

Money (A Suicide Note): The Psychomachy between Vices and Virtues

A. Lazić, Sinergija University, B. Đerić Dragičević, Sinergija University

Sažetak— Ovaj rad se bavi analizom romana *Novac* (*Money*, 1984) istaknutog britanskog savremenog pisca Martina Amisa, sa ciljem da identifikuje i naglasi nerijetko suprotstavljene ideje o prirodi i karakteristikama kulture, identiteta, samog života potkraj 20.vijekka. Kao teorijsko polazište, autorke koriste dobro poznate književno-psihološko-filozofske postulate cijelog 20. i s početka 21. vijeka, kako bi književno-kritičkom analizom a na primjeru samog romana pokazale kakva je priroda savremene psihomahije, nastale u središtu kulture konzumerizma; te da li materijalistički inicirani hedonizam i konformizam s kraja 20. vijeka vode u ataraksiju – odsustvo osjećaja bilo koje vrste. Psihologija nove ere, prikazana u djelu, obilježena potragom/potjerom za novcem, suprotstavlja se iskonskim vrijednostima – duše i dobrog.

Keywords – zavisnost od 20. vijeka; negacija 20. vijeka; *Novac*; psihomahija; poroci; vrline, sopstvo

Abstract – This paper deals with the analysis of the novel *Money* (1984), written by the prominent British writer Martin Amis, in order to identify and emphasise incessantly opposed ideas concerning the nature of culture, identity, as well as the very life at the end of the 20th century. As a theoretical background, the authors use well-established postulates of the 20th and the 21st centuries, so as to by the means of literary critics and analysis depict the nature of contemporary psychomachy derived from the consumerist culture, in order to answer to the question if materialistic hedonism and conformism present at the end of the 20th century lead to ataraxia – absence of any kind of emotion. The psychology of our era, depicted in this novel, is marked by the pursuit of money, and, as such, confronts primal human values.

Keywords – addiction to the 20th century; rejection of the 20th century; *Money*; psychomachy; vices; virtues, self.

I. INTRODUCTION

Following the notion of Neo-Naturalism or a modern theory of international law which tends to revive natural law theories through reliance on “an inborn sense of justice”, the novel *Money* by Martin Amis (1984) would be one of the pioneering works representing an opus of the addiction to or rejection of the 20th century. “Novelists and playwrights, natural scientists and social scientists, poets, prophets, pundits, and philosophers of many persuasions have manifested an

intense hostility to historical thought. Many of our contemporaries are extraordinarily reluctant to acknowledge the reality of past time and prior events, and stubbornly resistant to all arguments for the possibility of utility of historical knowledge,” (David Hackett Fisher, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, 1970, p.307). The new wave of writers faces the interfering mixed ideas of culture with a traditional English identity. On the other hand, In the US they face identity paradoxes (Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel*, 2007). As contemporary readers are able to look back on history and see how history has been depicted differently for different audiences, history and memory have become themes in 21st century literature. Often contemporary literature explores the notion of multiplicities of truth and acknowledges that history is filtered through human perspective and experience. Furthermore, it can be interpreted as a battle for the soul in the new age. Psychomachy (a term delivered from the Latin poem *Psychomachia*, c.400 by Prudentius), describes a battle between vices and virtues for the soul of a Man. Ironically, in the postmodern novels, there is “considerable anti-humanism to be found in mechanized, technocratic bureaucracies and in most regimes of power, be they capitalist, totalitarian, or socialist” (Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 1988, p.188). Therefore, the psychomachy between vices and virtues of today, ought to be interpreted as an allegory for alienation of the Self within the consumerism of culture.

II. REPOSITIONING THE CULTURE

“I’m not allergic to the twentieth century. I am addicted to the twentieth century” (*Money*: 33).

This states the protagonist of the novel *Money*, John Self. Following his misadventures as a filmmaker through New York and London it is understandable why he is ‘‘addicted’’. The fact that the plot is set in the ‘80s, also called the ‘‘Reagan-Thatcher era’’, the rise of the postwar capitalism and the new-established consumer culture had been the reason why many people were encouraged to make money, nevertheless in a dehumanizing way. The side effects or, for some, the main products of that culture were mass media, drug and alcohol addiction, violence, pornography, junk food and life in the fast lane. All of those things were a part of John’s life. The surrounding, due to the needs of the consumer society, changed drastically. Everything is changed and, in post-postmodern manner, there is a choice – to fight against or cope with the digital era, while trying to re-establish human connections, and rediscover relationship with readers (Škobo and Đerić 2019).

Places that used to be good restaurants, music shops, bookshops, auction rooms turned into fast food joints, hypermarkets, striplite boutiques, video clubs, go-go bars.

‘‘As a place for storytelling and culture, the city is mobile, existential and yet perversely monumental, combining in modern fiction a globalized economy with localized dynamics of intersubjectivity and with the feeling that culture, through its constant adaptation, or through evolutionary survival, always creates a sense of loss’’ (*The Contemporary British Novel*: p.94). In conclusion, through the rich characterization of American urban life, it is not hard to tell that an urbanistic massacre has been committed.

‘‘Columbia, Slick... Chicago, LA, wherever — in America our seats of learning are surrounded by the worst, the biggest, the most desperate ratshit slums in the civilized world. It seems to be the American way. What does this mean? What is its content? Now over here John, we get a really superb view of Harlem. I took a look at Columbia. I checked it out. I’ve seen these pillared, high-chinned buildings, their deep chests thrown out in settled cultural pride. The place had nothing to tell me that I didn’t already know. With Fielding’s

wrist on my shoulder I now approached the castle’s steep rampart. We leaned on the railing, and peered down through the littered lattice of cross-angled trees, their backs broken in their last attempt to scramble up the cliff. Beyond lay the square miles of Harlem — part two, the other, the hidden half of young Manhattan’’ (*Money*: 41).

III. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE NEW ERA

On a personal level, John Self indulges himself into a lifestyle of self-deterioration. In the novel he shows his aggressive nature through violence and foul language, he does not hesitate to get into a fight even though his life was not necessarily in danger – his money was. Furthermore, the paranoia stimulates his crave for money, disgust for unemployment and self-destructive tendencies. He hears four voices in his head. He is aware that two of them lead him into disaster, while he suffocates the other two which may provide redemption.

‘‘Number four is the real intruder. I don’t want any of these voices but I especially don’t want this one. It is the most recent. It has to do with quitting work and needing to think about things I never used to think about. It has the unwelcome lilt of paranoia, of rage and weepiness made articulate in spasms of vividness: drunk talk played back sober’’ (*Money*: 39).

He does not want to think, just to consume. Self thinks of these voices as an unwanted affliction, like his tinnitus, though he owns up to a small measure of responsibility for their presence.

‘‘All the voices come from somewhere else. I wish I could flush them out of my head. As with vampires, you have to ask them in. But once they’re there, once you’ve given them headroom, they seem pretty determined to stick around’’ (*Money*: 37).

This is because they come to constitute Self – who he is, how he sees and hears the world, how he relates to others. They represent his subjective experience of the world, what he calls his ‘‘private culture’’. And while the specifics of these voices

precisely measure Self's character, they have a wider application. Their resonance suggests something about the dialogic design of *Money* itself (James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 1995). Psychology claims that destruction commands our attention. It is human nature to be drawn to disaster or to *Thanatos* as Freud claimed. In Freud's view, the compulsion to repeat was "... more primitive, more elementary, more instinctive than the pleasure-principle which is displaced by it" (Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920, p.17). He further proposes that the death instincts were an extension of that compulsion wherein all living organisms have an instinctive "pressure towards death" that stands in stark contrast to the instinct to survive, procreate and satisfy desires. Another scientific explanation by Walter Bradford Cannon (*The Wisdom of the Body*, 1932) is that it triggers the survival instincts or the so called "fight or flight response". There were times when John Self questioned his life choices, but at those times it was due to the hangover and forgetfulness.

"Tinnitus woke me on a note of high exasperation, as if it had been trying to wake me for hours. I let my sapless tongue creak up to check out the swelling on my upper west side. About the same, yet tenderer. My throat informed me that I had a snout hangover on, too. The first cigarette would light a trail of gunpowder to the holster, the arsenal inside my chest. I patted my pockets and lit it anyway" (*Money*: 5).

IV. THE HUMANOIDS

Even though the narrative form (vernacular dramatic monologue that presents a manner of expressing the views of a character and offering the audience greater insight into that character's feelings) distinguishes John Self's life from his own perspective and the reader is able to see his point of view and stream of consciousness, that does not exclude the attitudes of other characters. Just like John himself, other characters follow the scent of money. Alec Llewellyn, a married man and father of two, takes money from him and he uses it for gambling and gives it to his mistress. Selina Street,

John's pornographic girlfriend, follows the scent of money in order to live a luxurious life. Fielding Goodney deceives him by spending money on women and getting intoxicated. For all of them every day is just the same old routine but ironically some of them are not even aware due to intoxication. Most of the times John Self is not even self-aware and does not remember anything from the previous night, week or month. All of them may be compared to robots that that kind of society created out of them. Again, ironically, John calls them "Earthlings", as if he does not relate to them. Today, technology is more integrated into people's lives than ever before. Dreams of what technology could potentially help people become and anxieties regarding the demise of humanity as a result of technology can also be seen in the 21st century literature. Contemporary society makes people lonely, unsure, pessimistic and overall alienated. Automatization has taken over their life.

"Deafened with caffeine, I was just a hot robot, a ticking grid of jet-lag, time-jump and hangover" (*Money*: 6).

In the arcade he sees people hunched over their controls:

"They look like human forms of mutant moles and bats, hooked on the radar, rumble and wow of these stocky new robots who play with you if you give them money" (*Money*: 10).

"I feel like a robot, playing a rival robot, for a price. We are both one-armed bandits. Hold, nudge, spin, kick, shuffle, double, win, lose. It's all done for you nowadays – Prizefinder, Holdamatic, Autonudge" (*Money*: 55).

When John sees Lorne Guyland he immediately realizes:

"This isn't a man, I kept thinking, it's a mad old robot, all zinc and chrome and circulatory coolant" (*Money*: 65).

V. THE MASS MEDIA SYNDROME

John Self's professional career revolves around making a series of controversial TV commercials, in the mid-seventies.

“Remember the stir in the flaming summer of '76? My nihilistic commercials attracted prizes and writs. The one on nude mags was never shown, except in court” (*Money*: 28).

The media, as one of the most influential forces in contemporary society, represents addicts as victims of the contemporary era and condemns drugs. The very name of the *Morning Line* papers as a media agent, alludes to cocaine, and is as addictive and destructive as the very thing it condemns. Addicts are subjects deprived of their subjectivity and that is what constitutes addiction in *Money*. Double standards are not a foreign notion in this novel or life.

“What is this state, seeing the difference between good and bad and choosing bad – or consenting to bad, okaying bad?” (*Money*: 10).

According to Muel Kaptein, a professor of Business Ethics and Integrity Management at the Rotterdam School of Management, there are various reasons why and how the human mind tricks people into losing their moral compass and going astray. Following the research of dr Kaptein and Johan F. Wempe (*Three General Theories of Ethics and the Integrative Role of Integrity Theory*, 2011) there is nothing wrong with setting goals and driving hard to achieve them. This only becomes a problem when people are possessed by a singular focus on a particular goal, to the point that they leave other important considerations such as compassion and ethics out of their thinking. In John' case the reader gets the impression that his sole pursuit of money is far more important than showing his artistic side and quality as a filmmaker. Also in the case of other characters there is the conspicuous consumption. When money is splashed around, it contributes to unethical behavior. Flashy displays of wealth lead to increased selfishness. People either aim hard for it or develop jealousy of their high-rolling colleagues who achieve them. This leads to people who are more likely to put their own needs ahead of doing the right thing. And to the extent that money is the common denominator by which the characters attain their life goals, they in turn become

addicted to money itself. Money functions as a drug, or as the literal currency of society. It comes into contact with everybody on a material level, and also functions as the metaphor for the system of transactions that occurs in society and what that society has become. The 20th century mass media boom created the areas of waste and fatigue therefore it reached its lowest point, then the 21th century came along and it never ceased in its progression. Today, media reached the point where it is considered as *Midas curse* as it fulfills ones thirst for information but it comes with a high price. Nowadays, acquiring a piece of information is less important than knowing how to filter the desired knowledge. A great convulsion of stupidity is happening in the world and mostly it has to do with television. People put very little effort into the accumulation of knowledge and culture and when they do it becomes pure consumerism of culture. Self encounters culture in various forms (mostly thanks to Martina Twain who tries to cultivate him by giving him books and taking him out to the Opera House, Art Gallery and Theatres) but he does not know how to interpret it. Money is the opposite of culture. He shows his uncultured “self” by his literal interpretation of *Animal Farm* and other uneducated Orwellian references as well as the mispronunciation of Rambeau's name. His life's slogan may be “Narcissism as a mode of living”, characterized by *autocentrism* or *the protagonist disease*. He strongly believes that everything revolves around him and when someone confronts him he gets violent or uses insults in order to degrade that person or notion (Doris Arthur who rejects his advances). The preeminence of money encourages his active hostility toward learning and the educated (Alec, Doris Arthur, Amis) for their failure to acknowledge the dissolution of their elite status and the assimilation of their cultural artifacts within the consumer capitalism.

“As a rule, I hate people who are the beneficiaries of a university education. I hate people with degrees, O-levels, eleven-pluses, Iowa Tests, shorthand diplomas ... And you hate me, don't you. Yes you do” (*Money*: 21).

He hates everyone who is out of his reach. People that surround him are his “kin” and he is the one who feels superior around them. Self shows the characteristics of a spoiled child and spoiled children do not form a strong character. In the end it does not come to someone knowing something or not, it is the attitude of not being interested to know. It is about the ignorance.

“Oh Christ, the exhaustion of not knowing anything. It’s so tiring and hard on the nerves. It really takes it out of you, not knowing anything. You’re given comedy and miss all the jokes. Every hour, you get weaker. Sometimes as I sit alone in my flat in London and stare at the window, I think how dismal it is, how hard, how heavy, to watch the rain and not know why it falls” (*Money*: 65).

VI. THE PHILOSOPHY OF SELF

The notion *Nomen est Omen* (from the Roman playwright Plautus translates to “true to its name”) is also present in the characters names and it represents one of the key ideas and stimuli for the degradation of human condition. Selina’s last name is Street which is related to her lifestyle as a well-off prostitute. The last name of John is Self. The *psychology of self* is the study of either the cognitive and affective representation of one's identity or the subject of experience. The earliest formulation of the self in modern psychology forms the distinction between the self as *I*, the subjective knower, and the self as *Me*, the subject that is known. Current views of the self in psychology position the *self* as playing an integral part in human motivation, cognition, affect, and social identity. The research upon those with amnesia shows that they have a coherent sense of *self* based upon preserved conceptual autobiographical knowledge. Putting it into consideration John’s amnesia is triggered by extensive alcohol and drug consumption which goes hand in hand with his hedonistic tendency. His memory is consisted of series of flashbacks that leads to a semi-fabricated self-awareness and identity (poor childhood without a mother, an ignorant father

and his constant change of social surroundings from The US to England and vice versa). The *Self-concept* is a concept or belief that an individual has of him or herself as an emotional, spiritual and social being. Therefore, the self-concept is the idea of who I am, kind of like a self-reflection of one's well-being. For example, the self-concept is anything you say about yourself. During those rare moments when John Self uses introspection it should not be taken for granted because his projection of himself is stimulated by physical fatigue and opioids.

“Deep down, I’m a pretty happy guy. Happiness is the relief of pain, they say, and so I guess I’m a pretty happy guy. The relief of pain happens to me pretty frequently. But then so does pain. That’s why I get lots of that relief they talk about, and all that happiness” (*Money*: 27).

The *Ataraxia* (avoidance of pain) which he mentions above is a product of *Hedonism* and *Conformism*. Those two are his main vices. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the pleasure principle which is related to Hedonism is the instinctive seeking of pleasure and avoiding pain to satisfy biological and psychological needs. Specifically, the pleasure principle is the driving force guiding the *id*.

John Self chooses and perversely chases success in an economic system shaped by sexual and competitive rebellions, devaluing a personality the protagonist cannot find within himself, but he turns his instinctive needs into consumer goods and sublimates through self-destructive or obsessive habits such as alcoholism and pornography (Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel*, 2007). In the end, when John Self is left without any money, even though it seems like he has a change of heart, in reality he does not. He has already become a victim of his own life choices. His moment of redemption is only triggered by the lack of money. It is an open ending so no one knows what happens after.

“I have lived headlong at a desperate rhythm. I want to slow down now, and check out the scenery, and put in a stop or two. I want some semi-colons. Maybe

Martina will be my big brake ... I can't change, but maybe my life can. Mere proximity might do it all for me. Maybe I can just sit back, with a drink, and let my life do all the work" (*Money*: 108).

In his case the forces of Vices are far more prominent. There is no sigh of him wanting to improve on a physical, emotional or existential level. *Conformism* is what shapes him and it is one of the ugliest human traits. Even people who are not Immoral, when they are conformists, they contribute to the degradation of social systems and norms. In *Piaget's Theory of Moral Development* (U. Müller, J. I. M. Carpendale, & L. Smith (Eds.), 2009) the *Autonomous Morality* represents the highest stage when moral issues undergo a fundamental reorganization and egocentrism is bound to fade away. Unfortunately, that is not the case when it comes to the main protagonist.

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