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## ***Small World* Proceedings: A Study of the Conference Papers, Lectures and Literary Discourses in David Lodge's *Small World***

**Tanmay Chatterjee**

Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Banaras Hindu University  
Varanasi – 221005

*Small World* is the second novel in David Lodge's campus trilogy. As a sequel to *Changing Places* (the first novel in the trilogy) this novel advances Lodge's creative enterprise to a different level. *Small World* transports its readers to an academic ambience more vibrant than the one we encountered in *Changing Places*. The entire novel is replete with academic concerns. Here the two local campus communities of *Changing Places* (i.e. University of Rummidge and Euphoric State University) are replaced by a single global campus that knows neither national nor linguistic boundaries. A worldwide marketplace of ideas has supplanted the various national ones as the site for agency and exchange. *Small World* begins with the annual conference at the University of Rummidge and ends with MLA annual convention in New York. In the course of the novel we come across many seminar presentations, lectures and literary discussions, some of which offer interesting and unique perspectives on language and literature, practice of reading and function of criticism, textual affairs and narrative games. The present paper is concerned with these conference papers, lectures and literary discourses in *Small World*.

*Small World* begins in April 1979 at a small academic conference at the University of Rummidge. The conference is attended by fifty seven people, all of whom are University Teachers of English Language and Literature. Philip Swallow (presently the head of the English department at Rummidge) and Morris Zapp (the senior professor at the Euphoric State University), the two principal characters from *Changing Places*, are present at the conference. This is the very first conference for Persse McGarrigle, an innocent young Irishman who teaches at the fictional University College, Limerick. He is the protagonist of this novel (or the 'academic romance' as the subtitle of the novel suggests). He has recently completed his master's thesis on Shakespeare's influence on T. S. Eliot. As a novice he has come to attend this conference in order to improve himself, to find out "what is going on in the great world of ideas" (Lodge 15). First day at the conference Persse meets Angelica Pabst, a beautiful young lady who is still working on her doctoral dissertation. She becomes the object of Persse's quest for the rest of the novel.

At the dinner table on the first day of the conference Persse happens to come across Miss Sybil Maiden who is from Girton College, Cambridge. She claims to be a former student of Jessie Weston. While conversing with Persse, Miss Maiden puts forward Weston's arguments regarding the Holy Grail metaphor in T. S. Eliot's poetry:

"She [Jessie Weston] argued . . . that the quest for the Holy Grail, associated with the Arthurian knights, was only superficially a Christian legend, and that its true meaning was to be sought in pagan fertility ritual. If Mr Eliot had taken her discoveries to heart,

we might have been spared the maudlin religiosity of his later poetry. . . . It all comes down to sex, in the end . . . The life force endlessly renewing itself. . . The Grail cup, for instance, is a female symbol of great antiquity and universal occurrence. . . And the Grail spear, supposed to be the one that pierced the side of Christ, is obviously phallic. *The Waste Land* is really all about Eliot's fears of impotence and sterility." (Lodge 11, 12)

In the next morning at the conference Persse attends a paper reading session in the course of which he comes across the word 'structuralism' for the very first time in his life. An Oxford medievalist was delivering a paper on the subject of Chaucerian metrics. While delivering his paper and presenting his arguments he refers to structuralism:

"To the structuralists, metre, like language itself, is merely a system of differences. The idea that there might be anything inherently expressive or mimetic in patterns of stress would be anathema..." (Lodge 13)

The word 'structuralism' catches Persse's imagination and he is desperate to know what it is. He asks Angelica about it. But, ultimately it is Robin Dempsey, a Professor from the University of Darlington, who explains the term for him:

"Structuralism? . . . It all goes back to Saussure's linguistics. The arbitrariness of the signifier. Language as a system of differences with no positive terms. . . . take the words dog and cat. There's no absolute reason why the combined phonemes d-o-g should signify a quadruped that goes 'woof woof' rather one that goes 'miaou'. It's a purely arbitrary relationship, and there's no reason why English speakers shouldn't decide that from tomorrow, d-o-g would signify 'cat' and c-a-t, 'dog'. . . . We know this because the same animal is signified by different acoustic images in different natural languages. For instance, 'dog' is *chien* in French, *Hund* in German, *cane* in Italian, and so on. 'Cat' is *chat*, *Katze*, *gatto*, according to what part of the Common Market you happen to be in. And if we are to believe language rather than our ears, English dogs go 'woof woof', French dogs go 'wouah wouah,' German dogs go 'wau wau' and Italian ones 'baau baau'." (Lodge 22)

Then Angelica, too, participates in the conversation as she discusses Jacobson's arguments on the arbitrary nature of language. As she says, Jacobson refers to the gradation of positive, comparative and superlative forms of the adjective as evidence that language is not a totally arbitrary system. Angelica gives the example: "blank, blanker, blankest" (Lodge 22). More phonemes imply more emphasis. She goes on to say:

"The same is true of other Indo-European languages, for instance Latin: *vacuus*, *vacuior*,, *vacuissimus*. There does seem to be some iconic correlation between sound and sense across the boundaries of natural languages." (Lodge 22)

The paper reading session on the second day of the conference belongs to Morris Zapp as he enlivens some of the audience and scandalizes others with a scatological lecture called "Textuality as Striptease" which offers, in fact, a dazzling exposition of poststructuralist poetics. He starts the lecture commenting on his earlier stance as an interpreter and critic of literature. "You see before you", he confesses to a conference audience, "a man who once believed in the

possibility of interpretation” (Lodge 24). He declares that he once was “the Jane Austen man” (24). He wrote five books on her. Then he started writing a commentary on the works of Jane Austen, the aim of which was “to be utterly exhaustive, to examine the novels from every conceivable angle. . . . So that when each commentary was written, there would be *nothing further to say* about the novel in question” (24). But he could never finish it as the project was “self-defeating” (24). Now he cites his abandoned Jane Austen project to illustrate the fallacies of the traditional criticism discredited by poststructuralism (and by his own most recent book, *Beyond Criticism*). He says:

“To understand a message is to decode it. Language is a code. But every decoding is another encoding.” (Lodge 24)

According to him, the fixing of meaning for any statement is always just over the horizon. By Morris’s deconstructionist logic, “Conversation is like playing tennis with a ball made of Crazy Putty that keeps coming back over the net in a different shape”(Lodge 25), so much so that not even the listener’s repeating back the exact words of a statement indicates an understanding of meaning “intended” by the speaker. Rather, the listener brings “a different experience of language, literature and non-verbal reality to those words” (24) – that is, they become fundamentally “different” words when employed by another speaker.

Morris then goes on to assert that the apparently greater ease of fixing the meaning of a written text is illusory as the same axiom, *every decoding is another encoding*, applies to literary criticism even more stringently than it does to ordinary spoken discourse. As he says, the activity of reading is “not a to-and-fro process, but an endless, tantalising leading on, a flirtation without consummation, or if there is consummation, it is solitary, masturbatory. . . . The reader plays with himself as the text plays upon him, plays upon his curiosity, desire, as a striptease dancer plays upon her audience’s curiosity and desire.” (Lodge 25)

Morris then comes to his striptease metaphor. He compares the nature of performance of the American nightclub dancers with that of their British counterparts. At the American nightclubs the female dancers take off all their clothes before they commence dancing in front of the customers. Morris says:

“This is not striptease, it is all strip and no tease, it is the terpsichorean equivalent of the hermeneutic fallacy of a recuperable meaning, which claims that if we remove the clothing of its rhetoric from a literary text we discover the bare facts it is trying to communicate.” (Lodge 26)

Morris finds real striptease performances at the British nightclubs. Striptease, for him, offers a valid metaphor for the activity of reading:

“The dancer teases the audience, as the text teases its readers, with the promise of an ultimate revelation that is infinitely postponed. Veil after veil, garment after garment, is removed, but it is the delay in the stripping that makes it exciting, not the stripping itself; because no sooner has one secret been revealed than we lose interest in it and crave another. . . . Just so in reading. The attempt to peer into the very core of a text, to possess once and for all its meaning, is vain—it is only ourselves that we find here, not the work itself.” (Lodge 26)

Morris then goes on to relate the concept of displacement to the activity of reading. Referring obliquely to Freud he asserts that obsessive reading is the “displaced expression of a desire to see the mother’s genitals” (26). He concludes his lecture with these words:

“To read is to surrender oneself to an endless displacement of curiosity and desire from one sentence to another, from one action to another, from one level of the text to another. The text unveils itself before us, but never allows itself to be possessed; and instead of striving to possess it we should take pleasure in its teasing.” (Lodge 26)

Morris’s lecture serves to shock the sensibilities of his audience of British academics mostly trained in Leavisite moralistic tradition. Philip Swallow is seemingly disappointed with the lecture. He thinks that Morris’s views refer to that fundamental skepticism about the possibility of achieving certainty about anything, which he [Philip] associates with the mischievous influence of Continental theorizing. Philip asks Morris:

“what, with the greatest respect, is the point of our discussing your paper if, according to your own theory, we should not be discussing what you actually said at all, but discussing some imperfect memory or subjective interpretation of what you said?” (Lodge 27)

Morris answers that in terms of arriving at “some certain truth” there is no point, and he appeals to his audience’s professional experience: “Be honest, have you ever been to a lecture or seminar at the end of which you could have found two people present who could agree on the simplest précis of what had been said?” (Lodge 27). Though momentarily outwitted, Philip nevertheless persists by questioning the value of their work generally as professional scholars. But this time Morris’s response – that the “point” is “to uphold the institution of academic literary studies” by performing “a certain ritual” analogous to those practiced by “other groups of workers in the realm of discourse-lawyers, politicians, journalists” (27) – sounds more disingenuous than honest and clearly begs some crucial questions that Philip, despite his lack of rigor, at least recognizes as important.

*Small World* ends with the MLA annual convention in the New York. It is the biggest phenomenon in the international literary circuit. The most important part of this year’s convention is the forum on ‘The Function of Criticism’ where all the five potential candidates for the UNESCO Chair for Literary Criticism have assembled to share their views on the function of criticism. Apart from Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp the other three candidates for the Chair are Michel Tardieu, a Professor of Narratology at Sorbonne, Siegfried von Turpitz, the German poststructuralist critic, and Fulvia Morgana, the Italian Marxist critic and Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Padua. The chairman of the forum is Arthur Kingfisher, the doyen of the international community of literary theorists. He is Emeritus Professor of Columbia University as well as Zürich University, the only man in academic history to have occupied two chairs simultaneously in different continents.

Philip Swallow is the first to speak. He says the function of criticism is to assist in the function of literature itself, which Dr Johnson has defined as “enabling us better to enjoy life, or better to endure it” (Lodge 294). The great writers of all ages were men and women of exceptional wisdom, insight, and understanding. Their novels, plays and poems are inexhaustible reservoirs of values, ideas, images, which, when properly understood and appreciated, allow us to live more fully, more finely, more intensely. But with the passage of time literary conventions

change and these treasures too easily become locked away in libraries, neglected and forgotten. It is the job of the literary critic to unlock the drawers and bring out the treasures into the light of day. Of course, he needs certain expertise to do this: “a knowledge of history, a knowledge of philology, of generic convention and textual editing” (294). But above all he needs enthusiasm, the love of books. It is by the demonstration of this enthusiasm in action that the critic forges “a bridge between the great writers and the general reader.” (294)

Michel Tardieu is of the view that the function of criticism is not to add new interpretations and appreciations of *Hamlet* or *Le Misanthrope* or *Madame Bovary* or *Wuthering Heights* to the hundreds that already exist but to uncover the fundamental laws that enable such works to be produced and understood. If literary criticism is supposed to be knowledge, it could not be founded on interpretation, since interpretation is “endless, subjective, unverifiable, unfalsifiable” (Lodge 295). What is permanent, reliable, accessible to scientific study, once we ignore the distracting surface of actual texts, are the “deep structural principles and binary oppositions” that underlay all texts that have ever been written and that ever would be written: “paradigm and syntagm, metaphor and metonymy, mimesis and diegesis, stressed and unstressed, subject and object, culture and nature.” (295)

Siegfried von Turpitz says that, while he sympathizes with the scientific spirit in which Michel Tardieu approached the difficult question of defining the essential function of criticism in both its ontological and teleological aspects, he would like to point out that the attempt to derive such a definition from the formal properties of the literary art-object as such is doomed to failure, since such art-objects enjoy only an as it were virtual existence until they are realized in the mind of a reader.

Fulvia Morgana asserts that the function of criticism is to wage undying war on the very concept of “literature” itself, which is “nothing more than an instrument of bourgeois hegemony, a fetishistic reification of so-called aesthetic values erected and maintained through an elitist educational system in order to conceal the brutal facts of class oppression under industrial capitalism.” (Lodge 295)

Morris Zapp is the last man to speak at the forum. He reiterates what he said at the Rummidge conference.

Persse McGarrigle attended the forum at the request of Morris Zapp. Interestingly, it is persse who attracts the attention of the audience at the end. He only asks the speakers of the forum a simple question: “What follows if everybody agrees with you?” (Lodge 296). This apparently harmless question unsettles all the speakers:

Arthur Kingfisher looked up and down the table to invite a reply. The panel members however avoided his eye. They glanced instead at each other, with grimaces and gesticulations expressive of bafflement and suspicion. “What follows is the Revolution,” Fulvia Morgana was heard to mutter; Philip Swallow, “Is it some sort of trick question?” and von Turpitz, “It is a fool’s question.” (Lodge 296)

Therefore, Arthur Kingfisher himself has to answer this question on behalf of the speakers:

“That is a very good question. A very in-ter-est-ing question. I do not remember that question being asked before.” He nodded to himself. “You imply, of course, that what

matters in the field of critical practice is not truth but difference. If everybody were convinced by your arguments, they would have to do the same as you and then there would be no satisfaction in doing it. To win is to lose the game.” (Lodge 296)

The MLA convention also has an “Ad Hoc Forum on Romance” where Angelica Pabst delivers her paper on the genre of romance (Lodge 296). The links Morris suggests in his paper are echoed and made more explicit in Angelica’s paper. She starts her paper referring to the concept of ‘invagination’ propagated by Jacques Derrida to describe the complex relationship between inside and outside in discursive practices. As she says, what we think of as the meaning or ‘inside’ of a text is in fact nothing more than its externality folded in to create a pocket which is both secret and therefore desired and at the same time empty and therefore impossible to possess. She appropriates the term ‘invagination’ and applies it to romance:

“If epic is a phallic genre, which can hardly be denied, and tragedy the genre of castration . . . then surely there is no doubt that romance is a supremely invaginated mode of narrative.” (Lodge 297)

Referring to Barthes’s connection between narrative and sexuality, Angelica contrasts the pleasure of epic and tragedies, which engage the reader’s curiosity and desire and move “inexorably” to “an essentially *male* climax (a single, explosive discharge of accumulated tension” [Lodge 297]), with that provided by romances, which are not structured in this way:

“[Romance] has not only one climax but many; the pleasure of this text comes and comes and comes again. No sooner is one crisis in the fortunes of the hero averted than a new one presents itself; no sooner has one mystery been solved than another is raised; no sooner has one adventure been concluded than another begins. . . . The greatest and most characteristic romances are often unfinished- they end only with the author’s exhaustion, as a woman’s capacity for orgasm is limited only by her physical stamina. Romance is a multiple orgasm.” (Lodge 297)

Angelica’s paper is followed by an interesting discussion session. Somebody in the audience asks her if she would agree that the novel, as a distinct genre, was born when the epic, as it were, copulated with the romance. She gave the suggestion careful consideration. Then a young man asked her – “if the organ of epic was the phallus, of tragedy the testicles, and of romance the vagina, what was the organ of comedy?” (Lodge 298). Angelica’s answer to this question is interesting:

Oh, the anus, Angelica replied instantly, with a bright smile. Think of Rabelais... (Lodge 298)

Thus, we come across many interesting ideas, perspectives, arguments and discussions in the course of *Small World*. Apart from what they contribute to the basic plot of the novel the seminar presentations, conference papers, lectures and literary discourses in this novel are of much academic interest. *Small World* is much more than just an academic satire. Here Lodge, the critic collaborates with Lodge, the novelist as we get the essence of criticism in the fictional space of *Small World*. We glimpse traces of Lodge’s intellectual and critical insights throughout the novel for all the disquisitions and arguments, thoughts and theories, ideas and perspectives introduced in the novel actually belong to him. He lets his characters propagate his ideas and

perspectives; and we, the readers, get much to know and experience while we let ourselves follow these characters (or travellers!) of the 'small world.' In the carnivalesque ambience of *Small World* the fiction comes to copulate with the non-fiction, providing us with the pleasure of reading.

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