

Knowledge is not one cixousian non-knowledge in selected stories of Lydia Davis

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Abstract

Lydia Davis is a short story writer whose personal form and structure of writing is well known for her short sentences and also for nameless characters. What is interesting in her stories, apart from the structure, is her idea of knowledge and the way it affects her characters. Helene Cixous, a feminist poststructuralist, tries to deconstruct the current definition of knowledge and introduces a new one; in addition, she claims to develop a new strategy of facing the old knowledge. Furthermore, she believes women can change the predefined ideas of knowledge and stand against them considerably better than men for the fact that, women have always been absent in the current definition of knowledge since it has always been defined by men historically. What is interesting about Cixous' ideas is that they can be traced in works of women writers even when they do not admit their belief in "Ecriture Feminine". Moreover, this new and feminine way of facing the masculine world is not a theory to be practiced, Cixous believes, but an innate adaptation within the works of some female writers. This study claims Lydia Davis' selected stories can be read in the light of Cixous' definition of knowledge and female characters of these stories are experiencing different stages of facing and redefining the current knowledge in the same way Cixous mentions.

Keywords: ecriture feminine, not-knowing, second innocence, lydia davis' short stories

Introduction

Three Women, Three Ways of Facing the World

The stories which are going to be analyzed in this study are chosen from Davis's *Collected Short Stories* (2009), a collection of stories in which most characters are nameless; therefore, the three chosen stories aimed at this study contain the same feature. The stories are called "The Professor", "Forbidden Subjects", and "Almost No Memory". Although nameless, it is clear that the characters are women and all of them have conflicts facing the predefined rules of different institutions, such as; university, family, and society. These women try to confront the difficulties they are experiencing; however, the level of courage and creativity in deconstructing the old definitions is different to every one of them. This article intends to demonstrate that reading these stories through Cixous' definition of knowledge, one can clearly imply that the characters are situated in different stages of the process and one of them can pass the scholarly knowledge to gain "not-knowing" which is a better kind of knowledge in Cixous' definition. The stories are going to be analyzed in the same abovementioned order. The woman in the first story is a university professor who dreams about living with a cowboy in the West. The woman in the second story is after more and new subjects to help her have a deeper communication with her male partner through a variety of speaking subjects. The woman in the last story has no memory and cannot remember what she does and what she reads. These three situations will be elucidated as being parallel to different stages and characterizations of knowledge and innocence in Cixousian thought.

Knowledge is Not One, but Two

"I do not understand anything, therefore (I) am." Cixous
 Studying Cixousian knowledge, we should be aware that for Cixous there are not only different levels of knowledge, but also

different kinds of it with different prominences. What causes these differences can be seen in the way one gains knowledge and what the usages of the learned knowledge in one's life are. In order to apply Cixous' idea of knowledge on the stories, first there is a need to make the definition of knowledge apparent; moreover, the ways of going through knowledge in order to reach better forms of it should be entirely clear. Then it would be possible to see where the characters are and what route they pass through and are they in the same path where Cixous is or not?

There are two kinds of knowledge; the first one is the higher knowledge which is what one can learn in universities and become a university professor: it is knowledge of knowing. On the other hand, there is the highest education which is learned through pleasure. "It is pleasure itself". And one learns it through heart instead of head (Cixous, "Reaching the point of wheat" 2). The woman in the first story, who is a university professor, has the first kind of knowledge but she desires more: a kind of pleasure via her demand for marrying a cowboy. In the second story, the same knowledge that rules the world has prevented the woman from talking about certain subjects and she manages to find a way out of these universal rules in order to have the pleasure of talking to her male partner. And in the third story, the woman has found her way out; she simply does not remember anything.

Knowledge can be a key concept in shaping human relationships since what we know about the world around us and other people, passes into our knowledge of living in such a situation. The university knowledge (knowledge of knowing) which is learned through head is not going to help the kind of relationship one can have with "the other" and moreover, it cannot adjust one's life; while, the second kind of knowledge is connected to the experience of the body (Cixous, "Voice I..." 61). Apparently, the second kind of knowledge for Cixous is what we learn through our own experiences living with other

people and it is not a piece of predefined information dictated to human beings for a long time. Instead, this type of knowledge is different from person to person in the same way their experiences and bodies are different.

In the first story, the English professor defines herself as “not very easy going”, “don’t know how to joke” (Davis 276) and then she describes other professors as “(they) dress in a way they think a professor should dress” and all of them carrying a briefcase (277). All the professors just follow a specific dress code which is not adjusted to their lives - at least in the eyes of the first character; while a cowboy who is out of scholarly knowledge dresses comfortably and “so practical, having to do with their work” (277).

Similarly, in “Forbidden Subjects”, dialogues are so constricted that “as times goes by there is less and less they can safely talk about” (852) and even communication between partners is rather tightened by social norms. On the other hand, in “Almost No Memory” the woman has found an intentional or presumably unintentional way to escape the situations the other two women undertake: “she remembers enough to get by from day to day... but she did not remember her work, so that she could not answer questions about it when people asked” (437). Only the last woman is not confined. Although she cannot remember anything, nothing seems to leave a bad taste in the reader’s mouth concerning her situation. The woman works, earns money and reads, but remembers nothing; this is how she is characterized. She looks fairly lively compared to the two other women; besides she is defined as someone doing what she likes potentially.

Cixous and Clarice Lispector- her favorite writer- call these two kinds of knowledge: 1. Intellectual and 2. Bodily. They question the first kind of knowledge for the fact that it does not teach life as one is living it. While, the experience of body and mind is highlighted in the second one and that is where “not-knowing” and the value of unknown come to exist (Colony XVI). It is clear that Davis’s characters in these stories share the same issue concerning scholarly knowledge and social norms. The two former characters - similar to the third one - make remarkable attempt to find a way out of the limitations. The first two characters are on a mission to travel from what they have been taught to a place where they can forget almost everything and live life as they wish. The third character has already reached the destination of “not- knowing” and she attempts to find out the ways of this new kind of none- knowledge. It is worth noting that in all the three stories, it is women who feel some kind of lack and intend to compensate for it. Cixous mentions why it is so.

She is Aware of her “not- knowing”

Lack has always been a part of women’s existence and in the hierarchical opposition of activity versus passivity; women are always on the passive side being defined by words, such as nature and passion which are pictured as the losers against culture and action. Therefore, it seems woman is completely absent from the man-made world (Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* 348-349). There is nothing of her but a mere shadow. That is the reason the lack of knowledge is part of her existence; an absent entity is not allowed and cannot gain knowledge. But what if this lack of knowledge is considered to be positive the way Cixous defines it? It can create a situation in which women can resist power and create their own set of rules. In order to perceive the result of such a situation, it is essential to see if

Cixous’ definition of what she calls “not- knowing” is compatible with the state Davis’ characters undergo.

“Not- knowing” is the wisdom of innocence, a strategic innocence of lack and therefore, the supreme knowledge; moreover, the state of “not- knowing” is a means of refusing the Phallogocentric knowledge of lack and also refusing power. Clearly, this Cixousian state stands against the intimidation of lack of knowledge and also knowledge of lack (Bray 167), women face. The question that may rise is why this state of “not- knowing” is important? Going back to the essence of knowledge can help us to find an answer for this question.

The first level of higher education acquires the law. Law is negative because it is absolute and causes prohibition: a “No” and “you mustn’t”. In the law, instead of signs, there are only orders (Cixous, “Reaching the point...” 4). Davis depicts law in the same way in her stories: in the first story, the English professor is obliged to follow the dress code as well as the way she communicates with her colleagues and other people, although she starts breaking some of them through the story. For instance, she asks her student out (Davis 286) or she does not read the notes her father sends her in order to use them in her classes (278). Correspondingly, in the second story there are rules preventing the woman from speaking about certain forbidden subjects and in the same way the second woman finds a way to avoid such limiting rules. Otherwise, in the third story, there is no sign of limiting rules since the third woman is already out of the boundaries of law and she has forgotten them. There is only one way to discard law and that is to desire the unknown. Coming back from the movie theater, in “The Professor”, the woman just wants to go as far as possible in the dark desert, far way from everything she had known through her life (283). Likewise, the second woman starts ignoring the rules speaking cautiously regarding the forbidden subjects (853) and the third woman in spite of having a “sharp consciousness” has “almost no memory (437) to remember what she reads or does; she is completely out of law. Hence, the first kind of knowledge is a limitation and a barrier which one should pass through in order to start living again and life is only possible when there is heartbeat. Heart beat becomes faster when there is something non-recognized and unknown; therefore, one can live while trying to get to know the unknown (Cixous, *Rootprints* 26). Such a rush toward the unknown and the forbidden is precisely what these characters do in order to continue living: dreaming about living in a completely unknown world of a cowboy or talking about forbidden subjects and also remembering nothing.

As a result, one of the first lessons about life is to “avoid letting scholarly knowledge be a limitation” and to keep away from this situation one should know how not to know, know how to not understand; although it does not mean being on the side of ignorance. It is just about being free of comprehension. The first step is to know and the second one is to “strike out” for the unknown. It is akin to walking in darkness with an apple like a candle (Cixous, *Coming to Writing* 161). The characters are not ignorant of the situation, they are professors, partners and good employees, but they find their ways of not knowing in order to push aside the power of law and to let the heartbeat, so that the unknown would keep them alive.

Thus far, it is clear that law and scholarly knowledge are considered to be the power which one is supposed to face and there is only one way for standing against this power and that is not only refusing but also clarifying it. Culturally, masculine

knowledge is always on the side of power; therefore, one should try to erase divinity of what is on the side of knowledge and speak in the realm of the feminine instead, in order to escape the domination of scholarly knowledge (Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 49). Clarice Lispector can help one pass through power and the past; "I don't know anything in an appropriating way, because I don't know anything because I remember nothing" (Cixous, "Reaching the..." 20). Davis's characters find the same way in order to rebel against power. The first woman wants to marry a cowboy to escape university and its rules. The second woman tries to forget the rules of speaking about taboo subjects and similar to Lispector, the third woman in "Almost No Memory", does not remember anything.

Up until now, it is proved that refusing knowledge is not ignorance but a new way of communication that can lead one to a "mobile reality" happening outside "I" and that is the only way of communication with the outside world. Such not-understanding is important for the reason that it saves us from fixed and predefined rules of biology, law and culture (Cixous, *Reading with Clarice Lispector* 56). In the selected stories of Lydia Davis, the characters make painstaking attempt to be released from law and cultural predefined rules. The rules of institutions like universities, or cultural norms concerning discourse ethical boundaries and also rules of a bigger institution: society, which is imposed on people through books, life styles and working conditions. Refusing all these is distancing from ignorance and entering the realm of the Supreme knowledge of lack. This lack of knowledge of rules is the only way for woman in order to find ways of her own for living.

Such a communication with outside "I" happens through curiosity which seems to be "a feminine fault". "Not-knowing" makes one (woman) have a stronger desire to know and that is why she is curious. On the other hand, the masculine respects himself in a narcissistic way (Cixous, *Readings* 23) that stops him from curiosity and the desire to approach the unknown. Thus, Women are not ignorant of the rules, but they create new rules and do not follow the old ones (12). In Davis's stories, it is clear that only women are in search of a way out of knowing into the unknown. In "The Professor", it is a woman who is curious about how cowboys live, while her father and her husband who are two other university professors show no interest in getting out of their current situations. In "Forbidden Subjects", the man whom the woman tries to talk to does not seem to be as curious as the woman concerning the forbidden subjects and him merely follows the woman in her gradual rule breaking process void of enough interest or inquisitiveness.

Apparently, the woman in "Almost No Memory" is the only one in the world that keeps forgetting everything and this makes her more curious to read. The reality is that there is no state of knowing since the more one knows, the more uncertain one will be (Cixous, "An Error of Calculation" 153). The more the third woman reads and makes notes, the less she can differentiate her ideas from those of the books; therefore, she reviews them all again while reading new ones insatiably. It is the unknown that is exciting for us, takes our breath away and leads us somewhere higher than ourselves. This unknown is life (Alexandrescu 217). According to Skidelsky, this unknown state is what makes Davis' stories appreciable. She leaves a significant number of blanks in the stories for the reader to fill them in and some of these remarkable gaps concerning human relationship make one accept that there are no answers to be found for them (2010).

This lack of information in Davis' stories gives them a sense of the unknown which in Skidelsky's idea it makes them more interesting to read.

Regarding certainty, Lispector's concept of none-intelligence seems to have similarities with Cixous' "not-knowing". Lispector uses intelligence in order to understand one's none-intelligence and in a similar manner, Cixous' not-knowing encourages one to try to know and then there would be a process of losing and gaining innocence over and over again. Consequently, one faces a dilemma of whether staying in the precious, idealistic state of non-intelligence which is void of any pleasure or go through the process of gaining intelligence. The latter choice means "one hurts and is hurt by it" (Cixous, *Reading with Clarice* 58), for the fact that, as mentioned before the more one knows the more uncertain one will be. While the former one is risky; for it is defined as lack in the masculine world although Cixous believes her power is her "nonknowledge" (Cixous, *Insister: Of Jacques Derrida* 109). As a result, the best and idealistic choice seems to be the circular process of gaining knowledge and losing it recurrently. In Davis' stories, the first woman does not dare realizing her dream about escaping from rules; in the end, she marries another professor and chooses the intelligence, but she still desires to imagine marrying a cowboy. She chooses to stay in the sphere of knowledge and it hurts her that there is no way of escaping the situation anymore. In the second story, the woman is in the second level, passing through the stage of "none-intelligence" in the course of trying not to know what taboo speaking subjects are in order to be able to talk about them. She is on her way to the unknown or in other words, she is trying to go out of knowledge. On the other hand, the third woman is already in the realm of the unknown and she has chosen to stay there trying to gain pleasure by reading but not remembering what she has read. She is precisely in the idealistic process of losing and gaining knowledge again and again.

There are two considerable aspects for the state of not-knowing: the first one is that such a state is threatening and the second one is that it strengthens the desire to know (Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" 49). In "The Professor", marrying a cowboy is the unknown situation which is threatening as the woman mentions that she would be criticizing the cowboy to death (Davis 284). In the second story, the woman thinks talking about forbidden subjects is dangerous (853) and in spite of the danger that threatens her, she starts talking about them. In "Almost No Memory", it is troublesome that the woman is unable to differentiate her own ideas from those of others in the books (440) and her situation might cause her some trouble if others get to know her secret. In spite of the threat that can affect these women's lives, they still have the desire to go on and try to know and experience what they do not know, although the amount of courage is different to each of them.

There are also two stages of not understanding: 1. one knows 2. One will no longer know (Cixous, *Reading with Clarice* 155). Women in these stories go through these stages. The first woman is a university professor and knows how she should be one, but from one point in the story, she starts ignoring her knowledge of rules. For instance, she claims that she does not feel like a professor at all (Davis 278) or she mentions that she wants to marry a cowboy, so that he would help her stop thinking obsessively (279). Obviously, she intentionally wants to go through the unknown. In the same way, the second woman starts to pretend she does not know what is forbidden, so that

she can welcome more subjects with her partner in the stage of not- knowing. The third woman works and reads strenuously, but immediately after, she passes the stage of knowing and goes to the not- knowing stage in which she cannot learn from what she has done or what she has read (437). The characters are travelling between the two stages of not understanding and they are in different points of the path.

Considering all the above examples, if one decides to choose the state of not knowing, one would probably encounter with certain difficulties: the power of law might not allow subjects lacking knowledge enter some spaces. Therefore, the one who is not permitted to enter such spaces should know – how – not – to – know and accept the knowledge of lack which is called “positive innocence” and the next step would be entering wherever SHE likes. Attempting to gain such “positive innocence”, women overcome the fear of lack they have always been accused of. Women should believe in the positivity of their lack through “laughter” as Cixous mentions in “The Laugh of Medusa” (Bray 168).

These three women share a positive lack of knowledge and as it is noticeable this positive innocence helps them to go on instead of stopping them; they keep teaching, talking and working with their own rules although the quality of success is different for each one of them. The writer does not write anything about laughter; however, there are few signs of it in the stories: this first woman who seems to be less successful than the other two keeps thinking about a cowboy in terms of a sign of laughter for the fact that although she is restricted by rules of university and is married to another professor who dislikes West (Davis 291), she still has her dreams; dreams about leaving her life behind and living in the west. This is what Cixous calls laughter: letting go of everything, loving the unknown and “dare what one does not dare” (Cixous, *Coming to Writing* 40).

The second woman ends the narration mentioning that finally one might be able to talk about the most dangerous and forbidden subjects (Davis 853) which is a sign of Cixousian laughter since she dares to think about a day when she can talk about new subjects of a forbidden nature; doing this she is laughing at the rules that stop her from doing what she desires to. The third woman knows that all the books and notebooks “have a great deal to do with her” but she does not know how (440). She does not know, but she continues going toward it and this is laughter; daring to approach the unknown. The last lines of the story clearly picture the process of gaining and losing an idea which is the ultimate happiness in Cixousian thought:

as they (books and notebooks) sat there on the shelf, being what she knew but did not know, being what she had read but did not remember reading, being what she had thought but did not now think, or remember thinking, or if she remembered, then did not know whether she was thinking it now or whether she had only once thought it, or understand why she had had a thought once and then years later the same thought, or a thought once and then never that same thought again (440).

Going through this process of gaining and losing an idea can help one reach to a stage called the “second innocence”.

“Second Innocence” for Cixous is the process of losing and gaining one's innocence/ knowledge over and over again (Cixous, *Readings* 30, 31). In this process, there is no naivety or irresponsibility; instead, there is “the wisdom of innocence”,

“the supreme knowledge” and a “strategic innocence of lack”. This state is a strategic innocence in order to disobey the Phallogocentric way of defining lack and using this state, woman can go further than law. Moreover, it is the feminine way of refusing Phallogocentric power which has always encouraged the connection of woman with lack. This “second innocence” is a “positive disbelief” indicating that woman is no more afraid of lack of knowledge (Bray 167).

In Davis's stories, this process of losing and gaining innocence/ knowledge happens for the characters in different qualities. In “The Professor”, the woman dreams about living with a cowboy where she still would read and think, but there would be no embarrassment anymore (Davis 281). She fights back the Phallogocentric rules of university where lack of knowledge causes embarrassment, while in her dreams when she loses the scholarly knowledge and gains it again through her own reading, “the wisdom of lack” saves her from the embarrassment. The problem with the first character is that she does not seem to have the courage to part from knowledge and continues living the life of a professor like her father. Moreover, she marries another professor who hates the West which she likes “because of its difficulties” (281). The unknown is difficult and she loves the unknown; therefore, the process of reaching the “second innocence” does not happen in her real life but only in her dreams.

In “Forbidden Subjects”, the woman is on her way to the “second innocence”. Step by step she loses the idea of forbidden subjects and she dares expressing them. She is not there yet, but one day when she finds “enough trust” (853) in herself or maybe in her male partner, she would penetrate the most dangerous and forbidden subjects without feeling guilty. That is when she would have gained “the strategic innocence of lack”. The woman in “Almost No Memory” is already there; she is not naive or irresponsible since she has “a very sharp consciousness” and she “worked hard and is paid for it” (437). She also “loved to read” (437) and has “ideas of her own” (438), but then she loses the knowledge for good. She is always working and reading but remembering nothing of it. Therefore, she has gained “the supreme knowledge”. We can make sure that she keeps doing it for the fact that the unknown is interesting (Cixous, *Rootprints* 71). She keeps gaining and then losing knowledge and the process of “second innocence” will go on.

Reading these stories in the light of Cixous' definition of knowledge, one can trace woman in her different stages of creating her own way of gaining and using knowledge. In the beginning, like what is observable in “The Professor”, she starts dreaming about being a woman and letting go of Phallogocentric institutions like university which teach masculine knowledge and can embarrass one if she is thinking in any other way. The second stage is to laugh at rules and start to break them one by one to reach where she wants; clearly what the woman does in “Forbidden Subjects”. And finally, she reaches to the state the woman is experiencing in “Almost No Memory”. She would be able to live in the same institution but not to remember it; she keeps doing what she wants without being embarrassed or scared. These three characters can be illustrated as one woman in her different stages of the fight against rules. Davis seems to have shared Cixous' ideas of knowledge and in her stories she depicts different stages of fighting the masculine idea of knowledge through female characters. Consequently, it is apparent that two women coming from different cultures share

their philosophy of thought, one through the practice of “Ecriture Feminine” and the other through writing short stories.

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