

## **The Real and Imaginary City in the Works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan**

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### **Abstract:**

**The aim of this paper is to present, in brief, how real and imaginary cities are perceived and used in selected works of Martin Amis and McEwan. I would like to show that both the writers use the urban milieu not only as a setting for their fictions, but that they also develop it on a more complex symbolic level of their narrative. Attention is also paid to how some of the novels' urban characters fit into the identity patterns distinguished by contemporary sociology.**

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### **I. Introduction**

Martin Amis is, undoubtedly, an urban writer – “one of the greatest urban portraitists in English prose” as James Diedrick suggests in *Understanding Martin Amis* (Diedrick 2004:22) - whose best novels are set in the modern city's milieu. Although McEwan's novels differ from Amis's in both style and subject matter, there are elements and motifs their narratives have in common and the use of the city as the crucial setting is one of the most significant of these.

Although the city is not always the central theme of Amis's and McEwan's novels, it represents their inseparable part as the only environment in which these stories are possible to happen or, at least, to be imagined to happen. As a result, the city appears there in several roles, of which I should mention the five most dominant ones – the city as a place of anonymity with unclear, distorted or hidden identities; a place where the encounter with “the other” in its manifold manifestations is most considerable and frequent; a place of loneliness and forced individualism; a place of infinite opportunities on the one hand, but a great many unknown dangers on the other; and there also appears London of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a centre of the political, social and economic changes of that time.

For Amis it is the modern urban life with its characteristic atmosphere, stresses, tensions, anxieties but also pleasures that becomes one of the foci of his narrative especially in his loose urban trilogy *Money* (1984), *London Fields* (1989) and *The Information* (1995), as well as in their immediate predecessor, *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981), and successor, *Yellow Dog* (2003). Therefore, if we are to trace the development of Amis's novels, we should by no means neglect that of his distinctive literary urban portraits.

With McEwan we have to distinguish between his earlier works, such as *The Cement Garden* (1978) or *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), in which the city appears almost exclusively on a symbolic level, and his later ones where this symbolic function coexists and blurs with that of the story's more or less realistic setting. From these we can mention for example *The Child in Time* (1987), *Amsterdam* (1998) or his latest, *Saturday* (2005).

## II. The Real and the Imaginary Cities

The action of *The Cement Garden*, for instance, takes place in London, but in a suburban part of the city and, moreover, in a former demolition zone. If there is only little mutual social control in an ordinarily functioning city, we can expect almost no such control in the place into which McEwan introduces the reader. The characters of the story live in a part of the city which has ceased to bear any features of a neighbourhood. This enables McEwan to turn the atmosphere of *The Cement Garden* into that of a nightmare. It is a story which only a city could invent, a dark urban prophecy of alienation and hopelessness.

The novel's setting demands a symbolic reading too – the deserted suburbia reminds one of the archetypal Eliotesque urban wasteland, the ultimately dehumanized space in which people have lost all their capacity to live a meaningful existence. The story thus could be understood as a warning against the dangers of modern city life and the consequent phenomena that accompany it – human indifference and emotional deprivation, which could drive their victims to deeds they would otherwise never commit.

In Amis's *Other People*, recovering from amnesia, Mary wanders helplessly around London in search of her true identity, discovering that urban experience is nothing to be gained without sacrifices, coming to the painful realization that the city will never give her anything for free until she makes her offer first:

Mary went on a journey, a journey that took several days. She rode the tubes, to and fro and round and round the city's fuming entrails. She rode the Circle Line until, on this new scale of time and distance, the Circle made her head reel. And it never got her anywhere. She walked the clotted concrete of Piccadilly and Leicester Square. She slept in a room full of other people and the gurgles and gases of bad food. She leaned against a wall where other girls were leaning. Two different men came up and asked her if she was free; she shook her head both times and they went away again. For a while, time turned into a series of boxes. (Amis 1999:157)

She does not travel by the Circle Line accidentally – living homeless and without money in a big city inevitably means ending up in a vicious circle of violence, crime and pain, a circle from which there is no way out unless somebody else, preferably an outsider like the mysterious John Prince in Mary's case, helps you.

However, reading the novel from the point of view of the Lacanian theory of the subject, the city in *Other People* can also be attributed another role – that of the metaphor of the symbolic order of language. It is not only the encounter with otherness but also linguistic experience that enable the main protagonist to recover her self.

And so both at the beginning as well as at the end of the heroine's quest there is her look into the mirror. In the meantime, Mary-Amy has to undergo a long and painful process of entering the symbolic order of language as she discovers its power. Simultaneously, she grows more and more aware of the necessity of her acceptance of the social roles and competences which have been prepared for her prior to her entry into such a structure.

The city-as-language allows the childishly innocent and inexperienced Mary to become the confident, being-in-the-world aware Amy, but only at the cost of her subordination to its order. Amy eventually understands that without language she is powerless; the otherness remains inaccessible and her despair undefeatable unless she is at least able to name them.

The labyrinthine, Venice-like setting of *The Comfort of Strangers* can also be understood as a remarkable metaphor for a world in which each person is just a stranger without a proper map. Such a reading of the text is enabled not only by the deliberate vagueness of the story's main protagonists, but especially by the enigmatic, unnatural character of the seemingly lucid city.

A highly interesting feature is McEwan's treatment of the city's maps. What one can find in them are either the main commercial zones or only fragments of the whole, while the gaps between these fragments remain mysterious, incomprehensible blind spots (and when you find a map which shows the whole city in detail, it is too large and fragile to be of any use). The maps thus represent our knowledge of the world. McEwan claims the impossibility of any total human knowledge since such a

project is too preposterous and immense. Through the characters of Colin and Mary, McEwan shows his belief that reason can neither control nor explain satisfactorily the world without the contribution of less rational components such as intuition, emotions and imagination.

In *Money* John Self, the masterly creation of the ridiculous “twentieth century addict”, invites the readers to take part in an unusual guided quasi-sociological tour around two late twentieth century megalopolises dominated by the monetary interests of commercial culture, during which he comments, with astonishingly unprecedented eloquence, on the condition of modern London:

[...] You *can* doublepark on people: people can doublepark on you. Cars are doubling while houses are halving. Houses divide into, into two, into four, into sixteen. If a landlord or developer comes across a decent-sized room he turns it into a labyrinth, a Chinese puzzle. [...] Rooms divide, rooms multiply. Houses split – houses are tripleparked. People are doubling also, dividing, splitting. In double trouble we split our losses. No wonder we’re bouncing off the walls. (Amis 1985:66)

The streets sing. Yes they do. Can you hear them? The streets scream. You’re told about street culture. There isn’t any. That’s the point. This is as far as it goes. Where does the song end, the scream start? And in the monologue malls and choric alleys of London West the screamers sing and the singers scream [...] The song the screamers sing is a song to what they cannot bear, defining and miming the meaning of the word *unbearable*. (Amis 1985:360)

as well as on the shabby streets of the New York slums:

Yesterday I was walking up golden Fifth Avenue towards the tawny gulf of the Park. The powerful stores were in full exchange, drawing people in, easing people out, superintended by the lean Manhattan totems, these idols of rock-statues that stare straight ahead in grim but careless approval of the transactions compounded in the street beneath. It was pouring money. On the pavement the monkeynut operatives and three-card trick artists, the thimble-riggers, hot-handbag dealers, contraband bandits – they all plied their small concerns. (Amis 1985:218)

The city is where Self feels most at home and so anytime he is to describe it, his language changes substantially, from a pitiable variant of pornography and primitive advertising into a highly playful or almost poetic one, suggesting that not Self but Amis is to be considered the true urban spokesman.

Due to the serious and rather gloomy mood of its narrative, the urban environment of *The Child in Time* is presented as one that is essentially alienated and lonely, and as such it is put into sharp contrast with the rural, or even pastoral, atmosphere of Charles’s woodland life or Julie’s countryside cottage.

When Stephen and his daughter Kate are taking a routine Saturday morning trip to the local supermarket, the listlessness of the city life breathes on the reader from each line. However, the abduction incident discloses that, in most cases, this listlessness serves as a kind of protective mechanism of the city dwellers in their everyday encounters with crowds of unknown people:

The faces of mothers were strained, alert. Several people had seen the little girl riding in the trolley. Someone knew the colour of her sweater. The anonymity of the city store turned out to be frail, a thin crust beneath which people observed, judged, remembered. (McEwan 1992:18)

Despite all the horror of the situation, McEwan claims that the traditionally valued human qualities such as altruism, empathy or solidarity can also be found in city people, though often concealed behind their deliberate mask of indifference.

Several aspects of McEwan’s fictional London also suggest the novel’s dystopian character – “the police are armed, licensed begging has been introduced, only one newspaper does not support the government” (Malcolm 2002:97). As a result, the London setting of the novel is far from the story’s

mere realistic background and assumes the role of a dystopian urban vision of the Thatcherite Britain that was not so remote from the time of the novel's publication.

*London Fields*, as its title suggests, is the novel of Amis in which the city plays the most significant role. Once again Amis's treatment of his favourite fictional milieu is rather ambiguous, since even the combination of the two words in the title itself is contrasting, oxymoronic – the only fields one can find there are, the physical and metaphorical ones from which those of various negative energies prevail. As Sam observes: “[...] this is London; and there are no fields. Only fields of operation and observation, only fields of electromagnetic attraction and repulsion, only fields of hatred and coercion. Only force fields.” (Amis 1989:134) Among these force fields there is an exceptionally strong one – Nicola Six, the personification of the apocalyptic vision of late twentieth century Western civilization.

The way London is presented in the novel is made both disturbing and funny through one of Amis's most comical characters – Keith Talent, the sinister inhabitant of the dark side of the city:

The moment I set eyes on him I thought Keith Talent was an anachronistic kind of character. I thought that time and inflation and the new demographics would have mopped him up by now or sent him somewhere else: to the North, or at least to the suburbs. Not so. The streets are full of jokers, dodgers, jack-the-lads and willie-the-dips – whole crews of Keiths [...] (Amis 1989:134)

Keith, the aggressive, primitive cheat, with all his “reptile modernity”, is a person of the street, one who feels, though often foolishly, safe and confident out there.

For Sam, the narrator, on the other hand, the city is something more than he can fully cope with. As he gradually realizes that he is losing his control over the story's manifold texture, he also admits his inability to understand the city streets:

There was a time when I thought I could read the streets of London. I thought I could peer into the ramps and passages, into the smoky dispositions, and make some sense of things. But now I don't think I can. Either I'm losing it, or the streets are getting harder to read. Or both. I can't read books, which are meant to be easy, easy to read. No wonder, then, that I can't read streets, which we all know to be hard [...] (Amis 1989:367)

Therefore, one of the functions of the city in the novel might be the parallel between the complexity of the modern city and that of postmodern narrative. They both require close and analytical “reading” as well as some additional knowledge and experience to prevent one's identity from being entirely dissolved in unstable or “liquid” (Bauman 2000) modernity, as well as to detect the meanings and interpretations of the city's various discourses.

However, the main and most significant role of the city in *London Fields* is to represent the state of modern civilization in the process of its moral and ethical decay. London is depicted as a place with a “sense of approaching catastrophe” where the streets remind one of “dark chambers of the elaborately suffering city” (Amis 1989:329, 391) full of unhappy people growing indifferent and childishly dependent on the superficial simulacra through which they are trying to live in order to avoid the “unbearable lightness of being”. It is Sam's act of saving Kim, the innocent child that finally averts the disaster, at least temporarily, suggesting thus that only genuine human feelings together with a responsible moral choice can save our dehumanized civilization from its doom.

In *The Information*, underneath the main story of Richard Tull, an unrecognized writer who is planning to mess up his unjustly celebrated friend's life, we can find the equally exciting story of Richard Tull, a modern city dweller at the end of the millennium.

What Richard experiences seems to him like a bad dream from which he finds himself unable to wake. The atmosphere of Amis's city reflects this feeling from the very first lines of the book:

Cities at night, I feel, contain men who cry in their sleep and then say Nothing. It's nothing. Just sad dreams. Or something like that [...]

from outside through the shivery window came the sound of fiercely propelled metal as it ground against stone, shearing into the sore calcified struts and buttresses with sadistic persistence: the house, the street, the whole city, taking it deep in the root canal (Amis 1995:47)

The city of *The Information* might thus be taken as a parallel to its main protagonist's desperate and confused state of mind, a map of his anxious soul.

However, the city in the novel does not only function on the symbolic level since Amis makes it physical through frequent vivid descriptions which form a sort of series of scenes from the city's life. There are even parts of London so desolate that they have lost the character of a city and have become an anti-city, or underworld depicted in terms close to those of the Apocalypse. From the description of Ladbroke Grove we learn that it is:

[...] that patch of London owned by bums and drunks, exemplary in its way – the model anti-city; here the pavement, even the road, wore a coat of damp beer (in various manifestations) which sucked on your shoes as you hastened past. Crouching men with upturned fucked-up faces [...] It made Richard think of Pandaemonium and the convocation of rebel angels – hurled like lightning headlong over the crystal battlements of heaven, falling and falling into penal fire and the deep world of darkness. (Amis 1995:42-43)

To highlight the resonant comic effect of his writing, Amis switches the familiar West End of London setting of his previous works to a quick succession of seven American cities, and the result is a “memorable series of urban portraits”(Diedrick 2004:149). While Chicago, for instance, represents the very height of the overtechnologized urban civilization, Los Angeles is rather presented in terms of the mass, commercial pseudo-variant of culture:

And Richard's body knew that whatever it was Richard stood for – the not-so-worldly, the contorted, the difficult – had failed. Los Angeles sought transcendence everywhere you looked, through astrology or crystal or body-worship or templegoing, but these were stabs at worldly divination, tips and forecasts about how to do better in the here and now. (Amis 1995:272)

Los Angeles thus represents the centre and living symbol of art's devaluation, which becomes a reminder of Richard's misery resulting from his failure in the conflict between literature and popular trash.

*Amsterdam* is one of McEwan's novels that signal the fact that the natural milieu of the writer's fiction is not only Britain but the whole of Europe. His books are often set in London but they could just as well take place in any other Western European metropolis. Their protagonists – a writer, editor, publisher, scientist, composer – are new intellectuals, members of the global cosmopolitan knowledge class, the sort of people who are most at home when they can move freely, realizing and developing their intellectual potential by attending or taking part in various international events.

Amsterdam, the novel's protagonists' destination, for instance, has been chosen to suit the plot as a city with liberalized euthanasia legislation but not only that. There is also a great deal of irony in the fact that such egoistic characters should meet their inevitable fate in this “calm and civilized city” (McEwan 1999:155) with a reputation for tolerance. Amsterdam proves more difficult to deceive than London and so the pathological elements of the two men's malice become much more apparent there.

### III. Postmodern Identity Patterns

The Polish sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman 1995:40-56) suggests that the personality of a postmodern person can be illustrated on four metaphorical identity patterns. It is their coexistence of and constant switching from one to the other, rather than their isolated occurrence that depict the fickle character of our contemporary urban existence. The first metaphor is that of “*the stroller*”, the most

typical representative of the postmodern urban culture who, hidden in the safety and comfort of his or her anonymity in the crowd, carefully observes, or better said gapes, and in his or her imagination projects other people's lives. Secondly, he describes "*the vagabond*", one without any firm bond with a place or person (this metaphor is most suitable for a postmodern understanding of career and intimate relationships), whose sense of life lies in the perpetual quest for change, new challenges and temptations. Thirdly, "*the tourist*" is the seeker of ready-made exoticism, a collector of prefabricated experiences in the form of photographs and souvenirs. Finally, "*the player*" indicates the accidental character of our life, which we are frequently encouraged to take as a slightly risky "game" in which things might but do not have to happen and which is all fun unless we look for some permanent and enduring values.

In the final part of the paper I will try to show how these identity patterns are mirrored in the above mentioned works. As Amis's characters are often meant to fulfill certain, limited-dimensional functions in the text, most of them tend to represent a caricature of one or two of the four patterns. While Mary Lamb is a forced *vagabond*, Nicola Six is a metaphor for a postmodern *player* drawn beyond extremes, a person who, out of the lack of sufficient stimuli, deliberately turns her life into a fatal game of self-destruction. However, the characters in which Amis's wit achieves perfect expression are the two *strollers* (and simultaneously unsuccessful *players*) – John Self and Keith Talent.

As a typical city-dweller, Self is well aware of the fact that people in the crowd, who know they are constantly being watched by hundreds of pairs of unknown eyes, have and usually take advantage of the possibility to present themselves in the way they choose and hide their real self behind a mask of anonymity and reserved indifference. Moreover, in the city street one can easily become a director who, using his or her imagination, can secretly invent and reinvent other people's fates, as well as a spectator deliberately standing aside, watching the urban performance, which is the position Self loves adopting the most: "Actors are paid to pretend that they are unaware of being watched [...] There are unpaid actors too (I thought); it's them you really have to watch." (Amis 1985:132)

Colin and Mary in *The Comfort of Strangers* are McEwan's remarkable achievement in creating the characters of postmodern *tourists*. The city in the novel has been made into an ultimate tourist destination and as such, it has two faces: one elegant and polished where the tourists are expected to move and are therefore welcome, and the other, the ordinary local people's everyday life which often differs dramatically from the first and where tourists are not only unwelcome but the inhabitants of which are rather indifferent if not hostile to them.

In order to get its money, the city strives to offer the tourists all possible comfort. In return for this pretended warm-heartedness it demands from them just one thing – that they will behave like tourists, according to the standardized model of nice, indulgently generous and permanently excited persons with cameras who walk obediently in the marked territories where they spend their money, as it is in the case of Colin and Mary:

It was mid-summer, and the city overflowed with visitors. Colin and Mary set out each morning after breakfast with their money, sunglasses and maps, and joined the crowds who swarmed across the canal bridges and down every narrow street. They dutifully fulfilled the many tasks of tourism the ancient city imposed, visiting its major and minor churches, its museum and palaces, all treasure-packed. (McEwan 1997:3)

The relationship thus created between the tourists and the local inhabitants of the visited place is logically very fragile as it is sufficient if just one of the two sides ceases to be willing to play the game. The real otherness which lies in the still maintained everyday habits and rituals of the local people is purposefully kept hidden from the visitors. McEwan presents this aspect as even more alarming since he makes the otherness his tourists encounter fatal for them – what he lets happen to his tourists can be understood as a kind of a ritual punishment by the genuine, but exploited and humiliated, local genius loci of the preposterous Western listlessness and ignorant unwillingness to acknowledge its otherness.

Of other McEwan characters we could mention, for example, Charles Darke from *The Child in Time*, a typical postmodern urban *vagabond* in all his unhappiness and isolation. He represents a

person whose life has become a perpetual quest for new professional “challenges” in which he would succeed, and through which he would be allowed to hide his inner insecurity and deprivation as well as compensate the utmost need of his infantile self for parental love and care.

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