

**LANGUAGE AND SYMBOLS
IN
CONTEMPORARY FICTION**

ALEXANDRA MĂRGINEAN

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CONTEMPORARY FICTION**



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Referenți științifici: Conf. univ. Dr. Elena Mușeanu
Conf. univ. Dr. Mariana Coancă

Redactor: Gheorghe Iovan
Tehnoredactor: Ameluța Vișan
Coperta: Monica Balaban, Alexandra Mărginean
Imagine copertă: Alexandra Mărginean

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B-dul. N. Bălcescu nr. 27-33, Sector 1, București

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www.editurauniversitara.ro

e-mail: redactia@editurauniversitara.ro

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Foreword

It would perhaps be unnecessary to argue that literature mirrors mentalities, as it is intuitive and somewhat universally acknowledged. It is the thought that lies at the foundation of this book. I have studied various pieces of literature in order to uncover commonplaces in the mindsets that they put forth. One of the ideas that I have pursued in writing the research was looking into the way in which people from very different backgrounds envisaged reality. My interest was to determine what haunted them, in terms of topics and ideas. It was important to see if they had the same or dissimilar obsessions, coming from various cultures and upbringings. Which is why I chose authors from several continents, with different origins. Also, I have concentrated on works from the last few years, ranging from 2016 to 2018, to justify the timeline that I called “contemporary” in the title. Moreover, I picked novels with more complex imagery and approaching a diversity of themes, avoiding too simple or focused ones – which is visible in the considerable number of pages that they all have as well (even though this was not, of course, a criterion in itself, it was just that it indeed pointed to and reflected complexity of topics as well).

Guillermo del Toro is Mexican and has completed his academic studies in Guadalajara. He has also been raised a Catholic, but from his statements in interviews he demonstrates that he is not one in the traditional sense, as he is not really a Christian or a believer either (Guillermo del Toro, n.d., *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guillermo_del_Toro). This does not take away his spirituality, though, as he believes in epiphany at the dawn of one’s life, the moment one leaves this world (*ibidem*). With such a profile, his ideas are borderline and

challenging, and what seems clear is that he has a preoccupation with the spiritual in an original acceptance of the term, and with fringe concepts, ideas, images and thinking in general. He also views the horror as political, in both the sense that it represents traumatizing oppression potentially engendering monstrosity, and in being the manifestation of protest against authority (going beyond it) and of anarchy (*ibidem*). The co-author of *The Shape of Water*, Daniel Kraus, is American, and known for various children and young adult's books, which share the elements of fantasy and the supernatural, as well as the use of monstrous beings as characters (Daniel Kraus, n.d., *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Kraus_\(author\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Kraus_(author))). His collaboration with del Toro began before *The Shape of Water*, in *Trollhunters*, later made into an animated series (*ibidem*).

Zadie Smith is born and educated in London, moreover at Cambridge, also having become a teacher of fiction at Columbia University of New York in her adult years, after previously authoring an anthology as a result of her writer-in-residence time at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (Zadie Smith, n.d., *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zadie_Smith). In America, she has also collaborated to “polish” language in film dialogues, as a guest-editor with BBC Radio 4, and as a book reviewer for renowned New York magazines (*ibidem*). All of these occupations rely on a mastery of English that makes her a representative person for Englishness in this respect. However, there is yet another facet of her personality, which reminds us of her being half-Jamaican, as her mother was born and raised in Jamaica, and only immigrated to England as a teenager. This origin perhaps manifested itself in her desire to change her first name, Sadie, to Zadie, when she was fourteen (*ibidem*). The latter sounds more Caribbean, reflecting the predilection for voiced consonants, the existence of names beginning with “Z” (6 in the list I have consulted), and central and back vowels, often in diphthongs, encountered in women's first names in this region (Jamaican Baby Girl Names, 2017, <http://www.babynames.org.uk/jamaican-girl-baby-names.htm>), unlike Sadie, which

reflects the preference for more subdued sonority and consonants in girls' names, for the letter "s" either at the beginning or in the middle of the name, and for the diphthong "/ei/" and front-close vowel "/i/", as it is visible in a study on most popular names in the seventies (when the author was born), where there is no name beginning with a "Z" in the list, and nearly no names to contain a "z" (other than Elizabeth, which ranks 12, probably due to the popularity of actress Elizabeth Taylor, and Suzanne, which ranks only 107) (Popular names of the period 1970s, 2019, *Social Security*,

<https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/decades/names1970s.html>). Also, Zadie Smith liked tap dancing and considered acting in musicals, as well as earned money as a jazz singer in her academic years – both preoccupations rooted in African culture (Zadie Smith, n.d., *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zadie_Smith). Smith has often made public photographs and appearances wearing a scarf around her head, like a turban. If we add to that the fact that two of her brothers are rappers (*ibidem*), we understand that her mother's background has been preserved as a vein in the children's education. If Zadie Smith did not reflect more her roots with her occupation, she certainly reflected them in the above-mentioned manifestations and in the topics that she chose in her fiction.

Haruki Murakami is of Japanese descent. Some elements that may have influenced both him as a person and his work are: his parents' teaching of Japanese literature, which gave him a taste for being an intellectual; his (perhaps resulting) interest in reading literature of all origins (American, European and Russian alike); the war trauma that affected his father (subsequent to his involvement in the Sino-Japanese conflict) and which indirectly also impacted him and could have been reflected in the tendency towards depression in his characters (Haruki Murakami, n.d., *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haruki_Murakami). Murakami has been considered less Japanese in his writing by some voices, because of the influence of foreign works in his (*ibidem*). Then again, we could also argue that the Japanese

elements that exist in his literature are most relevant precisely due to having been selected among many by an aware, informed writer, whose choice, in the context of knowledgeability of other trends and literary realities, makes them all the more salient and valuable.

Looking, finally, on the European continent, I have chosen for this study Olivia Sudjic, who is British English, and much younger than the other writers, which made her a good candidate for observing youth culture preoccupations and potential problems from the inside, as it were. Which she investigates, in her debut novel, *Sympathy*, published at the age of 29, where she compares the space of fiction with that of social media – a clear, central concern in her work – because, as the author points out herself, the protagonist in a story is just as unknown and unpredictable as one in the virtual environment, and people tend to project their own perspective on both, in the absence of a tangible reality (Olivia Sudjic, n.d., *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olivia_Sudjic).

The analyses in this book begin with the masterpiece *The Shape of Water*. In 2017, Guillermo del Toro was the first Mexican film maker to have ever won the Golden Lion award at the Venice movie festival, with this production. The novel came one year later, and was written in co-authorship with American author Daniel Kraus. Chapter 1 of my book, Guillermo del Toro and Daniel Kraus' *The Shape of Water: Hybridity and Representation*, dedicated to Guillermo del Toro and Daniel Kraus' *The Shape of Water* (the novel), intends to discuss the concepts of hybridity and representation in a postmodernist stance, demonstrating the way in which *The Shape of Water* is a masterpiece making the most of them, by tracking all the aspects in which these two principles reverberate in the story. First, we are looking at the hybrid nature of the characters in all its facets, in both concrete, obvious and material ways, and in the less visible, subtle areas pertaining to their personality and symbolical valences. Section 3 is dedicated to the political and social issues addressed in the book, such as the Cold War, the

Civil Rights Movement, the American Dream and minorities' rights. Then, in Section 4, we are interested in the way the text deals with the postmodern problem of representation and truth, looking at the manner in which it approaches the conundrum of knowing and rendering reality. Related issues, such as relaying the past and the present in such a way as to make sense, the reliability of traces of the past in forming a rational continuum, the question of whether there is unity and order of all elements in the universe, the dissolution of boundaries, the pervasiveness of ambivalence and taking political stands come to the fore. The analysis also approaches, in Section 5, some allegorical elements, in an attempt to explain their significance: the amphibian, the hunter and the lobsters as symbolical beings, then metaphorical objects, like the rotting hand, water, the eggs, shoes, or the state-of-the-art Westinghouse iron, along with less tangible symbols, such as the quest for the Being, muteness, the colors red and green, mythological characters and the phenomenon of synesthesia or redactions. Finally, we look into linguistic aspects, focusing on words and phrases taken from foreign languages which are present in the story, on the analysis of the meaning of specialized terms (especially from medicine and biology) and on some style and register considerations. The conclusions point to the symphonic quality of the novel, in the way in which it manages to interconnect a complexity of features in order to delicately suggest the ideas and preoccupations stipulated in the title of Chapter 1.

Hybridity is a starting point for the study and is mentioned first in our title for obvious reasons, since we are dealing with an amphibian creature that displays uncanny similarities with a human being. Nevertheless, it is only the surface of, and pretext for the analysis of more in-depth hybridity, i.e. one that unfolds at the level of thinking, and which actually refers to an ability to question reality as people are accustomed to perceive it, to breach limits and to look at everything from a new angle. It also means seeing beyond the surface or the superficial. This meaning is present in the very title of the novel, expressed by the apparent

absurdity of talking about the shape of a liquid. But, allegedly according to Plato, water has a shape when one considers the physical representation of its chemical composition in its purest form – the icosahedron, a geometrical shape that pushes the boundaries of imagination and representation in the same way in which we are asked to push our limits in understanding reality. Hence, this shape of water becomes the mathematical figure of an ideal, as well as a kind of warning that our perception is limited and can be modified all the time so as to encompass more.

Zadie Smith's *Swing Time* makes the object of Chapter 2, Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*, or the "Song and Dance" of Race and Identity, and it puts forth as obvious concerns race and spaces. When we refer to the latter, we mean both geographically, as in various continents, countries and regions of the world, and places for dwelling, so inhabitable, reduced-scale, immediate living spaces, as mirrors of identity. This is a very old theme in mentalities and literature, which has not been abandoned to this day. On the contrary, it seems to last, and in very obvious terms. A room is made to reflect the identity of the inhabitant in very complex detail, as it is pointed out in the first section of the study. A neighborhood may mirror a subculture, a group identity – as it happens with the population of the 1980s' estates. Section 3 looks at racial general characteristics, such as preference for certain games, like Double Dutch rope jumping, sharpness (or the attraction for glittery things), the problematic relationship with school and schooling, the predilection for story-telling (in various understandings of the concept), approaching heavier, serious issues as well, such as the tendency towards sexual objectification of girls from an early age, prejudice, segregation and racial stereotypes. The perspectives on these matters are both those of a person of color, as well as a white person's, the narrator separating, alternating and sometimes intermingling them, so as to provide a complete picture. Section 4, which discusses individual identities, is dominated by gender issues, alongside racial otherness, introducing personalities such as the

emancipated Black woman, the oppressed Black woman and the desirable (but potentially superficial) Black beauty, who is successful due to her looks and has learnt how to turn her race and appearance to her advantage, also accepting to use them as leverage; along these, we have the narcissistic white woman, or the thorny issue of friendship among women. This section also draws towards the common, more universal women's issues related to aging, being (un)married or childless. Section 5, dealing with African spaces, introduces aspects of life in The Gambia, related to poverty, proxemics, ways of living, status, ingeniousness and discreteness as distinctive features of the locals, indigenous folklore, political issues of militarism, dictatorship and exodus, tension between the old and the new (traditional and more modern views of existence). Quite a significant portion of this section is dedicated to language, and a close look at foreign terms introduced in the novel, their meaning, semantic fields and manner of introduction. One result is their classification into groups designating status and occupations, items of clothing, and words linked with music and dancing. Section 6 explains the most relevant symbols and allegories in the novel: Fred Astaire's dance in the movie *Swing Time*, as well as elements from his biography, the Black female singer accompanied by the white male piano player, dancing as life, and the sankofa bird.

Murakami's impressively lengthy novel *Killing Commendatore* is the focus of attention in Chapter 3, entitled Haruki Murakami's *Killing Commendatore: Palimpsest, Hypertext and Rewriting the Artist*. It starts, after the Introduction, with a section dedicated to environment and space metaphors and correspondences, highlighting the fact that nature reveals states and moods, as well as ideas, functioning as an extremely loyal mirror of the human being and of situations. It is not only dwellings that are used to show facets of identity, but also space-related notions, images and activities, such as driving a car or a swimmer adrift. The importance granted to colors, in the case of this novel to non-color and, even more precisely,

whiteness, is put under a lens in Section 3, whereas the next looks into the intricacies of the condition of the artist, and tries to outline some artistic principles. Time is indeed dealt with, but in a spatialized manner in Section 5, and Section 6 proposes an outlook of the four paintings in the novel as a kind of windows into insight about events, characters and significations. Section 7 is dedicated to the shrine, deemed as a physical axis mundi, the analysis of which occasions one of related metaphorical actions such as digging or cave visitation. It also starts the series of symbols that we are looking at, which continues, in the next part, with either physical items such as the face, body and the small Commendatore, or immaterial ones, like concepts (intimacy), Richard Strauss' opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, and myths and legends (Bluebeard, the Mandarin and Icarus). Section 8 also pushes the attention drawn to metaphor to the extreme, suggesting its extensive use by the notion of the Path of Metaphor, which is, simultaneously, an imaginary realm, a method for writing, a decoding device suggested to the reader, and a metaphor itself, for reasoning, the unconscious, self-therapy, life and the quest for knowledge and spiritual (self-)development. Last but not least, we have, in Section 9, a complex perspective on language, because it covers various fields of investigation, from examples of metalanguage, to semantic fields used in the novel, such as meteorology and natural elements and phenomena, construction site vocabulary, painting and drawing art terms, or spirituality terminology, to an analysis of metaphors and similes at the level of the novels' text – which are called small-scale so as to differentiate them from the larger metaphors that acquire allegorical dimensions and function as mirrors for the whole book. Section 10 brings us to the final aspect that we are interested in, which is the narrative devices and artifices that the author resorts to. These include structural elements, such as a certain employment of chapter titles (as quotes from key sentences in the story), or the use of the point-counterpoint technique, genre elements from magic realism, hybridity and palimpsest (such as images in the text, like

that of Menshiki's business card, or the excerpt from Samuel Willenberg's memoir *Revolt in Treblinka*), and those pertaining to the manner of construction of the storyline and style.

Chapter 4, Olivia Sudjic's *Sympathy: The Origin Story* and the Theory of Everything, is apparently, just like Sudjic's book, about obsession and addiction to the virtual environment and social media. Ties, often and most particularly unhealthy ones, are the main focus. These are, indeed, the most visible and immediately striking concerns. What it is also and, dare we say, really about, though, is the struggle to find meanings and reunite them in one comprehensive story into which everything falls into place, for which the clearest metaphor in the story is the theory of everything. The fight with randomness, the effort to disprove it, is the grand quest of the book, pursued to the point of exhaustion and apophenia or the pathological. This is the reason why, after the introductory bit, we look at interrelatedness as the key concept in the analysis, and as a skeleton key for all the themes approached in the novel, most of which are then subjected to a closer look in sections: identity narrative and quest and posts on social media, obsession and addiction and their psychology, the special interest in advanced physics and a theory that would encompass all the others (reuniting paradoxes), the curiosity of understanding cultures – which is really just one in finding common ground alongside and more than the noticing of difference. The last section of the analysis before the Conclusions looks into language, again on a few directing lines. The simplest is the scrutiny of foreign terminology, namely Japanese words, where I have tried not only to explain their semantics, or classify them, but also, on the one hand, to determine their significance for the construction of the Japanese culture and identity in the story, and, on the other, look at their metaphorical implications for the wider overall subtext of the story. Indeed, what some of the Japanese words have in common with terms from other fields, such as from psychology or computer science, is the way in which their meaning represents a complex metaphor for the main themes of the novel. We are

referring here to concepts such as *kizuna*, *kegare*, apophenia, skeuomorphism or portmanteau.

The Shape of Water was novelized in 2018, after the success of the movie from the previous year. *Swing Time* was released in 2016. *Killing Commendatore* was published in Japan in 2017, and one year later in English translation in America and the United Kingdom. Finally, *Sympathy* appeared in 2017. Two observations need to be made here. First, three of the four works of art were released simultaneously, in 2017 – a movie, a novel in its Japanese original version and another novel in English, by a debutante. Apparently, they are supposed to be very different, emerging in very different contexts and originating in wide-apart corners of the world. Yet, as we shall see, there are quite a number of concerns – in terms of topics and themes – that they share. Second, I indeed did not observe chronology in the order in which I have approached their study in this book. One may argue that this would have been the logical order. Had I done so, Chapter 1 would have been dedicated to *Swing Time*. I have decided, nevertheless, to introduce them in the order in which I have read them, and to begin with *The Shape of Water*. The reason why I did this was to somehow transmit, along with the information and research, the journey or progression of outlook and impressions that I have gone through, and in this way my experience of the fictional worlds at hand. I have therefore tried to render not only facts and interpretations dryly, but also a flow of feelings and ideas and a lens of one reader in the manner of being impacted by the involvement with these cultural products – and indeed products of mentalities. There is yet another reason why *The Shape of Water* came first, besides the fact that it was the first novel I read. It was the novel that made me decide to write this book. Originally, I intended it to be a singular study, a paper as it were, but then I realized it was turning into a chapter due to the complexity of the aspects that could be expressed and were worth analyzing and the complex symbolism and poetry of the book, which I believed I had to mention and which the audience should not miss out on. It was the novel that inspired

me the urge to put the ideas that it triggered through its metaphors out there, due to their beauty and ingenuity. Also, I feel, to this day, that it somehow encompasses, in a heightened form of lyricism and therefore transfiguration, complex themes that can be encountered in the other works, being a sort of anthology or index to the main preoccupations (in terms of ideas) and issues haunting the contemporary mind. I bought the novel *The Shape of Water* coming from a conference where I had just presented a much more specialized paper on the role of the visual elements in teaching and learning a foreign language. It was a spring read, and a summer analysis; and the starting point of, and trigger for this book.

The chapter titles of my book introduce, firstly, the authors and the title of the novel under analysis in the respective chapter. Then, the so-called subtitle puts forward the main issue emergent in the respective fictional world, the most relevant or encompassing one in my perspective. It is usually the chief concern, or a theme that subsumes all the others, functioning as an umbrella one.

The method of analysis is, as usual in what I write, a *mélange*. I have resorted to identity studies, cultural studies, visual studies, iconology, space and city studies, interculturalism, as well as gender or minority studies. Also, psychology or sociology cannot be missing from an interest that is, primarily, in human identity and culture. This blended approach is the one I consider the most suitable, because I have always been of the opinion that the logic of the tools is, and/or should be, dictated by the elements that are present in the object of the study. It is those that point to certain kits, not the other way around. I have never established for my extensive researches one kit or another as a definite instrument set in stone when I have looked at a cultural product, as I feel that I would be implicitly bent towards partiality of interpretation, to a limited viewing angle. I believe it is important to allow the cultural object to speak, to have its own voice as it were, and only then see what avenues of analysis it opens and favors – I use here the verb “favors”, as the search for

the ingredients of a work of art is also a question of ration, not only presence, i.e. we identify what is preponderant, where the scales tip more, towards what recurrent aspects. For the sake of the faithfulness and open mindedness owed to the object of my glance, I find it difficult to limit myself to only one theoretical approach, especially in a world in which boundaries have been, are, and will be questioned to an incredibly high degree. And I refer here chiefly to cultural boundaries, but not only to these.