

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

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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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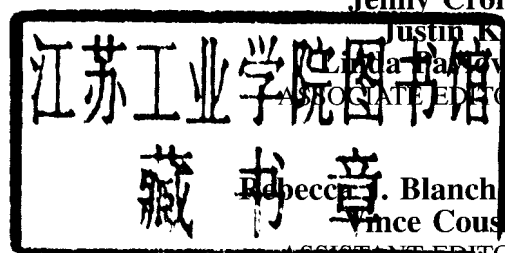
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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, had fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- 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 works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual paperbound edition of the *CLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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Kingsley Amis

1922-1995

(Full name Kingsley William Amis; also known as Robert Markham, William Tanner) English novelist, poet, short story writer, editor, nonfiction writer, biographer, script-writer, and journalist.

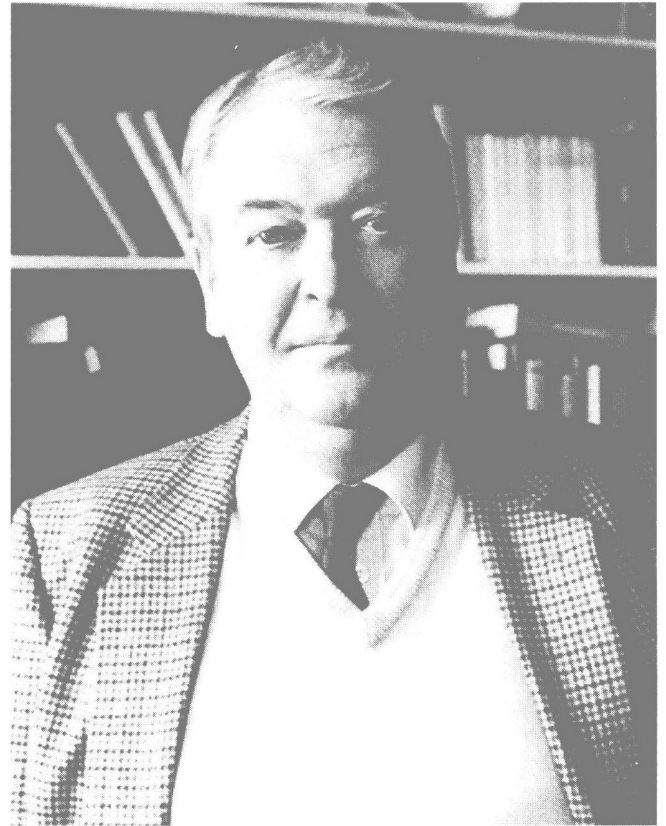
The following entry provides an overview of Amis's career through 1999. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 40, and 44.

INTRODUCTION

With the publication of his first novel *Lucky Jim* (1954), Amis established himself as the voice of British middle-class intellectuals. In the novel, Amis chronicles the exploits of Jim Dixon, a lower-middle-class man who refuses to accept the idea of the inherent superiority of high culture. As a result of this novel, critics identified Amis as a member of the "Angry Young Men," a British post-war working class literary movement. Throughout a prolific career spanning almost fifty years Amis continued to develop his voice, championing lowbrow culture such as the spy novel and adventure story, always writing in a straightforward and lucid style, and earning converts through his biting satirical humor. Although in later years he was criticized for dated and intolerant views, particularly in regard to women, he won the Booker Prize in 1986 for his novel *The Old Devils*. He continued working until his death in 1995.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Amis was born April 16, 1922, in London, England to William and Rosa. Amis's father William was a clerk at Colman's Mustard, earning the family a position among the lower middle class. Amis, an only child, characterized his childhood as bland and insular. At the age of eleven he had his first story published in the Newbury College school magazine; he later attended the City of London School on scholarship. As a result of his studies, Amis earned a scholarship to study at St. John's College, Oxford, where he befriended such talented writers as Philip Larkin and Elizabeth Jennings. Amis's friendship with Larkin was close, lasting throughout their lives and careers. Amis joined the Royal Signal Corps in 1942 as a commissioned officer and served three years in France, Belgium, and Germany during World War II before returning to Oxford to complete his studies. Following his graduation in 1947,



he married Hilary A. Bardwell and accepted a teaching position at the University College of Swansea in Wales, concentrating on his emerging talent as a poet. Along with his fellow writers, Larkin, Jennings, John Wain, and Robert Conquest, he began to garner critical attention, and soon the group was dubbed "The Movement," though its participants denied any intention to create a literary subculture. With the publication of his novel *Lucky Jim* in 1954, a new label was applied to Amis and his cohorts: "Angry Young Men." As his reputation grew, he received many literary awards and prizes, including a Booker Prize nomination in 1974 for *Ending Up*, and a Booker Prize in 1986 for *The Old Devils*. In addition, Amis earned praise as an essayist and reviewer. His personal life earned him national recognition as well; his bitter divorce from his second wife, author Elizabeth Howard, was highly publicized. Amis used these events as fodder for his later novels. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1990.

He died on October 22, 1995, in London, from injuries sustained in a fall.

MAJOR WORKS

Amis wrote humorous but biting satire aimed at the pretensions of class society and the weakness of the individual. His heroes are typically cynical, condemnatory individuals who combine intelligence and wit with curiously lowbrow or middle-class values. Jim Dixon, the sardonic protagonist of Amis's first novel, *Lucky Jim*, is a junior lecturer at a provincial university who flouts the pseudointellectual demands of academia as a way of rejecting its affectation and hypocrisy. The characters of Amis's subsequent novels are similar to Jim Dixon in temperament but grow increasingly mean-spirited in their attitudes. The hero of *That Uncertain Feeling* (1955), a young Welsh librarian obsessed with the sexual opportunities of university life, is alternately kind, lecherous, and cruel. In *Take a Girl Like You* (1960), an attractive but insincere grammar school instructor seduces, then nearly sexually assaults, a newly-arrived preschool teacher. The title character of *One Fat Englishman* (1964), a bigoted Oxford snob, is left with no redeeming human values at the novel's end as he fails to realize the fundamental contradictions in his own nature.

Amis disavowed the use of polemic and experimented with a variety of forms and styles in his fiction of the mid-1960s and 1970s. *The Anti-Death League* (1966) is a dark, humorless novel in which he combines elements of the spy thriller, love story, and ideological novel. *Colonel Sun* (1968), a novel written under the pseudonym Robert Markham, features as its protagonist Ian Fleming's hero, James Bond. *The Green Man* (1969) is a comic ghost story in which a malevolent spirit awakens in a rundown pub, believing it has found an ally in the establishment's drunken and lecherous but essentially decent proprietor. Amis received the John W. Campbell Award for *The Alteration* (1976), an example of the "alternate worlds" subgenre of science fiction. *Russian Hide-and-Seek* (1980), another example of the "alternate worlds" novel, centers on a future England overrun by the Soviets, who abandoned Marxism in favor of the ancient system of czarist rule. In 1986 Amis was awarded the Booker Prize for *The Old Devils*, a novel that takes place in Wales, where Amis worked as a university lecturer during the 1950s and 1960s; satirical references throughout the novel convey his disapproval of modern, gentrified Wales. The novel deals with the aging process, a phenomenon Amis treated previously in his novel *Ending Up* (1974), although with a different tone and purpose. In addition, Amis is known and highly regarded for his poetry, primarily written early in his career, and for his work as an essayist, exploring a wide range of literary issues, but always advocating clear, lucid writing.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Amis earned critical praise first for his collections of poetry and then for his novel *Lucky Jim*. He continued to build

upon this high regard throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Although Amis expanded upon the themes common in his early novels, he did not fair as well with the critics as his career progressed. These later books elicited sharply divided critical opinions due to their controversial or challenging conclusions. For example, although some critics condemned the novel's lack of engagement, V. S. Pritchett praised *Jake's Thing* (1978) as "a very funny book," adding that "Mr. Amis is a master of laconic mimicry and of the vernacular drift." *Stanley and the Women* (1984), though praised in England, was criticized elsewhere for its misogynist content, and Amis was unable for several years to find an American publisher. While Susan Fromberg Schaeffer called the novel "a misanthropic work in which Mr. Amis attacks everything in sight," Marilyn Butler contended: "The messages conveyed by the packaging, that the book is stupid, old-fashioned, illiberal and likely to displease women, are nonsense, the very reverse of the novel's actual message." In general, however, Amis's later works have been poorly received; though critics continue to praise the humor, many agree with James Gordin's assessment that they lack "the richness and force that derive from some form of commitment or commentary. The flatness of the pure and uncommitted comedy, its satisfaction with simple reflection, may often become repetitious and dull." Other critics maintain that Amis's artistic intentions have been misunderstood; R. G. G. Price noted: "Amis has suffered a good deal from admirers who insist on seeing him as a cultural portent or a satirist of the voice of the Left or, now, of the Right. . . . He is an intelligent poet and critic, an effective journalist and a straightforward, honest writer of fiction which is both entertaining and firmly committed to traditional moral values."

Reviewers agree that *The Old Devils* is Amis's least vitriolic and most humane novel. Amis mutes his customary sarcasm, they observe, showing tolerance for both his male and female characters and depicting the physical and emotional rigors of aging with compassion as well as humor. Some reviewers also comment that *The Old Devils* features Amis's most accomplished work from a technical standpoint, involving the reader in the story with his impressive prose, engaging dialogue, and startling paradoxes. Anthony Burgess declared in his review: "There is one old devil who is writing better than he ever did." By the close of his career, critics had become more uniformly hostile, attacking Amis's books for their dated political and social viewpoints, especially his derogatory treatment of women. Donald Bruce took issue with Amis's criticism of Vladimir Nabokov's writing. Bruce charged that Amis's writing is "tortuous, periphrastic, laboured: verbosely inarticulate." However, in retrospect, James Wolcott argues that critics were too harsh on Amis in his final years. George Watson summarizes that Amis was the voice of his generation stating, "(H)is novels spoke in our voice, and they looked like the first fiction that ever did."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Bright November (poetry) 1947
A Frame of Mind: Eighteen Poems (poetry) 1953
Kingsley Amis (poetry) 1954
Lucky Jim (novel) 1954
Poems (poetry) 1954
That Uncertain Feeling (novel) 1955
A Case of Samples: Poems, 1946-1956 (poetry) 1956
Take a Girl Like You (novel) 1960
The Evans Country (poetry) 1962
One Fat Englishman (novel) 1963
The Anti-Death League (novel) 1966
A Look Round the Estate: Poems 1967 (poetry) 1967
Colonel Sun: A James Bond Adventure (novel) 1968
I Want It Now (novel) 1968
The Green Man (novel) 1969
Girl, 20 (novel) 1971
Ending Up (novel) 1974
The Alteration (novel) 1976
Jake's Thing (novel) 1978
Collected Poems: 1944-1979 (poetry) 1980
Russian Hide-and-Seek (novel) 1980
Stanley and the Women (novel) 1984
The Old Devils (novel) 1986
The Crime of the Century (novel) 1987
Difficulties with Girls (novel) 1988
The Folks That Live on the Hill (novel) 1990
The Russian Girl (novel) 1994
You Can't Do Both (novel) 1994
The Biographer's Moustache (novel) 1995

CRITICISM

David Lida (review date May 1989)

SOURCE: "A Misunderstood Misanthrope," in *Harper's Bazaar*, Vol. 122, No. 3329, May, 1989, pp. 76-7.

[In the following review, Lida provides an overview of Amis's writings, considering whether the novelist's most recent work is dated.]

Early on in Kingsley Amis' new novel *Difficulties with Girls*, one character says to another, "The bloody world's moved on without consulting us." Although he is considered the greatest British comic novelist of his generation, some critics suggest a parallel view: that no matter how brilliant a sentence Amis turns, how trenchant his observations or how deep his skewering of British society, his work is dated, his politics are hopelessly reactionary—he's simply missed the boat.

Has the world moved on without consulting Amis? This is an excellent time to consider the question. After the 1987 American publication of his Booker Prize-winning *The*

Old Devils, a beautiful and sensitive comedy about aging, Summit is also bringing out two reissues of vintage Amis: *One Fat Englishman* and *Girl, 20*.

Amis' memorable first novel, *Lucky Jim*, was published in 1954, when he was 32. The eponymous protagonist is a penniless assistant lecturer in a provincial English university, who hates his pompous professor, is burdened with a hysterical girlfriend, and is less interested in advancing the cause of scholarship than in chasing other women and drinking himself comatose.

The book's portrait of a selfish and snide breed of academic caused many to brand Amis as one of the Angry Young Men, a rebellious set of English writers who blasted the British class structure.

Although he did little to correct this assumption—it was good for sales—it was nonetheless a misapprehension. Less a rebel than a social commentator, his major preoccupation is to pinpoint (and pinprick) the hypocrisy of the prevailing order and to shed light on its darkest corners. However, after nearly 20 novels and several collections of poetry and essays, he has proven to be fairly satisfied with the status quo—or at least uninterested in toppling it.

Amis was born in London 67 years ago to an export agent for Colman's Mustard. At present, he is "one fat Englishman" who, since divorcing his second wife in 1980, has lived with his first wife and her present husband in what he once described as an arrangement out of an Iris Murdoch novel. He claims to lead a sedentary life, stepping out for lunch occasionally, but spending most of his evenings at home reading, watching television or sipping his favorite whiskey. This last occupation is one he reportedly finds thoroughly engaging. His books are loaded with drink, and when asked what he was going to spend his Booker Prize money on, he replied, "Booze, of course."

Not surprisingly, Amis has become notorious for taking stabs at any and everyone—ethnic groups, the aged or, particularly, women. His females are usually crazy, chronic complainers or downright witches, who are either frigid, sex-mad or both, depending on how manipulative they are. His men tend to fare better; while they may be selfish cads, they redeem themselves with charm and humor.

Among the more sensitive critics, such portrayals have given Amis the reputation of a racist, anti-Semite and sexist. There is an almost "Who's going to get it next?" sense of anticipation that precedes each novel.

Difficulties with Girls is about Patrick Standish, a 37-year-old editor at a publishing house, whose marriage to the beautiful and tender Jenny is threatened by his compulsion to philander. While Patrick may be selfish, Amis has made him more attentive, sympathetic and guilty over his indiscretions than his past heroes. Each time he makes a sexist remark in Jenny's presence, he apologizes, and occasionally even shows her genuine empathy. Though Jenny

is perhaps Amis' strongest, most sympathetic female character thus far, some may find her hopelessly out of date. "In her opinion," Amis writes, "no wife could maintain a full-time job and expect to look after her husband properly."

The two earlier novels are more standard Amis. Roger Micheldene in *One Fat Englishman* (1963) is a misanthropic British publisher who is visiting a northeastern U.S. college called Budweiser. He is interested in little but food, drink and willing women. His view of women: "You're all the same," he says. *Girl, 20* (1971) concerns Douglas Yandell, a stuffy, 34-year-old music critic, who is embroiled in the affair of conductor/composer Sir Roy Vandervane and an unspeakably obnoxious 17-year-old. Sir Roy, in his 60s, doesn't much care what other people—including his wife—think and is ready to suffer any consequence for the pleasure of seducing a young girl.

This, the most ambitious of the three books, attempts to portray what Amis perceives as the rubble left in the wake of the political and social permissiveness of the '60s. It is also a barometer for his deep-seated conservatism, which at times makes him sound like one of his own protagonists. "I'm anathema to the young," he says. "I think it's because I point out so many unpalatable things. It's awkward to tell the truth."

Charges of racism and sexism are more complex. Amis' patronizing views of homosexuals, blacks and the Irish are probably less slurs than jabs at the complacency of his class and generation. (They also satisfy his penchant for the quick, cheap joke.) Like many British novelists, Amis feels there is a larger story behind his comedies of manners. As for his sexism, he once admitted that "for years . . . any female contact that did not end in sex was a letdown." Still, there is no doubt that besides good looks and sympathetic natures, the most well-rounded of his female characters hold a certain moral superiority over men.

Has the world moved on without consulting Amis? The answer is a qualified yes—the same way it has moved on without consulting P. G. Wodehouse, one of Amis' most brilliant forebears. It is impossible to read Wodehouse today without wincing at his political complacency; nevertheless, he is as enjoyable as ever. So is Amis. If the world has moved on, it is just a matter of time until it catches up with him again.

James Gindin (essay date 1990)

SOURCE: "Changing Social and Moral Attitudes," in *Kingsley Amis: In Life and Letters*, edited by Dale Salwak, Macmillan, 1990, pp. 130-48.

[In the following essay, Gindin, a professor of English at the University of Michigan, considers the nature of comedy as well as the political and moral tone of Amis's work.]

The changes and inconsistencies in the social attitudes visible in Kingsley Amis's fiction over the past thirty-five years are not any better explained by his change from voting Labour to voting Tory than they initially were by the simplistic designation of 'Angry Young Man'. Loyalty to one party or another masks the consistency within the changes in Amis's fiction, for his comedy has never promulgated an interpretation of experience that could follow a party doctrine or programme, never depended on a vision of what social experience should or might be. Rather, the sharp comic texture of Amis's prose and the operation of his satire depend on a clash, implicit or explicit, between a conventional illusion about what experience might be and the immediate sense of what it is. In his emphasis on what is, Amis writes a comedy of social accommodation. As, through his mimicry of varying voices and social details, his early protagonists learn or fail to learn to drive cars, lose virginity or order meals in restaurants in a world of rapidly expanding social possibility, the emphasis seems to fall on an opportunistic adjustment to experience. In the more recent fiction, in a world of physical decay and diminishing possibilities for most of his characters, Amis emphasises a necessary acceptance of things. In either case, however, the superficial focus is on accommodation to what the outer social world is rather than on any judgement about that world that can be translated or reduced to partisan political statement.

Much of Amis's early comedy depends on metaphors of a direct physical response to experience. Conflict is frequently dramatised as farce; iconoclasm is often a form of assault. Images of physical discomfort plague all Amis's characters. In *I Like It Here* (1958), a presumably elegant seaside resort in Portugal that could lay a very fair claim to being dubbed the Blackpool of the South but for its smallness and lack of amenities' is distinguished only in the availability of cheap drink and constant infestations of insects. Amis then spends three very funny mock-heroic pages reporting the protagonist's futile struggles against fleas. Sexual communication is interrupted by wasp stings, mosquitos or the intrusions of undisciplined children. The foul tastes of food crowd all the early novels, as in the boarding house in *Take a Girl Like You* (1960), in which the haddock is reminiscent of the 'lionhouse at the zoo' and the beef tastes of 'damp tea-towel'. Lest this be taken solely as a response to British food after nearly two decades of austerity, the messes of 'foreign sauce and muck' are even worse. Posed against the actual tastes and smells is the characters' hope that eating might provide sensuous pleasure as well as necessary sustenance, and the comedy is in sharply rendered images of the differences.

Mental experience is parodied in Amis's frequently elaborate structures of inappropriate logical analysis or classification. Love-making is also interrupted or prevented by pseudo-logical analyses of how to defend different parts of the anatomy or a manual of technique to demonstrate the protagonist's skills as seducer. In *Take a Girl Like You*, all forms of behaviour and relationship are codified into impossible axioms or classified by types of men (the

valuable ones dead), or ways of smoking a cigarette: 'not the almost-unbearable-enjoyment one nor the old-smoking-campaigner one, but the wise, thoughtful one, as if he was the only person in the whole world who understood exactly about cigarettes'. Even the varieties of pretentious nonsense he meets in America have to be classified by another of Amis's protagonists, Roger Micheldene in *One Fat Englishman* (1963), in order 'to be sure about nonsense'. The human mental or rational activity, the elaborate classificatory chain, is funny because inappropriate and unconnected, a diversion from the experience itself. Like his physical comedy, Amis's comedy of logical analysis underlines the difficulty in his protagonists' accommodation to the worlds they want to impress.

Another form of comedy depends on the juxtaposition of references to social class, a metaphor from one widely different form of social organisation planked against another. Estoril is always reminiscent of Blackpool, and Amis widens this theme into a cogent account of the different—and, for the protagonist, frightening—uses of money in the different social and national worlds. Class divisions inhibit accommodation, not by virtue or necessity, but by the difficulties involved in foregoing the security of origins and immersing oneself in the newer world of increased possibility. The English writer in Portugal

fancied that he had a long history of lower-middle-class envy directed against the upper-middle-class traveller who handled foreign railway-officials with insolent ease, discussed the political situation with the taxi-driver in fluent *argot*, and landed up first go at exactly the right hotel, if indeed he wasn't staying with the *contessa*, all cigarette-holder and *chaise-longue*, who called him by a foreign version of his christian name.

When another traveller finds a taxi more efficiently than he does, the protagonist snarls, 'Class traitor. . . . Imperialist lackey. Social chauvinist.' Class assault can escalate to ethnic or racial insult in the comedy of one of Amis's most outrageous anti-heroes, Roger in *One Fat Englishman*, as his way of sorting out his new world. More tamely, even the superficially confident protagonists in Amis's later fiction (the bumbling incompetents of the early fiction gradually disappear, although the issues of competence and accommodation remain) sort others out by class, sometimes by religion or race, often by occupation or trade that carries a consistent social meaning, as Amis's protagonists are consistently lethal in referring to the impercipient anxieties of dentists and dentists' mistresses. Jake Richardson, in *Jake's Thing* (1978), in a new world that acknowledges, discusses and tries, often foolishly, to change sexual behaviour, recognises that, in terms of both class and sex, he confronts 'Just another example of thinking that if you've named something you've explained it. Like . . . like permissive society.'

To some extent, over the decades of his fiction, Amis's protagonists acquire a mastery through their occupations and histories of accommodation that enables them to survive the more obvious and superficial pitfalls of the

modern world. They can drive cars, order meals and generally get women into bed, tokens of manhood rather like shooting bears in other social worlds. Yet the texture of a comic vocabulary that centres on physicality, disembodied mind or pseudo-logical analysis, and a social organisation based on classifiable divisions, remains central to Amis's prose. The comedy, outrageous or not, varying considerably in tone and in specific social reference, protects the persona from the uncertainty or inadequacy he feels. Amis's comic vocabulary and metaphors do not propound concealed ideologies or truths that might suggest salvation or redemption. Rather, in his world of change or accident, Amis's comedy becomes a vehicle for demonstrating both the kinds of control his protagonists have or have not over their chaotic and inexplicable worlds and the author's own linguistic control, his versions of the widely juxtaposed differences between human illusion and human experience. At various levels, Amis's comedy underlines the capacities, dilemmas and ambiguities of attempts at control of the self in accommodation to changing social experience.

The chaotic parties and farcical scenes in Amis's early novels are supposed communal gatherings lurching wildly out of control, like the iconoclastic medieval lecture in *Lucky Jim* (1954) or the international variety show that begins as a religious celebration in *I Like It Here*. In both these instances, fear generates the protagonist's participation, in the latter novel the combination of 'fear' and 'abroad . . . was what took him to perihelion'. In other early novels, the protagonist is more consistently aggressive and outrageous in assaulting others. The principal male in *Take a Girl Like You*, Patrick, for example, is a conscienceless womaniser who can operate well among the teachers and would-be artists of the small provincial city, but is ludicrously out of his depth in London or with the socially sophisticated. Aware of his different worlds, he often tries to summon 'full control'. Yet his control can be brutal or deceptive, as when he finally seduces Jenny Bunn in his ambiguous triumph over her outmoded 'Bible Class ideas'. Patrick expresses his need for control in the ridiculous cricket-elevens-of-enemies he draws up (combining names both within and outside the fiction), his manuals for seduction, his ludicrous plots to move others (like the one in which he sends his flatmate to watch a rained-out cricket match in London) and his shabby skill in turning logical argument to his own design. In a private moment, however, he recognises the fear on which all his language rests, as, apparently defeated, he 'tried to control his breathing' while imagining himself in 'thick mud, just mud and the struggle to breathe, a gradual loss of consciousness followed by dreams of water and mud and the struggle to breathe, dreams superseded by identical dreams, a death prolonged for ever'. One need not be as immorally duplicitous as Patrick to manufacture socially ludicrous forms of control. In the same novel, the Guernsey tomato farmer's daughter who masquerades as a passionate and sexually liberated Parisian in the provincial city is finally exposed. She responds: 'Playing a part's the only thing left these days, it shows you won't deal with society in the way it wants you to'.

The masks continue for Amis's protagonists. Roger Micheldene, in America, combines his language, his falsely reverential high culture, his deliberate aggression, and his lies, in an attempt to win the Danish/American symbol of beauty, Helene. He assumes his capacity to control others: 'A man's sexual aim, he had often said to himself, is to convert a creature who is cool, dry, articulate, independent, purposeful into a creature that is the opposite of these; to demonstrate to an animal that is pretending not to be an animal that it is an animal.' Helene is an animal, although not at Roger's prompting, and her own self-control is firmly established with her husband, an apparently dull and pedantic Danish/American linguist named Bang. Roger's language is persiflage. As his manipulations become more and more ludicrous, he becomes paranoid, assuming irrationally that others are plotting against him the more his own plots misfire. Similarly, in the later fiction, like *Jake's Thing*, the protagonist's elaborate schemes to control others are linked to his even more improbable convictions that others are deliberately and maliciously controlling him. Control, seen both positively and negatively, is a comic survival kit in an uncertain world.

In a number of the novels, the attitude toward experience as a series of comic survival kits perched uncertainly on the top of an abyss of nothingness or death is derived from reference to the Second World War. The war is seen implicitly as the war the English might well have lost, did not expect to win, had no ultimate reason or metaphysical justification for winning, but accidentally and fortunately won nevertheless. Amis's protagonists, like Amis himself, despite a generally concealed sensitivity to the pain and loss of others, managed, with nothing of the heroic proclamation or gesture, to survive. At several points in *I Like It Here*, Garnet Bowen, the protagonist, recalls the war: once to contrast the self-deluding tourists who romanticise the atmosphere of precipitous little streets in Italian towns with those, a decade earlier, who suffered there; once to connect the fear beneath his derision of Portugal to the one episode during the war in which he momentarily and physically feared darkness and death.

In 1962, Amis published a volume of short stories, *My Enemy's Enemy*, in which a number deal with the military at the end of the Second World War, although none is set in combat. The title story begins with a conventional contrast within the military between those who seem to care only for order and discipline (sometimes linked by others to Nazis), awarding prizes 'for the smartest vehicle to the driver of an obsolete wireless truck immobilised for lack of spare parts', and those who know and do their jobs well, who without show or inspections maintain their trucks and their communicating signals. Instead of relying on an easily simplified contrast, however, Amis deepens both sides, uses both metaphor and the plot to show that not all spit-and-polish officers are incipient Fascists, not all agile and sensible mechanics are as honest and straightforward as they seem.

Another long story called '*I Spy Strangers*' deals directly with the politics of the 1945 election within the Army. The story begins with a mock Parliamentary debate between the military Labourites who might allow the victorious Russians to do whatever they want and the military Tories who would just as soon find an excuse, while still mobilised, to bomb Russia. The debate is never resolved. Rather, it is diffused into the more knowable and therefore, perhaps, socially controllable divisions of class between the Tory officer who fears a force 'hostile to his accent and taste in clothes and modest directorship and ambitions for his sons and redbrick house at Purley with its back-garden tennis court' and the Labour officer who would build a 'decent' Britain, abolish public schools, the House of Lords and perhaps the Royal Family. But, despite a point of view that recognises political equity and change in the majority of the Labour party (still, at the time in which the novel is set, doubtful that it represented a majority of the whole nation), Amis does not simply dismiss or render irrelevant institutional Toryism. He respects the institution complex and capacious enough to function unevenly within the modern world in spite of the folly of its superficial posture and the spurious pretence of its ideological moorings.

Amis's institutional military at the end of the Second World War is like the aristocratic fairy godfather who for all the negative reasons saves the anti-hero and awards the prize in *Lucky Jim*. The godfather explains, or, rather, doesn't: 'It's not that you've got the qualifications. . . . You haven't got the disqualifications, though, and that's much rarer.' Amis's characters in the early fiction act as if they experienced an unexpected and undeserved reprieve from pain and death by 1945, and they aren't at all sure what to do with it. They don't express gratitude, which would be false, but they don't express ideological certainty or pompous assurance of immutable virtue (the disqualifications) either. They haven't the language for the qualifications, and their words, their forms of control, fend off or assault the disqualifications.

The early Amis's deepest engagement with the themes of control and survival is visible in his 1966 novel set within the military, *The Anti-Death League*. The plot and characters involved in a staged military manoeuvre at a peacetime Army base are framed, beginning and end, by traffic accidents that simply happen—a motorcycle courier delivering a secret message killed at the beginning, the parson's dog, unable to stand the music that is the object of the parson's principal devotion, slipping his collar to run into his death on the highway at the end. In both instances, the ministrations of parson, doctor and security man are irrelevant, establishing a world always conscious of the accidental finality of death. Within the novel, the only person killed (again by random accident) in the abortive military manoeuvre is L. S. Caton, the rather slimy author and editor who writes in green ink and offers lectures in each of Amis's early novels, a gesture that seems appropriately to expunge from the fiction a worn comic device. Death also intrudes into the fiction centrally