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**The Mystery in the Eye of the Beholder: An Analysis of the Gaze and Power  
in Martin Amis' *London Fields* and *Night Train***

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**Abstract**

Amis's novels dating the 80s and 90s and portraying mostly the lives of the modern English, more specifically the Londoner, are provocative for the way they represent women. They are sometimes classified as the "ladlit" or at times dismissed all together out of the canon because they confine women mostly in patriarchal cliché female figures, or silence them to an extent that would discard the very existence of women in these texts. Among these ladlits, *London Fields* strikes the reader at first glance as the ladlit par excellence; yet, the protagonist in the novel is an extraordinary woman, Nicola Six, and her representation in the novel is exceptional in Amis's oeuvre. When this novel is read in relation to another woman-starring Amisian novel, *Night Train* (1997) which features a hardboiled female detective, the result would be thought-provoking for gender studies across Amis's works. Therefore, in what follows, the way Amis portrays Nicola Six is studied together with another fictional female figure, Mike Hoolihan of the novel *Night Train*, and the focus of the study is limited to the analysis of the characterization of the protagonists in relation to the concepts of "seeing" and "being seen" together with such mediums of power and the ideology as "the authority" "the author," and "the reality."

**Keywords:** Gaze, gender, masculinity, femininity, author, ideology.

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## Introduction

Amis's career begins with his novel *Rachel Papers* (1973), yet his debut work is *Money* (1984) which, for many, has also been the most sexist of all so far, and *London Fields*<sup>2</sup> (1989), the novel published immediately after *Money*, shares a lot with its antecedent, particularly in terms of the narrative, literary, and discursive links between the two. These novels are also considered to be reflecting the state-of-England, and Lea (2005) classifies them "within the conventions of nineteenth-century realism," a legacy of such novels as *Sybil* (1845), by Benjamin Disraeli, and *North and South*, by Elizabeth Gaskell (1970) (p. 70). This is particularly because of the display of different classes and contemporary political and social concerns mostly in a realistic fashion with graphic descriptions and details; and among these concerns, there definitely is a debate about how women are portrayed, looked upon, or acted upon by male characters, narrators, and authors.

*LF* is, indeed, notorious, and provocative in the way it represents women, gender, masculinities, and femininities in a state-of-England novel, and particularly Amis's 1998 novella, *Night Train*<sup>3</sup> is considered to have a lineage to the previous novel, mostly because of the representation of women in these novels in an unusual way when situated in Amis's oeuvre. Gavin Keulks, for instance, links Nicola Six of *LF* to Jennifer Rockwell of *NT* noting "both are fatalist femme fatales, suicidal earth-figures, swamped by astrophysics", and they are both named as "*murderees*", who "separately orchestrate their deaths, asserting willpower over fate" (2006, pp. 161-162). In addition to Keulks's parallel, the representations of the female protagonists in these novels reflect similar concerns related to women's status in society. In what follows, the way these figures are portrayed is scrutinized in order to expose how they reflect masculinities and femininities in relation to the male gaze and how the female gaze complicates, transgresses, and reverses the male gaze while attempting to thwart the traditional reliable authoritarian roles of the narrator(s), of the author(s), and certainly as a result, of the patriarchy and the patriarchal ideology.

Several eminent critics shun sexism in Amis's novels. Elaine Showalter classifies his *Money* as the "apotheosis of the Ladlit genre", which became popular in the 80s and mostly focused on the male experience (2002, p. 69); Maggie Gee and Helen McNeil reject to shortlist *LF* for *The Booker Prize*, reasoning the existence of an extreme sexist portrayal of women in the novel from which, Gee and McNeil claim, the author does not detach himself enough (Brook, 2006, 88); Sara Mills (2002), carrying out a stylistic analysis on the novel, observes Amis's women in *LF* to be mere "sexual objects acted upon by male agents" (p. 206). Amis is a provocative author for sure, and he causes controversies among readers and critics because of the subjects and themes he covers in his works and how he handles these or where he stands before all these. He is not only criticized due to the sexually graphic details often diminishing women into pornographic images but also considered as a racist or anti-Islamic or anti-Semitic figure at times. Terry Eagleton in the "Introduction to the 2007 Edition" of the book *Ideology: An Introduction*, writes, "Amis's father Kingsley, after all was a racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals, and Amis *films* has clearly learnt more from him than how to turn a shapely phrase" (2007, p. x) This harsh criticism was directed at the Amises after Martin Amis allegedly accused all Muslims of being responsible for the Islamic terror, and thus they all need to be punished. Eagleton sarcastically notes these suggestions of "Amis *films*," are for "humiliating and insulting certain kinds of men and women at random, so that they will return home and teach their children to be nice to the White Man" (2007, p. xi). Notwithstanding the fact that most

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<sup>2</sup> hereafter referred as *LF*

<sup>3</sup> hereafter referred as *NT*

of Martin Amis's novels and short stories, including *LF* and *NT* might be disregarded as simply racist or misogynist when one considers the horrible representations of women and "the other" in them, it is also another undeniable fact that these non-pleasing representations are remarkable explorations of certain grave matters or ills of modern communities. Hence, what is unfair for *LF* and *NT* would be, indeed, to discard them as purely sexist and racist texts.

Accordingly, in various articles and papers, Amis has been praised for his skilful exposition of the ailing parts of modern societies. Philip Tew, for instance, negates the claim about Amis's sexism in *LF* and *Money*, claiming that it is in fact in Amis's intention in these novels to create 'lifeless' characters "to destabilize gender identity by revealing it as both fictional and stable" (2006, p. 89). In a similar vein, Cristina Ionica comments, "Amis's fiction evinces his commitment to subject masculinism and its various subdivisions (misogyny, heteronormativity, and racism) to haunting scrutiny in order to foreground the toxicity at their core and galvanize powerful reader responses" with these lifeless figures (2018, p. 67). In addition, as Parker notes, Amis denies intensely the allegations about his being a misogynist and racist author in numerous interviews (2006, p. 56). Moreover, in *The War Against Cliche: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000*, Amis confessionally remarks, "sexism is like racism: we all feel such impulses. Our parents feel them more strongly than we feel them. Our children, we hope, will feel them less strongly than we feel them" (2001, p. 9). As an author who is aware of and on alert against sexism or racism, as Tew and Ionica claim, Amis intentionally problematizes masculinity, femininity, sex, gender, sexuality, pornography, and voyeurism in his novels. This is because, as Finney (2008) also notes, Amis reacts and refutes the patriarchal ideology in the age of wild capitalism which presents women in films or literature as simple objects, spectacles giving pleasure through looking (p. 11, pp. 139-140). Drawing attention explicitly to certain problematic issues like the representation of the image of woman pornographically in art or literature as Gwozdz (2018, p. 286) and Finney point at (2008, p. 140), Amis, indeed, makes a stimulating critique of the relationship between women and the voyeuristic implications of art and literature.

Nevertheless, in *LF* and *NT* how men see or look at women and how women are seen or looked at and how they see or look at men or women are significant points to explore since the portrayal of these concepts in the novel problematizes certain strongholds of the power mechanism of the patriarchal ideology. In other words, these novels exemplify an interrogation of the male gaze, or "to-be-looked-at-ness" and of the female gaze, or the female experience of the power of "looking back" as well as of the concepts of "acting" or "being acted upon," "narrating" or "being narrated" and "writing" or "being written on." Therefore, what follows is an analysis of the abovementioned concepts in Amis's portrayal of the female protagonists Nicola and Mike in texts *LF* and *NT* mainly within the context of the studies of John Berger and his pioneering work *Ways of Seeing* (1972) which first draws attention to an omnipresent male perspective in all forms of art and then to the design of these works of art in characteristic ways to please the male viewer; and of Laura Mulvey whose ground-breaking article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" initiates the studies focusing on the scopophilic concerns in films and visual arts.

### **Nicola Six in *London Fields*: A Modern Femme Fatale?**

'Nicola, I'm worried about you, as usual. And in a peculiar way, as usual. I'm worried they're going to say you're a male fantasy figure.'

'I *am* a male fantasy figure. I've been one for fifteen years. It really takes it out of a girl.'

'But they don't know that.'

'I'm sorry, I just *am*.' (Amis, 1989, p. 260)

The epigraph above is a significant moment in Amis's novel, *LF* because it is the epitome of the problematization of the legitimacy of the author and the reliability of the narrator all throughout the text. The white male American narrator, Samson Young announces his worries about his protagonist, Nicola Six. At first glance, her portrayal appears to be the projection of a woman in the most despicable form portrayed by an exceedingly misogynist author. However, as one of the rare round characters in an Amis novel, Nicola Six, appearing as a character generated just as a "sight" confined to an "exhibitionist" role, turns out to be a deconstructive mine planted in the essence of the conventional narrative structure and the misogynist narrative tone at the forefront. At one point in the novel, she draws attention to her devouring nature addressing herself as a "black hole" whose "very nature prevented anyone from knowing what it was: unapproachable, illuminable," yet "Nothing is fast enough to escape from" (Amis, 1989, p. 67). Despite the masquerade of extreme femininity emphasized and pushed onto the face of the reader in the novel, she is a destructive black hole that also cannot be known or illuminated. The male narrator concentrates mostly on her physicality, forcing the details about her body to the front, and how she is seen, how other characters see her and how she sees others are highlighted repetitively. When she goes in from the doors of the "Black Cross" where other major male characters hang out often, she feels "the place skip a beat as the door closed behind her" and it is revealed immediately after that it would be a bad day (and that day would never come) when she entered a men's room, a teeming toilet such as this and turned no heads, caused no groans or whispers" (Amis, 1989, p. 22). Her physical presence at somewhere is reported to have been fixing all the gaze on her, and she is very much aware of her enchanting effect since it is also revealed in the novel that "[o]n important days she always felt herself to be the object of scrutiny, lewd and furious scrutiny" (Amis, 1989, p. 18). Such awareness is significant to identify because, as it is also seen in the epigraph of this section, she deliberately poses as "a male fantasy figure" and she knows how "lewdly" and "furiously" she is under the scrutiny of the male gaze (Amis, 1989, p. 18). Indeed, the protagonist of the novel is Nicola Six, but the emphasis of the narrative focus is on her body extensively, and the novel as a whole, is, on one hand, a phantasmagoria of the female body, and on the other, a negation of these images at another level; and the focalizer of the narrative is a male agent, Samson Young.

Laura Mulvey in her inspirational article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" draws a remarkable outline of the male gaze and voyeurism in the mainstream Hollywood cinema. She notes,

pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle. (1989, p. 19)

Mulvey mentions two aspects of this erotic spectacle and claims the existence of two different forms of visual pleasure men get through looking at women and objectifying them. The first of these, "the scopophilic," is done through fashioning women as a spectacle in the narrative to enable a voyeuristic experience for the viewers, whether male or female, and letting these viewers enjoy the objectified female body, or the feminine and perhaps erotic "scope." The second, "the narcissistic" pleasure takes place through the identification of the viewers with the male actors subjugating women. Mulvey simply identifies these two forms of visual pleasures noting "the first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen" (Mulvey,

1989, p. 18). In these two cases, women are the objectified other, not the subject and not the agency of these scopophilic and narcissistic actions; hence the language of the mainstream Hollywood cinema is discriminatory, phallogentric, and sexist. Mulvey's arguments could be extended to Amis's novel *LF* since the narrative portrays the struggle of a woman against the male gaze and agents acting or writing upon her.

The language of the narrator in *LF*, Samson Young is wildly sexist and his descriptions of her are mostly eroticized. In "Chapter 2: The Murdereee" allocated for the protagonist, Nicola, what the reader gets out of the whole narrative is the fact that Nicola is kind of a femme fatale. In fact, as it is seen in the epigraph cited at the beginning of this section, Samson craves to see Nicola as a femme fatale. Several specific descriptions about her body, her skin, height, skin colour and hair, her clothes including even the colour and type of her underwear, her virginity and hymen, even her post-coitus mental and physical state are all given in the second chapter making it very clear that the gaze on her is phallogentric and male, concentrating on her female body and sexuality. Yet, it is also repeatedly underlined in this chapter that she is aware of this "lewd," "furious," "unfriendly" gaze, or in Amis's words "eyes playing on her back" (Amis, 1989, pp. 18-19). With these two diverse narrative tones in the novel, one seeing Nicola as an erotic image of pleasure and another exposing the spooky gaze around her, the novel, in fact problematizes the male gaze prevalent in a fictional narrative. As Mulvey draws attention, the focalizer, or the eye, that sees or reports events happening in the narrative of a film, in other words, a work of fiction, could well be phallogentric, objectifying, fragmenting, and eroticizing the image of women. This is what happens in *LF*, yet with another undercurrent, this eye, viz. the male gaze, on Nicola is revealed, even to an extent that would ridicule and weaken its power. For instance, at different parts of the novel, three times, there is a reference to an imaginary "personal cinematographer" for Nicola (Amis, 1989, pp. 66, 69, 195). In one of these, narrator Samson remarks, "when Nicola walked the streets she was lit by her personal cinematographer," which is mockingly described as "nothing too arty either, a single spotlight trained from gods," and because of this spotlight, "[a]ny eyes that were available on the dead-end-street would find their way to her: builders in the gutted houses, a frazzled rep in a cheap car, a man alone at home pressing his face against the window pane with a snarl" (Amis, 1989, p. 69).

It is an undeniable fact that in literature, it has long been a tradition to arrange, fashion and present the works of art from the perspective of the male. John Berger (1972) observes that the arrangement of the subject in art began with the Renaissance, when for the first-time, "the perspective" consciousness appeared, and this perspective or the look, for Berger, is always from a male point of view (p. 16). The same phallogentric perspective has always been an issue in forms of literature, but it would be optimistic to claim that it dates back to any time around the Renaissance. In fact, men either in fiction or in real world, as clearly stated in *LF* through Samson as the mouthpiece of Amis himself, "wanted the female form shaped and framed, packaged and gift-wrapped, stylized, cartoonified, and looking, for a moment at least, illusorily pure" (Amis, 1989, p. 71). This is a strong "in-your-face" criticism of the scopophilic pleasure that the man seeks whenever he is in the viewer position against that of the woman as the viewed. The exposition of this fact in its wildest and most disturbing form in *LF* is later supported with several other examples to further problematize man's conventional position as the active "onlooker" as well as women's as passive and observed, a sight, a simple flat character with a stereotypical role, and present there in the text accomplishing a single mission, that is, "to-be-looked-at-ness."

Introduced in the novel as Nicola's assumed murderer and a cheat, and unlike his surname, a loser who has never been talented or good at anything useful except darts, Keith Talent sees all women

around him as eroticized bodies. He is addicted to watching pornography very much like John Self in Amis's *Money*. As Tew observes, he has no sense of what is fiction or what is real (2006, p. 94), and "[h]is libido would be all tabloid and factoid" because his education is solely based on the media, particularly the TV (Amis, 1989, p. 202). Keith with his TV-nurtured subconscious, or "modern reptile" as labelled in the novel (Amis, 1989, p. 192), is therefore reported to see Nicola as an object of eroticism, a mere body "in thigh-high pink boots, rayon mini skirt and bursting blouse" (Amis, 1989, p. 71). Keith's dressing that he saw fit for Nicola, is to imagine her in a form that would display her in the most erotic form since he cannot think of a woman in another role or form because the TV is narrated to have "burnt him, nuked him, its cathodes crackling like cancer" (Amis, 1989, p. 55), and the roles she saw fit for women are limited to what the TV has presented him in films or TV shows. Keith's particular interest is to close-up on the female body in these films, freezing the screen at a point of interest, and playing forward or backward, sometimes in slow motion, "chopping up the female body twenty times a night" (Amis, 1989, p. 165). He is used to see the female body in fragments like everyday objects he needs, like a commodity he consumes daily. However, Nicola Six, with whom Keith gets into a conflict is not a passive figure that can be acted upon as it is recurrently reported in the novel that Nicola has always been "dressed for death" not either to kill or die, but both to kill and die (Amis, 1989, p. 21), thus, not a traditional "femme fatale" but something darker, more melancholic and morbid, like a "black hole" as she thinks of herself; something that devours all yet does not reveal its precise identity denying any attempts of subjugation or depowering.

At this point, one might argue that this imaginary dressing of Nicola by Keith is a speculative one produced by the narrator, Samson Young since he imagines Keith doing that, but all throughout the novel, there are numerous examples supporting the fact that Keith is a man who sees all women around her as sexual objects, and in Laura Mulvey's diagnostic term, he takes "narcissistic" pleasure in watching pornography in which women are much or less dressed in the same way to suggest sexuality. Gamman and Marshment (1989) remarks "in film, on television, in the press and in most popular narratives men are shown to be in control of the gaze, women are controlled by it. Men act; women are acted upon. This is patriarchy" (p. 1). Keith Talent is the weakest and the poorest character in the novel, and through the power transferred to him from the active strong men on TV, he narcissistically enjoys being in control and empowered. He loves seeing women acted upon on TV, and men as screen surrogates of himself. Aware of Keith's weakness, Nicola concocts voyeuristic and narcissistic experiences for Keith throughout the narrative and lets him watch her making love to men through a TV screen she personally establishes with a camera she places in her room.

This concocted *mise-en-scène* adds a significant layer in the narrative of the novel problematizing the structure of the male gaze because it exposes the male-oriented, "ladlit" narration in the novel and voyeurism suggested by this narrative. This *mise-en-scène* turns into a *mise-en-abyme* revealing the biased nature of the narrative because in a text that is presumably produced by an author, Samson Young, who sees women as mere objects of pleasure, Nicola makes this narrator face his product with her metafictional comments added. Therefore, the hyper-reality sketched by Nicola is enclosed in Samson's illusory narrative, published by the assumed author Mark Asprey, and presented to the reader by the actual author Martin Amis. Critical of the way she is portrayed in Samson's writing, Nicola not only draws attention to the voyeuristic male mindset defiled by the pornographic industry, which Amis also has pointed out in multiple articles he has written for the *New Statesman* under the pseudonym, "Bruno Holbrook" (Finney, 2008, pp. 11, 139-140), but also, through Samson's narration, she exposes the artificiality of the focalizer in the novel and underscores him to be phallogentric, and thus she demonstrates how the perspective in the novel is utilized to objectify the female body to present "a look" at women through the filter of the male gaze. Behind this argument, of course, lay

the claims of unreliability about the narrator of *LF*, which is acknowledged by even Samson himself, who stops for a moment and asks, “[b]oy am I a reliable narrator?” (Amis, 1989, p. 162), questioning his narrative capabilities when he is at the peak of his misogyny in portraying Nicola. In fact, the unreliability of the author as well as the claim that not Samson, but Nicola is the writer of the book are some of the arguments suggested by numerous critics about *LF* (Bentley, 2015, p. 56; Almonte, 2001, p. 142-143; Tew, 2006, p. 87-88, 91; Ionica, 2018, p. 72; Finney, 1995, p. 9). With his unreliable and mostly male and phallogocentric narrators, Amis purports to expose the very nature of this active phallogocentric power in fiction, because in Amis’s several novels, there are “nonempathic-to-sadistic male characters who inflict emotional, physical, and/or sexual violence and abuse on victims they laboriously depict as nauseatingly inferior, outrageously guilty, hopelessly masochistic, or a combination thereof” (Ionica 2018, p. 69). However, as is the case in *LF*, the narrator has an assumed authority, and at one point, he confesses that his narrative did not work. Samson’s narration, together with other phallogocentric narrators in Amis’s novels are inventions of the ideology, and, as Ionica claims, Amis “both debunks them and emphasizes their toxicity” with his “pose and expose” scenario (2018, p. 70).

Moreover, including an author, Mark Asprey, with initials, M. A. alluding to Martin Amis; informing the reader at the end of the novel that this novel has been published by M. A. based on the notes of the narrator Samson Young who committed suicide; portraying each major character in the novel as writing something; towards the very end of the novel, adding a confession of the narrator who refers to Nicola, stating that “she outwrote me. Her story worked. And mine didn’t” (Amis, 1989, p. 466); and weaving numerous inconsistencies in Samson’s narration, causing a notable unreliability in his narration problematize the notion of writing and authorship in this novel. Particularly, Nicola as the character, “outwriting” the assumed narrator in the novel is very significant, since her story is validated and legitimized at the end, whereas Samson’s is discredited, exposing its toxic, ill-worded, phallogocentric nature. She is both the protagonist and the author in her story. “Herstory” exposes and problematizes the voyeurism, the male gaze.

Laura Mulvey refers in an article to the artist, Cindy Sherman’s, *Untitled Film Stills*, a collection of self-portraits captured in a *mise-en-scène* showing Sherman as if she were in a film scene. In this article, Mulvey observes Sherman’s portraits as alluding to and parodying feminine appearance of femininity, particularly in films in 50s. She notes “the accoutrements of the feminine struggle to conform to a facade of desirability haunt Sherman’s iconography. Make-up, high heels, hair, clothes are all carefully ‘put on’ and ‘done’. Sherman-the-model dresses up into character, while Sherman-the-artist reveals her character’s masquerade” (Mulvey, 1991, p. 141). In parallel to Sherman’s “phantasmagoria” in her self-portrait collection, Nicola in *LF* concocts a *mise-en-abyme* or a “phantasmagoria” reflecting “the feminine struggle to conform to a facade of desirability.” The narrator, Samson, in Amis’s novel portrays Nicola observing “always the simulacrum, never the real thing. That’s art” (Amis, 1989, p. 131). Because there is a hyperreality clearly pointed out with her “phantasmagoria of self-portraits,” her hoaxed poses, in other words, “the simulacrum” cannot be considered since, just because she is just taking advantage of men around him to get what she needs; moreover, she made clear at the beginning of the novel that she does not need anything for this life since she knows she will die soon. Posing a different male fantasy illusion for each of the major male characters in the novel, Nicola not only “highlights the author-ity question” in *LF*, as Almonte observed (2001, p. 143), but also exposes the male gaze on women. At times she poses as the chaste and virginal Madonna figure for the male gaze, and at other instances, as a sexually promiscuous pornographic figure, and this is possibly a move to subvert the Madonna-whore dichotomy in the patriarchal discourse. Moreover, as “Nicola mockingly inhabits” these stereotypes in her character (Almonte, 2001, p. 143), Amis, the author of

the book, makes another significant move by portraying these major male characters as representatives of different social groups to situate the toxicities within a larger social group (Finney, 2008, p. 52; Bentley, 2015, p. 60).

The major male characters in *LF*, Keith Talent, Guy Clinch, and Samson Young, not only reflect a distinct masculinity and a different form of the male gaze on women “hyper-realistically” and “hilariously,” but they also represent different classes in the society (Tew, 2006, p. 89). Keith Talent representing a lower working class wants to see Nicola as an eroticized figure like the ones he watches on TV because masculinity for him is boasting about his sexual affairs in the bar while Guy Clinch, representing a higher class living in a mansion-like house yet with no love and passion in it, desires to imagine Nicola as a virgin whom he will gentlemanly protect and serve in return for the passion and love he has long ago lost; and Samson Young, representing the intelligentsia and being the assumed author aspiring to be like the successful womanizer author, Mark Asprey, whose house is, for a short time, lent to him, craves to see Nicola as a murderess, a “femme fatale,” and as also suggested by Tew (2006, p. 91), an interesting piece of writing that would provide the context needed for his book. However, all these “wishful male gazes” come to be illusory and false by the end of the novel, and all the characters are, as Almonte also observes, disappointed, and their lives are never to be the same having lost too much because of Nicola’s manipulations (2001, p. 153-154); yet among these losses, Samson’s is the greatest because not only does he find himself to be the actual murderer of the story, but also, he pays the ultimate price by committing suicide at the end. Tew (2006) claims that all major characters are outperformed by Nicola, and “Nicola’s destructive female form paradoxically deflect the phallic thrust of pen, the penis, the dart,” respectively referring to Samson, Guy, and Keith (p. 96). All three characters fail at the end, and none may be seen as a positive role model suggesting normative masculinity. At this point, it might be well concluded that, the novel is a “hyperrealistic satire,” as Gwozdz (2018, p. 295) names, because Amis satirizes “the grotesque shortcomings” of modern masculinities, and the mechanism of the male gaze inherent in them, an ideological apparatus that desires to identify and control women. After all, Nicola in *LF* stands out in Amis’s oeuvre as a “merciless” woman who is “exposing human weakness, and adept at creating scenes of comic misery” (Diedrick, 1995, pp. 161-162); therefore, contrary to traditional representations of the woman who as Mulvey (1989) observes “stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (p. 15), Nicola in *LF*, perhaps on the path paved by Luce Irigaray (1985), “assume[s] the feminine role deliberately” with “an effect of playful repetition” to thwart subordination of women and the male hegemony (76).

Finally, the representation of women as not having agency on the things happening around is challenged in *LF* with the portrayal of Nicola who “looks back” distressing men in their safe zone, the centre of the patriarchal power structure. Nicola does not refrain herself from looking back or staring at men to an extent that would disturb them. All three male characters become the object of Nicola’s engaging gaze. Noticing early in the novel how Nicola was “not hiding but staring” at him, Samson remarks “[h]er stare contained – only clarity, great clarity” (Amis, 1989, p. 26) and “[n]o one had looked at me that way for quite a time; and I was moved” (Amis, 1989, p. 63). Although he is the narrator himself, Samson acknowledges that he is the one moved by Nicola’s gaze, and in other words, he becomes the one who is acted upon. Similar moments with other major male figures are seen in the novel, as well. Under her “inspections,” Keith is diminished to an unpleasant visual “stripped of all charisma from pub and street,” and he is fragmented with Nicola’s gaze and his body is objectified with Nicola’s close-ups at his clothes, his posture, his “scrawny shanks and backside,” “his unpleasant body



scent," and "the drunken scoop of his gaze" (Amis, 1989, p. 72). Furthermore, the third male figure introduced in the novel as "the foil," Guy Clinch is reported to be unable to meet her eyes while talking with her, and he feels a need to "half-hood his eyes" to avoid "her looming gaze" (Amis, 1989, p. 251-252). He exemplifies how much he is distressed by Nicola's forceful looks, and he is not happy and willing to imagine himself as objectified and as being looked upon, and similar men-only concerns are abundant in Amis's novel *NT*, as well.

### **Mike Hoolihan in *Night Train*, the reincarnation of Medusa as a hardboiled detective**

*NT* is another unusual Amis novel that features a female protagonist and concentrates on concepts of seeing and being seen, and the female body. The novel is about the mysterious death of a woman whose body is found dead, described with graphic and terrifying details, blood, and gore all around her body which is "glazed naked on the chair, her mouth open, her eyes still moist, wearing an expression of childish surprise" (Amis, 1998, p. 10). She was shot in the head, bullets going in through the mouth and possibly blasting her skull open. Detective in charge, Mike Hoolihan notes on seeing the body of the victim,

I've seen bodies, dead bodies, in tiled morgues, in cell-blocks, in district lockups, in trunks of cars, in project stairwells, in loading-dock doorways, in tractor-trailer turnarounds, in torched rowhouses, in corner carry-outs, in cross alleys, in crawlspaces, and I've never seen one that sat with me like the body of Jennifer Rockwell, propped there naked after the act of love and life, saying even this, all this, I leave behind. (Amis, 1998, p. 146)

With the first-person narration of the detective and her individual pursuit of the criminal *NF* harks back to the "hard-boiled" detective novels in the American fiction, on one hand; and on the other, the crime scene confined to an apartment room, to the "locked-room mysteries." Although Amis says there would be no place for "a positive female role model" in his fiction (Finney, 2008, p. 141), the major female characters in the novel, Mike Hoolihan and Jennifer Rockwell, are not caricaturized, grotesque, or passivized figures unlike Amis's many other characters, and they are not negative female role models. Natasha Walter (1997, para. 7) underlines this fact saying, "for the first time he has created heroines who are defined not by their underwear and the size of their breasts, but by their work and relationships and human disappointments."

In *NT*, there is an explicit problematization of the male gaze because Mike dissatisfies the phallogentric structure of the male gaze falsifying traditional "exhibitionist role" of women, which, Laura Mulvey believes, is seen in any form of the male gaze (1989, p. 14). Mike's voice, attitude, and behaviour questions the very meaning of gender. She is portrayed as a "forty-four-year-old police with coarse blonde hair, bruiser's tits and broad shoulders, and pale blue eyes in her head that have seen everything" (Amis, 1998, p. 43). The way she looks, Mike remarks, is "now associated with highly politicized feminists" and she has a voice "deepened by three decades of nicotine abuse" and features she says she has inherited from her father (Amis, 1998, p. 2). She promises no voyeuristic or narcissistic pleasure as a fictional character contrary to what Nicola Six of *LF* offers. In addition, Amis often creates his characters in "doubles" in his novels (Finney, 2008, p. 61), and as opposed to Mike's "unfeminine" body, he presents Jennifer's body which is in several instances suggested as the alternative and opposite of Mike's. Contrary to Mike's colossal and unappealing body and masculinized voice and name, Jennifer's body, is seen solely naked, throughout the novel either in the crime scene or in the autopsy room, and she is, or in fact her body, referred as "beautiful" (Amis, 1998, p. 10), "pornographic," "tasteful," "well-developed and well-nourished" (Amis, 1998, p. 24). In several other moments, Mike compares her body to that of Jennifer's, and at one point, she says she is going to change her name "to something more feminine" (Amis, 1998, p. 105). This occurs exactly at a time

when she feels the extreme pressure and obsession of the patriarchal ideology at the highest level leading her to become dissatisfied with her own body. The contrast between these fictional characters, particularly regarding the representation of the female body, exposes the overwhelming impacts of the male gaze on women in patriarchy. One is seen as quite feminized, yet the other is highly masculinized, but in both cases, they are seen as an object of spectacle, “a sight” that is looked upon, objectified, sexualized, and even literally devoured at the end since one is dead, and the other is contemplating suicide. These are obvious results of the male gaze that diminishes women into simply a physical being, a body, which parallels the patriarchal gender dichotomy in which women are associated with the body, whereas men are associated with the mind. However, this dichotomy is also intentionally questioned in *NT*, and it is repeatedly underlined in the novel that Mike is often taken for a man, because of her body, and she is extremely uncomfortable with her association either to femininity or masculinity. Keulks (2003, p. 248; 2006, pp. 162-163) considers Mike as androgynous pointing at the opening lines of the novel which read as follows,

I am a police. That may sound like an unusual statement—or an unusual construction. But it’s a parlance we have. Among ourselves, we would never say I am a policeman or I am a policewoman or I am a police officer. We would just say I am a police. I am a police. I am a police and my name is Detective Mike Hoolihan. And I am a woman, also. (Amis, 1998, p. 1)

Mike’s initial insistence on her title as “the police” together with an emphasis on her gender and untraditional name signify her effort to present herself as a figure who cannot or should not be categorized based on her name, gender, or profession. Similar efforts are scattered all throughout the narrative, and she does not hide her discomfort when she feels classified or categorized based on how she looks or sounds. All these discomforts are addressed by a man exposing the way they gaze or desire to see bodies in a dichotomous gender and sex binary. Mike’s problem could be situated in Mulvey’s arguments about the male gaze and women’s role in it, which is “to-be-looked-at-ness” (1989, p. 19). The frequent emphasis in the narrative on Mike not as a sight for the male gaze and her immediate denial of such an “exhibitionist role” expressing her discomforts clearly work to thwart the strength of the male gaze that categorizes women as mere spectacles. The recurrent insistence of men to categorize Mike in a phallogentric discourse is an apparatus of the patriarchal ideology which persistently propagates the fact that, as John Berger points out: “[t]o be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men” leading to an “ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space” (1972, p. 46). As Berger also notices, this causes “woman’s self being split into two,” one is the hidden but genuine image of herself and the other for the patriarchy that will grant her legitimacy (1972, p. 46). Therefore, women should always survey, check, and arrange themselves to fit the generic forms within category of the feminine. Berger notes, “[a] woman must continually watch herself. [...] Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually” (1972, p. 46). This patriarchal teaching is simply what Mike Hoolihan of *NT* does not conform and surrender to, undoing the power structure of the phallogentric male gaze similar to what Nicola Six does in *LF* by “outwriting” the narrator and “outplotting” the schemes of patriarchal ideology and the mechanism of the male gaze.

Moreover, the detective, Mike is also a challenge to the traditional victimization of women in conventional forms since she knowingly, and enjoyingly, exemplifies a disempower of the male gaze in traditional narratives. In a similar fashion to what Mulvey suggests, the possibility of a new stream of films that would not portray women as passive sexual objects acted upon in order to prevent the

workings of the male gaze (1989, p. 25), Mike, as portrayed in a work of fiction, is the projection of an affirmative character that would thwart the male gaze passivizing women into objects in the eye of the beholder. She has the agency to look upon and power to petrify the male gaze like the look of the mythical Medusa. For instance, at one point, she notes,

When I badge my way from door to door like this, and the women see me coming up the path—I don't know what they think. There I am in my parka, my black jeans. They think I'm a diesel. Or a truck driver from the Soviet Union. But the men know at once what I am. Because I give them the eyeball— absolutely direct. As a patrol cop, on the street, that's the first thing you have to train yourself to do: Stare at men. In the eyes. And then when I was plainclothes, and undercover, I had to train myself out of it, all over again. Because no other kind of woman on earth, not a movie star, not a brain surgeon, not a head of state, will stare at a man the way a police stares. (Amis, 1998, p. 35)

The difference between how women and men regard how she “looks at” is pointed out in the lines above, and her gaze, though not causing any “confined space” (Berger, 1972, p. 46) for women, establishes a strong power structure on men. It is for sure that this is particularly because of Mike being a detective and part of a powerful authority, a repressive state apparatus, that is the law enforcement, yet she also underscores, in the lines above, without her uniform, she continues to have that strong gaze on men, having trained herself.

In addition, the way Mike look at men or women around her changes only when she reveals she feels a sexual appeal or repulsion for these men, and her narration and perspective throughout the novel, generally not focusing on the body, changes its viewpoint only in these moments. Normally, no man in the novel is described with close-ups on their body amplifying their appeal. Only after Mike informs the reader that she has a crush on Trader, she notices her bodily characteristics. She observes, “Trader's body was always slow-moving. This night his face, too, seemed to bear the shadow of ponderousness [...] one of those guys given good looks for no good reason [...] the light of intelligence would return to the brown softness of his eyes” (Amis, 1998, p. 112). The emphasis on Trader's body and face was absent in Mike's first-time encounter with the same person who was mostly described as rain-soaked, wet, and dripping at that moment. Similarly, when Mike feels dislike for the autopsy guy, Paulie No, who reveals his interest in Mike, her perspective changes on to his body, and the reader gets a close-up to his ugly features. In both examples, it is suggested that when the gaze is charged with sexual connotations, its perspective on others changes, and with close-ups, there is more emphasis on the body, either female or male.

Keulks, claims Mike “neither carries her feminism on her back nor wears it upon her sleeve. She renounces polarizing rhetoric” and “*Night Train's* feminism is consciously latent rather than overt” (2003, p. 247), yet with the awareness of the strength in looking as seen in the extract above, she knows she has the power to disrupt the phallogentric structure in looking and the male gaze and she also knows this causes a disturbance in men, echoing Mulvey's argument that highlights the male reluctance to consider themselves as the object of the gaze (1989, p. 20). This argument is incarnated in *NT*, when a man is under custody in the police station being watched by a woman through the mesh window from which the male gaze is literally blocked. Mike, as the woman looking through this one-way window enjoys being the agent acting upon, and she remarks pejoratively, “all he sees is a scratched and filmy mirror” yet “what I see is a guy of around thirty-five in a tweed jacket with leather patches sewn on to his elbows” (Amis, 1998, p. 45). Unlike what Keulks claims above, this example is a hint for the presence of a “polarizing rhetoric” in *NT*. Mike, later goes on to observe the man under custody, at that same moment noting,

Left alone in an interrogation room, some men will look as though they're well into their last ten seconds before throwing up. And they'll look that way for hours. They sweat like they just climbed out of the swimming pool. They eat and swallow air. I mean these guys are really going through it. You come in and tip a light in their face. And they're bug-eyed—the orbs both big and red, and faceted also. Little raised soft-cornered squares, wired with rust. (Amis, 1998, p. 45)

It might be thus seen that there is a clear line drawn between the male gaze and the female one when we read it focusing on the power in the eye of the beholder. When, for instance, Mike goes in to interrogate Trader, she says, “[h]e looks at me, my own flesh, my eyes,” speculating on how he would judge her gender attributes and femininity and how all women would want to bear a baby except her, Mike Hoolihan, the woman with a man's name and body (Amis, 1998, p. 46). Mike is portrayed as already polarized and she is also aware of the fact that through the male gaze, the patriarchy objectifies, fragments, defines, and classifies women; thus, she must, and does definitely wear her feminism upon her sleeve against a wildly phallogocentric world she lives in.

A similar reaction to the teachings of the ideology comes from the next important woman figure in the novel, Jennifer Rockwell, the victim. Against the conventional silence of the victim, and the expected passivity of the victimized woman, Jennifer Rockwell is given as the driving force for the flow of the narrative, in a way “outplotting” the narrator as does Nicola Six in *LF*. She is the one manipulating the investigations of her death, with her false clues, blinds, red herrings that mislead the narrator, and which, as a result, brings the conventional reliability and authority of the narrator into questioning. Up to a point in the novel, there is a suggestion of a probability that Jennifer Rockwell was murdered, possibly by her boyfriend, Trader Faulkner, by her boss, Bax Denziger, or her one-night-stand, possibly blind-date, Arn Debs. This is because of Rockwell's antemortem efforts to mislead her investigation, and she assigns herself the author role for her own murder story, he deconstructs what the narrator does in a conventional narrative. Her efforts are a challenge not only to one of the most patriarchal forms of writing fiction, the traditional detective fiction, but also to the patriarchy itself, undermining the tradition of representing women as the victim or passivized by men, since no one but herself is the responsible for her own death.

## Conclusion

Amis remarks, in one of his interviews that he is writing comedies in which men and women are portrayed as stereotypes, and men are “either victims or predators” and women are often “vamps, ballbreakers and goldiggers” (qtd. in Finney, 2008, p. 141). That is partly true for *LF* and *NT* because these novels are nothing but dystopian, brooding apocalyptic works with pathetically comic, grotesque, and melodramatic characters. However, the characterization of these figures, in particular the female protagonists, Nicola Six in *LF* and Mike Hoolihan in *NT*, are not presented just for a generic effect of stereotyping since the narrative of these novels metafictionally coerces the reader to question the way they are portrayed by the narrator or presented by the author. In their presentation, also, how they are seen by agents and in what roles they look or what they see are some of the important points in the novel because the representation of the protagonists in these novels is both a covert and an overt parody of our gender perceptions, the femininities, masculinities, and the gender roles in the phallogocentric structure of the male gaze. Although Amis's fictional world in the novels is a male world, the patriarchal reality and illusions of male phantasy are ridiculed to a great extent as Amis himself also confesses in numerous occasions. This patriarchal illusion is pushed in its purest and ugliest form to the face of the reader in *LF* and *NT*, very much like what “in-yer-face theatre” does at that same time, with plays of Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and several others. Nicola in *LF* deliberately poses stereotypical pornographic images, just like the artist, Cindy Sherman's posing for her collection in the

80s, *Untitled Film Stills*; and Nicola's purpose is clearly understood at the end of the novel to be manipulative to expose the sexist, voyeuristic, and scopophilic mindset of the male characters in the novel as well as the collective unconscious and certain archetypal figures inflicted in it through the mechanisms of the patriarchal ideology. Therefore, she is the deconstructive brick in the narrative structure of the text, making it a writerly one. Similarly, Mike in *NT* not only disrupts gender roles in the structure of the patriarchy and "the male gaze" and negates the role of women as acted upon, murdered, autopsied, and written about, but she is also presented as an assault to the traditional role of the male agent in this structure. She enjoys how she looks at men, how she confines them in her look, how men fear to evict her presence in their very stronghold. With these arguments in mind, it might be well concluded that Amis's *LF* and *NT* are more than being an example of the kitsch or the ladlit, and they problematize the conventional centripetal power structures, the mechanism of the gaze, the legitimacy of the authorship, the reliability of the narrator.

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