



The Comic and Serious Duality in Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines how Amis' Lucky Jim provides double modes between comedy and seriousness at the same time. The study deals with criticizing the ground realities of the socio cultural and educational aspects of the British lifestyle in the period after the Second World War. As a result the study reveals the reflection of the social hierarchies in the British community as a main predicament affecting the lower middle class people and their simple aspirations of a decent living. From this angle, Lucky Jim expresses Amis' anger and dissatisfaction with the world around him. In doing so the study describes the events of the novel by quoting and analyzing them to encrust the combination between the apparent comedy and embedded seriousness in Lucky Jim. The general impression one gets out of this microcosm is that it is a genuine picture of the British academy in the years following the hectic years of the Second World War.

KEYWORDS : Culture, Humor, Satire, Irony, Farce and Intellect

The current study demonstrates the comic/ serious duality in Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954). In other words it reveals the apparent side of being comic and humorous and the serious side which is hidden. In the aftermath of Second World War, Britain struggled to recognize itself from the sociopolitical destruction. Writers also struggled to find an appropriate voice to speak out against the circumstances of the period. As Malcolm Bradbury rightly suggests the war

"created not only a new political, social and ideological environment, but inevitably a new intellectual and artistic environment as well".¹

Lodge believed that John Wain, John Brain, John Osborne, Kingsley Amis and many other writers appeared to take English literature into the next level reflecting the post-modernistic life after the war.² The works of these writers reflect a wider spectrum of real life especially that of common people. They present the true life of working middle class people. Their works reflect all sorts of contempt and subversion of the cultural values of upper class people.

Lucky Jim is considered as one of the funniest novel in 20th century. However, this novel goes beyond that sequence of funny actions as some people would expect. In fact, there is a dark irony embedded which reflects the real lifestyle of the British society. The study cites several actions and situations in order to reveal how Amis expresses the humor and farcical sides as well as serious implications of those actions.

As a comic book, *Lucky Jim* does not go in one direction of being only farce. Clearly, Kingsley Amis represents many significant themes through his main character. It touches almost all aspects of life that any common man may have experienced in his ordinary life. It is a book criticizing indirectly or even directly the old sophisticated English Establishment and its impact on the individual's life.

The foundation of the humor of *Lucky Jim* centers on Jim Dixon, the main character and his follies and blunders. One of the greatest skills that Amis has is the sarcastic technique he can create, not in the way of telling a joke for an empty pleasure but in more subtle way. He encrusts the true personality of Jim Dixon who reflects the absurdities of the English academia through his comedy. As Brown clarifies in her words,

"he (Jim Dixon) is no longer the cloistered scholar, or a figure in the ivory tower of academia, but is rather a deeply troubled member of a contemporary cultural landscape".³

Jim Dixon is a junior assistant history lecturer in a Redbrick Provincial University in England. He is about to finish his two year probation period to find out whether he is going to be hired or not. He comes from a working class origin which makes him in an inferior position to his arrogant boss, Ned Welch, and his son, Bertrand. Naturally, Dixon dis-

likes his boss, but he must keep respecting him because he is the one directly responsible for renewing the contract of his job.

The mistakes and unintentional blunders make the reader somehow in a distressing time, but the comedy of these mistakes adds a kind of flavor to make them more palatable and enjoyable for the reader. Jim's predicament lay in his involvement with the snobbish characters around him. For example, his relation with Margaret Peel is shown in the way that Dixon perceives it. In fact, he does not have patience to wait and see how this relationship ends for good. She transforms his simple life into a life full of anxiety and distress. The striking thing is that he does not take action although he knows that she plans for all that,

"Dixon fought hard to drive away the opinion that, both as actress and script writer, she was doing rather well". (p.76)⁴

Another character, Jim finds himself trapped with is Professor Welch. Jim expresses his anger through the inner comical thoughts and commentaries on the people around him as the following example shows,

'He pretended to himself that he'd pick up his professor round the waist, squeeze the furry grey-blue waistcoat against him to expel the breath, run heavily with him up the steps... stuffing the mouth with toilet paper'.(p. 9)

Critic Salwak finds such comical thoughts give him the power to endure the pomposity of Ned Welch and self-respect.⁵

Another funny ridiculous behavior Dixon does is his way of celebration after finishing his very boring article Merrie England. He starts moving all round the room imitating ape gestures. Under the influence of alcohol he unconsciously imitates Ned Welch using his intonation. After realizing that there is something wrong, he changes his voice just to find himself at this time imitating the Principal. As a result for this, Ned Welch fires Jim at the end of the lecture, leaving him in a very weak position of broken dreams.

The novel ends with some changes that the reader would not expect. Dixon is offered a new job by Christine's uncle, Gore Urquhart. Mr. Urquhart represents the new kind of upper class in the British culture. He does not discriminate between people just because of their social background. In fact it focuses on the individual personality,

"It's not that you have got the qualifications, for this job or any other works, but there are plenty who have. You haven't got the disqualifications, though and that's much rare".(p. 234)

Watson sees Amis as a great novelist for the way he expresses his generation's experiences.⁶

Amis' approach seems to be comic but at the same time he touches several serious themes of that particular period of 1950's in British society. Through the novel, it is evident that one of the important themes Kingsley Amis focuses on is his dissatisfaction with the British education system. He criticizes this corrupt system by representing the character of Professor Ned Welch.

Another serious theme that Amis focuses on is the class hierarchy. Amis through the character of Jim Dixon expresses dissatisfaction and frustration against the social and cultural changes. Dixon is the representative of the lower class background who has been baffled by the upper class members such as Ned Welch. However, one needs to mention the solution that Amis introduces to his readers. This solution briefly lies in the character, Gore Urquhart who is considered as a mixture of the pleasurable life of the upper class position and the simplicity and honesty of the lower class people.

Love and its diversification is also one more important theme highlighted by Amis. Jim's first relationship starts with a young female lecturer, Margaret Peel, at beginning he seems to like her but later on she seems to be crazy on him. She even tries to commit suicide just to convince him about how much she loves him. At the same time, he meets Christine Callaghan, the blond beautiful lady whom Dixon dreams about all his life. Finally, he wins the heart of Christine after she learns that her boyfriend is planning to marry someone else.

Jim's life is divided into two parts. The first one reveals how much this man is besieged by the mistakes he commits all the time unintentionally. The second part reveals the sharp turn which suddenly occurs to him at the end of the novel. Stevenson reports,

"Lucky Jim was nevertheless influential, especially in suggesting the usefulness of campus fiction for social observation".⁷

Conclusion

Lucky Jim is a social and moral criticism of the practices of certain classes (the upper- middle class) in segregating people from lower class. In its funny and sarcastic tune, Lucky Jim highlights the great extent of hypocrisy, condescension and double-dealing. The seriousness is represented in a very comic way which is a sign that Amis employs the comedy for its classical Aristotelian purposes i.e. the combination of seriousness and entertainment in a very remarkable way.

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