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# AESTHETICS, IDEOLOGY AND POSTMODERN LITERATURE

(DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S  
SHORT STORY *SIGNIFYING  
NOTHING*, 1999).

It seems that the most recent development in literary theory and criticism shows two basic approaches to a literary text. One of them emphasizes political, ideological and social aspects of the object of study, that is of a literary text. According to Richard Levin,

'ideology' refers to a consciously held set of beliefs or creed, usually in the social or political realm. In this sense ideological approach to Shakespeare would be one that is deliberately constructed from such a creed in order to serve it, and the two most important examples today are Marxist and feminist criticism (Levin 1996: 138).

The ideological, political and sociological position of a feminist approach can be clearly seen from C. Weedon's words: "*Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directing at changing existing power relations between women and men in society*" (Weedon 1987:1).

Some years later, a very similar position can be found in Catherine Belsey's and J. Moore's feminist anthology typically entitled *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*: "*The feminist reader is enlisted in the process of changing the gender relations which prevail in our society, and she regards the practise of reading as one of the sites in the struggle for change*" (Belsey and Moore 1989:1).

Thus especially Marxist, some feminist (Gilbert and Gubar), post-colonial, gay and lesbian, and cultural studies critics dealing with categories such as class, gender, race, sex, and ethnicity see a literary text primarily as social, historical, political rather than artistic or aesthetic product which is a result of author's or society's politics and ideology. In other words, the literary text seems to be understood as a direct representation of external, experiential

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 reality, social conditions, author's social background and ideology and is understood as equal to any other, non-literary, non-artistic texts. Such an approach marginalizes aesthetic aspects of the literary texts, uniqueness and originality of authorial narrative and style, and it foregrounds ideology and politics rather than aesthetics of representation. This approach applies and deals with non-literary categories and is often reminiscent of a sociological rather than literary theoretical study.

Other tendencies, loosely understood as post-structuralist, can be labelled as philosophizing or rhetoric, and they are interested, on the other hand, in the role and function of language in the formation/creation of meaning, in the working of the linguistic representation of reality, and in the relationship between the subject and object of representation. Since this approach often deals with a certain philosophical position or with working of some philosophical categories, it often becomes a discourse about itself and about philosophy rather than about literature and about the uniqueness of author's depiction of reality or some problems. Both approaches to a literary text tend to suppress the importance of artistic and aesthetic vitality of authors, and the literary text becomes only a tool to prove either ideological, political, social or philosophic positions of the interpreters or theories rather than the artistic and aesthetic value and meaning of these texts. Both types of criticism characterized above, in their most extreme versions, can often neglect the importance of the literary text as the aesthetic object. Language creating a literary text is neither a transparent channel to reality nor an artificial chain of signifiers but rather, as Charles Newman argues in his seminal study entitled *The Postmodern Aura*, "[...] a phenomenon which is neither autonomous nor coextensive with our lives. And literature, thus, is a gift— not the property of a class or even an individual prophet— a present, which, like all exemplary endowments, creates its own terms of acceptance" (Newman 1985:97).

Thus neither language creating reality in a literary work, nor its philosophy and social status should be studied separately but rather in their mutual interaction and context. Since the reality in a literary work is primarily constructed through the specific, artistic language, this language and its connection to the social reality should be, in my view, the primary focus of critics' interest. As Charles Newman continues in the above work,

Fiction does not render the world but makes its own world. Fiction is not history because history itself cannot be understood in itself as a language, as history does not consist of signs. Further, history is not intelligible without an extra-historical essence as a matter of principle. Therefore, fiction presumes an epistemologically privileged position as a matter of course. It operates as a distinct and whole addition to reality; in this sense, fiction always challenges conventional reality (Newman 1985: 62-63).

Both these tendencies in literary criticism, in the past decades, have gradually displaced a literary text from the center of attention by dealing

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either with the social reality or with a metadiscourse (literary theory which is about itself, or with a philosophy of a discourse) rather than with the literary text. As it was said above, these approaches take a literary text only as an instrument to be taken to prove some sociological, political, ideological or philosophical positions of critics and theories rather than its literary, artistic or aesthetic quality, value and meaning. Jonathan Culler has confirmed the existence of some of these tendencies arguing that

literary theory in the 1980s and 1990s has not focused on the difference between literary and non-literary works. What theorists have done is to reflect on literature as a historical and ideological category, on the social and political functions that something called 'literature' has been thought to perform (Culler 1997: 36).

In the last decades, ethics and ethical criticism have become another important tendency in the development of thinking on literature. Although ethics has been closely connected to literature, the representation of ethics in a literary work can never be the main criterion of its aesthetic, literary or artistic value otherwise, like socially, ideologically or politically oriented criticism, it would degrade a literary work only to a mere sociological document. Oscar Wilde once noted that *"There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written[...]No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style[...]No artist is even morbid. The artist can express everything"*(Wilde 1993: 1628).

Also Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that *"It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental.(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same)"* (Wittgenstein in Stengel 2004: 609).

Both Wilde and Wittgenstein point out, in a way, the inseparability of ethics (morality) and aesthetics. In Wilde's understanding, the literary representation of immorality does not make a literary work immoral or artistically invaluable, and immoral themes or characters cannot be understood as the criterion for the judgment of its artistic and aesthetic value. And Wittgenstein emphasizes the immanence of ethics within a literary work associating it with the whole process of reading understood as itself being ethical in its nature.

In his article *A Metaethics of Reading*, Ronald Shusterman develops Wittgenstein's ideas and suggests four theses confirming a certain immanence of ethics not only in literary works, but in the whole process of reading. He claims that *"there are four major theses one can defend with respect to the ethical or metaethical dimension that can be attributed to literature (or perhaps to the arts in general)"* (Shusterman 2003: 29).

In his view, these are

1. The ethical potency of fiction can be found in the represented content. It is what the work explicitly endorses and teaches that moulds us morally.

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2. [...] In fiction, a special attention to language produces an ethical experience.
  3. It is the literary form, and more specifically the form of the dialogic novel which is in itself always already ethical, independently of any content or specific type of language.
  4. The specific ethical potency of fiction is to be found, in the final analysis, neither in the content, the language, nor the form, but in literary practise itself, in the pragmatic dimension of our interaction with literary works of art (Shusterman 2003: 29).

Although especially the first point is quite contradictory and Shusterman does not entirely identify with it further in his article<sup>1</sup>, we can mostly agree with other points for several reasons. It is especially because all the other points emphasize creative thinking supporting plurality of both views of interpreters (readers, critics) and meanings stemming from it. Plurality derived from one's understanding of a plurality of meanings and from a possible discussion on these meanings (the more ambiguous, indefinite, the more creative, that is moral) can further support the idea of tolerance (I mean tolerance to and understanding of other views) expressed through different views of other interpreters on the work of art which thus becomes ethical itself. This plurality of meanings is expressed through author's mastery and use of the artistic language. As Oscar Wilde argues, "*Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art*" (Wilde 1993:1628).

The plurality of meanings is secured through the artistic and stylistic mastery of the author and it expresses the language's undermining potential which can subvert any idea, meaning, and position including the ethical one. In his article *Literature and Ethics*, Michael Eskin argues that literature is ethical because of "*its discursive-transformational 'capaciousness', that is[...]its ability to absorb and transform virtually any kind of discourse, including the discourse of ethics*" (Eskin 2004: 575).

It seems that it is especially modernist and postmodernist art which emphasize the language as artistic medium as well as its role in the creation of "artistic" reality. And especially postmodern and contemporary literature<sup>2</sup>, mostly through the use of metafiction in Patricia Waugh's understanding<sup>3</sup>, focuses a reader's attention to the working of language, its status, its role and function in the creation of reality and thus involving a reader into the process of the construction of meaning and, in this way, to critical thinking stimulating tolerance and respect for other views. In Patricia Waugh's view, metafiction is "*fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality*" (2).

David Foster Wallace is a contemporary author who has used not only Modernist and Post-Modernist narrative techniques but also who, through the use of meta-metafictional narratives and irony<sup>4</sup> has pointed out a commercialization of (iconic) postmodern authors of earlier generation (John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover

and others). Many of his works such as *Infinite Jest* or *Westward the Course of the Empire Takes its Way* seem to be much more complex and linguistically manneristic than the works of his postmodern predecessors. In his short story *Signifying Nothing*, Wallace seems to explicitly deal with morality. Despite the fact that a reminiscence of a young boy on a pedophilic behaviour of his father in his childhood stands in the centre of attention in this short story, Wallace does not deal only with the boy's frustrating experience from his childhood, but further also with the role of a time distance (past and present) and language in the construction/creation of the past reality, as well as with the reliability of narration. The story narrated from the perspective of a young boy starts in the following way:

It was a couple of years ago, and I was 19, and getting ready to move out of my folks' house, and get out on my own, and one day as I was getting ready, I suddenly get this memory of my father wagging his dick in my face one time when I was a little kid[...]Part of the total weirdness of the incident of my father wagging his dick at me down there was that, the whole time, he did not say anything (Wallace 1999: 63).

The story seems to be about a boy's attempt to reconcile with the family after one year of separation from it, especially with his father who was not able to explain his molesting behaviour in the boy's childhood. The end of a story when the family meets in a restaurant suggests a certain reconciliation and final understanding between the boy, his father and the rest of the family: *"The waiter put my plate in front of me, and I pretended to look down and make a face, and we all laughed. It was good"* (Wallace 1999: 68).

This seeming happy ending indicating that this short story is about the process of growing feeling of frustration in a young boy's mind caused by unpleasant and deviant experience and of the continuous process of his mental regeneration through forgiving his father's behaviour includes several "disruptive" elements. These elements partly undermine but also develop the other, possibly allegorical meaning associated with the depiction of the connection between the language and represented reality. The boy's reconstruction of unpleasant memories seems to be clear and reliable since he claims that *"The memory comes up out of nowhere, but it is so detailed and solid-seeming, I know it is totally true. I suddenly know it really happened, and was not a dream..."* (Wallace 1999: 63).

The narrator's reliability is, however, in a way, relativized by his inability to remember his father's facial expression. He says that *"...there was nothing in the memory about his face looked like, like what his expression looked like"* (Wallace 1999:63).

The narrator's close and even naturalistic reconstruction of the incidents of his father's molestation of himself in his childhood is further undermined by his further unreliability and doubt. Wallace graphically emphasizes (through the use of italics), in the later part of the story, the words such as look, imagine, believe and accuse (65):

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 [...]not only did he never in his life waggle his dick at me for no reason when I was a little kid but just the fact that I could even fucking imagine that he ever waggled his dick at me, and then like, believe it, and then come into his own presence in this rental van and, like, accuse him (65).

The narrator's emphasis on the words such as believe emphasizes boy's attempt to convince a reader about the truthfulness of the narrated events supported by the word accuse further, but they seem to be an expression of boy's imagination and will rather than fact. This doubt is further supported by the word imagine evoking an emphasis on the role of a language in the construction of reality. A doubt about the reliability of the narrated events is further expressed through the boy's comments that become metafictional metacommentary on the process of creation of reality through language. The narrator, a boy, comments on that:

I still knew that the memory of my father waggling his dick at me in the rec room was real, but, little by little, I started to realize, just because I remembered the incident, that did not mean, necessarily, my father did(66)[...]It was one of those totally bizarre incidents which are so weird, it seems like it is not happening even while it is happening (64).

Boy's intensive and disgusting memories are juxtaposed to father's indifference and silence about the incident as well as to his entire ignorance of the whole incident. Thus a sexually deviant and graphic act, intensified by boy's attempt to find a rational justification for it through his eloquent contemplation on the event, is juxtaposed to father's silence, indifference extended to irrationality of this incident. So while the boy tries to understand this act logically, there is no sexual, emotional, rational or psychological justification for this act from his father's side. It seems to simply have occurred, there is no touch, explanation, sexual climax, violence, there is just a simple act happening. The boy seems to be more frustrated by the irrationality and absurdity of the incident than by the incident itself. The title itself, *Signifying Nothing*, alludes to it by the statement about a lack of motivation and a clash, a meeting of two different principles and understandings of reality culminating in the meeting of a boy with his family (including his father) at the restaurant suggesting not only a reconciliation between a boy and his family, but especially a meeting of two different ways of looking at reality, two approaches and principles to its understanding. On the one hand, there is a boy's approach representing a rational and possibly mimetic understanding of reality, that is a certain belief in the language and its potential to convincingly and logically depict it. On the other one, father's approach and attitudes are irrational, undefinable, and unmotivated. It undermines the belief in all rationality and in the ability of language to represent reality truthfully, convincingly and objectively. So the final scene and a meeting of a boy expecting father's explanation with a family "signifies nothing"<sup>75</sup> and a boy does not learn about his father's motivation concerning

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the past incident. Despite this, however, the family party at the restaurant does not end with misunderstanding but with reconciliation even after another unexpected moment, that is father's vulgar comments without justification. This act of understanding among the members of the family becomes rather an event suggesting boy's changed approach to reality and language by his denial to continue in his search for motivation and meaning of his father's another unexpected and unmotivated act, that is his behaviour in the restaurant. In addition to this, by his lack of motivation and deviant or vulgar (in the restaurant) behavior, by his silence, father undermines traditional symbolic role and function of a father representing rationality and authority through the Freudian and phallic symbol the narrator remembers the best of all accident. The boy's attitude becomes an act of understanding of the working of a language and the process of the construction of reality which is not direct, reliable, mimetic and logical. This meaning of the final scene and the whole story is thus built up on the allegorical principle as understood by Craig Owens. In his view,

In allegorical structure, then, one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be [...] Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them.[...] He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured [...] Rather, he adds another meaning to the image [...] the allegorical meaning supplants and antecedent one; it is a supplement (Owens 1992: 54).

The other texts this allegorical principle is built through in this short story are not specific texts, but the entire inventory of texts based on a mimetic, realistic tradition as confronted with other, modernist and postmodernist texts all represented by the figure of a father and his son in this short story. Through the use of this allegorical principle without its original moralizing intent as in traditional allegory, Wallace points out the working of (artistic) language and its role in the construction of reality as well two different approaches to the representation of reality, that is traditional, mimetic, realistic and more experimental, rather postmodernist. Allegory produces the supplement to the basic meaning of the story as a story of a frustrated experience of a boy with his father in his childhood and turns out to be also a story on the relationship between the language and reality, art and life, realistic and experimental (postmodernist) representation of reality. Wallace also seems to parody the phallic symbol as a symbol of patriarchal authority and as the object of feminist criticism since father's sexual organ representing a phallic symbol finds itself in a blank space, without meaning, motivation and signification on the basic level of the story. The emphasis on the language, its working, and function stimulating critical thinking foregrounds not ethical, political or ideological but aesthetic aspects of this work. Wallace's allegory, however, does not have either a traditional moralizing impact or acquires an ethical dimension because of the thematization of perversity and vulgarity. Ethical dimension of this short story

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## CONCLUSION

stems from Wallace's focus on the language and its working which stimulates critical and creative thinking on literature as an ethical act. At the same time, Wallace avoids both direct, explicit and overt politics and ideology not only by his construction, but also by the whole narrative process commented on above.

As can be seen from the above, in this short story Wallace thematizes vulgarity, immorality and obscenity but he further extends its meaning through the allegorical principle pointing out the working of a language and different views on the construction of reality. Boy's initial frustration from his alleged molestation experience with his father turn out to become his quest for motivation, meaning, and rationality of this act itself suggesting his belief in the direct representation of reality by language, in the convincingness about a direct representation and reconstruction of experience through language. This quest, however, shows a process of the boy's intellectual maturation, which is based on the allegorical principle gradually revealing his distrust in the possibility of direct, reliable and objective recuperation of reality resulting in the final scene in which he accepts his father's irrational and illogical behaviour and resigns to the possibility of its logical understanding and explanation. This becomes an act of final understanding of the complicated nature of language and its impossibility to directly, truthfully and convincingly give an objective picture of reality.

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- 1 The fourth point seems to contradict the first in a sense. In this article Shusterman later argues that "[...]my position will be a defence of the final thesis, though I intend to grant partial validity and utility to every thesis, except perhaps the first" (Shusterman 2003: 29). By thesis Shusterman means the above four points.
  - 2 By contemporary I mean especially the authors emerging in the late 1980's and 1990's such as David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, William Vollmann, Richard Powers and others. Some of them are loosely labelled as post-scientific or meta-metafictional. See, for example, Rother, J. 1993. Reading and Riding the Post-Scientific Wave: the Shorter Fiction of David Foster Wallace. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 2, 216-234.
  - 3 See Waugh, P. *Metafiction*. 1984. London and New York: Routledge, 2.
  - 4 However simplistic it may seem, by meta-metafictional I mean Wallace fiction's allusions and reference to the works of mostly postmodernist authors which are already metafictional (John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis and others). David Foster Wallace argues that by becoming institutionalized (taught at the universities) postmodern narratives by the authors of earlier generation have lost their earlier undermining potential have become commercialized (included in the anthologies). In Wallace's view, the postmodern narrative strategies have also become commercialized by being used by TV commercials (especially postmodern irony). See Wallace, D.F., 1997.
  - 5 This intertextual reference to a famous quotation from William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* may also indicate the vanity of human existence, impossibility of communication and the inability of language to express a complex nature of physical reality. I must thank Professor David Rudd from the Bolton University, UK, for reminding me this reference:

MACBETH  
 She should have died hereafter;  
 There would have been a time for such a word.



To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
 To the last syllable of recorded time,  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing (Shakespeare).

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SUMMARYAESTHETICS, IDEOLOGY AND POSTMODERN LITERATURE  
(DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S SHORT STORY SIGNIFYING  
NOTHING, 1999)

In the last decades many theories such as Marxist, some feminist and post-colonial emphasize the ideological and political function of the literary texts as well as the “politics” of representation. The literary text is understood as a cultural product and as equal to any other, non-literary texts and discourses while the text’s specificity, its artistic, literary and aesthetic quality are often suppressed and marginalized. Such approach to artistic texts as practised by the Marxists, Marxist feminists, and, for example, cultural theorists can be relevant for the study of culture but, in my view, not for the study of arts (literature) since one of the most important aspects of the literary and artistic texts—their aesthetic quality is suppressed and understood as irrelevant. In post and (post)postmodern literary works not only the above mentioned narrative strategies, but especially parody, irony, self-reflexivity and metafiction form the tools that create an aesthetic potential producing not only a relevant aesthetic message, but through which the authors both reflect the contemporary cultural condition and sensibility and re-write traditional myths associated with particular cultural traditions. In my paper I analyze the role of metafiction, parody, and irony in the production of meaning and aesthetic quality in the postmodern literary texts as manifested in David Foster Wallace’s short story *Signifying Nothing* (1999) as well as the way these means create the message on the current cultural condition in the USA. In addition, I analyze the way how these narrative strategies foreground the ontology of a literary text through the treatment of the relationship between language, fiction and reality.

**KEYWORDS:** postmodern literature, metafiction, aesthetics, ideology, ethics, reality, fiction.