

# NEWSLETTER

## TESOL-UKRAINE

TEACHERS OF ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF

OTHER LANGUAGES IN UKRAINE

### CONTENTS

**Editorial** .....3

### ENGLISH UNDER GLOBALIZATION:

**The Importance of English in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century... Especially for Young Ukrainians.**

*J.Noel Heermance, Professor of English Lincoln University, USA.....* .....3

**“Local and Global impact - environmental and climatic effects on lakes as tools in education. Outdoor teaching”** Uppsala University, Erken Laboratory, arranged a course for young teachers and teacher students.

*Svitlana Matviichuk, a teacher of English, Rivne specialized school № 15 .....6*

**“What Must I Do to Attain Eternal Life And How Can I Find Joy Here on Earth?”**

*A Mini-Guide Book for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Life in Ukraine... and*

*Every Other Country on Earth as Well*

*J.Noel Heermance, Professor of English Lincoln University, USA.....* .....13

### METHODOLOGY:

**The 2008/09 Kryvyi Rih ELT: Innovative Methods and Approaches Program**

Joint Ukrainian-American project.

*A.Malygin, teacher at the English Language and Methodology Department, Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University.....* .....16

**Welcome to Apples4theteacher Newsletter.**

*Judy Miller.....* .....17

### THE WORLD OF LITERATURE:

*From the literary circle formed during Alumni Conference held April 21 in Kyiv*

**Neomythological World of N. Wallace’s Drama**

*Anna Gaidash Candidate of Philology.....* .....22

**Historical Landscape in N. Wallace’s play ONE FLEA SPARE.**

*Anna Gaidash Candidate of Philology.....* .....27

### PARTNERSHIP NEWS:

**Hawai’i TESOL/TESOL Ukraine Partneship.**

*Sally La Luzerne-Oi, liaison from 2001 to fall 2007.....* .....31

**A Greeting Letter from Jean Kirschenmann, Hawai’i TESOL Liaison.....** .....35

**ANNOUNCEMENTS.....** .....36

## **THE WORLD OF LITERATURE:**

### **NEOMYTHOLOGICAL WORLD OF N. WALLACE's DRAMA**

“Theatre is ideally suited to the mapping of potential worlds, for, within the defined parameters of performance time and place – its focus on now and here – a multiplicity of timescales and places mesh together. Theatre gives form to, and foregrounds, Otherness. It is a place of transformation, a *tabula rasa* that returns always to a state of blankness, yet is forever haunted by possibility. Through its highlighting of transformability, and of the making anew that follows each act of erasure, theatre is also an apposite medium within which women can give free expression to tongues that have repeatedly been silenced, and explore their current and future possibilities” [2, p. 2]. These words are a good introduction into the concept of contending discourses in a heterotopic space represented by the American cultural tradition. One of such discourses, quite recent in the theatrical experience of the XX century, is modern mythology.

Neomythological consciousness is one of the current trends in the fictional landscape of the twentieth century. Like neomythological prose and poetry, dramatic literature of the kind often finds its subject in the classical and archaic myths. Obviously contemporary American playwrights do not simply incorporate famous mythological plots and stories in their plays, but revise mostly historical facts and events of the quite recent past. So does Naomi Wallace, who comes from Kentucky, and lives time and again in London. Better known in Great Britain, than in her homeland – the USA – Naomi Wallace, a political playwright, largely relies in her plays on her American experience. Her work is obscure and at the same time daring for American stages. Despite the fact that her plays often set both in the USA and Great Britain they are supposed to involve the entire universe (especially evident in pieces *Slaughter City* and *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*). Naomi's idea of space is embodied in redefining the past. We will see how historical events that constitute the basis for her plays will be transformed into different, “Other” reality.

In her Mobil prize-winning play *Slaughter City* (1996) Naomi Wallace mixes reality and dream, the radical and the mystic depicting a drama about life in the meat-packing industry. *Slaughter City*, modeled after the actual Meat Packing Company of Kentucky, is set by author's definition “now and then”. So the historical landscape is indefinite and already presupposes temporal shifts. Let us see how these shifts of time function in the text. The play has a two-tiered structure: the main plot depicts the real experience of Louisville beef-boners. In the opening scene of its American production we could see how “bloody pig heads hung from a circular track round the ceiling”. In

this main plot line the audience is exposed of the relations of the workers – two tough women, Roach and Maggot, and one man Brandon. They discuss their personal and political troubles, sometimes in anger they even attack the pigs' heads with fingers and knives and also attack each other with cruel words. Probably that's why the drama is titled like this, implying not only cruelty of the meat-processing plant industry, but also the whole country if not the world. According to Roediger's opinion, "For Wallace, meatpacking is the industrial site at which urban and rural, old and new, meet in a context of disassembly and blood. It is where the life-and-death battles which workers fight against each other and against their bosses can be rendered in all of their complexity and drama" [5]. Neomythological consciousness is expressed in the combination of docudrama and surrealism. As G. Lester revises, Ms. Wallace would interview employees of the actual Fischer Meat Packing Company of Kentucky who were out on strike and it is their "eyewitness accounts of life inside the slaughterhouses (that) form the basis for almost all the episodes in the play" [3, P. 4].

Beyond the naturalistic writing *Slaughter City* is full of mysterious visions of the past represented by several symbolic characters of the subplot: a pregnant Irish Textile Worker, a Mephistophelean Sausage Man, and a mysterious character called Cod, who appears to be a fourth worker of the main plot line. It's actually Cod who is the protagonist in the drama. Found in the exposition of the play as a male and a scab Cod gradually shows the hidden gender of a female and the soul of a Wobbly.

Her story takes place in the distant past: we plunge into almost empty setting with the Textile Worker and Cod. From what they say we understand the characters don't hear each other, moreover, thirty years old Cod appears to be **yet-to-be** born child of Textile Worker – a woman in her twenties. This barely understandable prelude is abruptly over and the action is transferred to the present, where the main plot is being building up around the work in the packinghouse. We do not hear again about Textile Worker and Cod until the Second Act. Again Cod tries to attract her mother's attention though in vain. Yet so far it's not quite clear what is going on. There is an important stage direction here: "It is the same dream / scene as the prelude. The Textile Worker is the central focus, but we also see Maggot, Roach and Brandon working slowly, in silence. They are not aware of the scene going on around them, though they chant with the women" [7, P. 247].

The resolution of the Textile Worker's theme is found in the similar act of temporal interrelation, demonstrated by Cod's terrifying story of birth (very elliptical in its linguistic structure): "The fire started (*in a rag bin*)... Mostly young women. My mother jumped. A lot of them did... Nothing below them but concrete. My mother landed on top of some others. She wasn't crushed up like the rest of them. I was inside her. She was dead, but I wasn't. When the doctors found out I was in there, they ventilated her for five months. It was an experiment. They'd already filled out her death certificate. Then they cut her open and took me out... I was born from a dead woman" [7, P. 254]. In the final scene the enigma of Cod's birth is eventually clarified by

coincidence of past and present, which creates a specific atmosphere of life's eternity. Ready to save her child by any means the Textile Worker promises the Sausage Man who is a symbolic figure of hell and death to give Cod into his disposal. The play ends at the moment when simultaneously with the jump of Cod's mother the workers of the Slaughter City see the fire and fight it. Citing the words by the director of the American premiere of the play, Ron Daniels, "The images are very violent, and Naomi wanted to create a world that is hell" [3, P. 5]. Lester argues that *Slaughter City* is "a play of magic realism, steeped in enigmatic symbolism and small miracles which stand as oases in a wasteland of gore and decay" [3, P. 5].

Obviously in *Slaughter City* the playwright expresses a protest against labor exploitation and gender role models. Besides, *Slaughter City* is one of the few American plays that provides an attachment of a labor history bibliography. Regarding its genre and poetic techniques one can find elements of documentary drama and surrealism while violence and horror are related to metaphor and symbolism.

Production of *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* in 1998 brought Naomi Wallace the Macarthur Genius Award in the following year. The action of this play is set this time only in the past during the Depression year of 1936, in American town with no prospects for the future and people who have no hope. The only thing teenagers who are protagonists can be interested in is to outrun the passing trains.

Naturalistic grounding of *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* (1998) is also connected as in *Slaughter City* with unprecedented imagery. This play works out three temporal dimensions what creates the overlapping of various contexts.

In the exposition 16-year-old Dalton Chance is depicted imprisoned for killing his schoolmate and girlfriend Pace Creagan. She is a tough-talking girl who convinces Dalton to outrun a locomotive. The first dimension is demonstrated by the circular dramatic structure. The drama exposes and concludes with scenes in Dalton's prison cell. We can see how time both passes in the present of Dalton's consciousness and remains alive in his memories.

The second one is a main plot line – Pace and Dalton plan to test themselves by trying to outrun the train on a trestle 100 feet above a dry creek bed. Here we find out later that after the running Pace plunged down from the trestle. Feeling remorse and responsibility after her action, Dalton declares that it was him who killed Pace. According to Oseland, relationship of Pace and Dalton remind "incantation-like encounters" [4]. He suggests that Pace's attempts to teach Dalton to run oncoming trains is "dangerous action that becomes a metaphor for dodging sexual awakening. Trestle culminates in a chilling climax that cuts to the core of the American penchant for repressing sex, laughter and rebellion <...>" [4].

Eventually episodic scenes of Dalton's family life support the third temporal dimension. Dalton's father is depicted as a grim unemployed who wastes his time

making shadow puppets on a wall; Dalton's mother's hands turn blue from working in a dish factory. This textual layer provides an illustration of social depression of the 1930s both in the lives of older and younger generations. We will see further "how economy and environment can ruin adolescent dreams and desires".

Similar to *Slaughter City*, *The Trestle* is constructed mainly through narrative recalls and flashbacks. This time the playwright adds a deep-in introspection of the male protagonist. Therefore the play is very confessional. Achronology of the plot line is achieved by the incoherent and diffused dramatic enunciations of memory. The memory system in Naomi Wallace's drama is implicitly connected with the childhood, because kids like to state something and repeat it many times. In Dalton's verse we distinguish the recurrence of Pace's ideas on behalf of history, past and time in general. For instance Dalton insists, that at school they teach kids to speak "Not about world but about things" to be precise just the names of things.

In spite of long preparations Dalton is afraid to run the night they had planned. So Pace would run it alone. Dalton's memory recreates the whole scene in its naturalistic detailing. As long as Dalton watches Pace run, she will run, because this is her only opportunity to express herself in this empty world. Pace has told Dalton, "We can't watch ourselves. We can't remember ourselves. Not like we need to" [8, P. 337]. At the moment when Dalton stops watching her and turns around Pace, being betrayed, did plunge under the trestle. The next scene is really amazing – Pace's Spirit tells the story of her life after death:

*Pace: ...It was dark... he stood over her. He was shaking her. But she wouldn't get up... He gave up and put his hand on her breast. (Beat) And then, well. I saw it; he kissed her... I never let Dalton kiss me, but she did. And then, I felt him kiss her... But his mouth was inside of mine. And I let him... [8, P. 318].*

The overlapping of characters' distorted bodies with the discordance of their claims works out quite surrealistic vision of time. Resolution in death, which has often been the distinguishing trait of Southern literature, "however, offers change as an ever-present possibility" [1, P. 166]. The characters in *The Trestle* "search through the memories to locate the events that have shaped their lives. This search through the past becomes the present action..." [6, P. 28].

The final scene of the play demonstrates inverse relationship of the teenagers: if in the previous citation we could observe how surreal becomes reality, now we are exposed of their never ending interplay. Pace's Spirit instructs Dalton to experience sexual intercourse with her ghostly self:

*Pace: Let me inside you.*

*Dalton: Go on. (He takes a sharp intake of breath)*

*Pace: Does it hurt?*

*Dalton: Yeah.*

*Pace: Good. I can't stop.*

*(Dalton moans again, as though in both pain and pleasure.)*

*Dalton: I'll make you dress wet -*

*Pace: Can you feel me?*

*Dalton: Yes.*

*Pace: Where? Tell me. Where can you feel me?*

*Dalton: Inside. Everywhere. Pace. (Beat) You're inside me.*

*(Dalton comes. They are quiet some moments.)*

*Pace: There. We're something else now. You see? We're in another place [8, P. 342].*

I presume this temporal dimension represented by Pace's Spirit, constitutes the mythological consciousness of the whole drama.

The neomythological consciousness of N. Wallace's drama is read in the overlapping of the past and present what creates a hypertext. Both *Slaughter City* and *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* reifies the literary semantics of alternative worlds.

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