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Trivial Romance as an Archetypal Genre, Fiction of Dubravka Ugrešić

Abstract: The analysis deals with main narrative strategies used by Dubravka Ugrešić in her fiction. In the first part of the text it focuses on the ways Ugrešić uses popular genres, in particular fairy tales and trivial romances. Her use of trivial romance is particularly interesting here, and the way she makes a pastiche of the genre discerning its potential subversiveness. The other specific narrative procedure Dubravka Ugrešić uses in her fiction is a parodic rewriting of some well known literary texts, which serve here as narrative models for a sophisticated literary game. The text also explores the ways in which Ugrešić constructs her narratives as postmodern self-conscious fiction.

The other topic of this paper is the way Dubravka Ugrešić deals with feminine issues in her writings. Besides her interest in trivial romances as a genre which attracts women, she also pays significant attention to the female attitude towards writing, and women's status in literature.

Key words: literary genre, trivial romance, postmodernism, metatextuality, intertextuality, women, gender.

Writing as a trivial romance

At the beginning of "A Love Story", one of the early prose works of Dubravka Ugrešić, there is a quotation from Márquez: "...I write in order to be loved. I believe that is the writer's fundamental yearning". The same sentence is also once again repeated in the story, this time by the narrator, and at that point, it becomes obvious for the reader that this claim, although initially coming from another writer, is actually addressed directly to Dubravka Ugrešić's readers. In fact, it is obvious that the author uses this sentence to invite her readers to become participants in a specific form of a love story; or rather, to join a love-triangle, created by the writer, a reader and *les belles lettres*.

As it is the case with any love triangle, the relations between participants in this one are highly complex, which is a topic generally discussed in a number of theoretical books dealing with these issues. Some of these books are proving that in this triangle it is the reader who is the most important one, the others claim that it is the writer who is the most important, while the third ones are stating that it is only *les belles-lettres* that counts. But if we takes *Steffie Speck in Jaws of Life*, or some of the stories written by Dubravka Ugrešić's collections,^[1] it will be very clear that from her point of view, the most important one in this triangle is – a love story. As it is the case in the story with the same title, "A Love Story", where author-narrator, wishing to be loved, sends to her

reader (here named Bublik) literary texts as love messages (in the same way her mother was giving her peaces of paper with kisses made of lipstick-traces). For Dubravka Ugrešić, every writer, is in the same position as Cirano de Bergerac, who writes his love letters knowing that it is only through them he can realize his wish to be loved.

“A Love Story” speaks of writing, and in the first place, about relations between a writer and his or her audience. The narrator (who could easily be also seen as the author herself, but it is not really justified to talk about author-narrator in this case) is courting certain Bublik with her attempts to write for him a piece of fiction which he might like. Namely, Bublik is a literary critic who thinks that *les belles-lettres*, that is literature, is dead, hence the narrator overtakes a responsible task to revive it again (like a sleeping beauty from some fairy-tale), and thus earn Bublik’s appreciation and love. She offers him several various texts written according to different generic and stylistic norms, but none of them is accepted by him with approval. Bublik reads them all, but does not like any of her stories. In the end, it turns out that the problem is not with the writer, nor with *les belles-lettres*, but with Bublik himself, who simply is not a good reader; he is unable to sign a “fictional agreement” with the author,^[ii] which means to renounce the existing logic of everyday experiences and accept as relevant those assumptions upon which a possible world of a given literary text is being build. Narrator has to liberate herself from such a reader in order to be able to continue with her writing, so in the end of the story Bublik is turned into a small ball of hot dough and simply – swallowed by the narrator. Only in an imaginary way, of course. This final scene corresponds with one of the important scenes from the beginning of the story when the narrator, in a symbolic dream, peels of her own face as a mask in order to swallow it, turned into a small ball. Thus her initial renouncement of herself, made in the name of love, and the later coming back to her own, true self, are both achieved with the same kind of fantastic intervention of literature in the realm of assumed reality. The point is that the narrator in “A Love Story”, within her own immediate reality, always uses only literary devises to achieve her means. When she wants to seduce Bublik, she does that by writing literature; when she wants to liberate herself from him, she uses literary devices and performs fantastic metamorphosis (in the same way she gets even with some nasty neighbor, at first by introducing her into her stories, and then turning her into some strange fictional beings). In that way, Dubravka Ugrešić’s demonstrates in her writings that possible worlds of literature are superior to the world(s) of immediate experiences, which is also the way to violate and problematize the border between these worlds in her fiction.

“A Love Story”, although written for an early book of Dubravka Ugrešić, still keeps its significance as one of poetically relevant texts in her writings. Both the short novel *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*, and the collection of short stories *Life is a Fairy Tale*, are based upon the same assumptions as “A Love Story”. Using once again conventions of trivial romances, we can say that in all these texts the real object of seduction is actually literature itself. This relation becomes quite visible in narrative strategies Dubravka Ugrešić uses in these texts. In a manner clearly recognizable as characteristically postmodern, she often employs some kind of literary pre-text, usually a classical piece of fiction (as it is the case in *Life is a Fairy Tale*), or some well known genre (like in *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*), or even a recognizable set of narrative practices (like in “A Love Story”). In all these cases, it is literature, *les belles-lettres*, which appears to be the real object of author’s interest.

Trivial romance as a female genre and how to use it

The short novel *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life* relies on the same poetical assumptions we know from “A Love Story”, but in this case, literary game is focused on one specific, sub-literary genre which, being read mostly by women, is considered to be specifically feminine. *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life* is actually written as a pastiche of trivial romances, and Dubravka Ugrešić plays here with the basic conventions of the genre. In his study *Postmodernist Fiction* Brian McHale speaks about science fiction as “postmodernism’s noncanonized or ‘low art’ double, its sister-genre in the same sense that the popular detective thriller is modernist fiction’s sister-genre”.^[iii] With her novel, Dubravka Ugrešić shows that the trivial romance can also have a similar function when we speak about a new kind of main stream, women-centered fiction that has been written since late 1960s. Parody is the main narrative strategy she uses for that.

“Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies”, says Linda Hutcheon^[iv] in one of her books on postmodernism. This paradoxical nature of parody is closely related with the basic attitude of Dubravka Ugrešić towards trivial romances, which is very ironic and critical, but at the same time it recognizes and foregrounds certain subversive potentials of the genre itself.

Although transformed in a parodic way, conventions of the trivial romance frame *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*. But it is important to note here that to follow the rules of the genre does not mean only to write a story about love affair which is supposed to have a happy ending. As Janice Radaway in her study *Reading romances*^[v] clearly shows, real romance has to fulfill a number of readers’ expectations, because they know exactly what they want to get from their favorite books. Many women interviewed by Radaway stated that they often leafed through the book before they would buy it, reading on the spot not only a couple of the first, but also several last pages, in order to be sure that the book really had a happy ending, and that they would not be disappointed in the end. They disliked books with too much violence, and books with too much promiscuity.

Radaway in her book comes to the conclusion that the most favored plot in romances is usually centered on one relation, a man and a woman, where misunderstandings between them are not only possible, but expected; still, events are supposed to develop without excessive aggressiveness (for example, it is not really acceptable for a hero to rape the heroine, who is supposed then to fall in love with him deeply and eternally). A preferred hero has to have manly disposition, and to have authority, but he also has to be able to show gentleness towards women. Heroine has to be beautiful, but she usually is not aware of that, and does not use her beauty in a seductive way. She usually has some ordinary occupation, being at the same time quite able to accept any kind of outstanding social role, imposed on her through the prospective relation with the man of her life.

Among various conventions of the genre, the most important one, which is making it potentially subversive, is related with the way a story is being told. Namely, romance is a story told from a female point of view, which until quite late in XX c. was not so often to be found, nor it was strongly promoted in the main-stream literary production. In a romance, everything is told from a feminine perspective, events are told from the heroine’s perspective, and persons described from her point of view (which often means that male bodies are being seen and presented as objects), hence female readers can easily

identify with this kind of narration. In other words, a woman, considered to be the Other in the existing social order, as well as in so many acclaimed works of the main stream literature, is presented here as the real subject of the narration. Still, this potential subversiveness of the genre is rarely used, and it seems that both its authors and its readers have very little consciousness of it.

It is exactly these subversive potentials of the genre that Dubravka Ugrešić emphasizes in her novel *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*, showing that there is a “secret connection” between conventional forms of trivial romances and a new kind of women-centered narratives which tend to address consciously women’s issues as literary topics. This aspect of narration is even commented in one of the final authorial remarks in the novel: “The author endeavored to combine stitches of *romance* fiction, in which female characters are forever searching, searching until they finally happily find what they seek, and stitches of woman’s fiction, in which female characters also search and search – but never find what they seek, or, if they do, only with great difficulty.”^[vi] The connection with main-stream women’s narratives is also emphasized in the novel through very clear statements of the author-narrator that many of her friends and acquaintances asked her to write something about women, a “women’s story”. (But this point has also another function in the novel, which brings us back to the quotation from Márquez from the beginning of “A Love Story”; it has to prove that the writer in this case is only willing to fulfill her readers’ wishes, thus earning their love in the end.)

Parodic reshaping of basic conventions of romances in Ugrešić’s novel starts already with her choice of the heroine. Steffie Speck is a character that can be easily perceived as a typical reader of romances, but not as the heroine of one. She is presented as an ordinary, average girl, one of those women who write to their favorite fashion magazine for an advice when they have a problem. Significantly enough, similar letter is used at the beginning of the narration to sketch both the heroine’s personality, and the plot of the novel: “*I am 25 years old and a typist by a profession. I live with my aunt. I think I’m ugly, although some people tell me I’m not. I’m different from everybody my age: they’re all married or have boyfriends, I have no one. I’m lonely and sad, and don’t know what to do about it. Please advice.*” Steffie^[vii] And that is the whole story; Steffies Speck searches for her Mr. Right. In order to find him, she is going for advices to her female friends and to her aunt; she randomly and unsuccessfully dates some men; then attempts to concentrate more on herself instead of a search for a boyfriend; and finally finds one at quite an unexpected place.

At the beginning of *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life* there is rather unusual generic label, which says that it is “a patchwork novel”. Apart from the fact that such a label emphasizes fragmentarity of the structure, it also has some quite far reaching poetic connotations; together with a number of other indications in the text, it points to an intentional comparison of writing and sowing. Author-narrator also continually compares her typewriter with a sowing machine. She speaks about her heroine as if she were a kind of cheap material, chintz. The text of the novel is structured as cutting models which can be found in some fashion magazines (like *Burda*, for example), and a reader can find at the beginning of the novel a set of instructions, similar to those for cutting, which are suggesting him when and how to intervene in the text:

“..... *Cut* the text along the lines as desired

-.-.-.-.-. *Stretch*: the text may be stretched in any direction in case of unfulfilled expectations, and with the help of an ordinary damp imagination.

..... *Take in*: the text may be taken in as required with critical darts.

////////// *Pleat*: make large thematic stitches on either side of the author's seam. Then draw the lower threads in a little and arrange the pleats evenly." [viii]

These and similar instructions are suggesting the reader that he/she is free to "saw" the text according his/her wishes, that is to intervene in it according his/her expectations. But implications this gesture are much more serious that in can look like at the first glance. This funny game with the reader turns out to be one among other forms of significant, intentional violation of the assumed border between fictional and real world, a tendency we continually recognize in Ugrešić's fiction.

Comparisons between the text and sewing instructions also point to the stereotypical features of romances, which are taken here as a pre-text, and they also indicate the cultural contexts in which romances are rooted. Dubravka Ugrešić has in mind here a kind of women's magazines which significantly influence framing and promotion of clichéd perceptions on reality, and in particular, on women, supporting the same stereotypes upon which romances are being build. (The connection is emphasized here also by a mere fact that many fashion magazines of this type tend to publish a romance in each issue). These magazines promote socially acceptable images of women, who supposedly manage to be equally successful in all the areas, but in the first place remain to be a good wives and a mothers. Such a woman is supposed to be beautiful and attractive (which she can manage, only if she is careful with her diet, and follows closely given advices from her magazine concerning make up and clothing), but at the same time should not neglect her basic duties as a housewife (where her magazine is also helping her with its advices). [ix] A woman who would match such requirements would be very similar to a typical heroine of trivial romances, only women's magazines suggest that it is also possible in real life.

It turns out, actually, that in the case of women's magazines, as well as in the case of trivial romances, readers tend to develop some kind of a double perspective towards these texts, as well as towards their own given reality. On the one hand, it is quite clear to them that behind many stories on women they can find in their magazines, as well as behind usual plots of the favored romances, there is a recognizable fairy-tale core. Many readers state that they read romances in order to get at least a short escape from every day reality. On the other hand, they do not question the actuality of presentations offered to them by their favored magazines, or beloved romances; offered stories are taken with confidence, often literally. Thus many readers can identify themselves with their heroines and the situations they find themselves in, as well as they can take as trustworthy various claims and advices from their magazines.

This double perspective is reflected in *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*. Everything that happens in the novel is filtered through double lenses, and everyday perspective of a common reader is continually opposed to the fairy-tale kind of a narration. From this opposition, which Dubravka Ugrešić creates with an outstanding sense of humor and ability to use details, stems the fundamental parodic effect produced in the novel. It is

important to note here that it is not only romances as a genre which are being parodied here, but also the female reality itself, or, more precisely, a number of clichéd situations related with characteristic feminine experiences. Thus a statement of the author-narrator that “life dictates and writer is only writing down”, apart from obvious intention to ironize similar kind of statements, [x] in the novel gets a concrete meaning. It points to a paradoxical relation towards reality which is created in romances, as a kind of fairy tales for which their readers believe that they can come true. According to Janice Radaway, realist qualities of trivial romances are mainly rooted in their attitude towards language, for which their readers believe that it actually reflects reality. This language is highly clichéd, it uses quite simple vocabulary and standard syntax, while romances in their narrative proceedings tend to follow rather simplified forms of realist narration. [xi]

But the clichéd nature of trivial romances is not visible only in the kind of language they use, but also in the basic assumptions of the cultural model they rely on, and whose values their readers do not tend to question. And it is a point in which Dubravka Ugrešić addresses the problem of romances in a new way, showing that there is a number of clichés related with the genre which are used so frequently because of the demands imposed to the genre by readers themselves.

Writing and Re-writing

A collection of short stories *Life is a Fairy Tale*, which was published after *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*, is also based upon the poetic assumption that literature is mainly dealing with literature and not with reality as its primary referent; only, in this case, literary pre-texts are of a different kind. All the stories collected under this title have a literary pre-text taken from the realm of so-called “high literature”, and many of them are some very famous pieces. Thus the first story, “A Hot Dog in a Warm Bun” takes as its pre-text Gogol’s “Nose”; “Who Am I” relies on *Alice in the Wonderland*; and “The Kreutzer Sonata” evokes Tolstoy’s story with the same title. The story “Life is a Fairy Tale” contains evocations to Borges and Amos Tutuola, but is actually follows the logic of a classical fairy tale, while the story “Land me Your Character” is in fact a literary replica of a famous feminist book *Madwoman in the Attic*. As it was the case with *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*, the book *Life is a Fairy Tale* has also a strange subtitle, highly unusual generic label *Metatereixies*. As the author herself explains at the end of the book, the term is taken from the title of some old collection of hand-copied extracts from Latin ecclesiastical works, made by one Abbot Adalbéron. “The only part that comes from the Abbot himself are the few sentences he interposed between the lines as he carried out his unusual penance. These are simple and touching (I hunger; I thirst; God, release me from this penance; my shoulder is numb; God, when will this end; and the like). The charm of reading this booklet is indescribable, consisting as it does in imagining the background of the poor Abbot’s scribal conditions”. For the title of the strange book – which obviously problematizes issues like originality, authorship, authenticity, etc. – the author takes a peculiar word *metatereixies*, which cannot be found in any existing dictionary; she translates it here as a “metatextual-therapeutic tale”, thus marking her text as a postmodern self-conscious piece of fiction, but doing it in her characteristic, parodic way. The question if poor Abbot Adalbéron existed at all, or he is also a part of the game being a visible representative of one apocryphal literary history, is not the issue here. Apart from poetic connotations, the term “metatextual-therapeutic tale” has also an auto-ironic

implication. In this expression, *metatextuality* points to the specific forms of autoreflexivity, characteristic for postmodern literature, but also evokes discussions on autonomy of literature, of which Dubravka Ugrešić is deeply convinced. Assumed *therapeutic* features of the text, on the other hand, point to its possible use outside the domain of “pure literature”. In this way, through this unusual generic label, autonomy of literature has been claimed, and questioned at the same time, and an ironic twist introduced in the very definition of these stories.

Using rewriting as a narrative strategy in *Life is a Fairy Tale*, Dubravka Ugrešić addresses the problem of the autonomy of literary texts in such a way to evoke some of the basic assumptions of postmodern poetics. In contemporary literary theory (and I think here of the formalist approaches), a claim that literature was autonomous went along with an assumption that most significant qualities of any work of art have to be sought in its uniqueness and originality. Postmodern literary practice questions these assumptions, problematizing even the very possibility for a literary text to be really original, and emphasizing various ways in which any text is necessarily conditioned with its context. A literary text is not seen any more as an entity in itself, distinguishable from all the other forms of discourses on the grounds of its specific features, but as a part of discursive practices that necessarily frame its meanings. In other words, it is impossible to create anything really new, and there are no texts which can be read out of the context of what has already been written; writing is seen here as a re-writing of existing texts. In this way, referential frame for any literary text has been changed, and the question of its autonomy has been made irrelevant. The main issue is not any more the relation between literature and assumed reality, but relations between literary texts themselves.

Strategy of “re-writing” which Dubravka Ugrešić uses in *Life is a Fairy Tale* should not be understood only literally, for in her case, it does not refer only to the use of literary texts. In her book, “re-writing” became also another name for various strategies of *literarization* of different models of behavior which can be recognized as stereotypical. A good example for that is a story “Lend me Your Character”, which does not have an immediate literary pre-text. It speaks of two writers, who are attempting to live together. The story opens with an extremely amusing scene in which a male writer asks his female colleague – the narrator – to lend him a character from one of her stories. The narrator agrees at the beginning, but later regrets it, when she sees the story, a piece of erotic fiction, in which her character has been used. Writers meet again, and after a short bitter discussion on destiny of female characters in fiction, they end up in bed themselves, overtaking the roles of their own literary heroes.

The whole story “Lend me Your Character” is based on a constant violation of the assumed borders between literary and non-literary worlds. When the male writer in the story wishes to “borrow” a literary character, he actually gives it some non-literary attributes, treating it as a real person (and it is quite probable that he would rather have a love affair with that character than with her creator). Of course, the whole situation in which he is asking a permission to use it – on order to change later its name in his story, which actually means to invent another one – is highly ironic here.

In this narrative, as it was the case with “A Love Story”, literature has a power to interfere with immediate reality of its readers/creators. Playing the roles of their characters, two writers from “Lend me Your Character” confirm that reality is actually imitating, that is “re-writing” literature:

“ - Can't you see how awful it is? – I said in a husky voice and dropped the page on the floor. – We are not living, we are describing each other!
- Whoever said one had to live in live!”

Living together, two writers (again as some characters from a possible fictional texts) are adjusting themselves to assumed cultural roles that would fit in the given situations. Their roles are in accordance with the model of behavior described by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their famous book *Madwoman in the Attic*, hence the whole story has for the motto a subversive question they asked in their book: “Is pen a metaphorical penis?” In the story, male writer tends to equate his writing with his sexual potency, and with his social status. In the beginning, he is writing erotic fiction, but later he turns to more “serious”, more “manly” subjects (at first he writes a novel about “the relationship of a certain individual to a certain authority”, and later a novel on “the relationship of a certain individual to himself”). On the other hand, when the female writer falls in love, she changes her attitude towards writing. At first, she completely stops with her own writings, sending instead various love signals inscribed in everyday reality: instead of producing written pages, she irons white sheets, and in the meals she is preparing, she inscribes secret messages. “Without knowing it, I retraced the abbreviated history of female literacy”, says the narrator for herself. If she did write at all, those were the texts with “female” topics, and characteristic Ugrešić’s tendency to play with fairy tales and romances became visible once again here. Later, her heroine starts writing again, mainly articles like “A Revisionist Analysis of ‘Beauty and the Beast’”, “Pinocchio: Archetype of the Male Erotic Imagination”, “Why Did Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary Killed Themselves?”, with an intention – secret, of course – to make a big “Lexicon of Female Literary Characters”.

In other words, accepting female role in life, she is also positioning herself within a specific “female space” in literature, which is on the margin: as it was traditionally the case literature, it is the domain of fairy tales (romances) and feminine topics that women used to dwell in. But it should also be noted here that in Dubravka Ugrešić’s story - as it was the case more generally in the history of literature - female intervention in these areas turned out to be highly subversive one.

Finally, in order to be able to find her own language, and to regain her ability to write, the heroine of this story has to do the same thing as the heroine of “A Love Story”. As a writer, she has to liberate herself from her emotional dependence on a reader who is unable to follow the logic of her narratives. As it was the case with the heroine of “A Love Story”, the narrator in “Lend me Your Character” presents herself in the first place as a writer, who do not want to be perceived as women-writer only, but who also do not want this specific quality to be disregarded.

Female stream in *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*

“[P]ostmodern fiction manifests a certain introversion, a self-conscious turning toward the form of writing itself”, says Linda Hutcheon.^[xii] This statement can be taken also as very good characterization of Dubravka Ugrešić’s fiction. And the following book of hers, the novel *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, is centered on writing, literature and writers seen as literary characters. The novel speaks about events at an international literary conference held in Zagreb in early 1980s. The same tendency, recognizable from

earlier Ugrešić's fiction, to violate the border between so-called reality and literature is again visible here. The novel consists of two major parts. One is made of a number of fragments, describing actual experiences ascribed to the author herself. They are placed at the beginning and at the end of the novel, thus forming a kind of a frame for the central part, which is a piece of coherent, uninterrupted narrative. Those fragments speak about author's intention to write a book on writers, which is obviously a reference to this novel. It also speaks about her own travels to other countries, to other writer's meetings, thus blurring the boundary between the real ones, and imagined writers' meeting she is describing in her novel. [\[xiii\]](#)

Assembling a number of writers in one place, Dubravka Ugrešić turns her novel into a compendium of different approaches to literature, and of various authorial poetics (again, it is possible to make a parallel here with "A Love Story", which offered a compendium of different narrative strategies and literary styles). But it is only one important aspect of the novel, which was made as a postmodern generic hybrid, a parody of epic novels, combined with elements of thriller, romance, epistolary novel, autobiographic narratives and science fiction. The characters in the novel appear both as individualized personalities with their specific destinies, and as representatives of different literary trends. The novel *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* is a highly complex text that calls for an attentive reader, ready to deal carefully with its specific structure [\[xiv\]](#). On this particular occasion we will stay focused only on the problems already raised in the discussion on other Ugrešić's fictional texts.

Reflections on the question of women's relations with literature, raised so directly in the story "Lend Me Your Character", are present also in the novel *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, as one of its significant aspects. Several episodes in the novel, and some of the central characters, are conceptualized in such a way to address the problems of women's writing and the status of women in literature. These issues are discussed on several occasions in the novel, when the participants of the international conference are gathered together and they start to discuss various topics informally. Topics of this kind are usually addressed by an interesting character, certain Flagus, who is created in such a way to evoke some stereotypical features of anti-heroes from mass-media productions, like Lex Luthor, or Dr. No. He is presented as a nephew of Gustav Flabuert, who does not identify with his famous relative; rather, he performs the role of postmodern Salieri who hates literature, real talent, and – women. And he has an ambition (quite in accordance with his generic character) to gain an absolute power, this time in the world of literature. In discussions he inspires and leads, some important topics of the novel are usually marked out, one of them being a general negative attitude towards women in literary world, where they are still treated as participants of a lesser value, who do not really understand what literature is all about, nor they can really reach its heights, hence they appear to be destructive elements whenever they are allowed to come closer to it. This is a point of view that Flagus wholeheartedly supports. His statements against women are directly related with an episode in the novel which speaks about very specific female protest against such a treatment, when three women, enraged by misogyny of another man, a local critic, decide to take their revenge. They trap the local critic in a hotel room, tie him up, humiliate him, and one of them even decides to rape him. The whole scene is in fact re-writing of a book by Marta Tikkanen which speaks about a woman who decides to get even with her rapist by raping him herself. In Dubravka

Ugrešić's re-writing of the similar situation the initial motif for the revenge is different, it is not any more sexual assault, but intellectual harassment, a violence over women's creativity, and thus over their personalities also. Namely, the critic who is to blame for the harassment has stated on various occasions (as many of his predecessors also did before him, and like Falgus is also stating in the novel) that women's place is exclusively in the kitchen, and that they have nothing to do in literature. Unwilling to accept it, three women decide to react evenly, decisive to change women's destiny, symbolized in a literary character whose shadow lingers over the meeting. It is the shadow of Madame Bovary, a woman who actually wanted to change her small life, and had to pay a hard price for this. It is a kind of destiny which three women do not want to accept, and which they are also willing to revenge in a way.

But the character of Madame Bovary was not introduced in the novel only as an example of unhappy women's destiny from another time, an additional illustration for the discussions about women led in the course of events. Evoking Flaubert's novel, Dubravka Ugrešić introduces an important, complex intertextual reference, whose meanings can be read in different ways. We will point here only to one important aspect of this relation. It is through Flaubert's novel that Dubravka Ugrešić opens here highly sensitive issue of literary values; *Madame Bovary* is evoked here as an example of a work of genius. "Flaubert was the writer who made me aware what the true talent is and thereby injected me with a virus of hate", says Falgus, this literary Dr. NO, who hates Flaubert and destroys his books on any possible occasion. But he also wishes to destroy all good literature. Flaubert is for him just a name for talent. Falgus is some kind of postmodern Salieri, who wants to see every Mozart dead. According to him, originality and works of genius are bringing disorder into the world, while he wants total control and literary engineering which will produce "literary hamburgers". And he feels that the present literary situation is favorable for his project:

"This is an era of Salieri rather than Mozart, a time in which literature is based upon production values, and production is something that, in principle at least, lends itself to control. (...) I have been much influenced in this matters by the work of Señor Borges – scholar, transcriber and maker of models – who has done more than anyone to strip literature of its aura of inviolability, to squash the idea of the genius and originality or the written word (though he has been carried away by the genius and originality of the rewritten word). Of almost equal importance are the bands of third-rate speed-writers who fill in thematic blanks as if they were crossword puzzles, thus considerably accelerating the pace of literary inflation and unwittingly but unswervingly undermining the myth of great, unmatched, and unmatchable body of literature (...) A critic with a comparative background will always question the claim of a writer to be new, unique; he'll always throw his together with some group or the other, some movement, some model. Critics can scarcely wait for a new work to come out so they can pounce on it, tear it to pieces, gnaw off every scrap of meat."[\[xv\]](#)

Madness of Falgus can be seen as just one element in the plot of the novel, for he really attempts to realize his project of "total control" in the world of literature, appearing as the main negative character in the narrative. But his fantastic project, which looks like it was overtaken from a popular culture script, functions here also as a pre-text for very relevant

criticism of a postmodern situation in which commodification of all the culture became one of its most important characteristics, problematizing any safe ground for value judgments. [\[xvi\]](#)

It is also important to note here that Flagus' project is a literary project in itself. When he talks with his secretary about various destinies he aims for different writers, participant of the Zagreb conference – like packing anticommunist papers in the bag of Czechoslovakian writer in order to make him arrested on his way back home, ascribing false anti-Soviet interview to a representative from the Soviet Union, and arranging a situation in which the local minister of culture gets hit by an infarct - he compares his actions with writer's creative work; the power he exercises over these people is similar to the power a writer can have over his or her characters. "But my satisfaction is greater, because I do the same with *living writers*. The creativity involved is the same, you see? I design their fates and then make them happen. Of course, each of them wants what none of them has – a life full of excitement and adventure. But I give one a melodramatic death and another a new lease of life. (...) The very world we live in – is it not the quotation of another life, our lives quotations of other lives?" [\[xvii\]](#) Behaving towards living writers in the same way writers behave towards their fictional creations, Flagus is once again violating the borders between "reality" and "fiction", treating them as texts of an equal standing; or, to put it differently, he points that any "reality" is just another *possible world* of some kind. In that way, Flagus appears here once again as a promoter of postmodern poetics as it was argued, for example, by Brian McHale. [\[xviii\]](#) But Flagus is framed highly ironically in Ugrešić's novel, and can be perceived as a character derived from a number of clichés taken from mass culture products, and in a way, he can be taken, with his ideas on literature, as a product of commodification of all the culture.

Destiny of Ema Bovary corresponds in a strange way with the main ideas of Flagus, functioning here as a kind of their silent comment. Ema Bovary was not only living in a world of mediocrity, which was literally killing her. She was also a consumer of popular culture, in particular of trivial romances she adored, and her taste was a taste of mediocre consumer that Flagus would support [\[xix\]](#). On the other hand, when she was trying to arrange and re-arrange her own life, and to direct her love affairs in certain way, she was behaving just like some writer arranging destinies for his or her characters.

Speaking about Ema Bovary in *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, author-narrator is closest to the position of a marginal character in the novel, an old professor of French literature named Švajcer, who speaks of Flaubert and of his heroine with love and admiration. Švajcer was probably the only one among numerous guests at the official dinner arranged by Falgus for all the participants of the international meeting who recognized what was actually served there; it was a dinner where only meals from Flaubert's novel were served. Professor Švajcer was walking among tables covered with finest food, recognizing a special meaning in each of the dishes served, and the occasion for which it was made. Thus he became a kind of representative, or a subtle defender of Ema Bovary in Ugrešić's novel, while all the other guests, completely unaware of the hidden meaning related with the served food, ate it with very good appetite, resembling at that point to the same kind of heartless and plain people that Flaubert was depicting, a kind of people that finally did compel Ema Bovary to kill herself.

Madame Bovary wanted for herself "a life full of excitement and adventure" in the same way Falgus assumes all people do. But she was given another script – to live in a

world of banality which was general. “Banality is indestructible, like a plastic bottle”, said Danilo Kiš. Banality, clichés and kitsch are indestructible, believes Dubravka Ugrešić, and this is one of the central topics of her fiction. While writing about banality, stereotypes and kitsch, she manages to discover them in least suspected domains of our actual and our literary experiences. In doing so, she manages to show her readers how important and relevant many of our most common stereotypes seem to be, and why they should not be so easily disregarded; understanding stereotypes we employ so often, we get closer to understanding our own situation.

[i] Dubravka Ugrešić has published in Croatian two collections of short stories, *Poza za prozu* (Zagreb, 1978), and *Život je bajka* (Zagreb, 1983). The second collection, under the title *Love is a Fairy Tale* together with the short novel *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life* (*Štefica Cvek u raljama života*, Zagreb, 1981), and a long piece from the first collection, »Love Story«, was published in one volume, under the title *In the Jaws of Life*, translated by Michael Henry Heim and Celia Hawkesworth, London: Virago Press, 1992.

[ii] Umberto Eco, *Six Walks through Fictional Woods*, Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 77.

[iii] Biran McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York & London: Methuen, 1987, p. 59.

[iv] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, New York and London: Methuen, p. 11.

[v] Janice A. Radaway, *Reading romances*, London and New York: Verso, 1987.

[vi] Dubravka Ugrešić, *In the Jaws of Life*, translated by Michael Henry Heim and Celia Hawkesworth, London: Virago Press, 1992, p. 83.

[vii] *Ibid.*, p. 8

[viii] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[ix] It should be noted here that many fashion, or more generally, women’s magazines turn out also to be subversive in relation to the very image of women they tend to promote, in a similar way as it is the case with romances.

[x] The claim that immediately evokes the famous Balzac’s statement about his writing and history, which in a way dictates him his novels. Dubravka Ugrešić’s claim parodies this and similar statement which in the center of literary endeavor put the relations between literature and history or literature and society (meaning by the society the dominating institutions of power). This criticism, grounded in feminism, in the given

novel it points to the fact that women were mainly erased from history, and that they generally do not participate in power structures.

[xi] Janice A. Radaway, *Reading romances*, pp. 188-192.

[xii] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 128.

[xiii] By the way, international meetings like the one described in Ugrešić's novel, were held in Zagreb under the name "International Meetings of Writers".

[xiv] Complex structure of this novel was analyzed in my article "Roman kao golema matroska", *Knjizevnost*, no. 8/1991, and no. 9/1991.

[xv] Dubravka Ugrešić, *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, translated by Michael Henry Heim, London> Virago Press, 1991, pp. 185-186.

[xvi] This will be one of the main topic of the latest book of Dubravka Ugrešić, a collection of essays "Reading Forbidden", in which she is analyzing the present situation in publishing industry. The first edition of the book was in Holland, *Verboden te lezen*, 2001.

[xvii] Dubravka Ugrešić, *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, pp. 198-199.

[xviii] See Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London: Methuen, 1987.

[xix] Cf. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, translated by Gerard Hopkins, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 31-34.