PICARESQUE ELEMENTS IN NICE WORK BY DAVID LODGE

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Abstract:

In Nice Work, David Lodge brings the university and the industry together. During a close reading of the novel, it has been noticed that Lodge has used the elements of the picaresque while bringing these two different worlds together. This paper, thus, aims at exhibiting the elements of the picaresque used in Nice Work.

The novel is set in the late 1980’s when the Thatcher government was in power, and England experienced deep social changes. So, the setting provides a suitable background for the picaresque. Beside the social background, such elements of the picaresque as the character being an outsider, the element of satire, the realistic presentation of the social panorama, major characters striving for jobs, the motifs of insecurity and chance, the ending with unanswered questions have been used.

Key words: Lodge, Nice Work, picaresque, Thatcher period.

Özet:

David Lodge, İyi İş (Nice Work) isimli romanında üniversite ve endüstriyi bir araya getirir. Roman dikkatlice okunduğunda, yazarın birbirinden tamamen farklı bu iki dünyayı bir araya getirirken pikaresk roman unsurlarını kullandığı görülür. Bu çalışmanın amacı, İyi İş (Nice Work)’ te kullanılan pikaresk unsurlarını ortaya çıkartmaktır.

Roman, Thatcher hükümetinin iktidarda olduğu ve İngiltere’nin köklü sosyal değişiklikler geçirdiği 1980lerin ikincisi yarısında geçer. Bu dönem pikaresk roman için uygun bir aralanan sağlar. Bunun yanında, romanda karakterin dışarılıklı olması (outsider), hiciv, iş bulma mücadelesi veren baş kişiler, gelecek endişesi (insecurity), şans motivlerinin kullanımı, dönemin sosyal panoramasının gerçekçisi bir şekilde verilmesi, romanın yanıtsız sorularla bitmesi gibi pikaresk unsurlar kullanılmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Lodge, İyi İş, pikaresk, Thatcher dönemi

David Lodge, novelist and critic, got his doctorate from the University of Birmingham, and taught at various universities until he retired from the University of
Birmingham to become a full time writer. As a novelist, he makes good use of his experience at universities in a trilogy of the campus novel, *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984), and *Nice Work* (1988). However, *Nice Work* differs from the first two novels of the trilogy since it reflects not only the campus life but also the industrial life in England in the Thatcher era. Besides reflecting the worlds of the campus and the industry, and bringing these different worlds together, a close reading of *Nice Work* shows that Lodge has used the elements of the picaresque novel. The aim of this paper is, thus, to exhibit what elements of the picaresque novel have been used in *Nice Work*.

*Nice Work* is set in an imaginary city called Rummidge in the late 1980’s when Mrs. Margaret Thatcher was in power, and her government put strict monetary policies into practice. The Conservative Party under Thatcher won the May 1979 election.

…, after May 1979, monetary controls came to the forefront and a formal incomes policy was dropped. Any pretence of a full employment target was abandoned as the Government rejected the traditional post-war approach of trying to adjust the level of demand in the economy. Instead, the reduction of inflation became the prime, and for a time the sole, objective of macro-economy policy, to be achieved by limiting public expenditure and by strictly controlling the rate of monetary growth. The argument was that cutting back public spending would both reduce the public sector’s claims on savings and permit cuts in personal taxes which would promote enterprise. (Riddle 1989:17)

Of course, the universities suffered from the cuts. The measures taken by the government to improve the economy of the country increased unemployment. Morals changed; money and materialistic profit became the most important target of young people, exemplified by the high-living yuppie culture. “There was a sharp increase in the number of graduates going into financial work, particularly with accountants but also with brokers and banks before the 1987 market crash… This suggests that… the events of the 1980s may have made young people more inclined to accept the money-making aspect of the enterprise culture-and work in the City rather than in the public sector-…” (Riddle 1989:77-78). In *Nice Work*, Basil, Robyn’s younger brother, his girl friend Debbie, and Charles, Robyn’s boyfriend, represent the materialistic tendency of
the young people of the 1980’s. Basil works in a merchant bank although he studied Modern Greats at Oxford. After three years’ employment, he earns more than his academic father does. Debbie is a foreign-exchange dealer in the same bank, and earns more than Basil does.

Everything about him and his girlfriend signified money, from their pastel-pale, luxuriously thick sheepskin coats that seemed to fill the threshold when she opened the front door, to the red C-registration BMW … Underneath the sheepskin coats Basil was wearing an Aquascutum cashmere sports jacket, and his girl friend,…, an outfit remarkably like one designed by Katherine Hamnett illustrated in that day’s Sunday Times. (Lodge 1989:180)

The affluent life of Basil and Debbie impresses Charles who is an academic at the University of Suffolk. He resigns from the university to work in a bank, and, of course, to earn better. Beside the presentation of the affluent young people of the Thatcher period, the novel is full of the scenes, which will be discussed in the following part of this paper, exhibiting the situation of England during the late 1980’s. In Nice Work, Lodge presents the reader a realistic social panorama of England in the late 1980’s. As is known, the picaresque is generally realistic in the presentation of the situation of the society within which the story is set.

The changes initiated by the Thatcher administration widened the gap between the classes, as illustrated by the simultaneous existence of the yuppie culture and the yob culture. Ambitious young people enjoyed prosperity, while especially the working class was suffering from unemployment. There was a considerable increase in crime. “The extent of the problem has been underlined by the crime figures. During most of the 1980s the number of notifiable offences, particularly violent crime and robbery, rose sharply, at an annual rate of over 5 percent between 1980 and 1987, even allowing for all the necessary caveats about possible changes in the proportion of crimes notified to the police” (Riddlle 1989:169). Peter Riddlle comments that “Something has stirred in Britain during the 1980s… In many respects Britain is a more divided, less secure and harsher society, but it is economically more competitive” (1989:204). The dialogue between Vic and Robyn below displays the social uneasiness:

‘We live in the age of the yob. Whatever they don’t understand, whatever
isn’t protected, the yobs will smash, and spoil it for everybody else. Did you notice the traffic bollards on the way here?’
It’s unemployment that’s responsible,’ said Robyn. ‘Thatcher has created an alienated underclass who take out their resentment in crime and vandalism. You can’t really blame them.’
‘You’d blame them if you were mugged going home tonight,’ said Vic.
‘That’s a purely emotive argument,’ said Robyn. ‘But of course you support Thatcher, don’t you?’
‘I respect her,’ said Vic. ‘I respect anybody with guts.’
‘Even though she devastated industry round here?’
‘She got rid of overmanning, restrictive practices. She overdid it, but it had to be done. Anyroad, my dad will tell you there was worse unemployment here in the thirties, and much worse poverty, but you didn’t get youths beating up old-age pensioners and raping them,…Something happened to this country. I don’t know why, or exactly when it happened, but somewhere along the line a lot of basic decencies disappeared, like respect for other people’s property, respect for the old, respect for women-‘. (Lodge 1988:241-2)

As is seen, the novel reflects a period when Britain has struggled with social disturbance while trying to adjust its economy. Picaresque literature rises in a society which experiences a deep change. Yıldırımy Çevik in his doctoral dissertation quotes Hague: “A common belief in the critical works dealing with the novel is the view that the picaresque literature flourishes when a society is in a state of flux; the picaresque character is a reflection of a society in deep change” (1996:4). Similarly, Ulrich Wicks comments that “the typical social background for the picaresque novel is a world where the old social order is disintegrating but is still regarded as though it were continuing undisturbed” (1989:66). Therefore, England of the late 1980’s reflected in the novel provides a suitable social background for the picaresque novel.

The novel begins with the introduction of two major characters representing the two alien societies: Vic Wilcox, the managing director of an engineering firm, and Robyn Penrose, temporary lecturer in the department of English Literature at Rummidge University. The detailed academic background of Robyn reveals that she is a
very qualified and enthusiastic academic. After graduating from Sussex University with the highest marks, she goes to Cambridge to do her PhD. There she deals with new ideas of her time such as structuralism, post-structuralism, semiotics and deconstruction so much so that “she could be the first person on the Trumpington Road to know the latest thoughts of Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva” (Lodge 1989:46) at the expense of delaying the completion of her thesis on the nineteenth-century industrial novel. After completing her PhD, she gets a post-doctoral research fellowship for three years. Despite all her academic qualifications, when she tries to find a teaching position at a university, she is disappointed. This is because she is looking for a vacant position at the universities at a time when the universities have reduced their academic staff due to Thatcherite economic policies. Since Robyn is preoccupied with literary dispute, she is unaware of the economic policies of the government and their impacts on society and universities. In a sense, she has become ‘half-outsider’ to the life outside Cambridge, and Claudio Guillen describes a picora/picaro as a “half-outsider” (1971:79). She teaches in various institutions until she finds her present position at Rummidge University. However, her contract with the university will expire at the end of the year. Therefore, throughout the novel, the reader witnesses her struggle to find a place at the universities.

Her struggle, in a sense, is for survival. The narrator recounts Robyn’s feelings before she has found her present position at Rummidge University as follows: “The previously unthinkable prospect of a non-academic career now began to be thought - with fear, dismay and bewilderment on Robyn’s part. Of course she was aware, cognitively, that there was a life outside universities, but she knew nothing about it,...” (Lodge 1989:51). This quotation displays Robyn’s ignorance of the life outside universities as well as the importance of finding a position at a university for her. In order to survive, she even thinks of going to the United States when she is offered a position there, though she has inherited a large amount of money from a distant relative. As is seen, for Robyn, survival is not literally a matter of finding money to maintain her life, but of finding a place to teach. Robyn’s struggle for finding a teaching position resembles the struggles of a picaro. Ulrich Wicks describes a picaro as a man who “… is always looking for a home. But from society’s point of view, he is an upstart, and this is true of all levels of society, none of which make room for him” (1989:61). Wicks’
description is applicable to Robyn’s situation. Despite all her qualifications and enthusiasm, the universities cannot make room for her. While narrating Robyn’s struggle to find a place for herself at the universities, Lodge slightly criticises Thatcherite economic policies.

The slight criticism directed to the economic policies of the government through Robyn’s struggle becomes overt in the remarks of Professor Penrose, Robyn’s father. He says that the universities are suffering from the cuts and “they [the government] are systematically destroying the finest university system in the world” (Lodge 1989:307).

Throughout the novel, beside the policies of the government and the cuts, the university and the industry are satirized as well, and satire is an indispensable component of the picaresque novel.

In order to achieve satire directed to the university and the industry, Lodge employs two outsiders: Robyn becomes the vehicle for the criticism of the industry and Vic for the university. In order to overcome the problem of bringing someone from the university to the industry, Lodge invents a shadow scheme: 1986 is the Industry Year; therefore, a Shadow Scheme has been designed to develop the collaboration between the university and the industry. According to this scheme, someone from the university will follow her/his partner in the industry. Robyn is nominated to follow Vic according to the scheme. As has been discussed above, Robyn is ignorant about the life outside the university; furthermore, the life in the industry is totally different from the life at university. In order to emphasize this difference, Lodge quotes from Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil; or the Two Nations*:

‘Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, and fed by different food, and ordered by different manners…’. (Lodge 1989:n.p.)

Giving the quotation above at the very first page of the novel, Lodge implies that the novel will be about two social groups living in the same city, but having totally different habits and ethics. Therefore, it may be thought that Robyn’s visit to the industry is similar to a journey to another country, to which she is a total stranger.
Although Robyn studies the nineteenth century industrial novel, she has never been to a modern factory. Accordingly, she is confused by what she has observed in the factory. To Robyn, the place is noisy and dirty; so, to have men and women work in such a place is “oppression”

‘Oppression?’ He [Vic] gave a harsh, derisive laugh. ‘We don’t force people to work here, you know. For every unskilled job we advertise, we get a hundred applicants-more than a hundred. Those women are glad to work here...

Robyn was silent. She felt confused, battered, exhausted by the sense – impressions of the last hour... She had always taken for granted that unemployment was an evil, a Thatcherite weapon against the working class; but if this was employment then perhaps people were better off without it...

What had she expected? Nothing, certainly, so like the satanic mills of the early Industrial Revolution. Robyn’s mental image of a modern factory had derived mainly from TV commercials and documentaries: deftly edited footage of brightly coloured machines and smoothly moving assembly lines, manned by brisk operators in class overalls, turning out motor cars or transistor radios to the accompaniment of Mozart on the sound track. (Lodge 1989:120-1)

The quotation above is important in two ways since it both shows Robyn’s ignorance of real industrial life, and presents a realistic picture of unemployment in England in 1986.

Robyn’s ignorance of the rules of the industry causes some troubles in the firm. As a shadow, Robyn joins the meeting of the managers. During the meeting, Vic orders one of the managers to dismiss an Asian worker on the grounds that the machine run by him is continually breaking down. In order to dismiss him, they will observe and warn him when he makes a mistake. After the third warning, he will be dismissed. When Robyn objects, Vic reminds her that she is only a shadow (Lodge 1989:144). Robyn, thinking that it is a “moral issue” (Lodge 1989:144), leaves the meeting, finds the man, and informs him that the managers have decided to dismiss him. After Robyn’s taking her leave, the workers walk out. Vic asks Robyn to tell Danny Ram (the Asian worker) that she has made a mistake. Otherwise, the walk out will turn into a strike, the result of
which will affect all the workers in the factory. Robyn accepts speaking to Danny on condition that they will give up the idea of dismissing him. Here, it is obvious that the rules and ethics of the industry contradict with the morals of Robyn. According to the rules of the industry, it is unethical to tell the matters discussed in the meetings to the workers, and the profit of the factory is more important than the workers. For Robyn, the workers are more important than the profit, and it is a moral issue to dismiss a worker without any sound reason. So, Robyn, as an outsider, is able to observe the rules of the industry, corruption and racist attitudes such as Asians working in the foundry.

In the second part of the shadow scheme, Vic shadows Robyn at the university; so, the university life is presented through an outsider’s eyes. Vic, as a man from the industry, has difficulties in understanding the tutorials beginning at ten and the coffee-breaks taken at eleven. It is also surprising for Vic to see a lot of academics with shabby clothes sitting, drinking coffee and chatting in the Senior Common Room. The spectacle of the room gives the impression that academics spend their time chatting instead of working. Robyn as well becomes uneasy although she is accustomed to the scene. The narrator relates Robyn’s feelings as follows: “She suddenly saw the familiar spectacle through an outsider’s eyes, and almost blushed” (Lodge 1989:343). By relating Robyn’s feelings in this way, Lodge emphasises the importance of the use of an outsider to criticise the corruption. The existence of an outsider makes it possible to look at familiar scenes from a distance and to criticise them. Using two outsiders in Nice Work, Lodge is able to exhibit the corruption in the industry and the university.

Beside the use of an outsider, “The essential picaresque situation,..., is that of an unheroic protagonist,..., caught up in a chaotic world,..., in which he is on an eternal journey of encounters that allow him to be alternately both victim of that world and its exploiter” (Wicks 1989:54). The picaresque situation described by Wick is observed in Vic’s life. First, Vic is in the position of an exploiter. He wants to produce more with less expense. Therefore, he does not hesitate to dismiss some of his employees to save on costs when he thinks that they are redundant. For Vic, the profit of the factory is more important than a person out of employment. However, towards the end of the novel, Vic himself becomes unemployed on the same grounds that he once dismissed his workers. The Board of Midland Amalgamated sold Pringle’s to another Group owing to the fact that Pringle’s made “a small profit” (Lodge 1989:364), and it did not
fit into the Group’s long-term strategy (Lodge 1989:365). Since the new Group wants to employ another director, Vic is dismissed. So, like his workers he dismissed, Vic himself becomes a victim of the world of business, the only aim of which is profit.

According to Robert Alter (1964:72), “insecurity” is a dominant motif in picaresque writing. In Nice Work, Vic’s dismissal and Robyn’s striving for a place at the university illustrate insecurity in the late 1980’s. The novel makes the reader feel that unemployment is the greatest problem in England in the Thatcher period; no one is secure, experience and even doctoral degrees cannot prevent being unemployed.

As well as insecurity, “chance” (Alter 1964:84) is another picaresque motif, and this motif as well has been used in Nice Work. In the last chapter, Robyn inherits a large amount of money from a distant relative. She gives money to Vic so that he can establish his own business. Similarly, the dean of the Faculty of Arts informs Robyn that they can employ her for the next academic year since they will have the freedom of using the funds. So, Lodge is able to solve the problems of Vic and Robyn, employing the chance motif in the last pages of the novel.

Nevertheless, the reader feels that the solutions to the problems are temporary, and that the happy ending is superficial. It is because such questions as what will happen at the end of the next academic year; whether another fund will be found to extend Robyn’s employment or will Robyn have to find another university; or whether Vic will be successful in his own business remain to be answered at the end of the novel. Alter comments that “..., it is not surprising that a novelist should want to add some sort of post-picaresque stage to his picaro’s career. If he does not resort to the picaresque, he involves himself in a serious technical difficulty: there is no way of ending a picaresque novel...Picaresque novels have always invited sequels” (1964:33). As has been mentioned above, Lodge ends off Nice Work with unanswered questions.

Although Nice Work does not have a loose episodic structure or autobiographical viewpoint, the picaresque elements discussed in detail above make it possible to consider Nice Work as an example of contemporary picaresque novel.
References


