite a lot of tedious repetition going on within academia, at least in my view.
‘We aren’t essences, Vic. We aren’t unique individual essences existing prior to language. There is only language’ (293).

The narrator must be smiling ironically, but Robyn in fact turns out to be quite serious about what she says. For her, the adventure is just a cocktail of fantasy, champagne and a luxurious hotel, a break in her routines. It is all a matter of narrative elements, juiced up in a nice, seducing way. At least, that is how she deals with it, and in this sense her emotional life indeed is appropriated by her intellect. Robyn’s aloofness from human sentiment has provoked criticism by writers who in this detect a sexist “stereotypical portrayal of a female intellectual” on the part of the author (Lambertson Björk 121). But the only thing that can make Vic wake up from his romantic reveries and land on his two feet is actually being fired. When this finally happens, he cannot afford dreaming of the impossible anymore – and his discourse about material survival takes precedence again. Practicalities and duties are the only things that can bring him into control of his emotions, it seems.

The respective worlds of the main characters are more fully depicted through the side plots involving less important characters such as family members, relatives and colleagues of the main protagonists. In Robyn’s case, her on and off boyfriend Charles, who like Robyn holds a PhD in literature, provides an especially interesting arena for showing more of Robyn’s world of academia. Particularly, there is one scene which comes to mind, in which Robyn and Charles discuss the relevance of metaphoric and metonymic thinking. Charles makes a lengthy quotation of Jacques Lacan that reads: “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I think not … I am not, wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am wherever I don’t think that I am thinking” (177-178).
Surely, this sounds quite abstruse and confusing, but brings out an important statement about reality; what is “really” real seems to be something that is not graspable by directed thought.\(^9\) The gist here is that thinking actually and necessarily creates a duality of subject and object, thus drawing up a demarcation line between self and “other” (its thought). Therefore, as Lacan points out in the quoted passage, one cannot properly think of oneself without making it something “else”, or alien. This inadvertently leads us back to Robyn’s fascination with her “shadow-self,” the “other” which makes her life seem more meaningful and real. For Robyn, this discussion is “marvellous” since it for her seems to show that there is no “truth”, no “transcendental signified” and therefore no “self” either. There are just relations between various utterances, and “[t]ruth is just a rhetorical illusion,” as Charles puts it (178).

The whole passage ends up in an analysis of the relationship of truth and meaning to metonymy and metaphor, where the first one is what realism makes out of the experience, according to Robyn, whereas the latter will concern the meaning of it (178). In any case, being linguistic, both alternatives replace the experience itself, inevitably creating a sense of loss, according to Lacan (Tyson, 29). This gap Robyn seems to fill with her “doppelgänger,” her shadow-self and the direct experience it gives her.\(^10\) Further, metonymy and metaphor can be seen as distinguishing two almost mutually exclusive ways of looking at life, like two parameters of discourse that are at odds – which corresponds quite neatly to the two discourses we are trying to analyze here. According to Robyn,

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\(^9\) In fact, Lacan himself had troubles defining what his concept of the “Real” entails, except that it transcends “all meaning-making systems,” such as language (Tyson 32).

\(^10\) The fact that she feels more “complex” and “interesting” because of it indicates that there is more than an intellectual engagement. The narrator claims that she experiences a “subtle satisfaction” at “some deeper level of feeling and reflection” (215-16).
[y]ou could represent the factory realistically by a set of metonymies – dirt, noise, heat and so on. But you can only grasp the meaning of the factory by metaphor. The place is like hell. The trouble with Wilcox is that he can’t see that. He lacks metaphorical vision (178-179).

Robyn’s critique of the world of the factory and of Vic’s lack of understanding boils down to the analysis of words in quite an abstruse way, which does not make her critique less poignant. In fact, Vic’s lack of understanding, of seeing meaning behind signs, is also confirmed in various attempts on Robyn’s part to explain or analyze signs or symbols to Vic, as when she explicates her interpretation of an advert for “Silk Cut,” a brand of cigarettes: a piece of silk and its “sensuous texture, obviously symbolizing the female body, and the elliptical slit … was still more obviously a vagina” (220). 11 Vic just cannot grasp this, and confirms the image of him as lacking metaphorical vision, by retorting “Why can’t you people take things at their face value?”(221). In this he again shows that he is much more concerned with the functional (metonymical) side of reality, rather than understanding its meaning (metaphor).

In the concluding chapters Vic is to “shadow” Robyn and since he has fallen in love with her, this becomes more of a traumatic experience to him, quite different from Robyn’s activities at Pringle’s, which turn out as the main source of exchange in the novel. Predictably, as noted, Vic eventually lands on his two feet, but still learns to appreciate Robyn’s world a lot more in the process. Robyn still daydreams of a fusion between University and Workforce, as she in her imagina-

11 All of which can be seen as a standard interpretation at A-level English anywhere.
tion transports the workers to the campus, letting them “wander” into the premises staring in

bewildered curiosity at the fine buildings and the trees and flowerbeds and lawns, and at the beautiful young people at work or play all around them.

…. to exchange ideas on how the values of the university and the imperatives of commerce might be reconciled (347).

But the narrator finally concludes that “[p]hysically contiguous, they inhabit separate worlds …. Remembering her Utopian vision of the campus invaded by the Pringle’s workforce, Robyn smiles ruefully to herself. There is a long way to go” (384). As the narrator includes Robyn in the observation, we also understand that she has understood. In fact, as the story seems to indicate, these worlds are as wide apart as any other binary opposite concepts could be to each other, but some communication between them has indeed taken place. There has been an exchange of values and sentiments, but the gulf between them still remains – despite the “comedic” ending, wherein Robyn receives the unexpected legacy that she hands over to Vic, who knows how to handle money and business.12 It has been pointed out that there is a clear reference to Gaskell’s novel North and South, which Lodge explicitly alludes to in the novel, wherein the female protagonist in a similar manner supports the male industrialist financially (Lambertsson Björk 124).

12 There could also be a reference to Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own where an unexpected legacy allows Woolf to be a woman writer, a woman who writes. The legacy here is of no import to Robyn since she is already superior to Vic – not the least by not having been hurt by the discontinuation of their romantic escapade. It goes well with the logic of the narrative that she uses the money to restore to Vic some of his former masculine status as a representative of Industry.
In conclusion, we have seen that there is a magnetic attraction between the opposite worlds and their discourses, represented by the main characters, and also that their opposition is mediated by the narrator’s discourse, which is manifested in his ironic, distanced stance vis-à-vis the characters. The attraction between them is shown to derive from a sense of lack experienced by the protagonists. In Robyn’s case, she is partly aware of this lack at least intellectually. Vic is not so aware, maybe because he experiences it strictly on an emotional level, in the form of unrequited love. Robyn, on the other hand, experiences it as a lacuna in her understanding – which may or may not involve her emotions.

The gender opposition in the novel has also been dealt with in the essay. The analysis suggests that the discourse of the narrative neither confirms nor seriously questions traditional gender roles. If anything, the narrative in fact plays around with our preconceptions and prejudices about gender to quite an extent. It has also been noted that some critics have perceived the discourse of the novel as sexist in its stereotyping of the female academic.

If Robyn’s narrative within the narrative has been to “uncover meaning” and Vic’s has been one about producing material gain, the two have in some sense come together – their narratives have interfered with each other. Vic has provided Robyn with the meaning she craves, but in new, not so intellectual ways, by giving her some concrete insights into the industry she has previously been looking at only from the perspective of a literary scholar. In this sense she has received unexpected benefits from the exchange, actually understanding more of what the realist, metonymical world view of Vic’s discourse can entail. It has also been shown that she, to some degree at least, has become aware of the limits of her intellectual under-
standing. Her “shadow-self” seems to have taught her to respect the discourse of her opposite more.

Robyn has given Vic the money needed to pursue his discourse, but she has also conferred onto him a revitalization of his emotional life beyond the bounds of duty. He has in fact gained some insight into a metaphoric discourse where things seem to carry symbolic significance beyond what his realistic outlook would normally allow. All this can of course be seen as an ironic surface exchange, and the two worlds behind them seem to stand unperturbed. But as Lodge has said about narrative in general, there has been an exchange of “objects of value” between the “actants” of the story.  

The narrator’s discourse may seem quite invisible, due to his withdrawal from the story world most of the time, but I think it is safe to say that “he” – the emissary of the implied author, as one may perhaps call him – has achieved his purpose of bringing the two opposing discourses of the novel into contact, thus changing them to some degree. By keeping quite some distance toward them he shows his neutrality, but at the same time he does not refrain from commenting on them in various ways, mostly by irony.

The discourse of the narrative at large aims at comparing and contrasting two opposite world views, showing their respective incompleteness and inadequacies. The movement toward synthesis is ongoing, but also thwarted as Robyn in the end realizes the inevitability of this hard fact, which she seems to accept stoically. Vic’s unfulfilled dream, which perhaps is of a much more personal nature than that of Robyn, is handled by resorting to practicalities – i.e. work. As initially claimed,  

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13 Both of whom can be seen as ”senders” and ”receivers” as well as ”subjects” and ”objects” in their narratives of ”quest/desire” as well as ”communication,” the former referring to plots where the protagonist or “actant” is trying to realize a unfulfilled quest or desire, the latter to plots where the essential content is the transfer of some kind of knowledge or understanding (Lodge 1980, 6).
at least in this world of work they have come to a mutual understanding, whereas on the levels of intellect and emotion they may still stand “worlds apart.”
Works Cited

Primary source:


Secondary sources:


