

A Comparative Study of the Comic Vision in the Selected Novels of Kingsley Amis and Martin Amis

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Abstract-Kingsley Amis and Martin Amis both belong to a group of writers who wrote satirical novels in the 20th Century. They both belong to two different decade of the century and their works reflect the social evils of their times which they have presented in their novels through their comic vision. Both these writers have diametrically opposite comic visions which are the main thrust of present study. Kingsley Amis is a moralist as well as a humorist. The early novels exhibit a richly comic sense and a considerable penetration into character, particularly in its eccentric forms. With *Take a Girl Like You*, Amis begins to produce work of more serious design. He gives much deeper and more complex pictures of disturbing and distorted people, and a more sympathetic insight into the lot of his wasted or burnt-out characters. In all of his novels, he fulfills most effectively the novelist's basic task of telling a good story. In his best novels *Lucky Jim*, *Take a Girl Like You*, *The Old Devils* that uncertain feeling and one fat Englishman Amis tries to understand the truth about different kinds of human suffering, then passes it on to the reader without distortion, without sentimentality, without evasion, and without oversimplification. His work is based on a steadying common sense. On the other hand, Martin Amis employs a darker humour by means of which he outlines the atrocious, vicious and degenerated world of the postmodern world. In his novel *Martin Amis* handles subjects that are much more dark and complex than ever dealt by Kingsley Amis.

Keyword:- Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis, Novels, Comic Vision, Humor.

Introduction:- Kingsley Amis and Martin Amis are one of the most memorable father and son pair of novelists in modern English British Literature. Both Kingsley Amis and Martin Amis wrote satirical novels with comic undertones reflecting the social evils of their respective

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generations. They have addressed contemporary concerns through their satires in a comic way. Almost from the beginning of his career, Kingsley Amis enjoyed the attention of numerous commentators. Because his works have been filled with innovations, surprises, and variations in techniques and themes, it is not surprising that critics and reviewers alike found it difficult to make a definitive statement about his achievements. The range of his work is extraordinary: fiction, poetry, reviews, criticism, humor, science fiction, and biography. Of all of his writings, however, his achievement depends most upon his novels.

Amis's early novels are considered by many critics to be "angry" novels of protest against the contemporary social, political, and economic scene in Britain. The themes include resentment of rigid class stratification, rejection of formal institutional ties, and discouragement with the economic insecurity and low status of those without money, loathing of pretentiousness in any form, and disenchantment with the past. Because many of Amis's contemporaries, including John Wain, John Osborne, John Braine, and Alan Sillitoe, seemed to express similar concerns, and because many came from working-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds, went to Oxford or Cambridge Universities, and taught for a time at a provincial university, journalists soon spoke of them as belonging to a literary movement. The "Angry Young Men," as their fictional heroes were called, were educated men who did not want to be conventional gentlemen. Kenneth All sop called them "a new, rootless, faithless, classless class" lacking in manners and morals; W. Somerset Maugham called them "mean, malicious and envious scum" and warned that these men would someday rule England. Some critics even confused the characters with the writers themselves. Amis's *Jim Dixon* (in *Lucky Jim*) was appalled by the tediousness and falseness of academic life; therefore, *Dixon* was interpreted as a symbol of anti-intellectualism. *Dixon* taught at a provincial university; therefore, he became a symbol of contempt for Cambridge and Oxford. Amis himself taught at a provincial university; therefore, he and *Dixon* became one and the same in the minds of many critics. Like all literary generalizations, however, this one was soon inadequate. The most that can be said is that through Amis's early heroes there seemed to sound clearly those notes of disillusionment that were to become dominant in much of the literature of the 1950's.

Because it seems so artless, critics have also found Amis's fiction difficult to discuss. His straightforward plotting, gift for characterization,

and ability to tell a good story, they say, are resistant to the modern techniques of literary criticism. Because Amis lacks the obscurity, complexity, and technical virtuosity of James Joyce or William Faulkner, these critics suggest that he is not to be valued as highly. In many of the early reviews, Amis is described as essentially a comic novelist, an entertainer, or an amiable satirist not unlike P. G. Wodehouse, the Marx Brothers, or Henry Fielding. Furthermore, his interest in mysteries, ghost stories, James Bond thrillers, and science fiction confirms for these critics the view that Amis is a writer lacking serious intent.

Looking beyond the social commentary and entertainment found in Kingsley Amis's work, other critics find a distinct relationship between Amis's novels and the "new sincerity" of the so-called Movement poets of the 1950's and later. These poets (including Amis himself, Philip Larkin, John Wain, and D. J. Enright, all of whom also wrote fiction) saw their work as an alternative to the symbolic and allusive poetry of T. S. Eliot and his followers. In a movement away from allusion, obscurity, and excesses of style, the Movement poets encouraged precision, lucidity, and craftsmanship. They concentrated on honesty of thought and feeling to emphasize what A. L. Rowse calls a "businesslike intention to communicate with the reader." Kingsley Amis's deceptively simple novels have been written with the same criteria he imposed on his poetry; one cannot read Amis with a measure suitable only to Joyce or Faulkner. Rather, his intellectual and literary ancestors antedate the great modernist writers, and the resultant shape is that of a nineteenth century man of letters. His novels may be appreciated for their commonsense approach. He writes clearly. He avoids extremes or excessive stylistic experimentation. He is witty, satirical, and often didactic.

Amis's novels after 1980 added a new phase to his career. One of the universal themes that most engaged Amis is the relation between men and women, both in and out of marriage. After 1980, he moved away from the broad scope of a society plagued by trouble to examine instead the troubles plaguing one of that society's most fundamental institutions—relationships—and the conflicts, misunderstandings, and drastically different responses of men and women to the world. Most of his characters suffer blighted marriages. Often they seem intelligent but dazed, as if there were something they had lost but cannot quite remember. Something has indeed been lost, and loss is at the heart of all of Amis's novels, so that he is, as novelist Malcolm Bradbury calls him, "one of our most disturbing contemporary novelists, an explorer of

historical pain." From the beginning of his canon, Amis focused upon the absence of something significant in modern life: a basis, a framework, a structure for living, such as the old institutions like religion or marriage once provided. Having pushed that loss in societal terms to its absolute extreme in the previous novels, Amis subsequently studied it in personal terms, within the fundamental social unit. In *The Old Devils*, for example (for which he won the 1986 Booker Fiction Prize), his characters will not regain the old, secure sense of meaning that their lives once held, and Amis does not pretend that they will. What success they manage to attain is always partial. What, in the absence of an informing faith or an all-consuming family life, could provide purpose for living? More simply, how is one to be useful? This is the problem that haunts Amis's characters, and it is a question, underlying all of his novels, that came to the forefront near the end of his life.

In looking back over Kingsley Amis's career, critics have found a consistent moral judgment quite visible beneath the social commentary, entertainment, and traditional techniques that Amis employs. Beginning in a world filled with verbal jokes, masquerades, and incidents, Amis's view of life grew increasingly pessimistic until he arrived at a fearfully grim vision of a nightmare world filled with hostility, violence, sexual abuse, and self-destruction. Critics, therefore, view Amis most significantly as a moralist, concerned with the ethical life in difficult times. Amis's response to such conditions was to use his great powers of observation and mimicry both to illuminate the changes in postwar British society and to suggest various ways of understanding and possibly coping with those changes. For all these reasons, one can assert that Kingsley Amis has achieved a major reputation in contemporary English fiction, and, as is so often the case today, his is an achievement that does not depend upon any single work. It is rather the totality of his work with which readers should reckon.

Kingsley Amis's fiction is characterized by a recurring preoccupation with certain themes and concepts, with certain basic human experiences, attitudes, and perceptions. These persistent themes are treated with enormous variety, however, particularly in Amis's novels which draw on the conventions of genre fiction—the mystery, the spy thriller, the ghost story, and so on. Of the twenty novels Amis has published, his development as a seriocomic novelist is especially apparent in *Lucky Jim*, *Take a Girl Like You*, *The Anti-Death League*, *The Green Man*, *The Old Devils*, *The Folks That Live on the Hill*, and *The Russian*

Girl, his most substantial and complex works, each of which is representative of a specific stage in his career. All these novels are set in contemporary England. Drawing upon a variety of traditional techniques of good storytelling—good and bad characters, simple irony, straightforward plot structure, clear point of view—they restate, in a variety of ways, the traditional pattern of tragedy: A man, divided and complex, vulnerable both to the world and to himself, is forced to make choices that will determine his destiny. Built into this situation is the probability that he will bring down suffering on his head and injure others in the process.

In *Lucky Jim*, for example, Amis establishes a comic acceptance of many of life's injustices in the academic world. The novel is distinguished by clear-cut cases of right and wrong, a simple irony, and knockabout farce. Because he has neither the courage nor the economic security to protest openly, the hero lives a highly comic secret life of protest consisting of practical jokes and rude faces, all directed against the hypocrisy and pseudointellectualism of certain members of the British establishment. While only hinted at in *Lucky Jim*, Amis's moral seriousness becomes increasingly evident beginning with *Take a Girl Like You*. Whereas in *Lucky Jim* the values are "hidden" beneath a comic narrative, gradually the comedy is submerged beneath a more serious treatment. Thus, *Take a Girl Like You* is a turning point for Amis in a number of ways: The characterization is more complex, the moral problems are more intense, and the point of view is not limited to one central character. Distinguished also by a better balance between the comic and the serious, the novel is more pessimistic than its predecessors, less given to horseplay and high spirits.

In later novels such as *The Anti-Death League* and *The Green Man*, Amis continues to see life more darkly, shifting to an increasingly metaphysical, even theological concern. Contemporary England is viewed as a wasteland of the spirit, and his characters try vainly to cope with a precarious world filled with madness and hysteria, a world in which love and religion have become distorted and vulgarized. Threatened with death and ugly accidents by a malicious God, Amis's characters feel powerless to change, and in an attempt to regain control of their lives, act immorally. Amis's ultimate vision is one in which all of the traditional certainties - faith, love, loyalty, responsibility, decency - have lost their power to comfort and sustain. Humanity is left groping in the dark of a nightmare world. In the later *The Old Devils*, Amis's study of

a Wales and a Welshness that have slipped out of reach forever clearly shows a culmination of his increasing damnation of Western society, portrayed through the microcosm of human relationships. The final picture is one of the aimlessness of old age, the meaninglessness of much of life itself.

Martin Amis novel *Dead Babies* (1975) more flippant in tone, chronicles a few days in the lives of some friends who convene in a country house to take drugs. A number of Amis's characteristics show up here for the first time: mordant black humour, obsession with the [zeitgeist](#), authorial intervention, a character subjected to sadistically humorous misfortunes and humiliations, and a defiant casualness.

Martin Amis's best-known novels are *Dead Babies*, [Money](#), [London Fields](#), [The Information](#) and *Night Train* commonly referred to as his "London Trilogy". Although the books share little in terms of plot and narrative, they all examine the lives of middle-aged men, exploring the sordid, debauched, and post-apocalyptic undercurrents of life in late 20th-century Britain. Amis's London [protagonists](#) are [anti-heroes](#): they engage in questionable behavior, are passionate [iconoclasts](#), and strive to escape the apparent banality and futility of their lives. He writes, "The world is like a human being. And there's a scientific name for it, which is entropy everything tends towards disorder from an ordered state to a disordered state."

Money (1984, subtitled *A Suicide Note*) is a first-person narrative by John Self, advertising man and would-be film director, who is "addicted to the twentieth century". A satire of Thatcherite amorality and greed," the novel relates a series of black comedic episodes as Self flies back and forth across the Atlantic, in crass and seemingly chaotic pursuit of personal and professional success. [Time](#) included the novel in its list of the 100 best English-language novels of 1923 to 2005. On 11 November 2009, *The Guardian* reported that the BBC had adapted *Money* for television as part of their early 2010 schedule for BBC. [Nick Frost](#) played John Self. The television adaptation also featured [Vincent Kartheiser](#), [Emma Pierson](#) and [Jerry Hall](#). The adaptation was a "two-part drama" and was written by Tom Butterworth and Chris Hurford. After the transmission of the first of the two parts, Martin Amis was quick to praise the adaptation, stating that "All the performances without weak spots. I thought Nick Frost was absolutely extraordinary as John Self. He fills the character. It's a very unusual performance in that he's very funny, he's physically comic, but he's also

strangely graceful, a pleasure to watch...It looked very expensive even though it wasn't and that's a feat...The earlier script I saw was disappointing (but) they took it back and worked on it and it's hugely improved. My advice was to use more of the language of the novel, the dialogue, rather than making it up."

London Fields (1989), Martin Amis's longest work, describes the encounters between three main characters in London in 1999, as a climate disaster approaches. The characters have typically Amisian names and broad caricatured qualities: Keith Talent, the lower-class crook with a passion for darts; Nicola Six, a [femme fatale](#) who is determined to be murdered; and upper-middle-class Guy Clinch, "the fool, the foil, the poor foal" who is destined to come between the other two. The book was controversially omitted from the Booker Prize shortlist in 1989, because two panel members, [Maggie Gee](#) and Helen McNeil, disliked Amis's treatment of his female characters. "It was an incredible row", Martyn Goff, the Booker's director, told The Independent. "Maggie and Helen felt that Amis treated women appallingly in the book. That is not to say they thought books which treated women badly couldn't be good, they simply felt that the author should make it clear he didn't favour or bless that sort of treatment. Really, there were only two of them and they should have been outnumbered as the other three were in agreement, but such was the sheer force of their argument and passion that they won. [David](#) has told me he regrets it to this day, he feels he failed somehow by not saying, 'It's two against three, Martin's on the list'."

Martin Amis's 1991 novel, the short [Time's Arrow](#), was shortlisted for the [Man Booker Prize](#). Notable for its backwards narrative—including dialogue in reverse—the novel is the autobiography of a [Nazi concentration camp](#) doctor. The Information (1995) was notable not so much for its critical success, but for the scandals surrounding its publication. The enormous advance (an alleged £500,000) demanded and subsequently obtained by Amis for the novel attracted what the author described as "an [Eisteddfod](#) of hostility" from writers and critics after he abandoned his long-serving agent, the late [Pat Kavanagh](#), in order to be represented by the Harvard-educated [Andrew Wylie](#). The split was by no means amicable; it created a rift between Amis and his long-time friend, [Julian Barnes](#), who was married to Kavanagh. The Information itself deals with the relationship between a pair of British writers of fiction. One, a spectacularly successful purveyor of "[airport novels](#)", is envied by his friend, an equally unsuccessful writer

of philosophical and generally abstruse prose. The novel is written in the author's classic style: characters appearing as [stereotyped](#) caricatures, grotesque elaborations on the wickedness of middle age, and a general air of post-apocalyptic malaise.

Martin Amis's 1997 offering, the short novel [Night Train](#), is narrated by Mike Hoolihan, a tough woman detective with a man's name. The story revolves around the suicide of her boss's young, beautiful, and seemingly happy daughter. Night Train is written in the language of American 'noir' crime fiction, but subverts expectations of an exciting investigation and neat, satisfying ending. Reviewers tended to miss the book's real story, and it was subjected to harshly negative criticism. [John Updike](#) 'hated' it and others disapproved of a British author writing in an American idiom. But the novel found defenders elsewhere, notably in Janis Bellow, wife of Martin Amis's mentor and friend [Saul Bellow](#).

Conclusion- From present study it is clear that Both Kingsley Amis and Martin Amis have contributed significantly to modern British Literature. Martin Amis's works reflect his literary legacy but most of his works reflect a literary rivalry with his father. They both have different opinions on a number of things, such as literary canons, realism, postmodernism and attitude towards writers of previous ages and even contemporary ones. Martin Amis's novel proved that there was a stark difference in the comic vision of this father and son. Kingsley Amis did not think much of his son's writings, even though he was proud of the recognition his son received. They wrote novels unique to their own aims and tastes. Differ as they may, both have offered a powerful portrait of their times with rich narrative voices to bring their visions to life.

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