HPEPA 2019

Humanistic Practice in Education in a Postmodern Age 2019

"DEATH IS ALWAYS FEMALE": LANGUAGE AND GENDER IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S NOVELS

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Abstract

The article examines Wallace's feminine images of Lenore Beadsman and Avril Incandenza as the symbolic representation of language and its power. Resorting to Wittgenstein's writings and the results of modern linguocultural research, we compare the scientifically proved findings to the characterological details in Wallace's texts to discover that the writer makes the female images, with their historically and culturally stipulated inner dualism, represent the controversy of the linguistically formed reality. The feminine in the novel, depicted as doubtlessly essential for continuation of life, protecting and comforting, is disclosed at the same time as bewitching, paralyzing and destructive in its core. In the same manner as the language penetrates and shapes all human ideas and activities, we find Lenore and Avril interfering with their relatives' lives and controlling their families, while the latter are left largely unaware of it. Rational and dominating, the female characters in Wallace's novels aim at substitution of the real world for themselves. At the same time, as Wittgenstein's language does not find expression for the ethical, Wallace's women demonstrate the lack of true affection and moral enlightenment and, as a result, their destructive influence on those surrounding them turns to be more evident than the comforting one.

Keywords: David Foster Wallace, gender, language, philosophical novel, Wittgenstein.

1. Introduction

David Foster Wallace (1962 – 2008) is one of the leading representatives of the philosophical genre in American literature. Ideas dominate his novels but remain organically woven into the fictional context (as cited in Cahn & Eckert, 2015).

The writer poses himself as a committed fighter against all possible types of 'systems' that bereave a person of free choice, and it is evident that he regards the systematic character of language as the most notorious example of a powerful force, shaping a person's thoughts and life.

The Anglo-American analytical philosophy, that predominated in the USA in the second half of the 20th century, was deeply rooted in linguistic studies on the one hand, and pragmatic way of thinking on the other. It couldn't fail to shape Wallace's worldview in his student years, but in his graduation paper he already tried to speak against the indiscriminate identification of linguistic and metaphysical descriptions of reality. He protested against the academic attempt of substituting the world's endless opportunities for the language's strict rules and forcing a person into the narrow world of total absence of freedom.

It is true that the belief in the linguistically shaped, impenetrable for external influences and thus fully predictable reality is able to create a certain inner comfort, a feeling of stability and a view of clear perspectives, but at the same time it makes the human feel deprived of exercising their potential of free choice and creative abilities, crossing the borders and achieving the new. Stagnation and inability to change may bring a short-term psychological satisfaction, while in the long run can lead to nothing but disintegration and death. Wallace keeps considering the perspectives and results of 'dwelling in language' all through his professional career, only to find them irreducibly controversial. His major novels *The Broom of the System* (1987) and *Infinite Jest* (1996) should be considered the best illustrations for his ideas (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 49).

2. Problem Statement

Convincingly realistic at first glance, with recognizable plot situations and believable character drawing, Wallace's novels, nevertheless, remain philosophical in their nature and as such often resort to symbolism and allegory. Wallace's literary characters do not only discuss philosophical issues but become their very embodiment in life. This literary technique could not have gone unnoticed by critics. Thus, Dulk (2014, p. 199) analyzes the characters' progress in Sartrean perspective of the necessity to attain freedom, as well as in connection with Kierkegaard's categories of the aesthetical and the ethical, Bolger (2014, p. 31) and Tracey (2014, p. 157) find Wallace's source of inspiration in the American pragmatism of William James, John Dewey and Richard Rorty, B. Vermeule (as cited in Vermeule, 2014, p. 103) considers the writer's images an illustration to Schopenhauer's theory of suffering. Many researchers resort to Wittgenstein's writings as the most important contextual source, which is quite predictable, as Wallace himself pointed out to Wittgenstein as one of his infatuations (Burn, 2012). However, the mentioned researchers concentrate their studies on the general picture of Wallace's universe and the characters' patterns of behavior that are stipulated by the world's intrinsically linguistic nature. Notably less attention has been given to the particular character images that serve as symbolic manifestation of the language power in Wallace's novels, i.e. Gramma Lenore in *The Broom of the System* and Avril Incandenza in *Infinite*

Jest. Though formally not the main characters in either novels, the two women tend to become the most important images that reveal the philosophic message of the author, and as such require special attention from a discerning reader.

We attach special significance to the fact that in both novels the author resorts to feminine images as the symbolic personification of language and its power. C. Hayes-Brady in her article *Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace* makes an attempt to connect the functions of Wallace's characters to their gender, stating that "Wallace's women, who wield the influence if not the power, form the silent, shifting center around which his representations of masculinity can locate their stable orbits" (Hayes-Brady, 2013, p. 131). The researcher appears absolutely right emphasizing the fact that women in Wallace's novels tend to move in the background, remain static and demonstrate inner ambivalence. However we cannot fully agree with the other conclusions. Firstly, we would argue that the characters mentioned are not only "influential" but also "potent", and as such become the demiurges of the novels' peculiar universes. Secondly, we would attribute the fact that these powerful women never make a step to the fore in the novels' intricate plots, as well as their evident lack of inner development, not to the masculinity of the author who cannot find a way to describe "the ultimate Other" (Hayes-Brady, 2013, p. 135) but to the philosophical concept of the novels, in which Lenore and Avril are planned to function not as much as socially and psychologically recognizable individuals but primarily as philosophical symbols of language that forms our world without us being aware of it.

3. Research Questions

In the course of our study we have singled out the most important characteristics associated with Lenore and Avril who, being different from each other in insignificant aspects, appear strikingly similar in their core. We have compared the recurrent artistic details with the basic notion of language in Wittgenstein's interpretation, and the discovered similarity has led us to realizing the symbolic significance of the images in the novel's philosophical conception. We have also consulted modern research works on female images, linguistically stereotyped and fixed in European and American culture, which have enabled us to see the reasons for choosing women characters to fulfil Wallace's creative plan.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of our research is directed towards a deeper understanding of Wallace's novels and their ideas. David Foster Wallace is often viewed as a postmodernist, due to technically complicated constructions of his literary pieces, or a representative of "new sincerity", as, meaningfully, his books defy the postmodernist chaos and tend to restore traditional moral values. Yet what seems most important to us is the author's orientation to the philosophical genre in creating fiction. This aspect of his work has recently aroused much interest on the part of critics and has led to the publication of article collections, the titles of which may be regarded as illuminating. Adding our contribution to the continuing study, in the present article we attempt to ground the philosophical significance of the feminine images as the representation of the language's dual nature – the issue that has not received due attention so far.

5. Research Methods

In order to attain our goal, we have resorted to close reading of Wallace's novels *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest*, interpreting the meaningful details of Lenore Beadsman's and Avril Incandenza's character depiction. Taking to Wittgenstein's most famous writings on the one hand and the results of modern linguocultural research devoted to a concept of woman as represented in English phraseology and folklore on the other, we have applied the method of comparative analysis to the discovered facts to make clear why Wallace's female characters should be viewed as the embodiment of the 'language' concept, and why the 'language' concept demands to be creatively represented in the novels with the help of female images (Wallace, 2019, p. 67).

6. Findings

Both female characters' activities are closely connected to language. Lenore Beadsman, characteristically known to her family as Gramma, is Wittgenstein's former student, while Avril Incandenza, with her "fluid and imposing syntax" (Wallace, 2016, p. 88), is a prominent linguist and the founder of the militant grammarians movement in the USA.

Language, in Wittgenstein's interpretation, is direct mirroring of the material reality and a strictly logical formation. In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophical* the world is presented as 'the facts in logical space" and logic is set forward as "not a theory but a reflection of the world" (Wittgenstein, 2015, p. 123). Consequently, it is intelligence and rationality that Wallace's female characters demonstrate in the first place. Lenore with her university education, 'no small feat for a woman, in the twenties" (Wallace, 2019, p. 74), remains intellectually active during all her life. Avril inspires creation of the Enfield Academy and serves as dean there; she conducts linguistic research and publishes books regularly. She is obsessively efficient in all her daily routines and is described as "a fiend for light" (Wallace, 2016, p. 90), as she values nothing but absolute clarity.

Both women are energetic and dominating. Formally, they always seem to stay in the background, allowing the members of their families to take their decisions independently; but as the language penetrates and shapes all human ideas and activities, Lenore and Avril never loosen their grip on the surrounding. Lenore keeps controlling her family and interfering with her relatives' lives. Avril is ironically shown "establishing herself in the exact center of any room she was in" with a symbolic "conductor's baton" in her hand (Wallace, 2016, p. 102). According to Wittgenstein, "logic fills the world: the limits of the world are also its limits" (Wittgenstein, 2015, p. 127). In the same way, Wallace's women aim at substitution of the real world for themselves, remaining "the family's light and pulse and the center that held tight" (Wallace, 2016, p. 108).

However, in the same manner as Wittgenstein's language does not find any word for the ethical, which is "transcendental" and "cannot be expressed" (Wittgenstein, 2015, p. 131), Wallace's women demonstrate the lack of true affection. Both keep speaking about their love for their relatives but the love remains cold, intellectual and egotistic in its nature. Lenore has her left side paralyzed – definitely, a symbolic detail when one thinks of it as the location of the heart. Avril does not notice what troubles her family: she can brilliantly proceed with numerous definitions of 'sadness' as a vocabulary unit but is unable

to grasp her sons' reasons for being sad; a genius in theoretical issues, she simply cannot learn to change her baby's diapers or comfort little Hal, who is crying desperately in front of her, until a neighbor comes to her rescue.

Caring and helpful on the surface, they appear inhuman at the bottom. Lenore suffers from a disease that prevents her body from sustaining the necessary temperature; she needs artificially maintained conditions to keep it warm, thus resembling an automaton rather than a human being. In a similar way, Avril's mania for absolute cleanliness looks highly abnormal: she seems to be able to exist only in a sterile world, utterly devoid of life.

In one of his interviews, Wallace spoke about all of us being lost in language together (Burn, 2012, p. 56). The fact that we are lost *together* can certainly be regarded as solace, though in the long run it cannot overweigh the first part of the statement: the realization of being lost. Wallace regards language as a natural barrier that does not allow a human to cross the border and attain real freedom. Language defines precisely what one can know and meaningfully discourse upon; thus it chains and blocks one in the realm of logically definable: "the limits of the language mean the limits of my world", according to Wittgenstein famous statement (Wittgenstein, 2015, p. 135). We are stuck in language, with the ethical and metaphysical remaining eternally separated from us. If the ethical, in the long tradition of the western thought, should be treated as "divine", then it is language that does not allow a human to get access to it, trapping the person in the outwardly logical but inwardly meaningless. It is characteristic that Avril, the embodiment of rationality, is depicted in the novel as absolutely mad at the same time: it is enough to mention her 'deeply personal' relationship to zucchini in her garden or her Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder; she "sounds insane" when she sings and that makes her hate music: if one compares this detail with Wallace's statement that "God has particular languages, and one of them is music" (Burn, 2012, p. 125), it becomes evident that Avril's and God's languages are viewed as antagonistic means of communication.

Ambivalence remains the dominant feature of Wallace's characters. Lenore, a respectable elderly lady and a seemingly weak and helpless patient at a medical institution, turns out to be "hard", "cold", "querulous and selfish" (Wallace, 2019, p. 79). Avril is antithetically characterized as "a ray of light" and "a black hole" (Wallace, 2016, p. 110): her declared love for her family does not prevent her from destroying their lives.

We would argue that it was the writer's intention to choose female images for representation of the language's dual character. Woman has always been regarded in the western culture as a creature possessing an ambivalent and controversial nature. On the one hand, she is described as a beautiful, innocent, submissive, and caregiving person, who brings life into the world; on the other hand, she is a sly, vengeful and deceitful seductress, averting men from their righteous ways and causing death. This can be traced throughout the myths and legends of Ancient Greece, Rome, Britain, Ireland, and other European countries. The virtuous Greek Muses awarded or punished poets unjustly out of their own whim. Aphrodite, associated with love, tenderness and affection, in other aspects of her cult was represented as "man killer", "the revengeful", and "the intriguante." The same dark and sinister image of the "mother of death" can be traced in Aine, the Irish goddess of love and fertility, or the Celtic Don (Danu), mother goddess, married to the King of Death, thus again combining the concepts of life and mortality. Christianity, winning its popularity in Europe in the Middle Ages, did not actually change the image of a woman but rather developed it and

adjusted to its own needs. We see a woman as the innocent and sinless Mother of Christ and the helper of man, however, it is the woman who is addressed by the Devil and yields to temptation, bringing humanity to the fall. Medieval texts disclose a range of female characters, who are described as either "mother", "virgin" and "servant" or, on the negative side, "witch", "seductress" and "procuress" (Lenets & Ovsienko, 2018, p. 62).

The same ambivalence of the image dominates English phraseology, though negative connotations notably prevail over positive ones. The English language speakers popularly associate an elderly woman with a witch". It should not be surprising that Wallace makes his characters into recognizable witches. One of the key symbols for Lenore is a broom, a traditional witch's attribute. As for Avril, the reader cannot fail to notice her witch's hat, hypertrophic sexuality and the ability to 'immaterialize' so completely that even the omniscient narrator in the novel is unable to locate her on campus.

Wallace seems to develop the literal meaning of Wittgenstein's statement, "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language" (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 131). Language puts a spell on human consciousness, its promised comfort and clarity turn out to be a net, under which an entangled human is forced to remain forever, having lost freedom and personal identity. This leads Wallace to one of the most important declarations, "death is always female" (Wallace, 2016, p. 115), which in this context becomes not anti-feminist but anti-analytical in its philosophical meaning. Lenore 'kills' her husband with emotional indifference and keeps 'indoctrinating' the younger Lenore until the latter nearly loses her 'self'. Avril is directly described as "Death incarnate", while her scientific research of Emily Dickenson's poetry, well known for its obsession with thanatological images, and the apocalyptical four horsemen allegory, that her son chooses for her description, help to develop the association still further.

Thus, the feminine in the novel, depicted as protecting and comforting, is disclosed at the same time as bewitching, paralyzing and, as a result, destructive in its core. The same holds true about the language: it allows people to interact successfully and develop the world around them, but remains an artificial system that restricts complex ideas to simple logical operations, leaving no space for the affectionate and spiritual, and in this way destroying the most valuable part of human personality.

As soon as they discover the true meaning of their situation, the members of both Lenore's and Avril's families start to fight against their powerful relatives. Wallace, however, shares Wittgenstein's belief that the struggle against the linguistic nature of our reality "is perfectly, absolutely hopeless" (Wittgenstein, 2014, p. 156). In *The Broom of the System* the idea is ironically disguised by a seemingly optimistic ending of Lenore's complete though doubtful disappearance. The end of *Infinite Jest* looks less optimistic when the main characters resort to silence as the only possible way to find their human identity, but their inner spiritual progress is accompanied by outer degradation. Remaining in the realm of language kills a person morally, while trying to leave it leads to physical destruction. Both results appear equally disappointing.

7. Conclusion

Language, in Wallace's opinion, is a powerful instrument with a dual effect, but its destructive force appears to be stronger than the comforting one. In his philosophical novels, Wallace has made the central

female figures, with their historically and culturally stipulated inner dualism, represent the controversy of the linguistically formed reality. He once highly praised his colleague, David Markson, for his novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, in which the latter drew a striking portrait of "the linguistic beloved of a man who could not, in emotional practice, confer identity on a woman via love" (Wallace, 1998, p. 222). In the same manner, Wallace's Lenore Beadsman and Avril Incandenza turn into metaphorical Wittgenstein's mistresses too, when, similar to Markson's character, whose image we have previously analyzed (Nikulina, 2018, p. 180), they attach value only to logics and verifiable facts and do not find expression for the ethical and spiritual that results in distortion of reality and ruining the lives of people around them. We consider the role of these characters to be of primary importance for the novels, as they help to carry out the author's leading message and depict living 'in language' as essentially ambivalent but primarily destructive.

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