

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC 329**

Volume 329

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers

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# Contemporary Literary Criticism

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose



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# Martin Amis

## 1949-

(Full name Martin Louis Amis) English novelist, short story writer, nonfiction writer, essayist, and memoirist.

The following entry presents criticism on Amis's career through 2010. For additional information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 4, 9, 38, 62, 101, and 213.

### INTRODUCTION

Amis is one of England's most well-known and popular contemporary authors. Characterized by an irreverent wit similar to that of his father, renowned author Kingsley Amis, Amis's work comments on and satirizes aspects of modern culture that exhibit an obsession with sex, violence, and material gain. Although he has been accused of indulging in moral posturing and juvenile vulgarity, Amis's mastery of language and social critique has prompted comparisons to such authors as Vladimir Nabokov and Jonathan Swift.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Amis was born in Oxford, England, to famed British author Kingsley Amis and Hilary Bardwell Amis. He lived briefly in Princeton, New Jersey, while his father taught university courses; he moved to Spain with his mother after his parents' divorce in 1961. Amis attended a number of primary schools before being accepted into Exeter College, Oxford. He graduated in 1971 with a formal First in English and became a book reviewer for the *Observer*. Soon he was also working as an editorial assistant for the *Times Literary Supplement*, and in 1973 he was hired to review books for the *New Statesman*. His first novel, *The Rachel Papers* (1973), won the Somerset Maugham Award. In 1980 he resigned from the *New Statesman* to devote his time to writing. Amis's memoir *Experience* (2000) garnered the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, while *The War Against Cliché* (2001), a collection of his essays and reviews, received a National Book Critics Circle Award. In 2010 Amis was the recipient of the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Galaxy National Book Awards.

### MAJOR WORKS

Marked by an acerbic wit, a penchant for wordplay, and an absurd sense of humor, Amis's fiction provides a moralistic satire of modern life. John Self, the narrator of *Money* (1984), lost his mother when he was seven years of age and later received a bill from his absent father to cover the cost of his upbringing. He subsequently became obsessed with money and overcome by his appetites. Sexually indulgent and constantly inebriated, Self degenerates in a hyperkinetic downward spiral. While working as a director of exploitative television commercials for junk food and other disposable consumer products, he attracts the attention of Hollywood. On a flight from Los Angeles, he engages in a conversation with a producer named Fielding Goodney, and he soon finds himself in a partnership with Goodney to make a feature-length movie titled *Good Money* (later re-titled *Bad Money*). To prepare for the film, Self travels back and forth between London and New York. The latter city becomes the locus of his deviant sexual behavior and his guilt for past sins, while the former acts as the stage for his dysfunctional family ties and a sordid relationship with his girlfriend, Selina Street. At the same time, Self befriends a writer named Martin Amis who becomes a witness to the narrator's decline.

Told in reverse chronology, *Time's Arrow* (1991) is the story of German doctor Tod T. Friendly. Opening with an elderly Friendly's near-fatal heart attack, the plot follows him as he maintains his virility by embarking on affairs with various women. Fearful of being recognized by the authorities, he moves to New York where he acquires a new name, John Young, and begins working in an emergency room. The novel then traces his life in backward progression to the year 1948. Under the name Hamilton de Souza, he spends time in Portugal, seeks refuge at the Vatican, and later arrives in Germany. The reader now learns his original name and identity: Odilo Unverdorben, a Nazi doctor stationed at the Auschwitz concentration camp, where he conducts gruesome experiments on Jews and administers the poison gas used to kill them. At this point, the narrative relates Odilo's relationship with his wife and his student years, ending when he is a carefree child, soon to return to his mother's womb.

*The Information* (1995) focuses on the lives of two middle-aged friends and shows how their careers, each headed in a different direction, affect them and their relationship. The novelists Richard Tull and Gwyn Barry, close friends since their Oxford days, are turning forty as the novel opens. Barry is about to release a sequel to his best-selling novel; Tull, whose previous four books were unsuccessful, has almost finished his fifth. Convinced that his friend does not deserve fame and recognition, Tull dedicates himself to ruining Barry's life. As each of his plots against Barry backfires, Tull becomes increasingly obsessed and determined. He eventually hires a young hoodlum to attack his rival, but he soon loses control over the situation.

Amis's nihilistic take on the detective genre, *Night Train* (1997) is narrated by a woman named Mike Hoolihan. A former cop whose alcoholism has driven her out of the force, Hoolihan is tasked with investigating the apparent suicide of the daughter of a former boss. As she begins to realize that there are no clear-cut answers behind the girl's death, Hoolihan suffers a breakdown and resigns herself to self-destruction. *Yellow Dog* (2003) delves into sex, violence, gender, and the media via the story of Xan Meo, the son of an infamous gangster. An ideal husband, Meo suffers a serious head injury that transforms him into an abusive, primitive man filled with rage and uncontrollable lust. While being pursued by his father's vengeful enemies, Meo becomes embroiled in controversies regarding a salacious tabloid journalist and the Chinese mistress of the king of England. The nonfiction work *The Second Plane* (2008) contains Amis's critical reaction to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the War on Terror, and Islamic fundamentalism.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although critics have occasionally deemed Amis's most recent work repetitive and uninspired, they have nonetheless continued to laud the bulk of his oeuvre. For instance, reviewers have placed him alongside fellow British authors Will Self, China Miéville, and Maggie Gee for his ability to fluctuate between realism and fantastic satire. Similarly, they have noted his tendency to subvert and intermix conventional genres, particularly in the novel *Night Train*. Commentator Brian Duffy has claimed that *Night Train* "reveals itself ultimately to be a thoroughly hybrid and restless creation, mixing detective and anti-detective fiction modes, drawing upon the hard-boiled American *noir* idiom and the decentred postmodern sensibility, blending ugly realism and metaphysical speculation, and challenging throughout facile solutions to the question

of identity, be it of genre, character, or reality." In addition, some critics have compared *Money* to Malcolm Bradbury's *Rates of Exchange* for its insights into politics and gender, while others have noted the novel's use of Shakespearian criticism to underline the presence of the author. Furthermore, scholars have studied *Time's Arrow* as a text that highlights the implications of misplaced confidence, and they have contrasted the violence in *Yellow Dog* with the novel's subverted romanticism. Moreover, *The Information* has been praised for using the city of London as a metaphor for a map of authorial intention. According to scholar Nicole LaRose, "Amis establishes the link between community and shared authorship in the text through the idea of navigation. He suggests that a reader who looks for information on the novel must make navigational choices, just as a character who tries to find his or her way through London must make such choices." While his criticism of Islam in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 has met with significant controversy, Amis remains a vital presence in British letters.

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### PRINCIPAL WORKS

- The Rachel Papers* (novel) 1973
- Dead Babies* (novel) 1975
- Success* (novel) 1978
- Other People: Mystery Story* (novel) 1981
- Invasion of the Space Invaders* (nonfiction) 1982
- Money: A Suicide Note* (novel) 1984
- The Moronic Inferno: And Other Visits to America* (nonfiction) 1986
- Einstein's Monsters* (short stories) 1987
- London Fields* (novel) 1989
- Time's Arrow; or, The Nature of the Offence* (novel) 1991
- Visiting Mrs. Nabokov, and Other Excursions* (essays) 1993
- The Information* (novel) 1995
- Night Train* (novel) 1997
- Heavy Water, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1998
- Experience* (memoir) 2000
- The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews, 1971-2000* (essays and criticism) 2001
- Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (nonfiction) 2002
- Yellow Dog* (novel) 2003
- House of Meetings* (novel) 2006
- The Second Plane: September 11, 2001-2007* (essays) 2008
- The Pregnant Widow: Inside History* (novel) 2010

## CRITICISM

Carlos Silva Campañón (essay date December 2004)

SOURCE: Campañón, Carlos Silva. "Through the Looking Glass: America in Martin Amis's *Money: A Suicide Note*." *Atlantis* 26, no. 2 (December 2004): 87-96.

[In the following essay, Campañón provides a formal, historical, and symbolical analysis of the motif of America in *Money*, highlighting the importance of duality and otherness in the novel.]

Martin Amis's writing has been defined by Victoria Alexander as "a queer hybrid of a Nabokovian and Bellovian world-views" (Alexander 1994: 78). By this, the critic means that it is a fiction supported and enhanced by the tension between the formal and moral aspects of his prose. Through the recurrent presence of a fixed repertoire of motifs and thematic lines, we can simultaneously observe the workings of the aesthete in search of the perfect pattern and design and hear the musings of the social commentator and satirist. These two sides of the task of a writer, the formal and the moral concerns, are to Amis necessary dimensions of artistic creation, and central elements of his understanding of the novel as a literary genre. Accordingly, the inability to pattern random and shapeless reality are frequently used by the writer as a grudge against some of the novelists he reviews.

To Amis, life is nothing but raw material: "the trouble with life (the novelist will feel) is its amorphousness, its ridiculous fluidity" (Amis 2000: 7), which the novelist shapes through style, understood by the writer as "a radical reworking of impressions" (Haffenden 1985: 17). The search for form becomes a priority: "I would certainly sacrifice any psychological or realistic truth for a phrase . . . I think it's the higher consideration" (Haffenden 1985: 16). Some critics have understood this authorial insistence on the importance of form and style as a shield to protect his moral vacuousness (Mars-Jones 1990). However, this formal emphasis is not an isolated impulse, but works in the direction of what Amis considers to be the complementary aim of the novelist, that of producing "a reading of the world," an answer to the imaginary question of "what's going on here?" (Haffenden 1985: 22). To Amis "style is not neutral; it gives moral directions" (Haffenden 1985: 23). Form and meaning appear as inseparable, one leading to and sustaining the other; content not being the direct display of a set of ideas through plot, but the spontaneous emanation of the way in which the writer organises his artificial world.

These conflicting drives at the core of Amis's fiction are a primal example of an essentially dualist imagination, of "Amis's persistent double perspective" (Reynolds and Noakes 2003: 6). Amis's narrative thrives on dual patterns, his fictional universe being organised according to a multitude of conceptual pairings and symbolic thematic oppositions; shape and shapelessness, the conscious and the unconscious, the reader and the writer, presence and absence, experience and innocence, sickness and health, pain and pleasure, life and death. The precise structural designs and the plots of his books are an expression of the author's world of double-dealing and deception; the characters in his stories are trapped in a web of doubles, reflections and shadows trying to control, manipulate and eventually, destroy them.

The dual nature of Amis's writing has been highlighted by Karl Miller who has labelled Amis as "the latest of Anglo-America's dualistic artists" (Miller 1987: 410). Miller describes *Success* (1978), *Other People* (1981) and *Money* (1984) as "orphan deliriums" (Miller 1987: 409), and interprets the presence of "alter egos . . . double-takes and double-pates" (Miller 1987: 412) in these novels as an expression of the characters' feeling of exclusion and their attempt to escape unhappiness. In a different section of the same study, Miller deals with the connection between the motif of the orphan and that of America. To the critic, "America is an orphan of a kind," an embodiment both "of escape . . . and danger of a new life" (Miller 1987: 349). However, Miller does not provide an interpretation of America's presence in Amis's narrative as a form of doubling.

In his comprehensive analysis of Amis's fiction, James Diedrick defines "narrative doubling" as "an organizing principle" (Diedrick 1995: 40) in *The Rachel Papers* (1973), *Dead Babies* (1975) or *Success* (1978). He also surveys the way in which characters double each other in Amis's different novels and attributes the abundance of doubles in his writing to "the complex relationship between Amis's career and that of his father" which he signals as "one source of all the 'doubles' that haunt the younger Amis's fiction" (Diedrick 1995: 4). Diedrick also mentions the role of America in Amis's writing, but, like Miller, he does not attempt an interpretation of the motif which relates it to other aspects of Amis's narrative, such as the form and content dualism, America's symbolic significance as a form of doubling, or its function as a symbol in the writer's analysis of the historical present.

It is the purpose of this essay to bring the elements previously mentioned together through a systematic reading of America as a central motif in *Money: A*



*Suicide Note* (1984). From a formal perspective, I will explore the way in which the American motif contributes to the structure of the novel and how this contribution connects to the thematic level of the story. I will analyse how America, as a form of duality, as a representation of otherness, plays its part in the psychological development of the protagonist. Then, from a historical perspective, I will deal with the role of America in the novel as an embodiment of the post-modern present and a tool for social and political comment.

*Money: A Suicide Note* (1984) has been widely acknowledged as a major achievement in Martin Amis's narrative and a turning point in his development as a writer. The novel is a sophisticated literary artefact. It combines a complex web of postmodern tricks and narrative devices with an accurate depiction of the 1980s and its materialist philosophy of self-development through material success. However, the novel's main accomplishment is "its vibrant narrative voice" (Tredell 2000: 55) personified by its first-person narrator and protagonist John Self. Everything we perceive in the book, we perceive through John Self's arresting, energetic monologue. Self's very name, as all the names in the book, is heavily loaded with meaning, and proclaims what the character represents. John Self embodies both the particular and the general, both the individual self in search of a resolution, trying to escape from a web of manipulation and abuse, and the prototypical twentieth-century self, isolated and blinded by a wall of material concerns, a victim of self-delusion in a complex present he is unable to read.

The plot of the novel is, as put by Diedrick, "deceptively simple" (Diedrick 1995: 71). Over a period of six months, John Self, the director of "controversial TV ads for smoking, drinking, junk food and nude magazines" (Amis 1984: 78) travels back and forth between London and New York. He does so in order to make the necessary arrangements to boost his project of shooting an autobiographical film alternatively called, through the different phases of the project, *Bad Money* and *Good Money*. Self attends meetings and makes arrangements with Fielding Goodney, his American producer, and through him with the starring actors involved in the project. His main role will be that of heeding the actors' and actresses' paranoid requests, and trying to smooth things over between them. Self will do this despite his inability to focus on things, and his inaccurate and fragmentary perception of reality. The protagonist's shortcomings are thoroughly enhanced by jet-lag, alcohol and all types of twentieth-century addictions such as pornog-

raphy, fast food and instant credit. Self concentrates all his limited abilities on this project which he sees as the door to big money and success, and simultaneously, as a way out of a burdensome past. As an orphan, his past is dominated by the absence of his mother and the surrogate love of his aunt, and, later, his teenage years in a striptease pub, Self's surrogate home. As for the protagonist's present, it is ruled by his endless need of money to satisfy the unquenchable demands of his girlfriend Selina Street, his father or his car. The ignorant protagonist finds himself trapped in a web of conspiracy, manipulation and betrayal of which he is the final target. As things become increasingly blurred, Self is offered an opportunity of redemption through his relationship with Martina Twain and the twin character of Martin Amis. The writer's persona enters the book as a character to help Self with the film script and give him some hints about his real situation in the story and his delicate position as a fiction. Self, who remains consistently deaf to all the warnings scattered through the story, finally falls prey to the conspiracy set up for him by Fielding Goodney. The film project has never existed. It was nothing but an unmotivated financial trap devised by a madman. It is too late to get things right when Self finds out that he has been signing cheques and documents unknowingly and must escape back to London. There, he tries to commit suicide, but survives, ending up moneyless, ready to start anew.

A first evident way in which America contributes to the novel is at its structural level. The novel is divided into eight unnumbered sections corresponding to Self's journeys between New York and London. Each section takes place alternatively in one of the two cities, starting in New York and finishing in London. This dual organization which follows Self's shuttling between the two continents is preceded by a brief introductory note signed M. A., and followed by a postscript, narrated, as the rest of the novel, in first person by the protagonist. These problematic two sections are to be seen as being outside the story proper and acting as its frame. They are both italicised and the only sections in the book which are dated. Interestingly, the opening note's date is previous to that of the postscript. Thus, the M. A. signature must be read as that of the Martin Amis character, acting here as an editor or commentator of John Self's suicide note, and not as that of the Martin Amis author. In any case, the aspect which is more relevant to our study is how Self's journeys act as the central organizing principle. It is a structural design which shows an evolution of the American motif in Amis's fiction pointing towards a fusion of the symbolic and the formal.

In Martin Amis's previous novels, America is embodied by different American characters (DeForest Hoeniger in *The Rachel Papers* [1973] and Marvell Buzhardt, Skip Marshall and Roxeanne Smith in *Dead Babies* [1975]) whose function is that of opposing the English characters in order to destabilise their self-assumed identities and reveal their weaknesses as psychological constructions. According to Richard Brown, the American characters are stereotyped designs, functioning as narrative devices which push the story forward by eliciting the English protagonists' overviolent reactions in a "transatlantic meeting of competitive self-destruction" in which "their own death wish drives them to destruction" (Richard Brown 1994: 100). In the two subsequent novels, *Success* (1978) and *Other People* (1981), the allusions to America become more sporadic. They are reduced to some recurrent mentions which can be read as an expression of the characters' wish to escape their suffocating realities—"I . . . watch aeroplanes [take me to America]" (Amis 1978: 32)—or as cultural stereotypes or literary allusions working on the formation of the English characters' selves—"Mary learned a little about glass, desire . . . America" (Amis 1981: 57), "She read . . . *America, Sadness, Despair*" (Amis 1981: 104). It is precisely in *Money* that the story moves to America for the first time. From then on, journeys to and from America become a permanent hallmark in all of Amis's novels. The moving between England and America happens again in *London Fields* (1989), *Time's Arrow* (1991)—from Germany via Portugal, in this case—*The Information* (1995) and *Yellow Dog* (2003), and in four of the nine short stories contained in *Heavy Water* (1998). In fact, the only novel in which there is no displacement between the two continents, *Night Train* (1997), can be seen as a step forward in the same direction as the whole action takes place in America and all the characters are American, any reference to England having disappeared.

America, as an organising principle in *Money*, is an evident example of Amis's formal concern and of the author's liking of clear cut, neat, almost visual narrative structures. Recurring themes, scattered leitmotifs shape Martin Amis's novels, engaging the reader in an intellectual game of tracing and recognition. However, these repetitions must be justified at the level of plot, or, otherwise, the novel becomes a pointless crossword. John Self's episodic moving between London and New York is not only a structural feature, but it is related to the symbolic core of the novel. His journeys are a metaphor of both his displaced self and his attempt to escape such displacement. In New York, Self, a victim of jet-lag, still functions according to English time.

The same lack of temporal concurrence recurs whenever he is back to London. This keeps Self unaware of the present time he lives in, and, consequently, unaware of the nature of most of the situations in which he is involved. His shifting between the two continents is a narrative device to portray Self's anaesthetised consciousness, placing the character in a intermediate, unstable position from the start. When asked if he is English, Self replies to a waitress with a premonitory name in one of the strip bars he frequents in New York: "Tell you the truth, Dawn, I'm half American and half asleep" (Amis 1984: 9). Here, Self's words reflect two of the features which define him. On the one hand, he is a shapeless, half constructed, hybrid identity. He is a provisional, not entirely made, ontological structure. On the other hand, his perception is limited. Mediated, blinded, he is absent or unable to access what surrounds him.

This moving between America and England is also a doubling at the structural level of the character's frantic moving throughout the novel. From the first scene in which Self takes a taxi at the J. F. K. airport, to his fleeing America at the end of the book, the protagonist moves incessantly from meeting to meeting, from bar to bar, from date to date. While everything seems to impel him to move in New York, pace slows down radically in his London stays. Everything there seems designed to stop him. Even his car, his Fiasco, refuses to work. His life in London is nothing but "repetition, repetition, repetition" (Amis 1984: 25). All the activity, the movement points towards an understanding of Self's journeys to America as a metaphor of the character's existential quest. The symbolical nature of his travelling is also present in the fact that, in Self's eyes, New York is just an intermediate stage of his American dream which has Los Angeles and California, epitomes of the American promises of wealth and eternal youth, the land of the untroubled self, as its final stage: "California, land of my dream and my longing" (Amis 1984: 167). The film project began in California, when he met Fielding by chance in Los Angeles, in the months previous to the present moment when the novel starts. There, he plans to finish his days, when money lets him have a total reconstruction, a radical rebuilding of himself: "I can see me now. I'm in the design department over at Silicone Valley . . . Eventually I produce my wallet, and silence falls. 'Okay, boy . . . I'm paying top dollar and I expect the best . . . I want it blue, I want it royal, I want the best blood money can buy'" (Amis 1984: 171).

In setting off for America, Self is enacting a symbolical escape from the different forces acting on him and trying to destroy him, though, as to most of what hap-