

## Sexuality as 'universal illness' in David Lodge's novels

O. V. Uzlova

Kyiv National Linguistic University  
Corresponding author. E-mail: uzlovafulvia@gmail.com

Paper received 25.03.17; Accepted for publication 01.04.17.

**Abstract.** The paper tackles the problem of correlation between sexuality and illness in the writings by contemporary British author David Lodge. In his novels body is represented in the narrative, discursive and aesthetic strategies, as well as underlying semantic structures of the text. Drawing upon the novels *Therapy*, *Thinks*, *Author, Author*, *Deaf Sentence* and *A Man of Parts*, it is argued that sexuality is regarded as a 'universal illness'. The analysis of the texts under consideration shows that sex in the novels of former Catholic David Lodge is often considered to be a sin or a moral crime that should be followed by punishment.

**Keywords:** D. Lodge, body, illness, disease, sexuality

**Introduction.** Scientific theories as well as fiction of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century give special attention to the problem of representation of sexuality, as well as ill and deviant bodies. In modernist texts body was a repository for I-consciousness and controversial desires, but in postmodernist fiction it is mostly regarded as deviant, performative or virtual. Moreover, sexual behaviour is often regarded as a reflection of moral health or illness. The common feature of David Lodge's novels taken into consideration is their peculiar interest in such corporal and sociocultural experiences as sex, ageing and illness.

**Overview of related works.** Although there had been earlier studies, the poetic features of D. Lodge's recent novels have not yet become the object of focused scholarly interest. European critics and literary scholars (B. Bergonzi, R. Todd, M. Goch, E. L. Bjork, A. Quinn, H. Mantel, L. Lerner, F. Holmes, J. Mellors) pay attention mostly to D. Lodge's novels written in the period of 1960-1984 regarding them as a complex symbiosis of fictional and theoretical discourses.

The object of investigation of the majority of Ukrainian and Russian scholars are certain poetic features of Lodge's campus trilogy (O. Bandrovska, O. Luxembourg, V. Novikov, N. Solovyova, O. Masliaeva, V. Horolskiy, O. Sydorova, O. Tolstyh), as well as certain aspects of his theoretical works representing the development of Western literary process in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (I. Ilyin, N. Vladimirova, I. Kabanova, V. Strukov, Y. Muratova). Therefore, the comprehensive analysis of D. Lodge's latest fiction and theory is one of important tasks facing present-day English studies. Despite a great number of works exploring D. Lodge's earlier texts, the functions of ill body in his novels have never been the focus of special academic research.

**Purpose of the study.** The paper sets out to explore the relations between illness and sexuality in contemporary British fiction.

**Materials and methods.** Traditional academic methods of literary studies have been combined with strategies of such interdisciplinary branches as sociology, body theory and disability studies.

**Results and discussions.** So much has now been written on sexual discourse in all its ambiguities and complexities that, rather than being the taboo subject it once was, the issue has tended to become overdetermined. That is why, although D. Lodge's five latest novels break down taboos concerning sexuality among Catholics and the elderly, it can be argued that any representation of body behaviour in his texts should be regarded, first and foremost, in its metaphoric meaning. In fiction human body and sexuality are not autonomous phenomena since they are used to introduce a broader range of problems. In D. Lodge's novels, especially *Therapy*, *Deaf Sentence* and *A Man of Parts*, elderly subjects are not depicted as having lost their sexual identities. Moreover, sexuality is transferred to the ontological sphere of the terminal stages

of life. Different diseases, including erectile dysfunction, not only point to physical degradation as a result of natural processes, but function to represent the idiosphere of the texts under consideration.

As a matter of fact, D. Lodge used the representation of erectile dysfunction in his earlier novels, too. In *Small World* Arthur Kingfisher's sexual and intellectual sterility symbolizes 'a very un'healthy condition' of 'the whole profession of academic literary studies' [6, p. 119]. It is also significant that the protagonists of two novels (*Therapy* and *Deaf Sentence*) face erectile dysfunction exactly when their careers and personal relationships are going downhill. As S. Žižek aptly notes, the "symptom arises where the world failed, where the circuit of the symbolic communication was broken" [10, p. 73].

Quite often one partner's affliction can cause the inversion of gender roles. That is exactly what happens to the main character of *Deaf Sentence* and his wife. Having taken early retirement because of progressive loss of hearing, former professor of linguistics Desmond Bates becomes a kind of a housewife. The improvement of his spouse's appearance and her business success that seem to run parallel to the protagonist's physical and social decline make him aware not only of the age gap, but also of the increasing estrangement between them. At the beginning of the novel his wife seems to take the lead in the relationship with a submissive man. "When he accompanied her to this or that social event he sometimes felt like a royal consort escorting a female monarch, walking a pace or two behind her with his hands joined behind his back, a vague unfocused smile on his face" [5, p. 33]. The dominant role played by female characters surrounding Desmond is exaggerated by the male forms of their names (wife Fred and PhD student Alex). It is symptomatic that the protagonist is the only one in the novel who reduces his wife's name 'Winnifred' to 'Fred'.

In D. Lodge's novels the process of reconstructing the characters' split identity is implemented in complex interaction with other people, including sexual relationships that sometimes have 'perverse' nature. Therefore, due to its particular importance in the power discourse, BDSM as a variety of erotic role playing involving bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadomasochism, and other related interpersonal dynamics has got special meaning in *Deaf Sentence*. In her e-mail PhD student Alex suggests that Desmond should punish her for making "irremovable marks in a library book" [5, p. 128]. She offers professor Bates to see her "bent over the table", "naked from the waist down", with her "head on a cushion" and to "spank" her "butt" using just "the flat of [his] hand" without direct sexual intercourse [5, p. 129].

Though Desmond refuses to come to the student's apartment, her suggestion evokes his sexual desire. The protagonist uses proposed role play to vary sexual relationship with his spouse. Their intercourse is structured around a powerful imaginative configuration since touch-

ing Fred Desmond imagines himself in the 'red-lit room' spanking Alex [5, p. 132]. In this case Winnifred's body loses its individual features and becomes a collective female body. It symbolizes generalized image of the Other over whom Desmond has to get temporary control. However, the process of learning is oriented not to the Other represented by a woman, but to himself. It appears to be the process of self-discovering. Use of the first-person narration in this textual segment shows the character's narcissistic identification with the male narrator. As G. Brame notes, if "you're an ordinary person having ordinary intercourse, there are a lot of questions you never have to address about who you are, who your partner is, what issues of control [exist]. When you leave the world of vanilla sex <...> you have to start asking [such] questions of yourself. Doing so opens up the opportunity, or presents the problem of consciousness, of growing in self-knowledge" [1, p. 89].

In BDSM practice D. Lodge's character needs to retrieve the role of a dominant partner for a while, but not to cause or receive pain. It is desire to feel emotional satisfaction stemming from the power he has over another person and from the responsibility for her. Reconfiguration of power relations is realized through erotic domination. However, in the scene described in *Deaf Sentence* there is no hierarchy typical of BDSM role play. As soon as the protagonist gets the dominant role inverting the binary opposition, the borderline between its dominant and the submissive member disappears. Desmond and his wife perform identical actions towards each other, so that they assume dominant and submissive roles in turn. Rebalancing in sexual sphere, as well as retrieving their blurred gender roles has a positive impact on other spheres of their marital life.

In the novel *Thinks* a BDSM scene represents a reverse distribution of power relations. While the protagonist of *Deaf Sentence* needs to feel responsibility for another person to get back his lost self-control and control over his own life, in *Thinks* Helen Reed, vice versa, has to choose the role of submissive partner and to prioritize the emotional over the rational in order to get back the appetite for life. As it often happens in D. Lodge's novels, sexual pleasure in *Thinks* depends on 'the pleasure of the text', to put it in Barthes' terms. Helen agrees to have sex with Ralph for the first time only when he shows interest in one of the sexual scenes described in her novel. There is "one interesting bit, about the reawakening of the heroine's interest in sex, which has been at a very low ebb during her illness" [8, p. 253]. Anna, the heroine of the second-level narration, finds "two black velvet facemasks and some lengths of silky cord" in a drawer of a five-star hotel [8, p. 253]. Later Anna and her husband use these things in their role play. Putting on a mask allows Anna to see herself from another person's point of view. In a mirror she sees "a depraved stranger" [8, p. 253].

In *Thinks* the reader only finds out that Ralph suggests that he and Helen try the same practice that has cured her heroine from depression, but there is no explicit BDSM scene. Instead of velvet masks worn by the heroes of Helen's novel, the characters of Lodge's novel use narrative masks. Both of them have journals that function as "mirror in which you look at yourself every day, candidly, unflinchingly – without the protective disguise of a mask, without even the flattery of makeup – and tell yourself the truth" [8, p. 258].

Like the protagonists of *Therapy* and *Deaf Sentence*, Helen often rotates first and third person narration in her journal. The character uses third person narration every time she wants to fence herself off and to stop analyzing her emotional and physical experience: "I haven't felt like

doing that since Messenger and I became lovers. I didn't want to record my behavior because I was afraid that scrutinizing it and analyzing it might awaken scruples of conscience and inhibit my pleasure. (In fact I still shrink from examining this experience with the straight unflinching gaze of the first person. Let me try it another way...) <...> For that was what she had become, a woman of pleasure, a scarlet woman, a woman of easy virtue, a woman no better than she should be – or so she would have been described in the pages of an old novel" [8, p. 258].

In Lodge's novels the interaction between sex and illness is ambivalent. On the one hand, sex can sometimes cure characters from depression and help them to retrieve their gender and social roles. On the other hand, the novels illustrate common point of view that seriously ill or injured bodies cannot be considered as vessels of sexuality. That is why ill people are often treated as asexual or even worse, deviant and disgusting. At a certain stage in a grave illness' progress the termination of sexual life becomes a kind of experience that precedes the end of life itself. The absence of physical contact caused not only by pain, but also by the sense of guilt felt by both partners often indicates the loss of moral contact, because death, even the death of the Other, is always an individual experience. All these aspects are represented in the experience of the protagonist of *Deaf Sentence* and his first wife dying of breast cancer. "In the early stages of her illness they made love to comfort each other, but as Maisie's condition worsened it became painful for her and difficult for him, and they stopped by tacit mutual consent. Maisie raised the subject once in a touching but embarrassing way, about six month before she died, saying she would understand if he needed what she called 'solace' from another woman, as long as she didn't know about it, and none of her friends did. <...> The idea of entering into an emotional relationship with another woman while Maisie was dying by inches was unthinkable, and he was not the kind of man to resort to prostitutes or massage parlours" [5, p. 67].

When one of the partners is diagnosed as fatally ill, this revelation usually causes loss of interest in sex for both of them. Therefore, having found out about the possibility of having liver cancer, the protagonist of *Thinks*, who used to be a conference Don Juan, gives up any sexual activity, as does his mistress: "I just don't feel like sex at the moment./ Neither do I, Messenger, neither do I" [8, p. 282]. The news about terminal illness makes both partners understand their temporality and stop regarding their bodies as sources of pleasure. Therefore, giving up sex represents the fear of death.

It is noteworthy that the protagonist of *Thinks* stops making love, but he can't stop thinking of sex. He even puts it in Descartes' terms: "I've lost interest in sex... In having it, that is, I doubt if you ever stop thinking about it ... I think about it ... I think about sex, therefore I am ... I tried to force myself to make love to Carrie <...>, but it didn't work. She was very understanding ... I haven't even tried anything with Helen since my medical saga began" [8, p. 293]. The categories of Eros and Thanatos are inseparable in Lodge's novels. Therefore, in *Deaf Sentence* a PhD student Alex who studies the stylistics of suicide notes not only makes Desmond think of committing a suicide, but also evokes his appetite for sex, work and life. Similarly, the protagonist of *Thinks* enjoys listening to the fragment of his audio journal where he describes sexual contact with one of his mistresses. Ralph reminisces about her body and gets excited despite his awareness of the fact that the woman had died of breast cancer.

In *Therapy* the stereotype concerning the loss of sexual identity is represented by the protagonist's first love, Maureen. She is a cancer survivor who had her breast removed in the process of treatment. The deformation of her body causes the heroine's alienation in her own family. It is significant that the disease transforms Maureen's body, not her identity, but it changes the attitude of men around her. It was easier for her husband to support Maureen when her illness was something abstract, but he couldn't bring himself to be reconciled to its physical manifestation: "He was wonderfully supportive when the tumour was diagnosed, and while I was in hospital, but when I came home I made the mistake of showing him the scar. I'll never forget the expression on his face. He couldn't get the image out of his head, I'm afraid. I tried keeping my prosthetic bra on in bed, but it made no difference" [7, p. 316]. Bede uses his own illness to shield himself from his wife: "About six months afterwards he suggested we changed our double bed for two singles. He pretended it was because he needed a special mattress for his back, but I knew he meant that our sexual life was over" [7, p. 316].

Maureen's mastectomy also changes the protagonist of *Therapy*: "I had known that breast, known it and loved it – and written about it. My memoir had turned into an elegy" [7, p. 308]. As a youngster Laurence didn't think of Maureen as a personality. All he could see was her breast. It was the sexual desire unconsummated in his youth that gave rise to disjunction between his soul and body during the middle-age crisis. Therefore, having sex with aged Maureen who has lost her breast, accepting her disfigured body helps Laurence to accept himself. Their sexual interaction not only lets them relive the past where their ideal selves are encapsulated, but also makes it possible to accept each other and themselves as they are in the present.

In D. Lodge's novels characters' current state of illness is deeply rooted in their past. Sometimes the texts ironically illustrate stereotypical view of illness as a negative consequence following our actions: "BSE and AIDS between them have made two of the greatest pleasures in life, prime beef and wild pussy, possible causes of a horrible death ... sad" [8, p. 3].

Stereotypical beliefs about sex intercourse as deviant behaviour are represented in D. Lodge's early novels where the leitmotifs of his fiction were first formulated. One of the key features of his so called Catholic novels is the inclusion of the body into the semiotic field of religion. The idea of individual sexual life being regulated and their desires being modified by Catholic Church is presented in the novels *How Far Can You Go?*, *The Picturegoers* and *The British Museum is Falling Down*. In these texts one of D. Lodge's constants is formulated, that is, the idea of unity between body and soul that has been modified in his later fiction.

According to Foucault, the church's attempts at controlling lives of individuals including their reproduction are a form of 'biopower' essential for Western society. Regulating a person's sexual life in order to construct him or her as a moral subject illustrates the process of social appropriation of the body. Moreover, it influences the identity of individuals and molds further experiences of their transactions with each other. In D. Lodge's novels Catholic Church is depicted as an institution of power that demonstrates the ability to control human bodies using different disciplinary techniques. An individual's voluntary denial or limitation of his own rights and desires in order to understand the truth of his own existence and to claim himself as a subject acting in accordance with mor-

al and ethical norms transforms sexuality into an element of the power discourse.

In D. Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* the regulation of body behaviour is represented as total control over human sexuality and reproduction. The concept of sex as taboo imposed by the church doctrine pathologizes sexual experiences. Sexual behaviour is represented as abnormal due to its association with illness. In this novel the metaphor of sex as 'universal illness' makes its first appearance: "It was also the trusses, elastic stockings and male corsets, displayed on pink plastic limbs that were oddly like the gruesome votive objects, signifying cures, that hung in the side-chapels of Spanish churches. Still more it was the abundance of little boxes, jars and packets, these guaranteeing a spectacular development of the bust, those offering new hope to the older man, others more enigmatically labelled, containing, as he knew, the instruments of carefree pleasure, but bearing trade names suggestive of medicaments. The whole display was decidedly detumescent in effect, projecting a vision of *sexuality as universal illness*, its sufferers crippled hypochondriacs, trussed and bandaged, anointed with hormone cream, hipped on rejuvenation pills, who owed their precarious survival entirely to artificial aids and appliances" [2, p. 133]. In *The British Museum is Falling Down* sex is represented as a crime which should be punished, but at the same time sexual pleasure can release an individual from pressure and fear. Both ideas are illustrated by the titles of the books seen by the protagonist in one of the sex-shops in Soho: "He had need of theurgical gods – he longed to be possessed by the spirit of Dionysian abandon; but this shrine did not throw him into a transport of profane joy. On the contrary, he eyed the contents of the window with feelings of disquiet and repugnance. *Sexual Happiness Without Fear* was the title of one of the books for sale. But it was not only the two flanking volumes, *The History of Flagellation* and *Varieties of Venereal Disease*, which gave the cheerfulness of the first title a forced and hollow note" [2, p. 133].

Goods seen by Adam in the sex-shop are not eroticized. Moreover, they are represented not as the accessories of pleasure, but as medical appliances. The tendency to transpose sexual attributes to medical discursive field can be also traced in D. Lodge's later novels. Thus, in *Therapy* the ill body is represented as comic and grotesque: "I got the giggles as soon as I saw Laurence putting on his knee-support when we were preparing for our *siesta*. It's made of some spongy stretch fabric, like they use to make wet-suits, and it's bright red, with a hole in it for his kneecap to poke through. It looked particularly funny when he had nothing else on. He seemed rather surprised by my reaction. Apparently he always wears it when he and Sally have sex. When he put on an elasticated elbow bandage as well I nearly had hysterics" [7, p. 159–160]. On the one hand, naturalized and carnivalesque body can no more be regarded as an instrument of sexual pleasure. On the other, this body has no visible traces of illness or injuries. Moreover, the protagonist's IDK syndrome is a psychosomatic disease having no understandable physical reasons. That is why medical appliances used by Laurence are supposed not to maintain the wholeness of his body, but to ensure the continuity of his identity, with the Internal Derangement of the Knee used as a marker of the Internal Derangement of the Soul.

The concept of punishment for 'abnormal' sexual behaviours is, first of all, realized through the characters tending to be lady killers – Morris Zapp in the university trilogy (*Changing Places*, *Small World*, *Nice Work*), Ralph Messenger (*Thinks*) and Herbert Wells (*A Man of Parts*). They try to cope with everyday routine through

escaping from the banality of monogamous relations: “<...> addicted to sex, men are biologically programmed to want as much sex as they can get ... only culture constrains our urge to copulate promiscuously” [8, p. 79]. Quite often desire of novelty in sex and in life in general urges these men to look for women with ‘defective’ souls (Helen’s depression in *Thinks*) or ‘deviant’ bodies (breast cancer of Ralph’s mistress in *Thinks*, Maureen’s injured body as a result of mastectomy and pilgrimage in *Therapy*, Frau Gatternigg’s absent limb in *A Man of Parts*). Illness and sex, as well as illness and literature, Eros and Thanatos are inseparable in D. Lodge’s fiction. Therefore, in *A Man of Parts* Herbert Wells’ first sexual desire was provoked by caricatures of naked women seen in *Punch*. These caricatures were made by an artist who later became blind. Moreover, the protagonist experienced his first sexual drive when he was bedridden because of the broken leg. In the narrative frame of the novel, old Herbert Wells dying of a serious disease recollects his numerous love affairs and discusses them with his inner interrogator.

It is important that in D. Lodge’s texts heroes-seducers are usually punished by diseases, the metaphoric meaning of which is stereotypically associated with sinfulness and amorality. Therefore, in *A Man of Parts* Hubert Bland loses his sight because of syphilis resulting from his numerous adulteries. As S. Sontag notes, the stereotypes concerning illness are based on the idea that “the disease suits the patient’s character, as the punishment suits the sinner” [9, p. 43]. In *A Man of Parts* Herbert Wells falls a victim to liver cancer.

While tuberculosis is, metaphorically, “a disease of the soul”, cancer, “as a disease that can strike anywhere, is a disease of the body” [9., p. 18]. “Far from revealing anything spiritual, it reveals that the body is, all too woefully,

just the body” [9, p. 18]. It seems to be appropriate stereotypical punishment for sexual activity which is definitely associated with the body, not the soul. Moreover, the protagonist’s cancer strikes his liver, a vital organ which has the widest range of functions and is commonly associated with consumerism.

It is significant that in *Thinks* Ralph Messenger is also diagnosed with a lump in his liver which can be cancerous, but later it turns out that he has got Echinococcosis. He got infected while having sex with Helen in the sheep pasture; therefore, his illness is literally a punishment for his adultery.

In *Author, Author* the punishment for ‘non-normative’ sexual behaviour is represented in Oscar Wilde’s story – he has been sentenced to two years of imprisonment for his homosexuality. However, in this case the punishment is imposed by social institutions of power, but is not the physiological result of the imputed guilt as it was in *A Man of Parts* and *Thinks*. Moreover, sexuality of Henry James, the protagonist of *Author, Author*, is also regarded as pathological. D. Lodge makes his character asexual. It is not the punishment, but the price he has to pay for being a good writer. Henry James is interested in neither women, nor men. It is only literature that matters for him.

**Conclusions.** The body in D. Lodge’s fiction represents and transforms already existing metaphors and stereotypes concerning illness and sexuality. In his texts sexual relations, as well as illness, are considered within the framework of sociocultural matrix. Firstly, illness is represented as physical manifestation of body transgression. Secondly, illness and sexuality often become metaphors for social and political situation or a definite historical period. Thirdly, they can be regarded as cultural phenomena which have special symbolic meanings.

#### REFERENCES

1. Brame G. Different Loving: The World of Sexual Dominance & Submission / G. Brame, W. D. Brame, J. Jacobs. – NY: Random House, 1996. – 560 p.
2. Lodge D. The British Museum is Falling Down / D. Lodge. – London: Random House, 2012. – 192 p.
3. Lodge D. A Man of Parts / D. Lodge. – NY: Penguin, 2011. – 436 p.
4. Lodge D. Author, Author / D. Lodge. – London: Secker and Warburg, 2004. – 389 p.
5. Lodge D. Deaf Sentence / D. Lodge. – NY: Penguin, 2009. – 304 p.
6. Lodge D. Small World. An Academic Romance / D. Lodge. – London: Secker & Warburg, 1984. – 339 p.
7. Lodge D. Therapy / D. Lodge. – NY: Penguin, 1996. – 336 p.
8. Lodge D. Thinks / D. Lodge. – NY: Penguin, 2002. – 342 p.
9. Sontag S. Illness as Metaphor / S. Sontag. – NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978. – 88 p.
10. Žižek S. The Sublime Object of Ideology / S. Žižek. – NY: Verso, 1989. – 240 p.

#### Сексуальность как “универсальная болезнь” в романах Дэвида Лоджа

О. В. Узлова

**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается проблема соотношения сексуальности и болезни в произведениях современного британского автора Дэвида Лоджа. В его романах тело представлено в совокупности нарративных, дискурсивных и эстетических параметров, а также глубинных семантических структурах на разных уровнях художественного текста. На основании анализа романов “Терапия”, “Думает”, “Автора, автора”, “Глухота как приговор” и “Человек многих талантов” выдвигается положение о том, что сексуальность в исследуемых текстах представлена как “универсальная болезнь”, а секс часто рассматривается как грех или моральное преступление, за которое необходимо понести наказание.

**Ключевые слова:** Д. Лодж, тело, болезнь, заболевание, сексуальность.