

# The Satirical Theater of the Female Body:

## The Role of Women in Martin Amis's *The Rachel Papers*, *Dead Babies*, and *Money: A Suicide Note*

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### Introduction

One of the main thematic concerns running through the fiction of Martin Amis is a satirical preoccupation with human sexuality in the late twentieth century. Many of his novels often present a wide spectrum of debauched and lecherous male characters, ranging from cretinized brawling oafs to stylish degenerates who assault the reader with their explicit sexual behaviors. The shocking and bleak nature of sexuality in Amis's novels represents his cynical yet comic view of how predominantly male narcissistic attitudes and behavior have transformed sex into an arena of self-mastery rather than a transcendence of the self through intimacy and communication. His fiction, as James Diedrick has written in *Understanding Martin Amis*, largely illustrates a brutal "anatomy of male misogyny" (Diedrick 49).

In *The Rachel Papers* (1973), *Dead Babies* (1975), and *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984), Amis explores the sexual and social worlds of adolescence, the drug culture of the 1970s, and the obscene greed of the 1980s. In each of these novels, however, his concentration on corrupt male sexual actions raises questions about the treatment of women. Even though one of Amis's artistic intentions is to catalogue and criticize male misogyny, these texts are still largely patriarchal in their satirical designs: they often characterize women as sexual objects whose abuse accentuates the violent and sometimes comic degeneracy of his male characters.

James Diedrick has acknowledged the possible antifeminist nature of Amis's fiction, referring in particular to Amis's first three novels, *The Rachel Papers*, *Dead Babies*, and *Success*: "Finally, while they often brilliantly render male misogyny, it is not always clear where satirized

sexism ends and authorial antifeminism begins. Amis himself has called his first three novels 'not antifeminist but prefeminist,' which is one way of describing a failure to extend full imaginative sympathy to his women characters" (20). I want to suggest, however, that an antifeminist sentiment is not confined to Amis's early fiction. In the three texts under analysis here, Amis seems to use his female characters and the female body as textual landscapes and symbolic mirrors to render the violently Dionysian activity and the comically pathetic antics of his male characters. The absence of consciousness in Amis's female characters becomes a necessary textual vacancy that his male misogynists inhabit in order to establish his postlapsarian view of modern sexuality. In *The Rachel Papers*, *Dead Babies*, and *Money*, women ultimately function as narrative devices that stage and give voice to patriarchal behavior and Amis's larger artistic concerns for the Novel.

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## Part 2

# *The Rachel Papers*

To understand better the characterization of women in these three novels by Martin Amis, we can turn to a discussion of his first text, *The Rachel Papers*. The novel yields many themes that resonate throughout all of Amis's later work: the mediation of identity and sexuality, the effect of male misogyny on women, and a satirically comic analysis of morally bankrupt characters debased by materialism and commodity culture. In *The Rachel Papers*, Amis begins his critical examination of modern sexuality by satirizing the mediated sexual behavior of Charles Highway. Amis's satire is not limited to a comic critique of his protagonist, however. Amis uses Charles Highway's sexist behavior as a way to address his larger literary concerns—i.e., for establishing a literary dialogue with past writers on the issue of sexuality.

This pattern of dialogue can be illuminated by Harold Bloom's theories of literary influence. James Diedrick has pointed out the presence of Bloom's "anxiety of influence" in Amis's writing with respect to the rivalrous relationship between Amis and his father, Kingsley Amis. "In terms of Bloom's theory, the proximity and intensity of his father's influence have led him to seek a series of father substitutes whose influence he can acknowledge without filial conflict" (6). In this search for father substitutes, Amis seems to be rigorously engaged in "creative misreadings," enabling us to illuminate his work through Bloom's second revisionary ratio, *tessera*: "A poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor,

by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough" (Bloom in Richter 709). The principle of *tessera* is present in Amis's preoccupation with the mediation of sexual behavior: the follies and sexual corruption of Charles Highway become Amis's philosophical challenge to the romantic idealism of writers such as D.H. Lawrence. Indeed, Amis situates sexuality between the tensions of the contemporary world and the age of Romanticism and Lawrentian sexuality:

*It's part of a genuine idea about modern life—that it's so mediated that authentic experience is much harder to find. Authentic everything is much harder to find. In all sorts of behavior, even in the sack, we're thinking, 'How does this measure up? How will this look?' We've all got this idea of what it should be like—from movies, from pornography. I'm interested in two extremes. The first is the idea that the earth moves, this great union is formed, and the self is lost. That comes from D.H. Lawrence and Romantic poetry and is what we all devoutly hope for. The other extreme is sort of athletic—the hot lay, where the self is in fact not lost in the moment but is masterful and dominant. And that comes at us from another direction—from advertising and pornography and trash fiction. (Morrison 101)*

Charles Highway symbolizes this mediation of modern life: his intense self-consciousness (as particularly regards the seduction of women) throughout the novel reveals that there is hardly anything about him that is authentic. For instance, Charles "outlines" his bedroom in anticipation of his evening with Gloria:

*The room wouldn't, after all, need much preparation for Gloria—record-sleeves scattered negligently about the room, certain low-brow paperbacks displayed advantageously on table and desk, and the colour supplements, open at suitable pages, on the floor. Gloria probably had no fixed conception of me so there wasn't much point in going into detail. (Amis 16)*

In his attempts to impress and seduce women, Charles represents a youth caught in a postmodern world where identity has become another commodity to exploit: "In my room I looked out my *Rachel* note-pad in preparation for the telephone call. I flicked through it making notes, underlining the odd pertinent phrase, sketching personas" (33). Indeed, the self becomes an article of clothing that is valued only for representation, when Charles prepares for his encounter with Rachel:

*What clothes would I wear? Blue mandras shirt, black boots, and the old black cord suit with those touching leather elbow-patches. What persona would I wear? On the two occasions I had seen her last August I underwent several complete identity-reorganizations, settling finally*

*somewhere between the pained, laconic, inscrutable type and the knowing, garrulous, cynical, laugh a minute, yet something demonic about him, something nihilistic, muted death-wish type. Revamp those, or start again?* (42)

Identity, with Charles and his late-twentieth-century environment, has become commodified: people no longer possess innate or developed characteristics but are "types" that purchase personality in a marketplace of ideological self-fashioning.

This extreme of mediated behavior, then, conflicts dramatically with the romantic notions of self-effacement through sexual experience. Amis effectively employs his use of dramatic monologue in order to articulate this antagonism. As noted by James Diedrick, the use of this narrative technique is one of Amis's key accomplishments in the novel, for it allows Amis to comment on his characters and on literature in general without interfering with his characters' thoughts (Diedrick 31). Amis uses this technique during Charles's foreplay with Rachel to speak through his character and pose a challenge to D.H. Lawrence's romantic interpretation of sexuality: "Had the time come to orchestrate the Lawrentiana?" (151). Charles discovers rather quickly, though, that the self will not find transcendence through passion:

How nice to be able to say: 'We made love, and slept.' Only it wasn't like that; it didn't happen that way. The evidence is before me...I know what it's supposed to be like, I've read my Lawrence. I know also what I felt and thought; I know what that evening was: an aggregate of pleasureless detail, nothing more; an insane, gruelling, blow-by-blow obstacle course. *And yet that's what I'm here for tonight.* I must be true to myself. Oh God, I thought this was going to be fun. It isn't. I'm sweating here. I'm afraid. (152; my emphasis)

In a novel dealing with the comic and disturbing aspects of mediated behavior, Amis's intention here is to debunk the lofty idealism of Lawrence and expose sexuality under the influence of intense self-consciousness. He has Charles announce this challenge to Lawrence's idealism, signifying the presence of tessera: Amis is acknowledging Lawrence's preoccupation with and interpretation of sexuality, but extends and redefines its meaning by rewriting sexuality under the influence of mediation in the postmodern age. Amis presents this redefinition by satirizing the mechanical aspects of Charles's sexual encounters:

*It wasn't that bad, as I remember, not significantly worse than usual. Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes trying not to come, with a beady dread of what was going to happen when I did; a decent (i.e. perceptible) orgasm; a*

*further two or three minutes in garrotted detumescence. Cock attains regulation minimum and is supplanted by well-manicured thumb; Gloria has another...five? orgasms; and so it ends. (19)*

There is no great union or Lawrentian "connection" found in Charles's sex with Gloria: instead of romantic self-effacement through intercourse, there is intense self-concentration and anxiety. Amis also carefully chooses his language to articulate the tired, mediated machinery of sex: the body struggles in a timed process, its parts operating mechanically ("regulation minimum"). Sexuality, then, becomes a banal act of performance for the self: "I recall turning at one point from the section of wallpaper I was perusing to check on Gloria's face (just for the files): and impressively atavistic it was too" (21). Charles's ironic study of the wall debunks the notion of communicative sex, while his inspection of Gloria's face becomes a marker of status for the self.

In the process of dialoguing with and critiquing this Lawrentian and Romantic view of sexuality, Amis uses his female characters to foreground his thematic concern with mediation. The above satirized description of Charles's foreplay is effective only by having Rachel presented as a "blow-by-by obstacle course" that captures Charles's stumbling mediated behavior. To continue his deconstruction of Lawrentian sexuality, Amis casts Gloria as a voyeuristic spectacle in order to provide Charles with the voice he needs to revise the interpretation of sexual experience:

*During the long pre-copulative session I glanced downwards—and what should I see but Gloria, practising the perversion known as fellatio. Unaccountably, she was doing this with great rigour and enthusiasm, circling her head so that her long plush hair skimmed and glided over my hips, thighs and stomach. Visually, it was most appealing, but all I could feel was a remote, irrelevant numbness—plus, in my legs, cramps and pins-and-needles respectively. Have I come already, perhaps? I asked myself. (20-1)*

In this passage Gloria functions as a vessel through which the mediated sexual concerns of the novel can be revealed: the visual spectacle of her "rigorous" sexual behavior serves to construct a titillating image of expected erotic play that evaporates with the painful sensations registered by Charles. In this way, Gloria becomes a subjugated textual object, isolated in a pornographic image, that carries the greater significance of allowing male experience to speak and debunk the illusion of sexual pleasure.

However, Amis's intention in *The Rachel Papers* is not simply to rewrite ideas about sexuality. Before his characterization of women can

be further critiqued, his approach to sexuality must be thoroughly understood. Amis presents the reader with a comic manifesto in *The Rachel Papers*, clarifying his interest in scabrous sexual activity: "Surely, nice things are dull, and nasty things are funny. The nastier a thing is, the funnier it gets" (87). Amis seems to define humor as a way to satirize the moments of sexual and moral corruption of society: while using laughter to punish the degeneracy of his characters, Amis also uses comedy to cope with the nasty realities of domestic violence, sexual aggression, and the proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases that ooze their way across the pages of his texts. Indeed, Amis has admitted that the type of humor in which he is interested is one that embraces the painful situations of life: "What I am interested in is heavy comedy, rather than light comedy. It's a wincing laughter, or a sort of funky laughter...Sort of a hung-over laughter, where it hurts" (Morrison 97). Comedy, then, in the case of *The Rachel Papers*, is employed as a means of punishing the corruption of Charles, while also serving as a kind of lubricator for what Amis sees as the nasty realities of modern society—as a "method of confronting often-repressed truths, of using humor to gain a critical leverage on them" (Diedrick 14). A clear example of this "wincing" humor is Charles's recollection of his sexual experience at the Belsize Park flat:

*It ended one mid-August morning when I happened to glance down at the undulating area between my stomach and the stomach of a girl I just so happened to be poking at the time (in a sweaty, hungover state, I might add). What I saw there were worms of dirt—as when a working man, his day done, strides home rubbing his toil-hardened hands together, causing the excess grit to wriggle up into tiny black strings, which he soon brushes impatiently from his palms. Only these were on our stomachs and therefore much bigger: like baby eels. (13)*

The graphic imagery is purposefully used to criticize the misogynistic and inebriated sexuality that is characteristic of Charles Highway: it is a way to laugh at and feel disgust for his behavior. A more effective moment where Amis uses laughter to deal with Charles's sexual degeneracy follows his coupling with Pepita Manehian:

*However, on the following Friday or thereabouts I woke up to find that someone had squeezed a family-size tube of pus all over my pyjama bottoms. A toxic wet dream? On visiting the bathroom I found also that I was peeing lava. Palpably, something was up. To deal with the first symptom I fixed up a sort of nozzle over my helmet with a wad of Kleenex and an elastic band. To ameliorate the second, I took care always to use the narrow downstairs lavatory, where, with palms pressed flat against the walls, like Samson between the pillars of the Philistine temple, I would part company with angry half-pints of piss, pus, blood—you name it. (90)*

The comic elements of these scenes serve to attack the promiscuity of Charles, using laughter to confront the painful consequences of his (mis)use of sexuality. Amis's puritanical intention behind this critique of sexuality becomes evident when he brackets the discussion of Charles's sexually transmitted diseases with the satirist's disapproval: "This be Nature's way of recommending monogamy" (89). Thus, despite the undeveloped claim of Shanti Padhi that "Repulsiveness and grossness are the main elements of Martin Amis's humour" (Padhi 40), Amis does have a set purpose to his brutal and explicit treatment of sexuality. Contrary to Padhi, Amis's early works are *not* simply "The scatological pranks of a young writer trying with utmost panache to outdo his rivals in porno-peddling" (Padhi 36), since Amis's wider vision seems to be to relish in his use of language and imagery in order to expose the decay of a postlapsarian modern world.

Charles Highway is the first of many misogynists to strut his way through the pages of Amis's fiction. Charles holds stereotypical views of women, mocks their bodies, and willfully plots their seduction without regard to their feelings. More central to the novel's main theme, he uses literature to satiate his sexual desires: "Because I really quite liked Blake—and not just for the fucks he had got me, either" (73). Amis has stated his distaste for Charles, remarking that "Charles is a crude case of someone who tries to turn literature to his own advantage—using Blake, for example, to seduce girls" (Haffenden 10). Amis presents Charles's misogyny in varying degrees: "Ran into Jenny on the front doorstep. She was on her way out to have lunch with a friend. I didn't think girls did that sort of thing nowadays, and said so. Jenny laughed vivaciously, but looked not at ease" (33). More cruel than Charles's ignorant views of women, though, is his treatment of women during sex: "Of course: I had never used a sheath before. With those girls who weren't self-contracepting I had practised coitus interruptus, practising it all over their stomachs or in between the sheet and their bums, depending on locale and whether or not I liked them" (155).

Based upon this behavior, Amis is able to express Charles's sexual corruption by drawing a symbolic parallel between Charles's sexuality and the bathroom. After discovering two adolescent memoirs stapled together in his files, describing the appropriate behavior of turds and his desire to have sex with an Older Woman, Charles says: "I free the staple with my fingernails and marry the two items with a paperclip, instead. I don't think they can be *that* closely connected" (88; original emphasis). The irony Amis invests in this scene reveals that the memoirs share a crucial similarity. The juxtaposition of the two items suggests how Charles has confused sexuality with defecation, divesting sexual intercourse of its communicative potential and transforming it into a

process of expelling bodily fluids because of his selfish and emotionless pursuit of women.

While rendering Charles's misogyny and degenerative use of sexuality, however, Amis spends little time developing his female characters. Even though *The Rachel Papers* is a portrait of the sexual behavior of the late 1960s, Amis's satire in the novel can be best described as being specifically concerned with *male* uses and abuses of sexuality. Amis continues to express the degeneracy of Charles's desires for women, by using language to depict his sexual behavior as a kind of bowel movement: "Though—come on—did I really want to show her the other side, my place? Dionysian bathroom sex: troop in, tug back the covers, go through the gaping routine, do everything either of you can conceivably think of doing, again, lurch lick squat squirt squelch, again, until it's all over, again. No. And she probably wouldn't let me" (180). But while expressing this metaphorical connection between Charles's sexuality and the bathroom, Amis is lightly concerned with the characterization of women: "Made the girl mine in a lavatory at some weekend party. (All the bedrooms were occupied; but it was quite a spacious closet, with a rug, some towels, and tissues a plenty.) We did well, even though, in the dying moments, Pepi smashed her head three times against the lavatory bowl, this giving the cramped cleaning-up operations a still more incongruous air" (89-90). The main focus of the passage is to capture Charles's debased sexuality by symbolically placing this encounter in the bathroom. The physical condition of Pepita, though, seems only to help construct the debasement of the scene: there is no indication of her consciousness as a character, except that her abused body adds a comic air to this situation.

James Diedrick suggests that some of the mischievous sexual antics of this novel are purposeful: "While the novel can be read as a (male) adolescent coming-of-age story, it can just as easily be taken as a *parody* of the genre..." (30). But even when Amis parodies these sexual activities (as suggested by the tone and style of listing sexual positions quoted below), the female body stages the incident:

*Here we go. An old-school repertoire of minimally sexy positions. Examples: I slung her legs over my shoulder; knelt, bending her almost triple; lay straight as an ironing board; turned her round, did it from behind, did it from the side; I brought my right leg up, kept my left leg straight—I did the hokey-pokey, in fact. But, again, it is change of position that is sexy, not the position itself, and God forbid that I should feel sexy. (161)*

Rachel becomes an extremely elastic, pliable object that is "slung and bent," and twisted about in order to characterize Charles's behavior. The



manipulations of her body are presented as a comic dance—"the hokey-pokey"—to evoke parodic laughter at and satirical commentary on the male protagonist. In these moments of parodying sexuality, Amis even seems to become seduced by what he is critiquing and lose his satirical focus: "Tonight, my lad, you are going to get laid. Selfishly. You're going to get gobbled for a kick-off. You gonna bugger her good. You gonna rip out her hair in fistfuls, fuck her like a javelin hurled across ice, zoom through the air, screaming" (187-8). Even though Amis is seemingly attempting to satirize the narcissistic behavior of Charles in the scene, his intention fails precisely because of the violent antifeminist imagery that is employed in order to comment on Charles. If the passage is meant to ridicule Charles, it is done so by violently abusing the female body.

Amis's failure to maintain a satirical distance from his character's actions continues immediately after this fantasy of Charles's. When Charles lies in bed with Rachel, Amis seems to describe the scene so as to illuminate the misogyny that arises from Charles's selfish actions: "If you can slash in my bed (I thought) don't tell me you can't suck my cock. So I drive it into her cheek, practically up her nose, and Rachel takes it in her mouth and releases it almost at once. With a croak of disgust...And yet I was the one who felt ashamed, dirty, dog-like, in the wrong. To prove it there were tears on her face when I came up for air" (189). Charles's behavior is shown to be completely dehumanizing towards Rachel as signalled by the tears on her face. But the added descriptions of Charles's efforts to force fellatio seem to be tinged with the overtones of comedy, which detract from the satirical sentiments present in the passage.

Even though one of the goals of *The Rachel Papers* is to perform a satiric comedy and criticize the idea of the "hot lay" ("where the self is in fact not lost in the moment but is masterful and dominant" [Morrison 101]), Amis again stages this humor on a thoroughly objectified female body. Noting this complicated nature of Amis's satire in the text, James Diedrick states: "In *The Rachel Papers*, it is not always clear where Amis stands in relation to his narrator" (31). This satirical ambiguity suggests that Amis's questionable use of the female body represents the presence of authorial antifeminism that resonates within the attempted satirical sketches of Charles's sexuality.

Finally, on a more subtextual level, the use of women to foreground male behavior finds expression in Rachel's relationship to Charles. Rachel is hardly a fully developed character; indeed, her main role is to be a sexual object, to function, in the words of James Diedrick, "at least in part as a fantasy-projection of Charles's own upwardly mobile aspirations (her first name is a virtual anagram of his own)" (24). As I have shown, however, Rachel plays a more significant role—that of a

narrative vehicle that drives Charles "Highway" to maturity in this coming-of-age novel. The deeper concerns of *The Rachel Papers* is Charles's search for a resolution with his philandering father, Gordon Highway—an observation also made by James Diedrick: "Significantly, and despite the novel's focus on his pursuit of Rachel, Charles's relationship with his father forms the emotional center of the novel" (26).

What has not been acknowledged, however, is how the pursuit of Rachel *structures* and *resolves* this greater patriarchal concern of the text. In her study "Desire in Narrative," Teresa de Lauretis ruminates on this question of the feminine giving voice to male desire in narration. She states that feminist theory must perform a rereading of the "sacred texts" on narrative theory, and cites Roland Barthes's interest in language, narrative, and the Oedipus as the factors that produce the informing logic of male desire in narrative development: "Pleasure and meaning move along the triple track he first outlined, and the tracking is from the point of view of Oedipus, so to speak, its movement is that of a masculine desire" (de Lauretis 107). Amis's narrative places Charles in the role of Oedipus, a character who is travelling through his experiences in search of an emotional resolution with his father. And the character who provides the "road" on which to construct these travels is Rachel. Rachel and Charles's father, then, are not separate concerns of the novel; rather, she serves to inform and provide the landscape in which Charles can act out and think about the grievances against his father.

The truer significance of Rachel's character can be found in de Lauretis's reconsideration of the feminine in Oedipal narrative structures: "Medusa and the Sphinx, like other ancient monsters, have survived inscribed in hero narratives, in someone else's story, not their own; so they are figures or markers of positions—places and topoi—through which the hero and his story move to their destination and to accomplish meaning" (109). Rachel, like Medusa and the Sphinx, fulfills this role of the "marker of positions" by adding form to Charles's narrative perusal of his childhood. Charles "rigorously clerks" his adolescent files, because he (like Oedipus) is out on a quest: "Because something has definitely happened to me, and I'm very keen to know what it is" (4).

What Charles stumbles upon in the opening of this narrative is the question of his "absent" father: "It's strange; although my father is probably the most fully documented character in my files, he doesn't merit a note-pad to himself, let alone a folder...Why nothing for my father? Is this a way of getting back at him?" (8). After this point, Charles's encounters with Rachel throughout the text are tellingly juxtaposed with thoughts for his father. Immediately after Rachel surprises Charles at the Notting Hill Gate Smith's—almost forcing him to

speak without his usual mediated self-consciousness—Charles writes: "I think it was that afternoon I began work on the Letter to My Father, a project which was to take up many a spare moment over the following weeks" (66). Furthermore, after Charles narrowly escapes receiving a beating from Derek at the tutors, he announces: "Patently, I was in a state about something. Not so much about Rachel—for I was cockfree until the end of next week, so nothing dramatic could happen. Perhaps it was the idea of having some sort of showdown with my father" (121). In these scenes, Rachel marks the development of Charles's destination: she is the current that washes Charles through his narrative to articulate his real internal struggle with his father.

Ultimately, this relationship with Rachel allows Charles to achieve meaning, which he has been looking for during the narrative perusal of his past. In the last section of the novel "Midnight: coming of age," Charles desultorily prepares for his appointment at Oxford, "fumbling with clothes and Interview literature" (209). Curiously, though, Charles chooses a different guide to help him: "On an impulse, I decided to take The Rachel Papers with me, instead" (209). This decision can be understood from the fact that Rachel *symbolizes* Charles's younger, mediated self: she is the space of the text through which Charles has stumbled, tripping over his elaborate plottings and seductions that have only deluded himself. His own commentary on his relationship with Rachel reveals this self-delusion: "I tried writing letters to Rachel but although elegant and conscientious they made no sense to me and I merely filed them away. I seemed incapable of using words without stylizing myself" (144).

His interactions with Rachel give voice to his central problem—how he has selfishly used words and literature consistently to seduce women and inflate his ego. Thus, carrying The Rachel Papers into the interview signifies how Rachel has carried Charles to his textual corrective—i.e., the debunking of his stylized self he receives at the hands of the Oxford professor, punningly named Dr. Knowd: "...Literature has a kind of life of its own, you know. You can't just use it...ruthlessly, for your own ends...Just read the poems and work out whether you like them, and why" (215). Knowd delivers this knowledge to Charles, urging him to be himself, to find authenticity. He serves as a kind of father figure, giving Charles the parental guidance he has been lacking throughout his narrative, according to Amis: "The only come-uppance he [Charles] gets is from the university tutor who interviews him towards the end. Reading the book again after five years I saw with pleased surprise that the tutor was an author-figure, because all my other books have author-figures. He scolds Charles for his misuse of literature" (Haffenden 10).

Thus, no longer possessing the mediated self that was identified with Rachel, Charles loses interest in their relationship, and finds symbolic reconciliation with his father: "I return to the wastepaper basket and find Rachel's mascara-ed ball beneath the layers of tissue steeped in my own snot and tears. I examine it, then let it fall noiselessly from my hand. *I cover it now with the Letter to My Father*" (222-3; my emphasis). The supplanting of her tissue with the letter implies how Rachel has foregrounded the patriarchal conflict of father and son.

Rachel is not separable from Charles's issues with his father: she provides the obstacle for Charles to overcome in order to receive his come-uppance and gain a new consciousness. She is thus the textual stumbling block that provides meaning for Charles's story, fulfilling the de Lauretian role of the feminine in male narratives: "They are obstacles man encounters on the path of life, on his way to manhood, wisdom, and power; they must be slain or defeated so that he can go forward to fulfill his destiny—and his story. Thus we don't know, his story doesn't tell, what became of the Sphinx after the encounter with Oedipus..." (de Lauretis 110). While Charles progresses toward the achievement of manhood, Rachel suffers the same fate as the Sphinx: the reader never learns more about the ambiguous state of her possible pregnancy; she is simply whisked away by her former boyfriend, Deforest, leaving a slightly altered Charles Highway at the end of the novel.

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### Part 3

## *Dead Babies*

The use of women to foreground patriarchal activity becomes more complex and takes on greater social significance in *Dead Babies*, Amis's second novel and a formal satire on the state of sexuality during the drug and sex culture of the 1970s. As inscribed in its title, *Dead Babies* is often considered Amis's most egregious, repulsive, and offensive text—a book that has been called "not for the squeamish" (Diedrick 32), while being labelled by critic Neil Powell as more or less a failed satire due to its graphically brutal nature (Powell 44). It has also been labeled a misogynistic satire by critic Shanti Padhi: "Apart from being indecent, Amis's satire can be callous especially regarding women" (39).

The problem with these criticisms—most notably Padhi's—is that few reviewers, aside from James Diedrick, have attempted to discuss the form of satire Amis writes in *Dead Babies*. *Dead Babies* marks a

progression in Amis's writing; the novel takes the discussion of sexuality beyond the comic scatological world of adolescence presented in *The Rachel Papers* and presents countercultural sexual behavior as the disease weakening the humanist beliefs that hold society together. Within this wider socio-sexual concern, however—a concern that Amis develops further in *London Fields*—remains the question of the treatment of women. The problematic treatment of women ultimately lies in Amis's use of the female body as a symbol for the sexual decay of this social environment. Thus, the problem with women in the novel is not necessarily their characterization as shamefully immature sexual youths (for the men in *Dead Babies* are equally as callous), but that they are used to structure Amis's patriarchal narrative and to produce the satirical meaning he aims to achieve.

In order to qualify the attacks concerning the presentation of women and scabrousness in *Dead Babies*, however, Amis's role as a satirist must be carefully considered. Satire is generally defined as "the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation" (Abrams 187). Amis's writing embodies these characteristics, and he has even been considered a postmodern Jonathan Swift. An interesting difference in Amis's satire, though, is his self-conscious acknowledgment of the ambiguous state of morality in the late twentieth century. James Diedrick hints at this difference when he compares the two writers: "A voice of moral and religious certainty can be heard behind the masks of Swift's personae; the critical tones that filter through Amis's characters register contingent rather than definitive moral judgments" (15).

This lack of moral certainty seems to lie in Amis's realization that the satirist does not possess a set idea of virtue against which to illuminate the vices of society. He clarifies this ambiguous stance by identifying relativism as the philosophical dilemma that complicates the consideration of contemporary morality. In a key passage in *The Rachel Papers*, Amis once again uses the double-voicing technique in Charles's speech to discuss the relativism of contemporary moral values:

*It occurs to me that the analogy can be taken further—moral issues, for example. The so-called new philosophy, "permissiveness" if you like, seen from the right perspective, is only a new puritanism, whereby you're accused of being repressed or unenlightened if you happen to object to infidelity, promiscuity, and so on. You're not allowed to mind anything any more, and so you end up denying your instincts again—moderate possessiveness, say, or moral scrupulousness—just as the puritans would have you deny the opposite instincts. (130-1)*

Amis uses Charles Highway's dinner speech to articulate the problem that arises when morality clashes with relativism. In contrast with the puritans, there are no firm codes or moral absolutes to define behavior in the modern world: Amis realizes that depending upon the historical context and point of view, morality shifts in meaning to encompass new behaviors and attitudes.

For Amis, as Martin Dodsworth has noted, "moral positions are made difficult by a sense of relative values which chimes with the concerns of advanced thought in this period, as represented by writers like Jacques Derrida or Paul de Man" (Dodsworth 337). It is thus that the oddly named "Appleseed Rectory" in *Dead Babies* makes sense: the name ironically locates a postlapsarian sentiment within the bounds of a religious institution. The purpose of this juxtaposition is to define the "new puritanism," as represented by the characters in *Dead Babies*:

*Are we presenting characters and scenes that are somehow fanciful, tendentious, supererogatory? Not at all. Quite the contrary. The reverse is the case. By the standards that here obtain Giles and Keith could be dismissed as pathetically introverted, Quentin and Andy as complacent and somewhat fastidious, and Celia and Diana as sadly, even quaintly, inhibited. The household, indeed, considers itself a fortress for the old pieties, a stout anachronism, a bastion of the values it seems to us so notably to lack. (Amis 16-17)*

The shocking actions that are found inside of Appleseed Rectory are not to be necessarily seen as deviant; rather, due to the relativistic nature of moral values in postmodernity, Amis ironically redefines the "old pieties" as the contemporary behavior of the Appleseeders: the rectory is a bastion of the pieties of permissiveness, a castle that guards the new morality of infidelity and promiscuity. Thus, there is no established code of morality, just a difference in opinion between the narrator and reader, and the Appleseeders. By examining this relativistic view of morality, Amis is able to perform a satire that will graphically expose and indirectly judge the "moral codes" of Appleseed Rectory.

Furthermore, Amis's third-person narrative tone seems specifically to place the reader within this relativistic dilemma concerning morality by making the reader aware of her or his role in determining the judgments on the behavior of the Appleseeders. It is a postmodern move on Amis's part, drawing the reader into complicity in the construction of a work of fiction. This narrative technique also fulfills some of Amis's satirical effects: the narrator and reader become separated from the Appleseeders, allowing Amis to display the cruelty and violence he identifies with the philosophy of permissiveness while placing the reader and narrator at a

safe distance from Appleseed Rectory in order to laugh at and raise scorn for its inhabitants.

This satirical distance that Amis employs in *Dead Babies* most clearly resembles the indirect form of satire, "in which the objects of the satire are characters who make themselves and their opinions ridiculous or obnoxious by what they think, say, and do, and are sometimes made even more ridiculous by the author's comments and narrative style" (Abrams 188). Similar to Amis's mockery of Charles Highway's mediated sexuality, the narrative style of *Dead Babies* serves to ridicule the sexual behavior of the Appleseeders, as in this scene between Andy Adorno and Roxeanne Smith:

*He turned around and sneered sexily at Roxeanne, whose hair lay undisturbed by the warm wind. Our excellent Adorno was wondering whether to slap her about a bit first, or rip her T-dress off, or kick her legs out from underneath her—something casual like that—but suddenly Roxeanne skipped backward and in one double-armed action had pulled off her nightdress and was naked. (101)*

Amis again seemingly includes the reader in the creation of Andy's behavior, but does so to deprecate his actions: "Our excellent Adorno" is a clear example of ironic understatement, which effectively separates the reader from the presentation of Andy's thoughts, illuminating and therefore satirizing his misogyny. The narrator's use of language is also a mockery of Andy Adorno: "casual" is a word spoken often by Andy to refer to his breezy acceptance of violence or heavy drug usage. The use of the word here, however, parodies his thought, signifying that this "casual" attitude and behavior is really nothing more than the horribly desensitized mentality that is at the root of Andy's moral bankruptcy.

Amis's satirical portrait of Andy's behavior extends to a graphic analysis of Marvell's penchant for debased sexuality. Marvell represents the absolute moral nadir of the novel—a character who uses the liberal philosophy of permissiveness to rationalize the destruction of spiritual bonds with the use of drugs:

*Look—fuck—we're agreed that life is a rat's ass and that it's no fun being yourself all the time. So why not do with your brain what you do with your body? **Fuck** all this dead babies about love, understanding, compassion—**use** drugs to kind of...cushion the consciousness, guide it, protect it, stimulate it . . . We have chemical authority over the psyche—so let's use it, and have a **good** time. (44; original emphasis)*

Marvell's ideology is patently ludicrous: his apparent liberal philosophy is laced with Amis's cynicism—a cynicism that interprets the

hedonistic use of drugs as a destructive manipulation of the body and human relationships. Not only does Marvell's ideology serve as an ironic comment on his moral corruption, but Amis also uses his character graphically to expose the consequences of Marvell's liberal attitudes toward sexuality, and thus to incite disgust and contempt in the reader:

*Marvell snorted a nostrilful of blood onto the grass, wiped his nose with the back of his hand, and laughed drunkenly.*

*"Heard about the Body Bar in Santa Barbara? No? Hell of a fuckin' place. The waiters and waitresses are nude, natch—and you get fucked there for the cover charge. But you hear the gimmicks? You can have cunt cubes in your drinks. I mean it. And not just flavored with cunt. Real juice in the cubes. They got...yeah, they got tit soda, cock cocktails, pit popsicles...Oh yeah, and ice cream that tastes of ass. Hell of a place."*

*Marvell snorted a nostrilful of blood onto the grass. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. He laughed drunkenly. (154-5)*

The details of Marvell's description of the club teem with scabrous and pornographic energy. However, the passage reveals a moment where Amis is not necessarily complicitous in the portrayal of nastiness he so carefully describes. Amis distances himself and the reader from Marvell by bracketing the passage with a purposefully vile characterization of Marvell's bodily gestures, replacing his use of commas in the first portrait with periods in the second, to state more emphatically the corruption of Marvell's beliefs. Furthermore, the chapter in which this scene occurs, "Hell of a place," bears ironic relevance: it is a fitting title for a chapter describing Marvell's club, for the club is a hell of sexual degeneration for Amis. The graphic intensity of the scene would also fulfill the requirements of Menippean satire, as defined by James Diedrick:

*Bodily fluids of all kinds flow copiously in Dead Babies, but they are not purgative. They express the varieties of personal and social disease produced by everything from parental neglect to the aestheticization of violence. In Menippean satire, as Bakhtin writes, 'the idea...has no fear of the underworld or of the filth of life,' and Amis, providing proof, rubs the reader's face in it. (36)*

Thus, the explicit treatment of sexuality and presentation of misogynistic behavior are not simply "callous" characteristics of Amis's satire; rather, they are central textual elements needed to construct and ridicule the brutalized world that Amis sees before him. Indeed, in a comparison of the graphic matter in the novels of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan, Martin Dodsworth states: "The violence and nastiness of their



books are what they see and an expression of what they feel about what they see" (337).

However, the novelistic construction and expression of the nastiness of Amis's pessimistic vision of society becomes especially problematic once we turn back to the treatment of women in the novel. Despite the experimentation in satire that Amis performs in *Dead Babies*, women seem to be clearly used to foreground various acts of satirized violence and comic male behavior. James Diedrick provides a path to this argument when discussing the form of Menippean satire in *Dead Babies*: "The worst tendencies of the present are exaggerated and projected into a postseventies future that has become a theater of cruelty, with the body as its stage" (36). A more accurate description of the novel's treatment of violence, though, can be envisioned by realizing that the *woman's* body acts as the stage for this theater of abuse.

This point is demonstrated in one of the satirized dialogues that Amis refers to as "Those conversations," when Andy Adorno discusses the aestheticization of violence: "Violence is innate, so it's sort of felt selfhood, realized livingness, it's expressing life in its full creative force—it's sort of *creative to do it*" (143; my emphasis). Andy's philosophy is made ridiculous by the reader's and narrator's awareness that this "full creative force" of violence is the very agent that destroys the creative energies of life. It seems, though, that in order to develop fully this satirical comment the female body is staged as the site for Andy to demonstrate his morally corrupt philosophy.

After he sexually abuses Lucy Littlejohn ("Lucy was then required to perform fellatio on Andy, who from time to time offered to knock her fucking head off whether she swallowed it or not..." [29]), Andy explains his behavior to Quentin, revealing the fulfillment of his destructive ideology: "No, man, it's *creative*...—radical rape, for her own fuckin' good" (29; my emphasis). James Diedrick argues that in this scene Amis has Andy mimic the misogyny characteristic of Norman Mailer, and therefore concludes that "In this passage parody drives a wedge between Andy's thoughts and those of the author and reader" (16). But the form of satire that Amis constructs here is blatantly patriarchal: the parody of Mailer and the demonstration of Andy's ironic "creative" behavior provides commentary only on the actions of men (as well as offering an artistic challenge to Mailer), leaving Lucy's body as the silent stage where images of male cruelty can be reproduced and ridiculed.

The female body, however, is not limited to the reproduction of satirized images of male violence. As in all of Amis's works, comedy becomes a central element in structuring his satires on sexual behavior and attitudes. Even though Amis's use of humor is often employed to

confront repression, violence and other painful realities of modern life, women seem to have a subjugated textual role in this process. Amis's intention, indeed, is to use laughter as a buffer for moments of egregious actions; and it is precisely the role of humor that Amis identifies as the main concern of his fiction: "If you start off with the premise of me being a comic writer, you are taking an interesting line because there are clearly things in my novels that shouldn't really be in comic novels...But I think that comedy never works when all it is, is comedy" (Morrison 97).

Amis often creates characters of exaggerated dimensions to achieve his comic intentions, perhaps most notably in *Dead Babies* where the narrator provides the following response to the repulsive Keith Whitehead's query concerning all the comic misfortunes that befall him: "Well, we're sorry about it, Keith, of course, but we're afraid that you simply had to be that way. Nothing personal, please understand—merely in order to serve the designs of this particular fiction" (146-7). Here, Amis is borrowing the philosophy advocated by one of the writers who has influenced him the most, Vladimir Nabokov: "Nabokov used to say that what the reader *shouldn't* do is identify with the character. What the reader should do is identify with the writer. You try and see what the writer is up to, what the writer is arranging and what the writer's point is. Identify with the art, not the people" (Morrison 98; original emphasis).

But even if concern for the character is abandoned and authorial intention is investigated, it still seems apparent that female abuse becomes an artistic function used to create moments of novelistic humor. Immediately after Andy violently forces fellatio on Lucy (this time following the Appleseeders' visit to the Psychologic Revue), the comically disgusting image of Keith Whitehead enters the scene: "Down the kitchen passage Keith Whitehead fried on his hot mattress. He was burping terribly every few seconds. They were the very worst sort of burps to which he was subject, like hardboiled eggs imploding at the back of his throat. 'Mouth farts' was what Keith had once called them" (99). Perhaps this juxtaposition defines one aspect of Amis's use of humor—to ease the reader's confrontation with the shocking brutality of sexual aggression. It seems more likely, though, that Amis's interest lies in the comic dimensions of Keith Whitehead's character.

In response to readers' sympathetic concerns for Keith, Amis has said: "I wrote about Keith with a sort of horrible Dickensian glee, and it never occurred to me that his unloveableness could awaken love" (Haffenden 12). Thus, the cartoon-style and grotesque Dickensian features of Keith can be seen as the real concern of Amis in this scene. The violence enacted on Lucy's body, then, remains as a backdrop to emphasize Keith's follies rather than to articulate the atrocities committed against women. Indeed, Andy's attack on Lucy creates a setting for her trauma to

give space to Keith's comically rendered attempt to seduce her: "Keith could scarcely keep his little red eyes open. It was 5:30, and he had long relinquished any intention of—you had to laugh—'making a pass' at the white-haired girl in the bed over which he leaned" (103).

As the scene ends, Lucy has been basically forgotten; her presence is necessary only in serving to construct "the designs" needed to portray the pathetic antics of Keith's frustrated lust: "He put the light out and walked toward the door. On the way he stubbed his toe viciously on the metal-based coffee table, but he was half in tears anyway, tears of tiredness and contrition and self-disgust, and didn't bother to register the pain" (103). The process of supplanting Lucy's pain with Keith's has come full circle: a scene that began with Keith finding Lucy in tears from sexual violence ends in a detailed caricature of *his* sexual frustration and tears.

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## Part 4

# Money

The social world of Amis's fiction, and the role women play in it, is expanded in his fifth novel, *Money: A Suicide Note*. In the novel, Amis associates sexual debasement with late capitalism. To express this, Amis returns to the first-person narrative style used in *The Rachel Papers* in order to perform a heavy comic satire on the sexual degeneracy of a materialistic Everyman, John Self: "I'm called John Self. But who isn't?" (Amis 97).

The story of *Money* can be seen as a contemporary play on *The Pardoner's Tale* (one of the texts on Self's bookshelf). John Self, like Chaucer's Pardoner, is a character consumed by his own cupidity, gluttonously satisfying all his selfish desires while being utterly blind to his own spiritual emptiness. Within this caricature of Self's high-paced consumerism, Amis continues to examine modern sexuality by satirizing Self's main vices—money and pornography. But as with the sexual satires performed in *The Rachel Papers* and *Dead Babies*, Amis limits his satirist's lens to a focus on male behavior. In contrast, Amis claims that *Money* differs from his earlier novels: "I consider *Money* my feminist book. The hero does start to see the light, and being the kind of person he is, he fails to move into the light" (Morrison 101).

Despite the reformation that Self almost undergoes through the efforts of Martina Twain, his journey through the novel is still largely constructed with the sexual manipulation of women. Thus, it is difficult to consider *Money* as a feminist text precisely because of this sexually subjugated role women possess: while Amis consistently illuminates the misogyny present in John Self's sexuality (and of his other male characters), his novel rarely deals with or attempts to articulate the consciousness of women. One of Amis's obvious goals is to examine the capitalistic victimization of women and attack Self's treatment of women; but while performing this satire on materialistic and sexual greed, Amis continues to use the female body as a narrative prop to stage male corruption. In *Money*, women ultimately function as symbolic mirrors that reflect and give voice to Self's internal degeneracy.

In a superficial consideration of Self's sexual behavior in the novel, Amis openly criticizes his protagonist's views of women. This branch of the novel's various satirical focuses seems to elude critic Laura Doan, who states that Amis's women characters are "mere playthings for male sexual gratification" (Doan 70). Indeed, Doan bluntly writes: "In Amis's novel, women's relationship to money must be mediated through men in the form of sexual favors. His resulting equation is thus: women + money = object" (70). Doan's argument is too simplistic, and is therefore unconvincing. Amis is quite aware of these conditions and satirizes their existence. For example, Amis speaks through his protagonist to acknowledge the patriarchal dynamics underlying the use of money: "She [Selina] has always said that men use money to dominate women. I have always agreed. That's why I've never wanted to give her any" (88). This passage represents Amis's use of "double-voicing," a technique noted by James Diedrick: "Amis satirizes Self by 'doubling' Self's voice with his own throughout the novel, composing an artful counterpoint that resonates with implications beyond the range of his narrator's hearing" (77).

Through this technique, Amis is able to critique the gender politics underlying the economic power system: Self, unlike the reader, is deaf to the presence of Amis's voice, which creates a sense of irony in Self's statement that deprecates his capitalistic sexism. Because Doan limits her analysis to Self's character, she fails to distinguish the beliefs of John Self from the intentions of Amis. One of her main contentions is that "Amis's text does not transgress the established boundaries of the patriarchal order to break away from the dominant power systems..." (Doan 76). Even though Amis does not attempt to envision a utopic or dystopic transformation of the "power systems," he does not necessarily reify the patriarchal "gender system," as Doan claims; for his satirical portrait of John Self serves as a criticism of that very system.

Amis characterizes John Self as an embodiment of the capitalistic systems of England and America in the late twentieth century, and uses this status to further expose Self's internal emptiness: "Martina had given me a how-to kit for the twentieth century. And yet that was what I was giving her too—in person...She was learning quite a bit about her planet's travel through time. She had osmoted some with this limp fatso, his mind in freefall and turnaround, a rag-and-bone man, hollow, stuffed, made out of junk, junk" (308). For Amis, Self seems to be a late-twentieth-century rendition of T.S. Eliot's "Hollow Men"—an individual whose devotion to mass consumerism, materialism and pornography has shackled him in sexual, spiritual and intellectual poverty.

The claim that the female characters are playthings for male sexual gratification in *Money* is actually put to satirical use by Amis. Amis takes this condition, as embodied by Self, and articulates the effects that male sexism has on women. For example, Self is forced to occupy a woman's mindset when he is accosted by a group of homosexuals outside Fielding's rehearsal studio: "But as I walked across the jarred and cratered road and sensed the usual quickenings of irony and aggression I also sensed something further—I sensed that my weight, my mass, my meat was being appraised, registered, scaled, not with lust, no, but with a carnal speculation I had never felt before. Christ, is this how you chicks feel?" (182). In this passage, Self finds himself in a situation where the tables have turned: he is now placed in the role of the sex object who is objectified by the viewer, which allows Amis the opportunity to question the morality of Self's (and men's) attitudes toward women. In fact, Amis analyzes the problem of Self's pornography addiction to comment harshly on the sexual myths men hold of women:

*Here's a little-known fact: the girls in the pornographic magazines aren't like the girls in the pornographic magazines either. That's the thing about pornography, that's the thing about men—they're always giving you the wrong ideas about women. **No** girls are like the girls in the men's magazines, not even Selina, not even the girls in the men's magazines...It transpires that everyone has their human shape, their human form. But try telling pornography that. Try telling men. (219-20; original emphasis)*

Thus, Amis criticizes the situation of women existing as sex objects for male sexual gratification. The only way in which he reifies the contemporary gender system is in order to ridicule its mythical portrayal of women that leads men like John Self to practice sexual misogyny.

The problem of female characterization in *Money* is not so much that the women are "sexual playthings" for Amis's male characters (for this is what Amis satirizes), but that his very form of satire constantly relies on sexually manipulated images of women in order to exist. If we follow

Amis's Nabokovian desire to reject concern for the character to see what the writer's purpose is, it seems that once again we are presented with a specifically patriarchal satire that depends on the sexual subjugation of women to comment on male behavior. Even though Amis has his moments—very brief moments—of occupying female consciousness under the pressure of Self's patriarchal world, his sexual satire on Self is partially made possible by women serving as mirrors to reflect Self's lack of moral character.

The obvious factor that must be stressed about John Self is that he is corrupted by pornography, and it is through his eyes that we see the world. One of the four dominant voices that resonates inside of Self's head is indeed pornography: "Second is the voice of pornography. This often sounds like the rap of a demented DJ: *the way she moves has got to be good news, can't get loose till I feel the juice—suck and spread, bitch, yeah bounce for me baby...And so on*" (104; original emphasis). Thus, if Self's mind is cluttered with the decay of pornography, it soon becomes evident that the various representations of women in Amis's text must function as reflections of this corrupted consciousness.

The discussion of pornography in the novel exists primarily as the connection between Self's psyche and his external world: "Issuing from my head, can pornography now shape the clouds and hold all sway in the middle air?...Come on, if that is what it looked like then that is what it looked like. I am probably not alone in supposing that *I am shaped by how I see things*. And that cloud up there certainly looked like a pussy to me" (231; my emphasis). The outside world, based on Self's words, becomes an extension of the pornographic noise in his head: his surroundings and the people around him are, at times, transformed into looking-glasses that bear the images of his sexually corrupt thoughts.

Similar to Charles Highway's parodic "hokey-pokey" sexual behavior with Rachel Noyes, women in *Money* are thus presented as sexually pliable objects in order to articulate the callous sexuality of John Self: "In my experience, the thing about girls is—you never know. No, you never do. Even if you actually catch them, redhanded—bent triple upside down in mid-air over the headboard, say, and brushing their teeth with your best friend's dick—you never know. She'll deny it, indignantly. She'll believe it, too. She'll hold the dick there, like a mike, and tell you that it isn't so" (20). Amis here apparently abandons his concern for female consciousness by literally twisting the female body into impossible contortions to convey a comic view of Self's ignorant and misogynistic distrust of women.

This same elastic presentation of women recurs when Amis satirizes the commodified sexual relationship between Self and Selina Street: "The

day before last, however, I decided to open a joint bank account...An hour and a half later she turned to me, with one leg still hooked over the headboard, and said, 'Do it, anywhere, anything.' Things had unquestionably improved, what with all this new dignity and self-respect about the place" (85). As the last sentence indicates, the point of the satire here is to represent how self-esteem, sexuality and human relationships are reduced to monetary transactions; but the manipulation of the female body becomes a favorite image to communicate the corruption that shapes John Self's mentality.

This use of the female body to comment on male identity has been brilliantly articulated by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*. In her essay, Woolf ruminates on the supposed question of male supremacy and female inferiority, and discovers that the two issues are bound by the patriarchal need for confidence and identity: "Without self-confidence we are babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to oneself...Hence the enormous importance to a patriarch who has to conquer, who has to rule, of feeling that great numbers of people, half the human race indeed, are by nature inferior to himself" (Woolf 35). Woolf's psychological analysis of the patriarch's identity formation is based upon the idea that the subjugated Other—most often women—provides the male with the sense of power he needs to feel himself important.

This theory of identity formation is related to Amis's construction of Self's character through a process of inversion: instead of boasting or inflating Self's identity, Amis seems to subjugate women in his novel to show Self's *lack of confidence* and his fragmented identity. An example of this inverted, symbiotic relationship between the female Other and the male self occurs when Self and Fielding Goodney audition women for their film:

*I watched through my pornographic sheen. And the girls submitted to it, to the pornography. Professional city-dwellers, they were experienced in the twentieth century. They didn't dance, they didn't tease—they didn't strip, not really. They took most of their clothes off and gave you a lesson in their personal anatomy. One of them simply lifted her skirt, lay on the floor, and had a handjob. She was the best. (185)*

In this scene, women function as an absolute reflection of John Self: Self is the handjob specialist throughout the entire novel, a characteristic that becomes one of Amis's favorite satirical targets. In light of this fact, the sexual objectification of women here becomes a textual technique that captures Self's internal bankruptcy. This mirroring effect has been discussed by Woolf thus: "Women have served all these centuries as

looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (35). The woman in this scene, then, is merely a personification of the sexually debased male self—an object that emanates from Self, through his "pornographic sheen," to reflect his lack of moral strength and therefore *reduce* his size.

Using women to reflect male degeneracy is given ultimate expression when Self confronts his stepmother, Vron. Self has returned to Barry Self's pub, the Shakespeare, in order to get his money from his supposed father, when he finds himself trapped in a seduction scene with Vron. The details of the scene cast Vron as a pornographic spectacle that mirrors Self's pornography-saturated psyche: "With empurpled fingertips she smoothed her breasts as if casting them with an ointment of spectral costliness...I stumbled forward a pace or two but it was hard because hard core makes the air so thick. Hard core make the air as hard as concrete or steel" (340).

Vron, like many of the other women found in Amis's fiction, exists as a sexual prop to stage Self's final moment of sexual debasement. Amis himself acknowledges this patriarchal structure in ridiculing Self: "There are certainly one or two pornographic scenes in *Money*, and they're there for the effect they have on the narrator: he has no resistance to pornography, or to any other bad thing...The crucial pornographic scene is when he is seduced, as it were, by his then stepmother, Vron. That's his nadir in the book: everything has collapsed, so why not do the worst thing?" (Haffenden 21-22)

Considering that this scene is meant to comment on Self's jaded sexuality, it is quite significant, then, where this moment of Self's nadir occurs: "She turned over. Her neck strained to keep erect. There was *another mirror*. Vron could see what I could see. A woman on all fours, a set of fingers gripping the silver band, and tugging. 'There,' she said. 'Do it there, John.' " (340; my emphasis).

Vron is the critical detail of this scene—the image that foregrounds Self's ultimate pornographic experience. Since Vron functions as the key image, she bears special relevance to Woolf's discussion of the power present in the woman-as-spectacle metaphor: "The looking-glass vision is of supreme importance because it charges the vitality; it stimulates the nervous system" (36). Vron is an inversion of the looking-glass principle: she drains Self of any vitality, of any hope for redemption. Remembering that Self is shaped by how he sees things, then, it is rather symbolic that this room contains mirrors: for if we follow Amis's intentions in writing this scene, it seems apparent that Vron is just another mirror, capturing and reflecting the debased Self at *half* his "natural size."



Thus, *The Rachel Papers*, *Dead Babies*, and *Money: A Suicide Note*, can be seen as social and sexual satires that use women as vessels to articulate a vision of modern sexuality polluted by male misogyny. In his preoccupation with satirizing this state of sexuality, Amis finally seems to neglect the consciousness of women in these novels. The primary concerns of *The Rachel Papers* focus on the mediated sexuality of Charles Highway and the Oedipal designs of his narrative. The characterization of Rachel and other women only gain relevance through their bodies becoming literary landscapes that illustrate and amplify Charles's abuses of sexuality and the resolution of the tension present in the relationship with his father.

The women of *Dead Babies* and *Money* function in a similar manner, with the manipulation of the female body serving as a spectacle that reflects the moral emptiness of men and their often demented psychological natures. Women are ultimately silent props in these three narratives, then, since their existence provides Amis with the opportunity to develop the consciences of his male characters and his own novelistic interests in the uses of comedy to lubricate the violence that he sees in the world. While it may be misleading to state that Martin Amis is a misogynist, it can be safely concluded that he portrays his women characters, as presented in these three novels, in the role of the Other that shades in and produces the ambiance for the male self.

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