

# The Literary Representation of Obscenity : Examining the Socio-Economic Aspect of Sexual Perversion in Martin Amis' *Money*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This work, the case study of which is Martin Amis' Money, gives insight into the relationship between absolute freedom, money and debauchment by focusing on the wanderings of John Self, the protagonist. In Money, Martin Amis associates the American way of life with all its accessories to sexual perversity. As a matter of fact, the postmodernist grotesque that advocates a new order of social life, is the background to this novel. This paper's aim is to shed light on the reasons why sexual language and practices are recurrent in Martin Amis' narrative and, at the same time, show how sexual perversion leads man to alienation. The research findings have revealed that the close relationship between freedom, sex and money throughout Money partakes of moral perversion of modern times, emphasizing that money now tends to be substituted to God.*

**Keywords :** *freedom, money, debauchment, sexual perversity, alienation.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

*Money* has been written in the 1980s, a period of economic recession in Britain. To boost its economy, Britain had to integrate the American system of free enterprise and competitiveness in trade. Nevertheless, that American political liberalism, contrary to Britain's traditional conservatism, entails the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, and the freedom of religion to name but a few. Those freedoms were warmly welcomed by the majority of the British people who felt imprisoned in a community of strict conservative rules, and needed to live in a more stress-free society. As a result of that social change, many immoral behaviors started being born in Britain. America, the motherland of liberalism has always been more tolerant with some behaviors religiously considered unacceptable. Besides, "obscenity laws, rather, are based on traditional notions, rooted in this country's religious antecedents." (Henkin, 1963, p. 392). Thus, many English young people had to move to America for some excesses they could not allow themselves to in their British environment. That new type of a young English person in search for more social freedom, is embodied by John Self the protagonist of Martin Amis's *Money*. He goes to America with a view to pursuing eternal youth, wealth and happiness as promised by the American dream. But that desire of a more free life has pushed him to resort to sexual perversion, and he becomes the darling of prostitutes. This work talks about sexual perversion, which can be defined as the abnormal way of practicing or talking about sex. But that obscene life has ultimately led to John Self's alienation in the United States.

The following analysis is structured as follows : the first part gives the reasons why sexual language is recurrent in Martin Amis' narrative ; the second part examines the rapprochement that exists between pornography and prostitution ; and the last part explores the constant pursuit of corporal pleasure.

## II. THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE RECURRENT USE OF SEXUAL LANGUAGE IN MONEY

Martin Amis' narrative is difficult to read and understand because of the recurrence of the sexual and informal language. That sexual practice throughout the novel comes from one American ideal that is freedom or liberty.

In the American mindset, man should dominate nature and transform it in order to make it a better place to live. That is the reason why American people love inventing things and going to unexplored spaces. The first one to set foot on the moon, on 21 July 1969, is an American whose name is Neil Alden Armstrong. He was an astronaut and an aeronautical engineer. He said these words after his exploit: "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." Armstrong's statement is very telling as far as American culture is concerned. Armstrong considered his big exploit as "one small step". For the genuine American, there is no limit to what man can achieve on earth. Americans believe that "the sky is the limit". That belief has enabled them to make miraculous achievements in the world and to value the notion liberty. Liberty or freedom, meaning the absence of arbitrary restraints, is a core value in America, which is a country where individual liberty is highly promoted. The concept liberty matches with the American liberalism, which is a political philosophy that seeks to give to individuals as much freedom as possible in all social and economic fields.

Liberty, whose aim is to enable people to follow their passions, recommends the protection of natural rights, being the basic rights that include the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, also mentioned in *The Declaration of Independence*. John Self's understanding of natural rights is the right to freedom, especially that to sexual freedom. There is even sexual freedom among the freedoms guaranteed by the United States Constitution. That sexual freedom is so noticeable in *Money* to the extent of becoming sexual perversity. John Self confuses americanization and perversity. His American way of life is reflected through his obscene behavior and pervert language. The words 'fuck, fucking, breasts standing, live sex, mouthjobs, handjobs', etc. are recurrent in Martin Amis' narrative. Even to congratulate one of his friends who was celebrating his economic attainment, Self said: "You're a fucking genius." (Amis, 1984, p. 121).

The proliferation of sex in *Money*, is a way for Martin Amis to highlight "how there is a new order and a new aesthetic which are the result of the distorted perception of a society which has lost sight of the conventions and values of the past, now replaced by mass culture, in particular the vulgar manipulations of the tabloid press." (Crews, July 2010, p. 642).

Martin Amis is a postmodernist, and postmodernism is characterized by the grotesque, meaning by the incompatibility of norms or simply by the focus on what is not socially accepted.

England is a country characterized by a culture of a strict respect of social norms, so it is a conservative society. It is different from America, where individual freedom that entails religious freedom is promoted and protected by the law. Therefore, English historical norms are far heavier than American ones. That was what brought John Self to say: "Unlovely London. Even the name holds heavy stress." (Amis, 1984, p. 184).

The recurrence of sexual language rhymes with the prevalence of sexual intercourses in *Money*, and almost all the actions are sexualized. "As sex is life, so it is sex that defines the self. In Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins*, we have the usual assortment of lost souls looking for their selves. The rediscovery of the self is essentially an act of returning to the womb; and, since this cannot be accomplished literally, it is done in ritual and in symbol through sexual intercourse." (Fitch, 1957, p. 12).

The way language is sexualized in *Money* is a testimony to the moral decadence of the 1980s in the English society, a situation occasioned by the infiltration of the American liberalism in the British system. In this sense, Juan Ibrahim states: "Amis uses John Self to reflect the disintegration of the self in the modern, capitalist society of England in 1980s." (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 95).

It can be drawn from this part that Martin Amis has used John Self to represent the failure of the postmodern society, focusing on the loss of moral values.

### III. THE RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN PORNOGRAPHY AND PROSTITUTION IN MONEY

In *Money*, sex is exposed in pornographic films to flatter viewers with the view to earning much money. Pornography or porn is an activity that consists of displaying sexual organs in order to excite a public. In this vein, Jean Baudrillard explains: « le voyeurisme du porno n'est pas un voyeurisme sexuel, mais un voyeurisme de la représentation et de sa perte, un vertige de perte de la scène et d'irruption de l'obscène ». (Baudrillard, 1992, p. 48.). Pornography is art and is essentially commercial. In this sense, Cocks adds : "modern pornography, in which sex is isolated from its social and cultural context and presented as a thing in itself." (Cocks, 2012, p. 276). So here, sex is alienated from its primary function of pleasure provider to become a source of money.

The close relationship between money and sex in pornography has therefore affected true love, and John Self has to pay money to one of his girlfriends to have sex with her when he lets us know : "I pay good money to talk with Dawn here in her dressing gown." (Amis, 1984, p. 14). John Self only uses money in drinking, smoking and prostitution. One of his friends has made this remark: "Women for you, they are just pornography" (Amis, 1984, p. 112), meaning that Self doesn't make the difference between pornography and prostitution.

In pornography as well as in prostitution, money is a motivating factor as people perform sex for money. In the first one, it is a third person who pays the performance meant for sale, whereas in the second one, it is one of the partners who pays so as to satisfy a lust. So pornography is exclusively sex for money, but prostitution is sex for money and pleasure, a pleasure which is generally meant for only one of the partners. It is important to know that there is a connection between prostitution and pornography. Besides, "prostitution and pornography both serve to state male desire." (Kaye, 2017, p. 244).

In *Money*, John Self has made us discover many other characters whose similarities lay on their love of money. Such an attitude has justified the title of the book. Money is everywhere in *Money*, and determines the relationship between characters. There is a girl whose name is Selina Street. She is John Self's girlfriend, but her patronym 'Street' is symbolic. Street reveals that Selina is a street girl, meaning a prostitute. She loves John Self, but she never makes love with him without being paid. And whenever they are in lovemaking, she dares tell him how she makes it with others who give her more money. Talking about her other boyfriend, she confesses to John Self "how he took her to hotels and dressed her up and fucked her on the floor like a dog [...] She said that when she wasn't here, she was there." (Amis, 1984, p. 120). To make Self jealous and pay more money, she tells her how she makes sex with her other wealthy boyfriend.

It is noteworthy to underline that "pornography is a dynamic phenomenon which has, since its beginnings in the antiquity, been determined by the social practice, beliefs and norms characterising the particular society in the given historical moment." (Millica, 2013, p. 11).

Besides, since pornography and prostitution are closely linked to money, they epitomize the negative effects of capitalism. However, pornography "has more pressures and constraints" (Katyal, 2006, p. 1473) than prostitution.

### IV. THE CONSTANT PURSUIT OF CORPORAL PLEASURE

In *Money*, the pursuit of corporal pleasure, epitomized by the main character John Self, is explored in depth. John Self is known to be a committed hedonist. Hedonism is a philosophy according to which only pleasure and its pursuit are important in life.

Self is always enthusiastic about satisfying his sexual needs. He associates happiness to sexual pleasure. As such, he lives in dissoluteness. He is in eternal yearning for lust as summed up in this passage : "Fast food, sex shows, space games, slot machines, video nasties, nude mags, drink, pubs, fighting, television, handjobs. I've got a hunch about these handjobs, or about their exhausting frequency. I need that human touch." (Amis, 1984, p. 67).

In reality, Self is not interested in true love. He enjoys having sex with different partners, but he doesn't love the women he generally makes love with. One of his friends confirms that in these words: "you just take women and use them. Then you toss them aside like a salad." (Amis, 1984, p. 112). He is egoistic, he only thinks about himself, hence the quintessence of his family name 'Self', which means the consciousness of one's own identity. However, that narcissism prevents him from understanding what is happening around him as he concentrates too much on himself. He is to a certain extent blinded by relentless sexual desires. John Self is not aware of what happens around him because of his endless quest for corporal pleasure. While Self only seeks to satisfy his libido, the cunning 'thief' Fielding Goodney, another character in the novel who seems to be Self's friend, fills his pocket with his money. Self, always drunk and surrounded by prostitutes, is often unaware of what he does. That situation is beneficial to Fielding Goodney who makes Self sign papers he understands nothing. In fact, these papers are loans' contracts. So Goodney uses the money from John Self's loans and even supports him with his own money. Self thought that Fielding was a rich and generous man who supported him, but in reality he didn't know what that man was doing with his money. Goodney spends up Self's money and he ends up impoverished. After that, Self's credit cards become useless.

Sex has alienated Self who has become the victim of Fielding Goodney. The latter encourages him in debauchment in order to steal his money. Through his mouth, Amis asserts : « He dropped me off on Broadway. Eleven o'clock. What can a grown male do alone at night in Manhattan, except go in search of trouble or pornography." (Amis, 1984, p. 28). Manhattan is chosen by Martin Amis to represent the city that shelters the American dream of John Self. The choice of the city of Manhattan is relevant because it is one of the five boroughs of New York, and is considered the heart of that city owing to its density, infrastructures and other characteristics. It can be labeled the epitome of the American dream, and prostitution is very developed there. Matching John Self's lusts and desires, that city can welcome him. That is why he wonders what he has to do there apart from engaging in profligacy.

Nevertheless, John Self's adrift behavior can be understood under another angle. He is lost and anxious, and is spawning a way through obscenity. But he is aware of the filthy life he leads, and is trying to find a way that leads to a decent life as maintained by Martin Amis here : "And that is why I long to burst out of the world of money and into – into what ? Into the world of thought and fascination. How do I get there ? Tell me, please. I'll never make it by myself. I just don't know the way." (Amis, 1984, p. 118).

Furthermore, he once said : "I'm half American half asleep." That means that he is a hybrid who is desperately in quest for identity. Self is a native Londonian, but he now spends more time in America because of the American dream's promises of eternal youth, wealth and happiness. The other factor that makes his behavior problematic is that he doesn't know his real father. As a result, John Self doesn't know his true origin. That void has created a gap in his existence, and he tries to fill it up through debauchment. In actual fact, Self is trying to escape that tough reality by finding a stress free chink.

The important use of sexuality in *Money* is not accidental, it is a way for the author to lay the emphasis on the loss of moral values.

## V. CONCLUSION

John Self, the main character of *Money*, supported his wealth on debauchment that defined him, and made his success visible. But in reality, he was trying to escape from a heavy respect of social norms in England by deciding to settle in America where more sexual and religious freedom are promoted. Nevertheless, he ended up in social alienation. Furthermore, the erotic way *Money* is written along with John Self's engagement in sexual perversion is a means for the author to lay the emphasis on the morals decay of the modern society, and on the failure of postmodernism that was supposed to bring a new social order. So, Martin Amis has a critical purpose in his sexual representation of *Money*.

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