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Cultural Politics and Academic Crises in American Campus Fiction – Francine Prose's *Blue Angel* and Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*

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Abstract
The article starts from the implications of a phrase in the first chapter of Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain*, a book that addresses issues of contemporary morality in the closed environment of the American academia: "Everyone knows." Written in the aftermath of the Clinton-Lewinski scandal, Roth's novel and the two books this article discusses reveal dual, often deliberately ambiguous depictions of gender and power dynamics in the ecosystem of the American college campus, a space that widens the gap between social structures, which grow more and more granular. The examined novels share concerns about cultural politics, offering a complementary perspective: while Francine Prose's novel follows the tradition of the campus novel and retells the story from a mature academic's point of view, Tom Wolfe's book shifts to a young student's side of the story. The article aims to demonstrate it is not a mere coincidence that these representative novels about social and moral crises faced on the campus were actually written in a time when campus fiction was also going through an aesthetic crisis. The crises on the campus and the crisis in campus fiction indicate a turning point, where creative solutions can be identified, despite their potential controversy.

Keywords: campus fiction, controversy, crisis, cultural politics, gender roles, morality, power dynamics

Introduction

Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), a novel in which the phrase "Everyone knows" is repeated, points out the harmful pressure of the

public opinion which legitimates the allegations that destroy the protagonist's career and family life. The novel is set in the summer of the Clinton-Lewinski scandal, which "revived America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony" (Roth 61) and the traditional "persecuting spirit" that Hawthorne had written about in the nineteenth century. "Everyone knows," the spirit that condemns Coleman Silk's slip of the tongue as racist and his affair with Faunia as abusive, is set against the background characterization of the public reaction to the Oval Office incident in terms that point at society's double standards and hypocrisy:

> It was the summer in America when the nausea returned, when the joking didn't stop, when the speculation and the theorizing and the hyperbole didn't stop, when the moral obligation to explain to one's children about adult life was abrogated in favor of maintaining in them every illusion about adult life, when the smallness of people was simply crushing. (Roth 67)

The Human Stain is a campus novel that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, voiced concerns and anxieties that marked a multi-fold crisis in the academic environment, and, at the same time, announced some of the transformations that the campus novel as a genre was undergoing, preparing to respond to changing social realities, as well as to new expectations in its readership. This article will look at two campus novels which are contemporary with Roth's story, discussing the crises they addressed at the time of their writing, but also how they were received by critics and the general public in the decades that followed, decades which saw significant shifts of focus in campus fiction and changes of mentalities in the campus environment and the academic world in general.

Campus fiction emerged as a distinct genre in the post-war period, even if significant depictions of university life can be identified as early as Victorian fiction. As more and more writers embraced the world of the academia in their prose, theorists started to make the distinction between the academic novel, which is usually said to highlight the ivory-tower quality of this environment, and the campus novel, which is permeated by the echoes of the outside world, and which attracts a wider variety of readers because its protagonists are students (Williams 561). The former

sub-genre is frequently criticized for its elitism, intellectualism, for the gap it contains between what people live and what they read (Showalter 2). But, although this intellectualism may often lead to the predictability, repetitiveness, and self-referentiality that justifies why the academic novel has reached a crisis in recent years (Scott 81), it can also be appealing and relevant for its satirical tone, sometimes for its seriousness, even sadness (Showalter 3). On the other hand, the campus novel, which focuses on the students' lives and problems, is predicted to have better chances of survival, being more dynamic and more open to change as it incorporates new, ever more complex, realities and is, for this reason, able to turn "an alien world" into "a familiar setting" (Williams 561). A particular line of critique of campus fiction in general, which Elaine Showalter addressed directly, probably for the first time in her 2005 study, is women's under- or misrepresentation, except, perhaps, as "murder victims" (35). The ambivalence of women's representation in this fictional genre is a topic the current study will address, as an implicit part of the political and cultural crisis the academia is facing.

Angela is No Angel

Francine Prose's 2000 novel *Blue Angel* tells a campus story at the beginning of the new millennium from the perspective of a 47-year-old writer turned tenured professor. Ted Swenson teaches creative writing at Euston, a small, exclusivist college in Northern Vermont, founded by an upper-class gentleman who intended it as a place to educate his twelve children, six sons and six daughters. Swenson is fighting a middle-age crisis and resents the platitudes he is expected to teach his not-very-talented students. He is also estranged from the wider academic circle and regards even the secondary duties as stifling and frustrating, such as the participation in faculty meetings and reunions, "symptoms of [the campus'] hangover from Puritan repression" (21). Lorna Sage, describing Swenson's campus-specific crisis in a review, observes that the protagonist's life has passed "in tenured tranquility while inwardly he seethes with discontent." Temptation comes to Swenson in unexpected ways: first, it is the students' stories about bestiality which, in their

striking eeriness, capture his imagination and set him speculating; then, it is the prim and proper dean's new and draconian rules about sexual harassment on campus, which make Swenson regret his own "high-minded self-denial" and determination to be a good husband and "an all-around good guy" (Prose 23). This happens long before student Angela Argo enters the stage, with a physique and temperament that make her an unlikely enchantress: "A skinny, pale redhead with neon-orange and lime-green streaks in her hair and a delicate, sharp-featured face pierced in a half-dozen places" wearing "an arsenal of chains, dog collars, and bracelets" (8), a 'metallic' character whose aggressive silence during classes causes Swenson's embarrassment and exasperation at first.

The path towards disgrace is set from the first pages of the novel, Prose suggesting that, Greek-tragedy-like, the hero's fall is inevitable and has little, if anything, to do with divine or human justice. That the novel, as well as the campus environment in general, is caught up in moral ambivalence, becomes obvious in the depiction of the illicit affair that takes place between the professor-writer in residence and the student-aspiring writer. At first glance, the power dynamics in the Ted Swenson-Angela Argo relationship seem quite straightforward, and this may explain why the faculty dismissing Swenson for sexual harassment and misconduct never take a second look at the story: the adult male teacher manipulates and seduces the young, innocent and vulnerable female student. But Prose actually wants to dwell more seriously on the topic of moral relativization, and so she reverses the roles. Angela makes the first move, flatters Swenson, seeks his attention and his company, dresses and undresses in a provocative manner, and manipulates him into supporting her to get her first novel published by his prestigious New York editor.

This line of the plot has been welcomed with mixed feelings by critics. On one side of the controversy, some reviewers have saluted Prose's courage to tell the story from a man's perspective and her sincerity to present a male protagonist "caught in a web of powerful false pieties" (Sage). Sage goes on to argue that Swenson's blindness and gullibility is not only the result of a reversal of power relations based on gender roles and social status, but also the consequence of a generation gap and cultural misunderstanding, as the middle-aged teacher finds it

excruciatingly hard to wade through every class without provoking a scandal (Sage). His students, who make up identities in their stories, demonstrate how difficult it is to imagine other people's lives because impersonating another human being is not only a matter of talent but also a matter of political correctness and orientation. There is an episode, at the beginning of the story, when Swenson recalls how everybody in the class awkwardly assumed the African-American student's story about a mother being a poor alcoholic janitor was autobiographical only to learn that the respective student's real-life mother was an upper-middle-class professional.

On the other side of the debate, there are reviewers who criticize Prose's novel for portraying Swenson as the injured party in a feminist plot. Lucinda Rosenfeld, for example, writes that "One only wishes Prose had spent more time dissecting Swenson's competing desires for home and hussy and less time taking pot shots at women's studies professors and rape crisis center counselors (his daughter, Ruby, later becomes one – in case there weren't enough humorless feminists to go around)."

Indeed, the character who is the most instrumental in Swenson's demise is Lauren Healy, presented in the novel as a woman with "tense, aggrieved shoulders," the department's expert in the "feminist misreading of literature" and the acting head of the Faculty-Student Women's Alliance, who has always "faked a chilly collegiality" towards the writer in residence and who "for reasons he can't fathom – a testosterone allergy, he guesses . . . wants him dead" (Prose 22). Lauren is a caricature, much like Delphine Roux, the French woman who teaches in the male-dominated classicist environment of Athena College in *The Human Stain*, also responsible for destroying her rival's career.

Similarly mixed reviews were written about the 2017 film adaptation of Prose's novel, *Submission*, directed by Richard Levine, starring Stanley Tucci as Swenson and Addison Timlin as Angela Argo. Some have regarded this film's script as a "fresh and valiant attempt to breathe some fresh air into the #MeToo Movement," with Swenson being a lonely middle-aged man, first and foremost guilty of his naivety about the motives of an aggressive student (Reed). Reed concludes this story by making a serious point about women not being the only possible victims

of abuse and harassment. On the other hand, other reviewers take this argument with a pinch of salt: "By making a none-too-convincing femme fatale the source of its drama, *Submission* comes off as an antiquated and rather reactionary campus parable. . . . At heart, *Submission* views the prospect of a professor-student affair less with alarm than with a kind of unexamined nostalgia" (Gleiberman).

It is worth noting that the film, while inspired by the 2000 book, was created in a significantly different social context. Prose also chose to respond to these mixed reviews and to her own story in 2018, a time when the social landscape was very different from the early 2000s, both on campus and in society in general, especially as a result of the #MeToo Movement. Prose confesses that she did not set out to write a book about sexual harassment, even if "the subject of sexual harassment hovered in the popular consciousness, though of course not as heavily as it does now" (Prose, "When Women Aren't Angels"). She characterizes Angela Argo as an "ambitious and manipulative student" responsible for her teacher's downfall. "Now," Prose continues,

> we tend to assume that the male is always in the position of power, that the male is in every instance the predator and the female always the victim. But my novel . . . look[s] at the ways in which male power can be subverted and destroyed by youth, sex and talent. I suppose many readers and viewers will conclude (and have concluded) that predatory Ted Swenson gets what he deserves. But [the book] intentionally makes it hard to decide what he *does* deserve, what he does to himself, what he does to Angela, what she does to him – and why. ("When Women Aren't Angels")

She concludes that, while aware of risking to force a taboo, her version of the teacher-student relationship is a rarity worth mentioning if only because the classical narrative has dominated, becoming a script that has been advanced and promoted out of a moral obligation.

Thinking of an urtext of campus fiction, David Lodge's 1984 *Small World: An Academic Romance*, we can identify in it the source of the gray area of sexual politics on campus analyzed by Prose. In his novel, Lodge makes the apparently simplistic distinction, between love, pure and selfless, and sex, "an assertion of will, an exercise of power" (111), imposed by an empowered individual, the teacher, on an insecure and

vulnerable party, the student, who is in great need for support and good marks. However, cynically, the same novel suggests a reversal of roles and a blur of distinctions, when a beautiful female student starts blackmailing her tutors after they have shown some kind of interest – sexual or otherwise – in her. Prose's *Blue Angel* follows a similar path, in which the campus policy about sex is laid out clearly from the beginning, with Dean Bentham's new code, but also with apparently harmless academic discussions about EngLit subjects considered unsafe to be tackled with students. Such subjects include Poe, who might otherwise come down as a child molester, or Dickens, whose Magwitch may or may not have imposed a gay relationship on Pip.

In this climate of "heightened conscience" (23), when Swenson declares that, as a professor of literature, he is not scared by a little eroticism, he is in fact playing with fire. Early in his communication with Angela, the power dynamics seem straightforward – she is the insecure student and apprentice writer seeking approval from her mentor. Even later, when Swenson does not immediately report the result of his conversation with his New York editor about Angela's manuscript, the assumption continues to be the same, as she accuses him of callousness and selfishness, typical male behavior, and he feels bound to be protective and rescue her from her classmates' criticism of her work. During the hearings at the university, Angela adopts the verbal and body language of the victim, innocent, passive and out of control, helping the prosecutors, especially feminist Lauren Healy, conclude this is a textbook case of sexual harassment. But, in fact, the power dynamics of their relationship changed at the very moment of sexual contact. In the lovemaking scene, Swenson's tooth breaks, interrupting the romance abruptly and leaving him clumsy, exposed, confused, and . . . old. While it is obvious that his actions are inappropriate and unprofessional, the entire situation, as sketched by Prose, becomes much more complicated and twisted.

After all, apart from the critique of the predictable asymmetry in the teacher-student relationship, with the former being expected to exert power and the latter being expected to suffer from it, the novel also examines a wider gap in the relationships on campus. On the one hand, there are those between Swenson and his students, in whose presence he is

afraid to dwell for longer than requested by his teaching load: "As always, getting out of class, Swenson feels like an innocent man, sentenced to life, whose jail term has just been commuted. He's saved, alive, he's been reprieved . . . at least until next week" (13). On the other, he is equally out of place among the faculty, both at school meetings and at dinner parties. Together with his wife, Sherrie, he feels "as dangerous outsiders with no resemblance to these nerds and their servile wives dishing out the tabbouleh salad . . . rebels, partners in crime passing for respectable citizens" (17). The way in which Swenson's fate is decided at the end of the novel reinforces the hypothesis laid out at the beginning, that both the students, members of a different generation, and the faculty, members of a professional group in which he has never integrated, are as remote and mysterious to one another as if they belonged to a different species altogether. In this sense, the last scene, with Swenson at his lowest after the hearings are over, job and wife lost, reputation and career destroyed, is very suggestive, when he spots a deer on the campus lawn: "From farther away, [the doe] turns again, and looks through the mist at Swenson. What is she seeing? What does she expect? Swenson has no idea. But how strangely lighthearted he feels, what a relief it is to admit, even just for one moment, how much he will never know" (314).

The Victim and the Femme Fatale

Commenting on how her 2000 book would be received today, in a different cultural and social climate, Prose wrote in *The Paris Review* in 2018: "Today there is a fear that showing one woman with sexual agency, one situation in which the all-too-real narrative of male power was subverted, will take away from the other, necessary stories that women are coming forward to tell" ("When Women Aren't Angels"). The novel was inspired, as its title indicates, by the German 1930 film, *Der blaue Engel*, about a beautiful, outspoken cabaret singer and an awkward, unsuspecting Gymnasium professor. In turn, the drama directed by Josef von Sternberg, which launched Marlene Dietrich's international career, was an adaptation of Heinrich Mann's 1905 novel *Professor Unrat*. Each of these sources indicates a different stage in both gender relations and in the educational

system. Mann's novel, set in Wilhelmine Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century, portrays the goal of education as one of fighting a daily battle against the declared foes, the students, who must be subdued at all costs. This perception of the teacher's role gives the novel its subtitle, "Small Town Tyrant," and the belligerent nature of the teacher-student relationship is suggested by the professor's nickname (*Unrat* means 'garbage,' while the protagonist's name is Raat). The strict, conservative, old-fashioned professor (who has discontinued communication with his own son because of the latter's alleged moral laxity) eventually falls in love with the barefoot cabaret dancer and prostitute. What began as his attempt to persuade the fallen woman to stop corrupting young men, turns into a lusty affair, humiliating for Raat, who loses his head, his reputation and his fortune. While Rosa Fröhlich is the very embodiment of the seductress, scheming, self-centered, mercantile and sinful, the novel's explanation for the professor's downfall hints at a critique of the early twentieth century hothouse morality and double standards.

The 1930 film places the story some decades later, in interwar Weimar Germany, where morals are looser and the firm bourgeois standards have relaxed considerably. However, no such relaxation has yet been introduced in the education system. So, the contrast between the strictness inside the classroom and the loose morals outside the classroom is all the more striking. The Gymnasium professor's passage from the aseptic environment of the school to the life full of color and temptations of the cabaret seems more dramatic in the film. At the end, when Immanuel Rath, now rejected, destitute, turned into the laughing stock of the whole town, returns to his old classroom, the picture of his demise is complete. It is only appropriate, for the economy of the plot and the moral of the story, that the professor dies of a broken heart while clutching the desk where he used to teach his students. The angelic references in the film are a cynical commentary on the part played by the woman, in this story and in society in general, rendering her status ambiguous and fuzzy. If the bourgeois society reserved the angelic role to the woman who played by the standard script, as virtuous daughter, wife and mother, in the 1930 film, the blue angel interprets a different role, being responsible for a long series of transgressions.

As Prose confesses, her initial intention was not necessarily that of writing a book about academic politics. After watching *Der blaue Engel*, in which the esteemed professor destroyed his career for the sake of a nightclub singer, Prose saw the potential of this interwar romantic plot in the contemporary campus context. And so, the chanteuse in a cabaret, ambiguously called the Angel, became a student, ambiguously called Angela. The nod to the film and to the relationship between the dancer and the teacher was supposed to make the message of Prose's novel less equivocal, in the sense that "it never occurred to me that the ambitious and determined Angela Argo was Ted Swenson's victim, no more than a viewer of the German film would have concluded that the empowered, shatteringly sexy Marlene Dietrich was being victimized by Emil Janning's meek, bumbling professor" (Prose, "When Women Aren't Angels").

If some readers may have considered Prose's novel reactionary, it would be important to consider the specific feminist context which had developed prior to the publication of *Blue Angel*. Decades before #MeToo, which is the movement that gave unprecedented visibility and impact to the wide range and scope of sexual violence and pushed, in a broader sense, for gender equity in a variety of social and professional contexts, there was the rape crisis movement. With less coverage than #MeToo, in an age that preceded the social media, this movement developed in the 1980s, in the wake of the second feminist wave. But the feminists' position on campus politics instrumentalized by the rape crisis movement was not entirely homogeneous. A well-known critical position was adopted by Katie Roiphe, in her 1994 book, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus*. The main idea of this study is that, while more awareness about sexism in its various forms is good, a heightened sense of women's vulnerability and potential victim status goes against the very principles of the second-wave feminist struggle, to put an end to patriarchally imposed passivity. Roiphe also argues, in an article that precedes the book (1993) that the "portrait of the delicate female bears a striking resemblance to that 50s ideal my mother and other women of her generation fought so hard to leave behind" ("Date Rape's Other Victim"), where the 50s were a rigid and conformist age in which women's empowerment was still an elusive concept. Starting from the assumption that the overemphasis on the dangers to women's safety was a way of

"sequesting feminism in a teary province" ("Date Rape's Other Victim") and arguing that the definition of rape can sometimes dwell in a gray area, Roiphe criticizes the emergence of a "rape culture" and disputes its genuine potential as a source of authority for women. Focusing specifically on the campus environment, Roiphe is worried about the climate that may suggest a nostalgia for the old days of social control, that may alter the beneficial changes that have appeared in campus life in the meantime. Roiphe concludes it is a "cardboard stereotype" (Roiphe, "Date Rape's Other Victim") to claim that men are always physically and intellectually stronger than women.

Very importantly, Roiphe considers that the reason behind "the miscommunication" that may give rise to rape accusations is not related only to gender politics, or to the fact that men and women speak different languages. She finds its source in the change of the social composition of university environments in the past several decades. No longer only white, Christian and privileged, the inhabitants of the campus have different backgrounds, where the same social norms do not apply: "When ivory tower meets melting pot, it causes tension, some confusion, some need for readjustment" (Roiphe, "Date Rape's Other Victim"). Connecting this reality with the rape crisis movement on campus, Roiphe goes as far as to suggest that discussing or handling gender issues is sometimes easier and safer than discussing class. Agreeing with Roiphe's conclusion that, by insisting on her victimization, one denies woman's agency, Janice Haaken resumes the rape crisis argument in 2017, inviting us to analyze, in the campaigns on campus sexual assault, the debate about the active-passive binary pair and the nature of the narrative strategies at work. The feminist psychologist identifies the lessons to learn from these campaigns about feminist sexual politics and their legacy, given that "feminist campaigns carry surplus social symbolic loadings and . . . morally charged issues around sexuality invoke less readily articulated grievances" (Haaken 18).

Is It a Small World?

When Lodge wrote his famous trilogy of the campus novel in the 80s, about an EngLit professor dreaming of becoming the best paid teacher in

the Humanities in the whole world, the academic (as well as literary and curricular) environment looked quite different. The traditional campus novels usually depicted a small world indeed, in which a different reality was staged, far from the wear and tear of the big universe outside. This was a world of charmed circles of privilege, whether social or intellectual, fraternities and sororities, with an often utopian, or at least romantic, projection of values and rhythms of life that could never apply outside. In fact, Lodge himself, in *Write On*, explains the popularity of his campus fiction, its reception as a marvellous pastime in terms of its belonging to "a literature of escape," which is so far away from the "ordinary" that it can be regarded as "a modern, displaced form of pastoral" (171). But the glamour of this small world, what gives it authority and legitimacy, is fed by practices of collective identification, which exclude everybody who is not an academic or who does not have an academic background. In the 90s, when the academic landscape started to shift, one of the criticisms of Lodge's depiction of the Ivory Tower of the academia, with its often narcissistic singularity, was the observation that these novels had such a "surprisingly widespread following" in Britain, despite the fact that this was a country "that sends fewer than 20% of its population to any kind of higher education" (Wilson 58). While most academics enjoy reading about themselves, the argument continues, those make a very small percentage of the readership attracted by the campus' mirage. The others like to read campus fiction because they are the others, outside the Ivory Tower, enjoying a second-hand intimacy with the charmed circle, feeling complicit in it.

Lodge is often criticized for his elitism, illustrated, for example, by the endless intertextual games he plays, his references to the literary canon being another way of keeping out readers who have little access to detailed, high cultural information. The hints, allusions, and pastiches Lodge creates make up a code which 'the others' find hard to crack. The same kind of intellectual elitism is identified by critics who, in the 2000s, observed that the campus novel was already in a state of crisis. Robert F. Scott, for example, wonders whether the academic novel reached a dead end because it is an artificial, exclusively self-referential genre, written by academics – writers turned into college teachers, or college teachers

experimenting with creative writing (81). The crisis of the campus novel, which began at the turn of the century, coincided with the crisis of liberal education, which was the principal focus on the genre from its onset. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in her 2016 book, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, deplores the crisis that resulted in the replacement of the complete, moral man, with the commercial man, of limited purposes, whose rise has been aided by scientific developments, but especially by the consolidation of the soulless corporations. She pleads for the return of the humanistic scholar, capable of skills which are vital in stable democracies, such as critical thinking and compassion, and, therefore, for the return of interest in humanistic education and liberal arts.

But, of course, the crisis of the campus novel at the turn of the century had other explanations. For Jeffrey J. Williams, the relevance of campus fiction has grown more and more limited as its flavor of "quasi-nobility" has been found to no longer respond to the social needs of the readers, being "quaint and eccentric, depicting the peculiar world of academics and appealing to a coterie audience" (561). This is the very reason why the critic considers it vital to distinguish between such novels, which he includes in the genre of academic fiction, and campus fiction, which focuses on student life, and which has increased congruity with the contemporary – especially young – public. The campus novel, set apart from the academic novel, offers more relatable themes, such as insecurity and pressure, being an outsider, facing the hidden curriculums of the university, balancing personal life and study, etc.

This separation between the genres may help explain the popularity of a new subculture, whose rise has been supported by the social media and whose specific aesthetic has been guaranteed by these newer environments: Dark Academia. Aida Amoako summarizes the features of Dark Academia in the following terms: "autumnal colors, vintage clothing, the romanticization of liberal arts education, a pursuit of knowledge, and occasionally, a murder mystery." Such motifs make it a direct descendant of Gothic literature, which also capitalized on an atmosphere of secrecy, stirred feelings of awe and wonder in readers, and fed on a nostalgia for the past. Inevitably, this can bring Dark Academia forth in the debate about the Eurocentric focus of campus fiction, many of the authors,

themes, or styles it mimics being overwhelmingly white – think *Harry Potter* for example, or *Dead Poets Society*. This lack of diversity may lead to the same elitism and insularity identified in the Lodge urtext and may display an unwanted pretentiousness (Amoako). But let us not forget this subgenre developed exponentially during a time when the big world outside and the small world of the campus were faced with a very obvious and universally embraced crisis, the COVID pandemic. Its specific way of dealing with crisis has, thus, increased its relevance. And its accessibility was in turn granted by the genre's clear focus on the dysfunctional side of university life, the students' anxieties and vulnerabilities, or the serious challenges they may face on campus.

Other scholars, addressing the topic in the academia in a broader sense, argue that 'darkness' actually implies a variety of challenges which cannot be solved by either individuals or programs. But coping with this 'darkness' may lead to a better grasp of gender imbalances and ethnic conflicts, of the reasons why universities are not as inclusive as they should be. Søren Bengtsen and Ronald Barnett claim that the 'dark' side may be just a "blind angle" which does not necessarily lead to a dystopian direction. On the contrary, it may be an encouragement to increase creativity and critical thinking in the academia:

> We need more elaborate language and subtle concepts for grasping students' experience of failure and letdown, when struggling with and withdrawing from difficult courses never completed; for half-formed ideas and crippled thoughts, full of passion and heart, but unfit for the academic genre of writing; and for interior imaginative wanderings that seldom see the light of day. (2)

All in all, the defenders of the subgenre consider it helpful for the way it addresses students' anxieties and for the models it provides of students in search for a sense of belonging (Gentry).

Indeed, addressing the relevance of the campus novels in general, some critics comment on the fact that their "built-in sense of urgency" about studying and deadlines does not actually reflect the higher stakes of actual student life (Dwyer). Students interviewed about their expectations of the campus novel mentioned more and more frequently a desire to see "non-traditional student paths" represented: not a "cloistered campus

bubble" but "bigger-picture trends," such as financial insecurity, anxiety about future employability, taking jobs while studying, commuting to school rather than living the sheltered campus life. The actual campus is, in fact, a "precarious place" (Dwyer), completely opposed to its earlier pastoral projection of Lodge and his followers.

Wondering how much the campus novel caters to the needs of the young generation today, Kate Dwyer concludes: "For Gen Z, the campus novel is a fantasy. In the age of student debt and hybrid learning, students are thinking long and hard about how fiction can better reflect the new reality of college." While it is hard to imagine many students demanding to read a campus novel about online classes, it is worth mentioning here a critical comment made by a reviewer to the next novel to be discussed, Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. Fifteen years after the book's publication and a year after Wolfe's death, a retrospective review of the famous journalist's experiment of campus life suggested that *I Am Charlotte Simmons*' modest impact could be explained by the fact that, untrue to his convictions that the social novel is the only valuable literary genre to make a difference in contemporary America, Wolfe did not fully grasp and reproduce the surroundings he witnessed. More specifically, the critic found fault with the fact that the students on Wolfe's reported campus still used fax machines instead of computers and the internet in 2004 (Nardini). So, the argument went, the 74-year-old writer (who had wanted *I Am Charlotte Simmons* to be his first book written on a computer) failed to provide his readers with a realistic portrayal of campus life, offering them only an allegory. Whether this was true or not probably has little to do with the choice of fax machines over the internet.

Wolfe in Student's Clothing

One of the narratively as well as politically challenging things to consider when analyzing Prose's *Blue Angel* and Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is the perspective. The former novel, about a man accused of sexually harassing a young girl, is written by a woman – and a declared feminist at that. The latter, a *bildungsroman* about the maturation of a young and innocent girl in the jungle of the campus, is written by a man – an elderly

gentleman who is not quite keeping up with Hi-tech, if we are to give credit to *The Washington Post* article quoted above. Wolfe is known for his provocative style, embraced with the declared purpose of achieving a novel of deep social observation that would expose behavior and mores in contemporary America. His critical observation is obvious in the novel that established him as a fiction author, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, set in New York, a book whose title is a literary reference to W. M. Thackeray's 1848 *Vanity Fair*, the ultimate satire of English society and manners in the nineteenth century. Wolfe can be said to have borrowed something else from Thackeray, who chose this subtitle for his book – *A Novel without a Hero*. If the Victorian author deconstructed the convention of the protagonist's importance, the American journalist casts multiple unheroic characters in his plots, frequently transforming them into caricatures or puppets in his exercise of social observation.

In his groundbreaking collection about *The New Journalism* of 1973, Wolfe postulates four important features that good reportage and good fiction (in the realistic vein) should share: telling the story scene-by-scene; lots of dialogue, as naturally sounding and, therefore, as unconventional as possible; avoiding the illusion of complete objectivity; and relying on genuine material. This last feature attracted the most controversial reactions to Wolfe's style, as it implied that the writer-journalist actually investigated the subject and employed first-hand experience that allowed him to actually get into character.

His writing technique allows Wolfe to explore central themes, such as status. In many of his novels, like in his non-fictional writing, Wolfe aims to demonstrate that, while the traditional class system has become less important and hierarchies have been permeated successfully since the post-war period, status consciousness is as powerful as ever, in all spheres, from the world of business to the university campus. In *The Pump House Gang*, for example, a collection of essays in which he explores the lives of new status symbols, Wolfe gets for the first time into the mind of a young woman. "The Life and Hard Times of a Teenage London Society Girl" anticipates the experiment Wolfe develops in *I Am Charlotte Simmons.*

1968, when *The Pump House Gang* was published, was the year of revolutions – political, social, and sexual. Wolfe describes the period as

one in which the massive cultural changes and shifts in mentalities permeated all walks of life, and, among these radical cultural changes, the sexual revolution ranked high in his interests. In the 1970s, he chronicles another revolution, that of individualism, for which he coins the term the "me" decade (Wolfe, "The 'Me' Decade"), an age in which the political involvement of previous years is replaced by political disillusionment, especially after the Watergate scandal involving President Nixon.

I Am Charlotte Simmons can be viewed as a novel which perhaps best illustrates Wolfe's observation of how sexuality became institutionalized in the time span between the 60s and the 2000s. Published in 2004, it confronts the dark side of higher education, to paraphrase a scholarly article quoted above, even if it cannot be stylistically included in the Dark Academia subgenre. The story is set in the aftermath of the famous White House sex scandal, but less obviously so than in Roth's *The Human Stain*, where "the ecstasy of sanctimony" is a Zeitgeist, and, while moral hypocrisy is projected against the issue of sexual harassment, it hits hard in accusations of racism, too. It is also true that Wolfe's 2004 novel is set against another, slightly less famous, but no less significant, case of sexual harassment involving the American political elite. In 2003, when Arnold Schwarzenegger was re-elected governor of California, the *Los Angeles Times* published accusations of groping made by six different women, which the former actor denied, continuing his career – an attitude which was not very different from Bill Clinton's own attitude. The president's refusal to resign came to be regarded in a more critical light during the rise of the #MeToo Movement. The impact of this movement touched the governor of California too, who admitted his guilt in the 2023 Netflix documentary *Arnold*. Looking back on this story, Carla Hall, the *LA Times* journalist who exposed Schwarzenegger in 2003 during the California re-election campaign, draws the readers' attention that the climate was very different, with an investigation on the sexual harassment of a very successful man being then "uncharted territory:" "This was 14 years before the #MeToo movement would upend much of society's tolerance for the sexual misconduct of powerful men (and some women)" (Hall).

In Wolfe's novel, investigative journalism seems to be more successful than its real-life counterpart was in 2003-2004, with a student revealing the scandal around the governor of California's sexual abuse of a young female campus resident the night before the college's commencement ceremony. Adam Gellin, a student from a working-class background, writes a convincing article for the campus newspaper, suggestively entitled "The Night of the Skullfuck," which is soon picked up by the national press, revealing a scandal which starts with sexual misconduct and ends with bribery and blackmail, a scandal that eventually brings the powerful politician down and ruins his ambitions for presidency. Hoyt Thorpe, the golden student who actually caught the governor in the act, is punished for his duplicity when the well-paid job he had been promised on Wall Street in exchange for his silence evaporates once Adam's article is published. But this punishment is not to be read in clear-cut moralizing terms, as Wolfe is not favoring any of his characters, displaying their thoughts and innermost secrets with entomological curiosity.

I Am Charlotte Simmons is a critique of contemporary American campus culture, Wolfe presenting the following composition: half of the students are privileged and come from elitist backgrounds, their social status passing for a sense of belonging to a cloistered circle of brothers and sisters, while the other half see the university as a means to acquire social status and wealth, or at least to experience physical pleasure. The impression of an exclusivist environment that makes up the imaginary Dupont, a fictional version of an Ivy League College, is suggested early in the novel, when Hoyt admires the campus where he studies after his family has sacrificed their life savings:

> The moon had turned the university's buildings into a vast chiaroscuro of dark shapes brought out in all their sumptuousness by a wash of pale white gold. . . . Walls thick as a castle's! It was a stronghold. He, Hoyt, was one of a charmed circle, that happy few who could enter the stronghold at will . . . and feel its invincibility in their bones. Not only that, he was in the innermost ring of that charmed circle. (9)

The description is deliberately reminiscent of a classical Gothic fiction atmosphere, where the sense of awe in readers was caused by the

solitary majesty of the landscape and architecture, foregrounding a sense of mystery and escapism. Hoyt's pride in this "moonwashed kingdom" reinforces the powerful social symbolism of the campus environment, whose very *raison d'être* seems to be that of keeping out the unwanted outsiders who invade it and undermine its feudal-like system that protects 'the happy few.' The picture of grand buildings, with details that include gargoyles for good measure, is spiced with more modern details, such as the dome of the basketball arena or the glass and steel of the neuroscience center, but, to the lucky and loving insider, even those odd buildings "looked great" (10), blending old-money polish with the new gleam of celebrity culture – sports stars and Nobel prize winners.

The innermost circle of the academia is contrasted with the primitive landscape of Alleghany County, hidden, isolated and "perched high up in the hills of western North Carolina" (11), the home of the outsider par excellence, the novel's female protagonist Charlotte Simmons. This parallel universe is described as attractive for the few intrepid tourists because of its "primeval beauty" (11). The place is literally primeval, as "Paleontologists reckon that the New River is one of the two or three oldest rivers in the world. According to local lore, it is called New because the first white man to lay eyes on it was Thomas Jefferson's cousin Peter, and to him its very existence was news" (11). Ironically, the two worlds, of the expensive and elegant campus and of the virgin forest, share a common trait – they are both impregnable fortresses: the former is the engineered result of a long-standing practice of social exclusion, while the latter is the natural result of geography: "Not all that long ago the mountains were a wall that cut Alleghany County off from people in the rest of North Carolina so completely, they called it the Lost Province," this "air of remoteness" persisting even after the modern highways were built (11).

Charlotte Simmons, as virginal as the forests in which she grew and as primeval in her naivety as the New River, arrives at Dupont with a full governmental scholarship in equal pursuit of social upgrading and sexual initiation. The novel was criticized for its failure to implement Wolfe's plan, that of offering an accurate, anthropological portrayal of life at an elite university (Adams), the result being a caricature instead. Rather than

an investigation of life on campus, Wolfe succeeds in giving us a comic version, full of stereotypes, in which "all intimacy is rotten," another reviewer believes (Nehring). In the same reviewer's opinion, the message of the book, even if it claims to follow the echoes of the sexual revolution amongst today's younger generation, goes awry: "When . . . an older man has sex with a younger woman, it is, of course, cynical. But when a younger man has sex with a younger woman, it is equally cynical." This cynicism is reinforced by the scientific parable students are made to witness in the lab, where the Nobel Prize-winning professor Victor Starling gives the lecture called "Introduction to neuroscience: Descartes, Darwin, and the Mind-Body Problem." Starling demonstrates that cultural parastimuli are more important than DNA, by showing how normal cats can be sexually aroused if they are in the company of cats who are artificially kept in heat. The lab scene shows that Wolfe's highlighting the sex-crazed atmosphere of the campus as the top feature of his novel is part of a more complex social experiment. Another critic (Nardini) believes Wolfe is not successful in inhabiting his heroine's body and mind because of his contempt for all his characters, whether they are the innocent but eager Charlotte, the brazen Hoyt, or the boorish Schwarzenegger-like Republican politician.

However, Wolfe seems to remain true to his theories about the culture of individualism, in which former social and political involvement is replaced by a more callous, self-centered desire to remodel and elevate one's own self and, in the process, become more gentrified. In this novel, Wolfe firmly places the individualist mindset on the campus, which becomes a microcosm of the entire American society. Charlotte sets out to make a name for herself at the university while remaining true to her principles: after all, her mother has taught her to say "I am Charlotte Simmons" if anyone tries to tempt or corrupt her. But, as the book progresses, the now integrated and gentrified Charlotte "cares less about being happy than about being observed to be happy" (Nehring), a social perversion she picked alongside her neuroscience classes. The novel ends with Charlotte dating the sports star of the college, Jojo, something that facilitates her acceptance in the sorority initially denied because of her humble origins. Counting her blessings and managing her changing

priorities, Charlotte no longer embraces the initial values she shared with Adam, when they were both critical of the class snobbery that was all-pervasive on campus and wanted to expose the darkness of the academia, making it brighter, as in more truthful. Instead, she concludes that the most important thing for her is to be considered special by her peers, even if for the wrong, or superficial, reasons.

Conclusion

Etymologically, the word 'crisis' contains a paradox: *krinein,* in Greek, refers to a decisive moment or an important decision to be made, therefore stressing its potential positive side. Just as education scholars claim that facing the dark side of academia does not imply a dystopian scenario, but taking advantage of a challenge, the crises around campus fiction may indicate a moment of great importance, a turning point. There may be a multiple crisis on the campus, as there is a crisis which the campus novel as a genre is facing, but the future of both looks brighter. The dark side, or "the blind angle," helps campus fiction reinvent itself by addressing critically and in a balanced manner the variety of crises on actual campuses, as reflections of crises faced by society in general, providing not only questions, but creative solutions. Even if these solutions are sometimes controversial, as the analysis of the two campus novels proved, they are valuable because they help readers put things into perspective.

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