

# *Martin, Karl, and Maggie Too:* *Political Discourse in Martin Amis's* **Other People: A Mystery Story** *Stephen Jones*

A common thread that runs throughout criticism of Martin Amis's work is a concentration on the formal aspects of his writing. In his earlier work, this concentration often comes at the expense of his novels' political content. Martin Cropper has written that:

Martin Amis has published two novels worth re-reading, his third and fourth: *Success* (1978) and *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981). Each is structurally exquisite—a double helix; a Möbius strip (Cropper, p.6)

While I would argue that all of Amis's work is worth reading regardless, and possibly because, of any 'aesthetic shortcomings' that Cropper may identify, his description of Amis's precise structuring is enlightening. The analogy to the mathematical structures of a double helix and a Möbius strip suggests the precision and rigidity with which Amis has 'calculated' his narrative structures, and it is the Möbius strip structure of *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981) in particular that appears to have distracted many critics from any political content that the novel may contain. Brian Finney pays close attention to the novel's metafictional elements, concluding that its cyclical structure entraps 'the narrator and the reader ... in the web of the fictional construct' (Finney, p.53). Finney's suggestion is that the main purpose of the novel's metafictional devices is to draw attention to the problems of narrative closure. While Finney is correct in noting this, it is also possible to read these devices as drawing attention to social as well as narrative issues.

In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, while considering the question 'What is postmodernism?', Linda Hutcheon describes fiction as a form that:

[is] firmly rooted in realist representation but which, since [its] reinterpretation in modernist formalist terms, [is] now in a position to confront both [its] documentary and formal impulses (Hutcheon, p.7).

Hutcheon sees this as a postmodernist confrontation 'where documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody'(p.7) that

comes under scrutiny in the postmodern form she likes to call 'historiographic metafiction' (p.14). Referring to Lennard Davis's argument that 'the novel has been inherently ambivalent since its inception: it has always been both fictional and worldly', Hutcheon suggests that:

If this is so, then postmodern historiographic metafiction merely foregrounds this inherent paradox by having its historical and socio-political grounding sit uneasily alongside its self-reflexivity (p.15).

This notion of postmodern historiographic metafiction describes a fictional form that contains both socio-political and self-reflexive impulses while simultaneously showing an awareness of the paradoxical nature of this containment. Amis's *Other People* may not fit neatly into Hutcheon's category of 'historiographic', but it does fit her idea of metafiction. The novel's self-reflexive, cyclical structure initially appears to exclude history and socio-political documentary in favour of a study of narrative closure that suggests a dominance of modernist formal impulses. As I will show, however, there are oblique references to the 'Winter of Discontent' and Marx's theory of labour power that reveal the text's socio-political impulses. I argue that, rather than undermining each other, these two impulses work together in Amis's novel to create a discourse that reflects the rise of Thatcherism during the late 1970s and the subsequent shift of focus from collectivism to right-wing individualism.

Towards the end of *Other People*, after the main character Mary Lamb has survived a murder attempt and reclaimed her true identity as Amy Hyde, her friend, the policeman Prince, identifies himself as her murderer saying, 'I am the policeman, I am the murderer', and then kills her (Amis, p.205). This would appear to have solved one of the text's mysteries, in that Prince has revealed himself as the man whom Amy said she loved 'so much [she] wouldn't mind if he killed [her]' (p.172). However, the narrative itself remains unresolved, and there follows a final section and an epilogue in which Amy awakes in her parents' home while the narrator prepares to introduce himself to her. These sections disorientate the reader and disrupt the novel's apparent resolution. They also, I suggest, provide an important clue to a political interpretation of the novel.

Contemporary reviewers of *Other People*, while being impressed with it overall, have found the ending problematic. R.D. Jacobs, for example, concludes that:

I am still somewhat bewildered by the very end, which undercuts the strength of the novel, but the effect of a page and a half cannot detract from what is a very fine piece of work (Jacobs, p.347).

In reply to this type of criticism, Amis has said that:

The simple Idea of the book—as I point out several times in the text—is, why should we expect death to be any less complicated than life? ... The novel is the girl's death, and her death is a sort of witty parody of her life ... At the very end of the novel she starts her life again, the idea being that life and death will alternate until she gets it right (Haffenden, pp.17–18).

While it is possible that the criticisms stem from Amis's failure to convincingly portray this intent, I would suggest that the novel's structure supports his comment, indicating that cycles, doubles, and mirroring are important in constructing the novel's meaning.

The novel's table of contents provides the first structural clue to interpreting the text, by showing the chapter structure to be symmetrical (Amis, p.8). The novel consists of twenty-four chapters divided into three parts, framed by a prologue and an epilogue. Parts one and three contain four chapters and part two sixteen. This symmetrical chapter structure is reflected in the textual content itself. An examination of the first section of chapter 1 and the last of chapter 24 reveals that the first paragraph of each is identical:

Her first feeling, as she smelled the air, was one of intense and helpless gratitude. I'm all right, she thought with a gasp. Time—it's starting again. She tried to blink away all the water in her eyes, but there was too much to deal with and she soon shut them tight (pp.13 & 206).

The phrases 'Her first feeling' and 'Time—it's starting again' suggest a beginning and a rebirth, while the repetition of the paragraph as a whole suggests an unending cycle. The first occurrence describes Mary's awakening in a hospital, while the second describes Amy's in her parents' home as a child. By re-using the paragraph, Amis indicates that time is repeating itself; the order of appearance in the text suggests that Amy wakes up in her parents' house after she wakes up in the hospital. To emphasise the notion of time repeating, the narrator tells us that 'I feel as though I've done these things before, and am glazedly compelled to do them again' (p.207). The last section therefore is not a flashback to

an earlier period, but a continuation of the narrative sequence.

The prologue and the epilogue also contain textual elements that create structural symmetry. The prologue begins:

This is a confession, but a brief one. I didn't want to have to do it to her. I would have infinitely preferred some other solution. Still there we are. It makes sense, really, given the rules of life on earth; and she *asked* for it [Amis's italics] (p.9).

While the epilogue begins:

This is a promise. I won't do anything to her if she doesn't want me to. I won't do anything to her unless she *asks* for it [Amis's italics] (p.207).

'This is a promise' parallels 'this is a confession', while 'unless she asks for it' parallels 'and she asked for it'. Using parallelism rather than repetition signals that the cycle, rather than simply repeating itself, is capable of slight changes on each circuit. The prologue, written in the past tense, suggests the end of events, while the epilogue, written in the present tense, suggests the beginning. The content of the prologue and the epilogue would appear to be the wrong way round. A more logical sequence would be for the promise not to do harm to come before the confession of having done harm. Presenting them in the 'wrong' order suggests that the narrative is cyclical; that this is another beginning with the possibility that things would be different if 'she' doesn't 'ask for it' this time around. This structural evidence suggests that rather than being 'patched on', as some critics have suggested, the ending is tightly bound into the novel's structure. The repetitions and parallels bind it to the beginning and suggest, with the chapter structuring, that mirroring and circularity may be important keys to unravelling the novel's meaning. So, rather than being a flaw, the ending is a key part of the overall structure that provides a vital clue to interpretation.

I wish to suggest that the narrative structure functions to foreground the novel's themes. By using parallelism and repetition, Amis signals the circularity of the novel and the true identity of the narrator. The identification of the narrator then leads to a questioning of his reliability and of the nature of narrative itself. Finney rightly points out that:

Amis seems to be asking us ... are writers (and readers) condemned to go on murdering their characters to create new worlds that are always old? (Finney, p.53).

The circularity of the narrative, along with the narrator's attitude to narration, does seem to suggest that all three parties involved in the narrative (narrator, reader, and character) have a distinct lack of control over their places in it. It would appear, then, that Amy is fated to repeat her life, and Prince to narrate it, indefinitely, with only a slim chance of Amy breaking the cycle by 'getting it right this time'. It is, however, possible to read this structure as foregrounding more than just the problems of narrative. This notion of 'fate' then transmits an interesting message about individualism. Both Amy and Prince appear to have little self-determination, and this suggests, I argue, a dominant social structure that prevents individual choice or social mobility. Although Amis hints that breaking the pattern is possible, the evidence for this is slight when viewed beside the evidence for an unending circular existence. Considering the novel's cyclical form alongside its content also presents a conflict, with aspects of the text suggesting the characters' fates are sealed, while other aspects hint at the possibility of individualism. This conflict can be made sense of through an examination of political events in Britain during the period of writing. More specifically, it is connected to the transition from a collectivist Labour government to an individualist Conservative government midway through the writing of the novel.

Throughout *Other People*, there are references to money and contemporary events, such as the 'Winter of Discontent' and the generally poor state of the British economy during the mid- to late '70s, that present conflicting notions of capitalism and reveal corresponding political discourses within the text. These discourses, I argue, reflect the change from a collectivist Labour Government to a Conservative Government that proposed the replacement of the state ownership of key industries (i.e., steel, coal, and gas) with a free market.

Early in the novel, the narrator explains the status of tramps within society:

The reason they are tramps is that they have no money. The reason they have no money is that they won't sell anything, which is what nearly everyone else does. You sell something, don't you, I'm sure? I know I do. Why don't they? Tramps just don't want to sell their time. *Selling time, time sold: that's the business we're all in. We sell our time* [my italics], but they keep theirs, but they don't get any money, but they think about money all the time. It's an odd way of going about things being a tramp. Tramps like it, though. Being a tramp is increasingly popular, statistics show, there are more and more tramps doing without money all the time (p.23).

This passage indicates two things which are useful in contextualising the novel and uncovering its underlying discourses. One is the individual's relation to capital, signalled by the notion of selling time, while the other, which I explore later, is the actual economic condition indicated by the ironic reference to an increase in homelessness. The narrator's statement that 'Selling time [is] the business we're all in' re-expresses Marx's notion of labour-power for the late '70s, reducing it from the capacity to labour to a more basic unit, time. For Marx, labour-power is:

the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind (Marx, p. 270).

To allow the exchange of labour-power as a commodity, its possessor firstly, 'must be the free proprietor of his own labour-capacity, hence of his person' (p. 271) and secondly:

instead of being able to sell commodities in which his labour has been objectified, must rather be compelled to offer for sale as a commodity that very labour-power which exists only in his living body (p.272).

Workers, therefore, are free individuals in that they possess their own capacity to work, but the fact that this is all they own restricts this freedom, in that they must sell their labour-power to be able to buy the commodities they need to live. As all workers need to do this and all have the same commodity to sell to the capitalist, they are, as Terry Eagleton puts it, 'turned into replaceable commodities in the market place' (Eagleton, p.41). For the narrator of *Other People*, however, time is the only commodity an individual has to sell and is therefore inseparable from money. This concept is evident throughout the novel, with a number of statements connecting the two. The narrator tells us that 'time was slow on the streets when you had no money ... [Mary] had all this time to sell, but didn't know who might want to buy it' (Amis, p.68). When Mary does find someone to buy her time, Amis describes her wages as 'the money she had earned from time sold' (p.104). Money and time are inseparably and paradoxically linked, in that money is needed to make time bearable, but the only way for most people to earn money is to sell time. In this way, the narrator represents money as a necessary requirement for life and the need for money as the motivating force behind most actions. For example, while explaining the motivations behind Jock and Trev's

criminal activities, he tells us that 'It's all about money, of course, like so much else' (p.40). This short sentence expresses crucial facts about capitalist society: that everything is about money and that the individual's principal concern is to accumulate at least enough to live on. As will be shown, however, the narrator's consideration of this idea is influenced by his idea that time and money are inseparable and that to accumulate money, time must be expended. The narrator reproduces this notion of time as commodity throughout the novel.

Despite the links that he makes between capital and exploitation, the narrator should not be thought of as a Marxist. Like Marx, the narrator presents the exchange of capital for commodities as a necessary requirement for life. However, he also sees time, rather than the individual, as the commodity. This subtle difference indicates that the individual may have some control over his position in the capitalist system. For example, at one point in the text Prince explains prostitution to Mary:

'He paid an agency fifty pounds to bring her here tonight. She will keep five, perhaps less. Five pounds, for going out with fat guys. Later they will make a deal. He will give her a hundred pounds, maybe a hundred and fifty. She will spend four or five hours of her time in his hotel, then go home to her children and her husband, who doesn't mind, who can't afford to mind' (p.112).

This demonstrates the commodifying effect of the need for money. In this case, the conventional notion of a woman selling herself as a commodity is still there, but the wording also suggests a commodification of time. The woman 'spends time' with the man, the emphasis being on the exchange of time and money, with the actual exchange of money and sex being only implied. The notion of her selling time de-emphasises the actual act and could be interpreted as a way of lessening the demeaning nature of her transaction and perhaps creating the illusion that she has some control over the transaction. What I argue Amis is presenting through his narrator is a right-wing rationalisation of Marxist doctrine. In this rationalisation, by presenting time as the commodity rather than the individual, the individual is represented as having a certain amount of freedom. The narrator then contradicts this by showing a woman whose choice to exchange time for capital is exploited. In short a fundamental principle of Marxist thinking is appropriated to mask exploitation. This slight rethinking of Marx, I argue, signals the beginning of a shift into Thatcherite individualism, which gets stronger as the novel progresses.

In my original example of the tramps, the narrator comments that 'being a tramp is increasingly popular, statistics show. There are more and more tramps doing without money all the time' (p.23). This ironic statement hints at a homelessness problem that in turn suggests a general problem with the country's economy. Throughout the novel, money is repeatedly referred to as being scarce:

In shops everyone talked about money. Money had recently done something unforgivable: no one seemed able to forgive money for what it had done. Mary secretly forgave money, however. It appeared to be good stuff to her. She liked the way you could save money as you spent it. Mary developed a good eye for bargains, especially in the supermarket where they openly encouraged you to do this anyway. Mrs Botham was always saying how much money Mary saved her. Pretty good going, she thought, considering that all she ever did was spend it. But Mrs Botham still couldn't find it in her heart to forgive money. She hated money; she really had it in for money. She would repetitively abuse money all day long (p.57).

This passage suggests a hatred of money based upon something it has done, and what money 'did' during the late '70s was become scarce. In his examination of the failure of British collectivism, *Britain Against Itself*, Samuel Beer mentions that:

The terrible year of 1975 when inflation reached an annual rate of 26 per cent ... obliged Labour to reverse direction and to resort to the old painful remedies of spending cuts, tight money, and wage restraint (Beer, p.17).

Beer also states that:

after falling during the first years of this Labour Government, the real living standards of working people began to rise in 1977 and 1978. Then came the wage explosion of the following winter (p.18).

The 1975–1979 Labour government imposed policies of spending cuts and wage restraints in an attempt to reduce inflation. This resulted in an initial lowering of living standards, which, I argue, is reflected in Amis's description of his working people's attitude to money. They are unable to forgive money because they do not have enough because of money's recent—unforgivable—action of becoming less valuable. Later on in the novel, Mary's shopping trips are again described. This time

money, rather than causing resentment, appears to have reduced the other shoppers to desperation:

Mary went out in [the rain], past the porous houses, stalwart and dreary in the wet, to the rained-under commerce of the junctions and shops. You could say one thing for rain: unlike so much else these days, it was clearly in endless supply. They were never going to run out of it. People shopped with wintry panic, buying anything they could get a hand to. They shouldered and snatched among the stalls, at the drenched vegetables and the sopping sobbing fruit. Like the holds of ships in tempest, the shop floors swilled with the wellington-wet detritus of the streets, each chime of the door bringing deeper water, umbrellas working like pistons, squelching galoshes and sweating polythene, all under the gaze of the looted shelves. Things were running out, everything was running out, things to buy and money to buy them with. But the rain would not run out (p.178).

This passage can be placed in the winter of 1978–1979, commonly referred to as the ‘Winter of Discontent’, during which pay disputes and strikes caused severe disruption to parts of Britain. Joel Barnett, Chief Secretary to the Treasury from 1974 to 1979, recalls that:

The first three months of 1979 were the longest three months in the whole five years ... While [the Prime Minister] was being televised from Guadeloupe, we at home had the strikes rendered more effective by the worst winter for many years ... There were daily reports of petrol and food shortages. Lists of items said to be in short supply were reported nightly on our TV screens. If they were not in short supply before the broadcasts, they were soon afterwards, as supermarket shelves were stripped (Barnett, p.169).

Amis’s description of Mary’s shopping trip reflects these conditions. The scarcity of money and the perceived food shortages are emphasised throughout the passage, which begins and ends by stressing a lack of money and commodities and an abundance of bad weather. Rain is described as being ‘clearly in endless supply’ in contrast to ‘things to buy and money to buy them with’ which are said to be ‘running out’. This arguably locates the passage in the winter, and the notion of things running out in conjunction with the shopper’s ‘wintry panic’ and the ‘looted shelves’ connects it to the events described above. This passage draws attention to conditions in the ‘real’ world that, it can be argued, were caused by policies of state ownership and government intervention that placed the government in direct confrontation with the unions. This

confrontation was the result of the left-wing government being unable or unwilling to agree to the demands of left-wing unions. The two main socialist organisations in Britain were therefore brought into conflict by the collectivist system's failure.

Considering that the situation described above contributed to the Conservative victory in the general election, it is then possible to interpret the narrator's rationalised Marxism as reflecting a general political shift from the left to the right in Britain. Before the election, Thatcher had, in various speeches, emphasised her party's commitment to the individual. In 1976, she stated that:

we believe that government should act to enlarge the freedom of the individual to live his own life whilst [Labour] believe the government should diminish it. Our way upholds the importance of the individual and makes provision for him to develop his own talent. To us, all individuals are equally important, but all different. It is this difference which gives richness, variety and strength to the life of the community (Thatcher, p.13).

In the same year Keith Joseph outlined the practical steps required to create the conditions necessary for these individuals to develop and reduce the scarcity of money suffered by Amis's characters:

We can eliminate general poverty—but only by a free market economy and by ways which do not destroy the incentives necessary for the market system to work effectively. Less government spending, lower direct taxation, competition and some form of reverse or negative or tax credit system. These are the instruments for increasing prosperity and eliminating poverty (Joseph, p.77).

These two statements provide a basic sketch of the principles underlying Thatcherism: that by controlling the money supply and decreasing direct taxes, entrepreneurs would be less restricted and therefore able to make more money and employ more people. This principle has its roots in the economic theory of Monetarism, which the Conservative Party adopted shortly after Thatcher became its leader. In contrast to the Keynesian theory of economics that had dictated British economic policy for governments of both the left and right during the post-war period, Monetarism placed the emphasis on controlling inflation rather than reacting to it. Policies based on these principles were put into action in the 1979 budget, in which direct taxation was reduced and indirect

taxation was increased in an attempt to regenerate the economy (Keegan, pp.118-127). The effect of this change in attitude to money can be seen in Mary's attitudes once she has regained her identity as Amy.

Towards the end of the novel, a description of the suburbs where Amy lives with Prince re-establishes the narrator's reinterpreted Marxist notions by informing the reader that:

This was where the earners of London came back exhaustedly to sleep in lines, while on the far side of the planet other people rose like a crew to man the workings of the world (Amis, p.193).

The sentence describes the world as a continually running machine that is tended twenty-four hours a day by shifts of workers on either side of the planet. As with the narrator's replacement of labour-power with time, this suggests the possibility of individual choice with the use of 'earners' instead of 'workers'; earners being more in keeping with Thatcher's self-developing individuals than workers, with its socialist implications of a proletarian mass. This, I argue, further indicates a dilution of left-wing doctrine by the ideas of the right that in turn reflects the replacement in government of Labour by the Conservatives.

This change in political circumstances is also reflected in Mary's regaining of her identity as Amy and her subsequent change in attitude to money:

Money, of course, was still in everyone's bad books; in shops and coffee-bars people talked bitterly about it and its misdeeds. But Amy had a lot of time for money and thought that people seriously undervalued it. Money was more versatile than people let on. Money could spend and money could buy. Also you could save money whilst you spent it. Finally, it was nice spending money and it was nice not spending it—and of how many things could you say that? (p.193).

Amy appears to recognise money's power and usefulness as a tool. In fact, Amy appears to have become a Thatcherite. The narrator began the novel by demonstrating a right-wing illusion that hides exploitation. He now shows us Amy apparently in control of her life and embracing another Thatcherite ideal, the notion of money as a tool of independence rather than repression.

Amis reworks Marx's notion of labour-power within the text of *Other People* to reflect its status in early Thatcherite Britain. This reworking relates money to time, making time a commodity while

simultaneously reflecting a freedom that this exchange gives the worker. He then demonstrates how this reasoning masks the exploitation that Marx's original statements revealed. This reworking, I argue, manifests within the text the beginnings of Thatcherism in Britain demonstrating how its reasoning created an illusion of individualism that masked exploitation. By the end, Amy appears to have gained control over her life and has become an individual. Ultimately, however, she is still trapped within the novel's structure and must repeat the cycle with little hope of escape. I argue then that although Amis's novel initially appears to be far more concerned with fiction's formalistic impulses than its socio-political impulses, a reading based upon Hutcheon's notion of their paradoxical relationship reveals that both impulses work together to form a consideration of the individual's relationship to the state. In this reading, the individual is trapped within historical and political cycles that endlessly repeat themselves. However, within different cycles the emphasis on individual freedom of choice can be stronger or weaker. The suggestion is that in the early stages of the cycle, Mary's individuality is restricted by left-wing ideology, but she gains more control over her choices in the later stages. This freedom, however, is tempered by the realisation that at certain stages of the cycle, dominant ideologies create an illusion of individuality to maintain the inequalities necessary for their dominance and that, as this is part of a cycle, the emphasis on the individual in society will eventually shift again.

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