

A Note on Selected Names in James Hynes's Academic Novel *The Lecturer's Tale*

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This note offers a brief discussion of selected names in the literary sub-genre commonly labeled the “academic novel,” and exemplified in *The Lecturer's Tale* by James Hynes. It defines the genre and enumerates its most common features. Because this note constitutes an overview of nomenclature in one specific academic novel, it is exemplary rather than comprehensive.

KEYWORDS academic novel, James Hynes, *The Lecturer's Tale*, onomastics

Introduction

In her discerning study of the academic novel, Showalter (2005: 1) notes that this literary sub-genre “[...] has arisen and flourished only since about 1950, when American universities were growing rapidly, first to absorb the returning veterans, and then to take in a larger and larger percentage of the baby-booming population.” She adds (Showalter, 2005: 2) that “[t]he academic novel is by now a small but recognizable subgenre of contemporary fiction and has a small body of criticism devoted to it.” Showalter’s (2005) study is a decade-by-decade presentation of this novel type beginning with the 1950s and continuing into the first few years of the new millennium. Moreover, she studies both US and British exemplars. From the 1950s, she discusses C. P. Snow’s *The Masters* (1951) and Mary McCarthy’s *The Groves of Academe* (1951), and she includes novels from the early part of the twenty-first century, for example, James Hynes’s (2001) *The Lecturer's Tale* and Jonathan Franzen’s (2001) *The Corrections*, though, as Showalter (2005: 114) points out, the latter novel is not entirely about the academy, that is, “[...] the university fully merges with the rest of society” (Showalter, 2005: 115).

Several designations for this novelistic genre exist: (1) college novel, (2) academic novel, and (3) campus novel (Scott, 2004: 81). Showalter (2005: 2) alludes to the neologism *professorromane* originated by Caram (1980). In an initial Google® search for the term “academic novel,” Scott (2004: 81) found a staggering 840,000 entries. After refining his quest, he found hundreds of examples. Showalter’s (2005: 133–135) study reviewed sixty-four novels in the US and the UK.

Definition and description of the academic novel

Lyons (1962: xvii) defines the academic novel quite simply as “[...] one in which higher education is treated with seriousness and the main characters are students or professors.” Written fifty years ago, the author did not anticipate the plethora of academic fiction that would be written, in part, because of the massive expansion of universities in the US. Its relative popularity is no doubt due to the fact that many individuals have either attended or graduated from a college or university, and thus have some familiarity with the academy.

Dalton-Brown (2008: 592) enumerates four common conventions of the academic novel, namely,

[...] (1) the (usually male) academic protagonist is satirized, and secondary academic figures caricatured, in order to indicate his naiveté, (2) his department/university is shown to be a place of politicking, an environment that requires considerable cunningness if it is to be survived, and (3) the tale hinges on the academic’s decision whether to opt for the life of the mind or the life of desires whether sexual, status-oriented, or commercial lust, and this moral dilemma is often developed in the context of a fight to gain tenure, status, or to keep his position. In certain variations the moral dilemma expands to include a relationship or family issue, which again reveals the academics inability to deal with practical dilemmas. Finally, (4) the academic either wins the battle to stay in academe, or escapes, and here conventionality ends as the protagonist rediscovers a creative originality once freed from generic confines.

The potboiler predictability of the academic novel has even been satirized in a clever article by Mott (1962), who provides a set of rules for such works, including tone, character analysis (vanity, social position, self-dramatization), and the theme of career motivation. As an endnote, Mott (1962: 251–252) argues that, in the academic novel, the professor ought to ruminate and reveal his thoughts about his professional pursuits on the printed page.

Selected names in the academic novel

The present note will address selectively the names employed in one US academic novel, namely, the farcical and absurdist postmodern novel *The Lecturer’s Tale* (2001) by James Hynes (1955–). It is a microcosm of the sometimes satirical and sardonic names employed in many campus novels. Hynes’s fictional work is peppered with references to the academic world of the US English department as well as to actual and surreptitious allusions to the real-world characters that populate it. This note will exemplify selectively names in the following domains: (1) anthroponyms, (2) institutional designations, (3) named chairs, (4) titles of academic research, and (5) the title of John Hynes’s book and selected chapter titles.

The Lecturer’s Tale (Hynes, 2001) may be considered a *roman-à-clef* (French, “novel with a key”), that is, a fictional work about real life intended to satirize a particular domain, in this instance academic life, especially the English department. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Morris, 1979: 1126) defines it simply as “[a] novel in which actual persons or places are depicted in fictional guise.” The purpose in writing a *roman-à-clef* is to avoid conflict either personal or legal, especially if a well-known person is the butt of satire and

criticism based on his or her behavior. Moreover, it allows the novelist to avoid self-incrimination. Finally, it may provide the author with a way to amuse the “wise” reader who seeks to identify the people and places depicted through fictional characters (cf. Boyde, 2009: 156–157). In the opening lines of her essay on the *roman-à-clef*, Boyde (2009: 156) writes that this expression “[. . .] refers to fictional works in which actual people or events can be identified by a knowing reader, typically a member of a coterie. Madeleine de Scudéry (1607–1701) is attributed as the innovator of the genre creating it to disguise from the general reader public figures whose political actions and ideas formed the basis of her fictional narratives.” Within the context of the *roman-à-clef*, many of the names in *The Lecturer's Tale* are intended to evoke real people, real places, and real research for the express purpose of parody and satire. In what follows, selected names will be illustrated in this aspect of the Hynes novel. In this regard, Pinkser (2003: 186) observes that “[. . .] there are enough flashes of recognition so that some English professors will find themselves squirming while many others will be hooting in delight.”

Anthroponyms (characters' names)

The personal names of the professoriate in James Hynes's (2001) farcical, absurdist, satirical, and over-the-top novel *The Lecturer's Tale* is a cornucopia of names designed to emulate the various characters' identities and to reveal aspects of each one. Likewise, the names of some of the characters represent their ethnicity in an unflattering and extremely stereotypical fashion. The members of Hynes's fictional English department constitute a typology of professorial stereotypes. Several examples illustrate this point very well.

The main protagonist, Nelson Humboldt, “a visiting adjunct lecturer” (p. 3) at the University of the Midwest, whose surname, according to Bailey and Slay (2003: 28), conjures up the expression “humbug” as well as the professorial protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov's (1899–1977) *Lolita* (1955) named Humbert Humbert. Most academic novels have a character whose purpose is to serve as an interpreter of the sometimes arcane and mysterious rituals that take place in the academic to a possibly naïve reader.

The Chair of the English Department is Anthony Pescecane (Italian “shark” with a figurative meaning of “profiteer”). Showalter (2005: 109) notes that this character may be “[. . .] yet another incarnation of Stanley Fish [. . .]” because Pescecane wrote a dissertation entitled *To Reign in Hell: The Will to Power in Paradise Lost* (p. 79), an allusion to Fish's (1967) real book *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. Pescecane's speech is also represented by stereotypical eye-dialectal orthography intended to imitate the East coast dialect of his native Hoboken, New Jersey. Showalter herself (2005: 109) cites Harshaw's review of *The Lecturer's Tale*, who describes Anthony Pescecane as “[. . .] the evil spawn of Elaine Showalter and Tony Soprano [. . .].” All readers, however, will find the stereotypical representation of Italian-Americans to be egregiously offensive. Other minorities receive similar derogatory treatment.

Marko Kraljević, the department's literary theorist, is described as “[. . .] a former professor at the University of Belgrade and a refugee from Slobodan Milosevic” (Hynes 2001: 40). His name alludes to the Serbian king of the same name who reigned from 1371 to 1395. He was also a character in Serbian epic oral poetry. The meaning

of the name is “king’s son.” Some critics argue that this character represents the Slovenian philosopher and theorist Slavoj Žižek (1949–).

Lorraine Alsace (Hynes 2001: 41), Kraljević’s lover, is an obvious humorous reference to and reversal of the name of the territory created by imperial Germany in 1871, and the territory reverted France after the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. In 1940, it was annexed by Germany, but again reverted to France in 1944–1945.

Vita Deonne, the English department’s gender theorist, researches the lesbian phallus (Hynes 2001: 86–94). As Showalter (2005: 109) points out, this is an allusion to Virginia Woolf’s (1992–1941) lover Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962).

Morton Weissmann, the department’s New Critic, and representative of the traditional literary canon (Hynes 2001: 100–102) is, as Bailey and Slay (2003: 28) note, a sort of Cleanth Brooks (1906–1994, Gray Professor of Rhetoric at Yale University, 1906–1975) clone.

Another member of Hynes’s imaginary, but all too real, English department *ménagerie* is simply identified as “the Canadian Lady Novelist” (Hynes 2001: 40), who is “[...] reputed to be like Margaret Atwood [1939–], only nicer, the department’s only likely candidate for a major literary prize” (Hynes 2001: 40).

Victoria Victorinix is the undergraduate chair of the department (Hynes 2001: 3) whose alliterative name is a combination of the Latin “*victoria*” (“victory”) and a surname which echoes that meaning with the Latin root *victor* (“conqueror”). Her graduate student, Gillian, elected to eliminate her patriarchal surname “[...] in the spirit of such foremothers as Roseanne, Cher, and Madonna” (Hynes 2001: 43, see Nuessel, 1999: 163).

Penelope O (Hynes 2001: 82) holds the Hugh M. Heffner Chair in Sexuality Studies (Hynes 2001: 82). Her name suggests the literary work *Story of O* authored by French writer Anne Desclos (1907–1998) published under her pseudonym Pauline Réage (1954). Moreover, it is the title of the tenth chapter (Hynes, 2001: 161–181) of this book filled with literary allusions as Showalter (2001: B–13, column 1) astutely notes.

A job search results when Nelson Humboldt persuades Timothy Coogan, an Irish-American stereotype and the Department’s poet-in-residence, to leave (Hynes 2001: 39, 133–155).

As a result of interviews at the Modern Language Association’s annual meeting in Toronto (Hynes 2001: 176) to fill Timothy Coogan’s position vacated through his resignation, three candidates are invited for a campus visit. The first is Lester Antilles, the Cecil Rhodes Chair in Postcolonial Studies (Hynes 2001: 204), a pun on the geographical location known as the Lesser Antilles, an island group situated in the Caribbean. The second candidate is David Branwell (Hynes 2001: 210), a British scholar, and author of *It’s Not Unusual: The Tom Jones Way of Knowledge*, who gives a presentation on what turns out to be a non-existent Elvis Presley film entitled *Viva Vietnam*, which he calls a “lost masterpiece” (Hynes 2001: 213). The final candidate is jennifer manly (Hynes 2001: 220), an African-American queer theorist, whose name is intentionally spelled in lower case, a style employed by bell hooks (1952–; see Penultimate, 2011).

Institutional designations

The designations of colleges and universities in *The Lecturer’s Tale* are designed to evoke real ones. The invented names of various universities and colleges seek to

call to mind several such institutions of higher learning. Thus, the University of the Midwest located in Hamilton Groves, Minnesota appears to refer to the main campus of Minnesota's state university located that state's largest city (Hynes 2001: 7). Other geographical references include Halcyon College (Hynes 2001: 16), described as "a small four-year liberal arts institution in Ohio." To be sure, there are several such colleges in Ohio that could fit this description. Another institutional reference is Fricke State College, Fricke, North Dakota (Hynes 2001: 32 = any of a number of state universities in North Dakota). The place name Fricke conjures up the euphemistic slang term "frick" as an expression of disdain. Another one is Northwestern Michigan University, Traverse City, Michigan (Hynes 2001: 189 = Northern Michigan University, Marquette, Michigan).

The State University of Indiana at Edgarville from which Nelson Humboldt received his doctorate is described in the following terms "[. . .] the dullest town on the flattest landscape in North America, The State University of Indiana at Edgarville — SUIE, pronounced "Sooeey" — had been an agricultural college until recently, and its graduate program in English and comparative literature was brand new" (Hynes 2001: 20). It is further described as "[. . .] a smallish land-grant school in north central Indiana" (Hynes 2001: 19). The pronunciation of the acronym SUIE is a clear derogatory reference to the pig calling expression "sooe," and intended to signify the agricultural origins of Nelson Humboldt's graduate school.

At the end of the novel, the University of the Midwest undergoes extreme financial exigency. As a result, the new governor of the state, a former professional wrestler, sells the state university to the Harbridge Corporation, a multinational publishing conglomerate (Hynes 2001: 376) with a subsequent name change to "Midwestern." Moreover, its Latin motto "*Sapientia [sic] prima stultitia caruisse*" ("the first rule of wisdom is to avoid folly") attributed to Horace (65–8 BCE in his *Epistles* 20–14 BCE) is replaced by "We're Midwestern™ — If We Don't Teach It, You Don't Need to Know It" (Hynes 2001: 376).

Named chairs

The phenomenon of the named or endowed chair is becoming more and more common at colleges and universities. In essence, such professorships are named to honor a person worthy of great respect or a donor who has provided a significant bequest to an institution of higher learning that provides permanent support for the professor who holds this chair. It is a tradition that dates back to the British university system as early as 1502.

One of the named chairs in Hynes's novel is "The Hugh M. Hefner Chair in Sexuality Studies" (Hynes 2001: 82) held by Penelope O. In fact, Hugh M. Hefner (1926–), founder of *Playboy*® Enterprises, donated two million dollars to the University of Southern California to create the Hugh M. Hefner chair for the Study of American film currently held by Rick Jewell.

A second named chair is the ironically designated "Cecil Rhodes Chair in Postcolonial Studies" at Columbia University (Hynes 2001: 170) held by a Lester Antilles, a finalist for a position at the University of the Midwest. Cecil Rhodes was a South African businessman (1853–1902) born in the United Kingdom, who sought to expand the British Empire, and founder of the state of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). In his will, he established the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship the first to be designed for international studies at Oxford University.

Selected titles of academic research

Titles of academic research constitute names (Nuessel, 2011: 243) constitute acts of naming, which serve to differentiate, denote, and individualize such studies. In this sense, the “names” of scholarly treatises have a five-fold nominal function (Nuessel, 2011: 244; cf. Nuessel, 1992: 1–2):

1. To provide a unique identity for the purpose of referencing an artistic creation.
2. To access works in catalogues, collections, libraries (Library of Congress number, museum catalogues, and so forth).
3. To refer to a work so that all concerned (writer, reader, speaker, hearer) have a common point of reference.
4. To provide an interpretation for the receiver of the artistic work no matter what its form.
5. To encode meaning from which an anonymous public may decode the same or different meaning.

A brief examination of selected titles of academic works in *The Lecturer's Tale* indicates that they are intentionally satirical, although some of the titles refer to actual authors and their works (see 1, 2, 4, 6 below) while others are meant to parody the verbose and pompous titles of some scholarly works (see 3, 5 below).

The books authored by the English department faculty in *The Lecturer's Tale* belong to a category labeled “fictional book” (List of fictional books, 2011), that is, a non-existent book created within a work of fiction whose purpose is to used to “(1) provide the basis of the novel’s plot, (2) add verisimilitude by supplying plausible background, or (3) act as a common thread in a series of books of a particular writer or canon of work. A fictional title may also (4) be used as a conceit to illustrate a story within a story, or (5) be essentially a joke title to establish the humorous or satirical tone of the work” (List of fictional books, 2011). In Hynes’s novel, the titles employed correspond to functions 2, 4, and 5.

1. *Rhythm and Metonymy in Coleridge's “Christabel; Daughters of the Night.”* Christabel is an unfinished poem by Samuel Coleridge Taylor (1772–1834) whose protagonist is a woman. A second work is *Clitoral Hegemony in LeFanu's Carmilla*. Sheridan Le Fanu (1814–1873) authored Gothic tales including *Carmilla* (1872), a story of a lesbian vampire situated in central Europe. Both books are fictional monographs by Victoria Victorinix (Hynes 2001: 4).
2. *Guilt and Predestination in the Work of James Hogg, 1770–1835*. James Hogg (1770–1835), Scotland, wrote under the pseudonym of “the Ettrick Shepherd.” He wrote *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) as well as poetry. This is Nelson Humboldt’s doctoral dissertation (Hynes 2001: 25).
3. *Das Ding an Sich: A Cultural History of Cultural Histories*. This is described as the “chef-d’oeuvre” of Lorraine Alsace (Hynes 2001: 41).
4. *To Reign in Hell: The Will to Power in Paradise Lost*. According to Showalter (2005: 109), this is an allusion to Stanley Fish’s *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (1967). This fictitious work is Anthony Pescecane’s doctoral dissertation (Hynes 2001: 79).

5. *Reading with My Pussy: I Gang Bang the Canon*. Written by Penelope O, holder of the Hugh M. Heffner Chair in Sexuality Studies, this work is considered to be her major work (Hynes 2001: 82).
6. *It's Not Unusual: The Tom Jones Way of Knowledge*. This is a book written by David Branwell on popular culture (Hynes 2001: 210).

The title of John Hynes's novel and selected chapter titles

The Lecturer's Tale, the title of John Hynes's novel, a work packed with literary allusions, refers to Geoffrey Chaucer's (c. 1343–1400) famed *The Canterbury Tales*. In fact, the epigraph to Hynes's narrative tale comes from *The Pardoner's Tale* and ends with a spoof of Chaucer's Retraction (Hynes, 2001: 387–388; see Showalter, 2005: 110).

A few chapter titles also function as names, in the sense that they allude to literary works, which may function as names as previously noted. In fact, the titles of individual chapters feature literary allusions as Showalter (2005: 110; cf. Bailey and Slay, 2003: 28–29) points out.

1. “The Story of O” (chapter 10). A reference to *Story of O*, an erotic novel written in French as *Histoire d'O* by Anne Desclos (1907–1998) under the pseudonym Pauline Réage. One of the characters in *The Lecturer's Tale* is Penelope O, who, as previously noted, is the holder of the Hugh M. Heffner Chair in Sexuality Studies.
2. “Discipline and Punish” (chapter 11). A reference to Michel Foucault's (1926–1984) *Discipline and Punish* (1975).

Concluding remarks

As noted in the previous section, titles may function as names. In this sense, it is worth commenting briefly on the title of John Hynes's novel and a few selected chapter titles. *The Lecturer's Tale* is replete with allusions to literary works and the critics of those works. These constant references lead Showalter (2005: 110) to note that it is “[. . .] a Norton Anthology of a novel, a course in a book, that covers all the literary material of an introductory survey in English literature.”

This note is a prelude to a much longer semiotic analysis of the academic novel in the US, which will examine the following elements of this subgenre: (1) onomastics (names of professors, colleges and universities, endowed chairs, titles of scholarly research), (2) themes, (3) use or misuse of foreign languages, (4) general themes, (5) interpretation of the academic world to the outside world, and (6) intertextuality.

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