

CONCEPTS OF PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN DAVID LODGE'S *DEAF SENTENCE*

Dagmar Blight

Comenius University in Bratislava

Abstract: David Lodge needs no introduction as an acknowledged author of campus novels. Over the years his protagonists have, however, undergone a change. Although they are still more or less involved in the world of academia, they are growing considerably older. Their previous worries and concerns (career ambition, acknowledgement etc.) are absent, and have been replaced by new ones, more closely related to their approaching retirement (decline in health, lack of drive, impotence etc.). This paper will examine how *Deaf Sentence* (2008) explores the presence as well as the absence of previous themes to be found in the works of David Lodge. It will take a closer look into the physical and auditory presence and absence of the hearing-impaired hero, Desmond Bates, a retired professor of linguistics. Going gradually deaf, he finds himself in many a situation present yet absent, for often he cannot hear what is going on. Despite the protagonist's unfortunate disability, the novel is still fairly light and the reader can laugh at the embarrassing misunderstandings caused by Desmond's poor hearing.

Key words: campus novel, presence, absence, hearing impairment

David Lodge is the doyen of the campus novel genre in English literature. In the 42 years between his first example of the university novel, *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965), and his latest, *Deaf Sentence* (2008), he wrote, among other numerous fictional and theoretical works, a famous trilogy of critifiction: *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984), *Nice Work* (1988) and the novel *Thinks* (2001). *Deaf Sentence* not surprisingly differs from the previous ones in several aspects. For a start the protagonist, Professor Desmond Bates, is a linguist and not a literature academic like Lodge's other protagonists Adam Appleby, Philip Swallow, Morris Zapp, Persse McGarrigle, Robyn Penrose, and Helen Reed. Desmond is moreover retired, so in fact very little of the plot actually takes place on the campus. Our hero is also considerably older than his well known predecessors and thus the previous worries and concerns of Lodge's protagonists such as career ambition, acknowledgement etc. are absent. They have been replaced by the presence of new ones, more closely related to Desmond, the pensioner: deafness, a general decline in health, lack of drive, care come brochures, suicide, evil, predictable everyday routine and, inevitably death.

What sets Desmond Bates apart is the high-frequency deafness he suffers from. Hence the pun in the title and the life stories of other deafness sufferers to be found in the book such as Beethoven, Goya and Philip Larkin. Deafness does play quite a crucial role in the novel, and not just as a comic characteristic of the protagonist: "*Deafness is comic, as blindness is tragic.*" as Desmond says when he contemplates his disability (Lodge, 2008, p. 14). The novel, in the form of a journal, is a kind of occupational therapy for the hero. Desmond indulges himself in getting his own voice through the journal writing. It is an exercise he himself used to give his students in linguistics classes. This is not the first time Lodge's narration switches from third person to first person journal form. We can also come across this stylistic device in *Therapy* (1995), in which the protagonist, Tubby, uses it as a kind of therapy too. The protagonist's hearing impairment enables the author to spice up the plot with misunderstandings caused by Desmond's poor hearing, be it with his wife Fred, father, the PhD. student Alex, and others. As a result, Desmond finds himself in many a situation absent though physically present, for often he cannot hear what is going on. Inevitably he gets into trouble, particularly when he agrees unofficially to help Alex with her PhD. thesis. This is just one of the storylines which make *Deaf Sentence* so enjoyable, with the reader kept on their toes not knowing whether Desmond will succumb to the kinky behavior of the attractive student or not.

The hearing impairment brings along many social advantages, which make the reader sympathize with our hero. Once a keen theatre-goer, Desmond, can no longer enjoy going to the theatre as "*the voices have a thin, distant timbre, as if you are listening to the performance through a telephone on stage that has been left off the hook*" (Lodge, 2008, p. 37). Similarly, eating out and parties have become a source of embarrassment for both Desmond and his companions. Poor Desmond misses out on the jokes, unintentionally insults people who unfortunately often happen to be his wife's customers, and inevitably upsets his wife Fred.

The PhD. topic, a stylistic analysis of suicide notes, gives the author the means to ponder another serious topic, suicide. Desmond, we find at the end of the novel, had assisted his first wife's suicide, crushing painkillers and mixing them in warm milk and brandy and helping her swallow the mixture when she was in the last stage of cancer. He nearly has to duplicate this horrific experience when expected to decide whether his Dad, helpless in hospital after a stroke, should be kept alive or whether the hospital staff should "*let nature take its course*" (Ibid, p. 283). Fortunately, Desmond is spared having to make this decision as his father soon dies. What he is not spared though are the emotionally draining visits to his dying father in the geriatric ward. Never had he imagined that he would have had to deal with such a humiliating task as to wash his father: "*It was an extraordinary experience, which took the reversal of the infant-parent relationship through the taboo barrier. Basically I was helping to change a nappy on an eighty-nine-year-old man, but he happened to be my father.*" (Ibid, p. 282).

Father's welfare becomes a serious concern for Desmond. His casual monthly visits to London become seriously draining towards the end of the novel. With his father's health, both mental and physical, deteriorating Desmond realizes he is in need of more

regular care. The care home hunt starts and Desmond, with very little enthusiasm, starts browsing care home brochures. It is not an easy task; the father is obviously reluctant to accept the idea of having to move and sulks. Desmond on the other hand is shocked both by the general gloomy and pathetic atmosphere in the care homes and by their steep prices.

The death of Desmond's father is not the only one in the novel. It reoccurs in the book, on a horrific scale of Auschwitz Birkenau, which Desmond visits on his lecture tour of Poland. He is clearly shattered by the sheer monstrosity of this factory of evil and rejoices in the absence of evil in his own times.

Dad's house in London, in which Desmond avoids staying overnight, is also full of presence and absence. It is obviously full of Dad's memorabilia from his musical days. There is also Mum's ghost that Dad hears walking upstairs. Once the house is cleared out to be sold, its bareness and bleakness is in strong contrast to Desmond's home up in the North, offering "*a haven of civilised comfort. [...] the pale light-reflecting walls, the familiar pictures, the surfaces and textures and artfully blended colours of the floors and furnishings, the carpeted staircase with its brass stairrods and polished banister, were welcoming presences, like a team of mute, discreetly smiling servants welcoming the master home.*" (Ibid, p. 278).

When Desmond becomes a grandfather, the birth of the baby boy is a compensation for his father's death and absence. The whole family is overcome with joy and infused with hope. The arrival of baby Desmond steers the novel away from serious topics and allows the author explore more familiar and, lighter topics, such as performance in bed.

The novel thus takes on a more frivolous tone with Desmond's concern over his declining vigour and occasional erectile dysfunction. (This is a prominent topic in *Therapy*, where among Laurence Passmore's anxieties is his lack of libido. His anxieties miraculously all disappear, not as a result of numerous kinds of therapy, but due to a personal change in the protagonist.) Desmond feels worn out compared to his younger, vigorous, and successful businesswoman wife Fred, and has to plan each potential bout of intercourse very carefully. He has to keep an eye on his alcohol consumption to meet the wife's and his own expectations in this area: "*Knowing that in my tired and slightly tipsy state I would not be able to pursue any amorous overture to a satisfactory conclusion*" (Lodge, 2008, p. 70). As he is not a sporty person he also lags behind his wife's newly acquired stamina and general fitness. Fred has recently undergone a transformation of her body. With the help of the scalpel, breast reduction, she got shapely breasts, and with endless gym work sculpted "*her matronly torso into an alluring hour-glass shape*" (Ibid, p. 70). Desmond is aware that this transformation is not for his benefit but a personal make-over related to her new career. Nevertheless he finds the results titillating, provoking as he says, in the words of the English poet Betjeman (1906 – 1984), "*late flowering lust*" (Ibid, p. 70). This intertextual reference is a good summary of how Desmond feels: old and short of the joys he had when he "*was young in sin*" (Betjeman). The absence of action in his life, lack of professional drive and general decline in health is strongly juxtaposed to his wife's exciting new life, her successful business, and her newly acquired beautiful body and good health.

Despite the presence of new, gloomy topics (old age, illness, death, evil, etc), *Deaf Sentence* is overall a fairly light read and still very much like other novels of David Lodge. With the passage of time, Lodge will be 77 this year, it is no surprise that his latest work, though still an example of the campus novel, differs from its predecessors in the character of the protagonists as well as in the issues they have to face.

Bibliography

- BETJEMAN, J.: Late flowering lust. http://poemsandprose.blog.co.uk/2007/08/14/late_flowering_lust~2804950/ retrieved 14/01/2012
- KERMODE, F.: Jogging in the woods at Bellagio. In: London Review of Books. Vol. 6 No. 7. 19 April 1984. P. 22-23.
- LODGE, D.: Therapy. London : Penguin, 1996. 320 p. ISBN 978-0-14-025358-0.
- LODGE, D.: Deaf Sentence. London : Penguin, 2008. 308 p. ISBN 978-0-141-04104-9.
- SCOTT FOX, L.: Decrepit Lit. In: London Review of Books. Vol.30 No.9. 8 May 2008. P. 29-30.

Dagmar Blight
Katedra anglického jazyka a literatúry
Ústav filologických štúdií PdF
Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave
Račianska 59, 813 34 Bratislava
blight@fedu.uniba.sk