

Contrastive Analysis of the British and the American Working Class, as presented in David Lodge's *Nice Work* and Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*

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The main topics David Lodge addresses in The Campus Trilogy are the academic environment, the relationship between ideology and personal life, the idea of the global campus and other academia related aspects. However, in every of these three novels he deals with themes which are unrelated to the academic life. In the last novel of the trilogy, *Nice Work* (1988), Lodge presents the lives of the workers from the factory managed by Victor Wilcox. Even though this topic is meant to be a parallel to the Victorian factories, it raises awareness regarding the lives of the poor people belonging to the working class.

In the beginning of the twenty first century, Barbara Ehrenreich, an American journalist, wrote a documentary book about the lives of the working class people in the United States. Her book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001), soon became a bestseller due to the writing style and tone. In order to accomplish this documentary book, Ehrenreich did "the old-fashioned kind of journalism", as she terms it; she led the same life as the working poor so that she could get the right idea about their situation.

The present paper compares the situation of the British factory workers, as presented by David Lodge in *Nice Work* at the end of the eighth decade of the twentieth century, and that of the American working poor, as depicted by Barbara Ehrenreich in her documentary *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* in the beginning of the twenty first century.

Keywords: poverty, low class, factories, industry, working poor.



Introduction

Poverty is something we cannot ignore. Even in a modern and developed society we encounter the poor and we witness their struggle to make ends meet. Regardless of the countries they live in, their race, their ethnicity, their gender, the poor face the same struggles all over the world. The working poor are what all the countries and continents in the world have in common. In Europe as well as in America there are poor people who work in factories, supermarkets, garages, cleaning services and so on.

This paper embraces an innovative approach,

comparing the lives of the working poor in Britain with those of the same social category in the United States. The comparison is based upon a work of fiction, a British novel, David Lodge's *Nice Work* published in London in 1988, and an American documentary book written by the journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, first published in New York in 2001.

This perspective is determined by the assumption that all poor people share the same problems, have the same needs and troubles and deserve a better treatment, regardless of their country and continent. They need to be respected and treated as human



beings; they need to be encouraged to gain their lost self-respect. The society all over the world should think about the poor people and get to know the hardships they face every day.



Narrative Techniques: Humor and Irony

It can be argued that the public has no reason to be interested in documentary books on poverty. Why would the upper classes want to know about the poor? If they care, then they feel ashamed and guilty; thus they would not want to further examine the matter. Or, if they do not care, then the problem is even more straightforward: they have no reason to read about poverty. But there is something about these documentary books that attracts everyone and makes people interested: the fascination of the story. Moreover, these stories are true. No one can resist a true story, especially when it is told well. Thus, Barbara Ehrenreich's book meets the conditions to become a bestseller: the narrator presents true stories and she tells them well.

Nice Work is a totally different example: it is entirely fictional, though David Lodge aims to draw attention through certain excerpts towards the hardships of the lives led by the factory workers. The novel is structured on parallelisms and one of them focuses upon a comparison between the lives of the factory workers at the time the book was written and the lives led by the Victorian factory workers.

Ehrenreich presents facts from a documentary point of view, thus she is a part of the world she describes. She filters everything through her perception and the reader gets mainly her perspective on the facts. In Genette's terms, *Nickel and Dimed* is told by a homodiegetic narrator with internal focalization. This makes the reader even more involved both with the story and with the narrator's thoughts and opinions about the state of affairs. In *Nice Work*, Lodge employs a heterodiegetic narrator with internal focalization which shifts from one character to the other. The main character is Robyn Penrose, a young lecturer specialized in Victorian Literature, who as a part of the Shadow Scheme, has to spend one day every week throughout the term as the "shadow" of Victor Wilcox, the managing director of a casting and general engineering company.

In describing the facts, both authors make wide use of irony in order to create a humorous effect. Even though Ehrenreich presents sad stories, she manages to keep an attractive humorous tone through most of the plot and to use irony in describing her own problems with the living conditions and the low-wage

jobs. When she reaches Minneapolis, for instance, she spends a few days in the friends' of a friend apartment, while they are visiting relatives: she only has to take care of a cockatiel and "for reasons of ornithological fitness and sanity" (Ehrenreich, 2002: 69), she has to let it out of the cage a few hours every day. But birds are her phobia and the cockatiel seems to draw its main pleasure through flying at her face and playing in her hair. "This is what anyone coming to the door would encounter: a cringing figure, glasses peering out the porthole of her sweatshirt, topped by a large, crested-and, I can only imagine, quite pleased with its dominant position-exotic white bird." (Ehrenreich, 2002: 73-74) Ehrenreich presents this scene between her and a bird using an external point of view; she imagines what she and the cockatiel must look like to different person, she imagines that the bird is pleased, and she describes everything in a humorous manner.

Lodge builds the entire novel on binary oppositions which have an ironical effect. The relationship between Robyn and Wilcox represents one of these oppositions: she is an exponent of the academic world and he is a managing director of a "factory", suggesting the wideness of the world outside academia. When Robyn visits the factory (the machine shop and the foundry), the irony is everywhere. The character is out of place and she finds the factory work "appalling" (Lodge, 1988: 120). When she states that she consider this type of work as a type of oppression, Wilcox laughs at her opinions and faces her with the truth: "for every unskilled job we advertise, we get a hundred applicants. [...] [They] are glad to work here." (Lodge, 1988: 120) Through irony, Lodge draws attention towards how little do intellectuals and academics really know about the real life of factory workers.

While working as a cleaning lady at The Maids, Ehrenreich cleans many people's houses and by stating that she has never had anyone cleaning her house, she actually admits that she finds this job degrading: "this is just not the kind of relationship I want to have with another human being." (Ehrenreich, 2002: 53) She then proceeds to a detailed description of the bathrooms she had to clean, focusing on toilets and bathtubs, in order to emphasize the "dirty" dimension of the job as a maid. But the conclusion to her description has a humorous nuance: she states that "There are worse things that owners can do, of course, than shit or shed. They can spy on us, for example." (Ehrenreich, 2002: 54) Ironically, after describing the horrors of a dirty toilet, she concludes that spying on them is even worse. And she is right, from a certain point of view; spying on them implies that the house owners do not trust them and this can be considered even more degrading than cleaning a dirty bathroom.

Finally, Ehrenreich employs irony in presenting

her corporate orientation session at Wal-Mart when receiving a job there. She emphasizes the way in which the new workers are persuaded not to form a union, as that would not help them at all and her description slightly mocks the pains taken by the employers: "You have to wonder - and I imagine some of my teenage fellow orientees may be doing so - why such fiends as these union organizers, such outright extortionists, are allowed to roam free in the land." (Ehrenreich, 2002: 81) But her irony is aimed at both her employers and some of her co-workers, as she considers them able to believe such things about the disadvantages of unions.

Even though Ehrenreich lives her real life in a different environment and usually interacts with different people, her experience as a low-wage worker raised her involvement in the lives of the poor and made their world part of her own. Robyn does not get that much involved in the lives of the poor, but she deeply feels for the workers in Wilcox's factory and tries to help them. Both approaches to poverty are influenced by subjectivism, as this paper will further discuss.



Subjectivism and the Sentimental Approach

When Ehrenreich interacts with the working poor every day, lives the same life as they do and becomes part of their world, she cannot avoid the emotional involvement concerning their condition. Even though her documentary work should exclude any type of subjectivism, her thorough knowledge of their lives makes her psychologically closer to their struggle. By living and working in the same conditions as the low-wage workers, Ehrenreich annihilates any effects of the othering. She interacts directly with the working poor and sees them as real human beings, not as mere numbers on lists. The direct interaction makes one realize more than ever that the low-wage workers are people like us and that they share the same feelings, fears and hopes like everyone else. Thus, through this book, the reader can actually reach Ehrenreich's level of understanding and share her awareness concerning the working poor.

Robyn gets involved in the lives of the factory workers but on a very different level. She witnesses a board meeting held by Wilcox and learns that they decide to fire an operative because he is not competent enough and his machine keeps on breaking down. Robyn is outraged by the board's decision and she goes inside the foundry in order to find the worker and warn him. Lodge also emphasizes the discriminating attitude of the board members

towards the worker: they are not sure whether he was Pakistani or Indian and do not even care about the difference (Lodge, 1988: 143). Robyn considers that "the whole set-up is racist" (Lodge, 1988: 134), as plenty of Asian, Indian, Caribbean and Pakistani immigrants were working in the foundry, more than in any other part of the factory. It can be argued that immigration and poverty are interconnected, but here Lodge tackles the discrimination which is inherent to this aspect. Poor workers are the same regardless of their skin colour.

There are some instances in *Nickel and Dimed* when Ehrenreich gets really impressed by her fellow workers' words or feelings. When Pete, the cook from the Alzheimer's facility, starts telling her unbelievable stories about all the money he has and she asks why he keeps on working, his answer moves her. "Oh, he tried staying home, but you get stir-crazy, you know, you start feeling like an outcast. And this touches me, somehow, [...] that this place that he described as so morbidly dysfunctional could amount to a real and compelling human community." (Ehrenreich, 2002: 40) This is an instance of breaking apart the constructed othering of the poor. Their need to feel part of a human community, even as workers for an Alzheimer's facility, makes them closer to Ehrenreich as well as to the readers who see the situation through her eyes.

Ehrenreich presents an account of the problems encountered by the workers at Wal-Mart. During a cigarette break, she gets to talk to her fellow workers, as "almost everyone is eager to talk, and I soon become a walking repository of complaints." (Ehrenreich, 2002: 101) They are pressed to work overtime but they are not paid for that; many of them do not have a health insurance, as they do not think it worth paying for; the managers are always something to be afraid of; the inflexibility of the schedules is a problem as well: "especially in the case of the evangelical lady who can never get Sunday morning off, no matter how much she pleads." (Ehrenreich, 2002: 101) Even from her privileged position as a documentary journalist, Ehrenreich cannot avoid being emotionally involved. She experiences a stronger feeling than pity, she feels compassionate towards these people. Now she can put herself in their shoes, even though she does that for documentary reasons, she can experience their problems and she knows thoroughly how they feel like.

The objectivity of documentary books is influenced by the writers' ideological background. The reader sees the working poor through the author's eyes; the documentary narration focalizes through the writer. In *Framing Class*, Diana Kendall draws a comparison between David Shipler's and Ehrenreich's manners of presenting poor people. She states that, in



his documentary book *The Working Poor. Invisible in America* David Shipler “tends to blame women who are single heads of households for their low-income status”, whereas *Nickel and Dimed* suggests that “corporate greed and other social factors, rather than the behavior of the working poor, should be blamed for their economic condition.” (Kendall, 2005: 171) In his tendency to blame the single women for their situation, Shipler has a slightly misogynistic view. On the other hand, Ehrenreich, a democrat socialist and a feminist, would never lay the blame on single women, but rather on the social factors. This is a strong proof of the importance held by the influence of the authors’ ideology upon their “objective” documentary works.



The Readers’ Involvement in the Lives of the Poor

David Lodge addresses readers on a higher social level, as he writes intellectual novels. As he is a Literature Professor, he has a very wide literary background and largely employs intertextual references. In his own words,

“No book [...] has any meaning on its own, in a vacuum. The meaning of a book is in large part a product of its differences from and similarities to other books. If a novel did not bear some resemblance to other novels, we should not know how to read it, and if it wasn’t different from all other novels we shouldn’t want to read it.” (Lodge 1981: 3-4)

Thus, his target reader is a person with encompassing previous reading experience and most likely an intellectual. This type of reader would identify himself or herself with Robyn when the character interacts with the workers and would admit that he or she would have the same reaction (awe, shock, even repulsion) regarding the working conditions in the factory. Thus, the readers of Lodge’s novel are negatively impressed by the lives of the workers and the author succeeds in raising awareness regarding the working conditions.

There are two types of readers of Ehrenreich’s bestseller: the first type is the reader belonging to the middle class or a higher social class, who has never experienced this kind of quest for survival. These readers get involved in the lives of the characters when the narrator presents sad things that disturb them and might even trigger compassion. This type of public reads *Nickel and Dimed* from a detached perspective, remarking Ehrenreich’s ability to make use of humor

and to present the facts in an enjoyable manner. These readers would appreciate the jokes about Barbara’s work as a cleaning lady: the details about the toilets, the shaved hairs; they would see her struggle to find a cheap place to live as an adventure and they would be amused by her description of her various homes. But they would feel disturbed by Holly’s condition, the maid who tries to hide her pregnancy from Ted, and who gets into a fight with her husband because he forces her to go to work, even during her pregnancy.

The second type of public for her book is represented by the readers who have been there as well; who shared her experience and know what she is talking about. These people are prone to be impressed by her book and by her initiative to address such a subject and would be very much involved with the facts she presents and the stories of her characters. On Ehrenreich’s webpage there is a section which presents letters received by her from the readers of *Nickel and Dimed*. Most of the people who wrote these letters shared her experience at some point in their lives, even though they acquired a university degree (B.A. in most of the cases), and this is why they felt connected to the facts she presents, being touched by her book and emotionally involved with the stories.

In October 2001, Patricia Misiuk writes: “you were so right about the aspects of minimum wage jobs. God forbid you catch your breath for a second, for punishment (cleaning out floor drains in my current job) is sure to follow.” (Ehrenreich, Misiuk’s letter: 2001) Patricia has a B.A., but, “for whatever reason”, she has “gravitated to those jobs”. She knows very well what Ehrenreich is talking about in her book. In the end of her letter, Patricia makes an interesting remark: “I hope that many others read your book but, unfortunately as you may have discovered, the ones who could see themselves are not generally readers.” (Ehrenreich, Misiuk’s letter: 2001) This is another argument in favor of the idea that most of Ehrenreich’s readers are in a better social condition than the working poor, considering that people like those presented in her book lack time, means, and sometimes even interest for reading books, even though these books are about people in the same situations as they are.

Another low-paid reader of Ehrenreich’s book tells her in a letter dated June 2005 that she read the book at work; she is a bookseller. She identifies herself with the low-wage workers described in the book, as she openly states: “I wanted to let you know that your book touched me. And I want to thank you for taking the time to see how we survive.” (Ehrenreich, A.J.’s letter: 2005) She makes another point which is interesting in terms of reader response to the book: “I just hope that when the teachers assign your book to these upper middle class kids as required reading,

that the kids get what life is like for the rest of us.” (Ehrenreich, A.J.’s letter: 2005) It can be argued whether a book which is assigned for students to read in school really has the effect the teachers seek. Many young students, mostly those between thirteen and seventeen years old, usually have the opposite reaction when doing the required reading. However, the point made by A. J. is valid: even though the students do not comprehend entirely the phenomenon of low-wage workers, or do not wish to comprehend it at that age, at least they get aware that there are people living in these condition, and maybe later the adults that these students will become might get interested in the situation and get somehow involved.

Moreover, the working poor lack the self-determinacy to look for a better job, maybe move to a different city, if needed. Sometimes they are even scared to stand up for their own rights in front of their employer. Barbara is surprised to notice that in her discussion with the other women who work as cleaning ladies: “Don’t they realize that the sheer abundance of [want ads] means that they’ve got Ted by the short hairs and could ask for almost anything – like, say \$7.50 an hour, reckoned from the moment they show up in the morning to [...] the end of the day?” (Ehrenreich, 2002: 64-65) The upper-middle class readers acknowledge their superiority when reading this and they experience a feeling of pity for the poor who cannot even control their lives.



Conclusions

After a comparative analysis of the way in which the lives of the working poor are presented in a British novel and an American documentary book, this paper has proved thus far that poor people face the same struggle and discrimination all over the world. Poverty must not be ignored. The first step that should be taken, which is also the easiest one, is to show the low-wage workers some respect. Stereotypes generate prejudices, emphasize differences, and distort our perception but, what is more important, they can always be defeated.

The stories of the poor should be known by people belonging to all social classes, the privileged should feel guilt, shame, pity, and finally compassion for the lower classes. And for these feelings to occur and evolve the issue of poverty should be more present in the media, the topic should be discussed in family circles and analyzed in schools. Every social change starts with the children: they should be educated in a non-discriminatory manner in order to understand the high degree of respect which a fellow person

imposes through the simple quality of being human.

Novels and documentary works that deal with the matter of poverty aim to create awareness among the higher classes that poverty exists. There will always be lower classes and low-paid working people in order for the society to function; all that the privileged are able to do for them is to overcome the stereotypes and not to look down on poor people but rather to treat them in a manner as close to equality as possible. In order for this to happen, poverty should be taken out of the closet and brought forward so that the upper classes become aware of its existence, become acquainted with the stories of the poor and eventually they would not consider poor people as unnatural and dysfunctional, but rather as fellow persons who share the same fears, worries, stories, hopes and aspirations as every other human being.



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