

Joanna Stolarek

University of Silesia

## A Crime Story or Metafictional Game? – A Definition and Redefinition of the Status of the Detective Novel in Martin Amis’s *London Fields* and Tzvetan Todorov’s *Typology of Detective Fiction*

### A structural approach to detective fiction

As a literary form, the detective story has constituted a crucial part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century British literature. Dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and flourishing after World War I, it became the canon of English literary fiction as well as a determinant of social relations in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The underlying pattern of a classical detective story with its murder, culprit and detective reflected the thirst of the middle and upper classes in British society for a firm, practically hierarchical social order, and for a competent, well-organized police force (Symons, 9). From a literary standpoint, this genre, despite the heterogeneity of its forms, has frequently conformed to the realm of popular literature. Nevertheless, contemporary critics highlight a miscellaneous aspect of detective fiction and therefore make the distinction between the “serious” novel, the examples of which are the works of Wilkie Collins, Agatha Christie, G.K. Chesterton and others, and the detective story which is regarded, according to Howard Haycraft: “as a frankly non-serious, entertainment form of literature” (Symons, 13).

Throughout the history of detective fiction in Britain, one may trace its literary ascent which manifested itself in the rise of the great detective fiction between World War I and World War II, as well as its gradual descent after 1945. There is no denying that the weakening form of this genre since the late 1940s was mostly due to the shift of public interest from the strict rules and an out-of-date pattern of the classical detective story onto crime fiction, as well as the change of people’s attitude towards life, world and literature. As a result of the traumatic experi-

ences of World War II, many a reader was no longer keen on the literature which invariably offered them a deep-rooted belief that human conflicts could be solved by reason and intellect, and that virtue and righteousness must triumph in the end. A classical model of detective story did not cater for the expectations of the new generation of readers. Thus, the postwar writers resolved to transform certain rules of the genre and add new elements, such as the aspect of the motive of the crime, a new status of a criminal, detective and a victim, so that they would suit the tastes of the new reading public.

Together with various alterations within detective fiction, one may witness critics' growing interest in this genre. In the 1950s and 1960s detective stories and crime novels became the subject of a meticulous examination for such prominent writers and theorists as Julian Symons, Hammond Innes, and above all, Tzvetan Todorov. The last of the above-mentioned critics is well-known for his contribution to the literary assessment and classification of detective fiction according to the criteria based on the structural approach to literature. In his work *The Typology of Detective Fiction*, published in 1966, Todorov scrutinizes selected novels and stories dividing them into three genres: the whodunit, the thriller, and the suspense novel (Todorov, 159). Such classification is based, as the author states, on historical, not logical grounds, and he takes as a point of departure the classical detective fiction which thrived in Great Britain in the interwar years (Todorov, 162). The writer examines step by step each kind of detective fiction, focussing on their theme and, above all, their internal structure. At this point, he refers to the model of detective fiction laid down by the literary theorist and the author of various murder mysteries, George Burton. According to the latter, "all detective fiction is based on two murders of which the first, committed by the murderer, is merely the occasion for the second, in which he is the victim of the pure and unpunishable murderer, the detective" and "the narrative... superimposes two temporal series: the days of the investigation which begin with the crime, and the days of the drama which lead up to it" (qtd in Todorov, 159). Taking into account Burton's analysis of detective fiction, Todorov comes to the conclusion that its first genre, the whodunit which corresponds to the classical model of a detective story, is built upon a narrative duality, that is, it comprises two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation (Todorov, 159). At this point, Tzvetan Todorov, referring to the terminology of Russian Formalists, *fabula* and *sjuzet*, makes a distinction between the story, in which the reader gets to know "what happened" and the plot, which explains "how the reader (or narrator) has come to know about it" (Todorov, 160). The story and the plot, or "the discourse," have disparate status; the former is important, since the characters really act in it, whereas the latter consists in a mere investigation and revelation of the murderer. According to Todorov, the plot is of minor importance, as it displays no genuine action and nothing happens to the main protagonists: a rule of the genre assumes the detective's immunity (Todorov, 160). Needless to say, the story of the investigation is crucial by virtue

of the narrative voice, as it is usually told by a friend of the detective, who admits straightforwardly that he/she is writing a book. In view of this, the linguistic style of the plot must remain neutral, plain and transparent. Here, the author refers to such examples of detective novels as *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie, or *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* by James Hadley Chase.

Another genre examined by Tzvetan Todorov is the thriller. This kind of detective fiction, created in the United States just before and particularly after World War II, contains, similarly to the whodunit, the two stories. However, it brings into prominence the second story and suppresses the first one, which was not the case in the whodunit. Furthermore, in the thriller the narrative coincides with the action, which means that the crime becomes committed during our reading, not anterior to it. Hence, retrospection is substituted by prospection. The mystery, an indispensable element of the whodunit, is absent in the thriller, but our interest is not diminished, rather, it takes the form of a twofold curiosity: the reader is willing to get to know the motive of the crime, and he/she waits for the outcome of the story. It is worth noticing that in the thriller the life of the detective and the narrator, often being one person, is put in jeopardy, and till the final chapter of the book we are not certain whether he/she will be alive or dead. As far as the linguistic aspect is concerned, this genre distinguishes itself by a crude descriptive style, devoid of any rhetoric and pathos. This is the case of the thrillers written by such prominent writers as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, or Horace McCoy (Todorov, 163).

Finally, Tzvetan Todorov focusses on the third kind of detective fiction, the suspense, which has developed on the basis of the combined properties applied to the whodunit and to the thriller. As the author points out, the suspense keeps the mystery of the whodunit and contains the two stories, the *fabula* and *sjuzet*, but, similarly to the thriller, the discourse constitutes a pivotal part of the book. In view of this, the reader's attention is focussed not only on the past but, first and foremost, on the forthcoming events, especially on the future of the characters. Taking into account the miscellaneous components and themes of the suspense, Todorov divides the genre into two subtypes. The first one, called "the story of the vulnerable detective," delineates the figure of the detective as its main character who many a time risks his life and, therefore, it becomes integrated into the universe of other characters. The second type, described as "the story of the suspect-as-detective," illustrates a personal aspect of the crime in which the main character, inequitably suspected of and charged with murder, seeks to find out a real culprit and becomes a potential victim of the murderer.

It should be pointed out that the above classification of detective stories is based on historical and thematical grounds. Tzvetan Todorov, underlying the same structural pattern of the whodunit, the thriller and the suspense, refers to the rules of the classical detective fiction formulated by S.S. Van Dine in 1928. Among Van Dine's twenty principles, Todorov focusses on the following elements: the double

narrative, the presence of the detective, the criminal and at least one victim; the presentation of the culprit as a professional criminal and as one of the main characters of the story; and the avoidance of the fantastic and banal situations (qtd in Todorov, 163). He states that according to such model of detective stories, which made a profound impact upon miscellaneous theories of detective and crime fiction in the following years, the differences among the genres are mostly determined by thematic nuances: the milieu, which distinguishes the whodunit from the thriller; the aspect of the mystery; professional crime in the whodunit versus personal crime in some thrillers or suspense novels, etc.

All things considered, *The Typology of Detective Fiction* by Tzvetan Todorov constitutes an invaluable contribution to the structural studies and criticism on detective literature. Such an in-depth examination of detective and crime stories has been a point of departure for postmodern writers and critics working on this type of fiction. By the same token, Todorov adopts his detailed, yet rigid classification to the norms of popular literature. He emphasizes that, contrary to the literary masterpiece, which “does not enter any genre save perhaps its own” (Todorov, 159), it is easy to categorize the books of popular literature to specific genres. Hence, the author makes the division of detective fiction into the whodunit, the thriller and the suspense, referring to such writers as Agatha Christie, Hadley Chase, or Raymond Chandler.

### A postmodern aspect of detective fiction in Martin Amis's *London Fields*

Since the late 1960s and 1970s, one may observe numerous alterations and modifications of a detective story as a genre, its pattern and crucial components, such as the presence of the detective, the criminal and the motive of the homicide. This is indubitably connected with many new tendencies and trends in this field of literature which reflected significant changes in art and culture. In contemporary literature, various attempts have been made to transform and redefine a classical model of detective stories. Several British and American writers and literary critics have experimented with this genre endeavouring to adapt the rules of the classical detective to the norms and realities of postmodern fiction. Among the most outstanding novelists, short-story writers and critics, one ought to mention Paul Auster, Vladimir Nabokov, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Alain Robbe-Grillet, as well as prominent critics, such as Slavoy Žižek, Brian McHale, and Hans Bertens. The works of the above-mentioned writers testify to a grand shift from the canon of detective fiction laid down by S.S. Van Dine and Tzvetan Todorov.

Martin Amis, whose novel *London Fields* is going to be scrutinised, has made a substantial contribution to the modification of a classical pattern of detective

and crime fiction. Like many other artists of his generation, the author of *Money*, *London Fields* and *The Night Train* has attempted to be in tune with his times, so his works touch upon the issues of the contemporary world, especially on the role of the writer at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The leading themes which run through Amis's books are crime, violence and power. However, they are closely connected with the existential anxiety and philosophical questions concerning the sense of life, the motives of human behavior, as well as the relation between the existence on the Earth and the mystery of the universe. On this score, Martin Amis's novels, which represent postmodern detective fiction, illustrate the transformation of interests in crime literature, namely the shift from epistemological questions of the accessibility and reliability of knowledge, in other words, *what we know* and *how we know it* to ontological questions of *being* rather than *knowing* (McHale 2007). Postmodern crime fiction delineates the proliferation of worlds rather than quests for knowledge which is typical of modernist detective literature and endeavours to answer the questions of ontology: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (McHale 2007).

Such concerns are fully developed in *London Fields*. Being aware of this, I still believe that when scrutinizing this book, in particular its narrative structure and thematic components, one benefits from taking as a point of departure Tzvetan Todorov's typology of detective fiction and Van Dine's classical model of this genre.

The form of *London Fields* differs considerably from a traditional pattern of the whodunit and strays into the thriller, or, as some critics claim, such as Brian Finney, into a "whydoit." The use of such a term is justified by the fact that the main female protagonist, being simultaneously a victim and one of the narrators of the book, can tell, thanks to her prophetic abilities, the exact time of her death and the manner in which she will be killed. What remains unknown to her and to the readers is the identity of the murderer (Finney 1995). Here, it is worth mentioning that Martin Amis is not the forerunner of a new kind, or a *mélange* of various modern and postmodern subtypes of crime fiction. Since the 1960s one may witness visible transformations and experimentations with this literary genre in the works of Tom Stoppard, Ira Levin and Anthony Shaffer. The lastly mentioned playwright, similarly to Amis, worked on the idea of a whodunit, yet he deviated from its traditional form creating instead a "whodunwhat", probably the first of its kind, and he misappropriated the mechanics of the classic murder mystery. Needless to say, when we inspect more closely Amis's novel, it becomes visible that, although most of the elements of his work are apparently different from the classical whodunit and oscillate between a traditional detective story and postmodern metaphysical and metafictional thriller, some of them correspond to its rules.

At this point, perhaps, one ought to analyse *London Fields* step by step in terms of its genre, structure and theme, referring at first to the salient principles of

the classical detective fiction formulated by S.S. Van Dine in 1928. Amis's book indubitably conforms to the first rule, according to which "the novel must have at most one detective and one criminal, and at least one victim (a corpse)" (qtd in Todorov, 162). However, his novel does not accord with the second one, which refers to the culprit and the detective as two different characters. It also stresses a non-personal motive of the homicide. Contrary to this rule, in *London Fields* the detective is simultaneously a professional killer, and he commits the crime for personal reasons. Such a deviation from one of the fundamental principles of the classical crime story testifies to the innovation and unconventionality of the author. Yet, it does not constitute the novelty in postmodern detective literature, since similar themes concerning the ambiguous role of the detective as well as the position of the culprit and the victim could be found in the works written prior to the novel of Martin Amis, such as *Death and the Compass* by Jorge Louis Borges, or *The Erasers* by Alain Robbe-Grillet. With this respect it is tempting to suggest that the British writer follows (rather than creates) the patterns of his postmodern predecessors. The next principle says that "love has no place in detective fiction" (qtd in Todorov, 163). It is not the case in Amis's book. Here, the main plot, which centers around the crime, murderer and murderee, is closely connected with love and passion. As the author highlights in the preface: "This is a true story but I can't believe it's really happening. It's a murder story, (I think), of all strange things, so late in the century, so late in the goddamned day" (Amis, 1). Nevertheless, Amis's novel conforms to the fourth principle of the classical detective story, which stresses a significant position of the culprit. Analogically to it, Samson Young, a criminal and a detective at the same time, is one of the main characters of the book.

Having examined *London Fields* with reference to the above-mentioned points of Van Dine's theory of the classical detective fiction, one may easily come to the conclusion that this postmodern novel cannot be classified as a whodunit. As it was previously pointed out, this is the example of a ready-made thriller or of a whydoit (Finney 1995). The final term, being the subtype of the thriller, sounds enigmatic and does not correspond to any genres of detective fiction classified by Todorov. Yet, it seems to elucidate a mystifying structure and a perplexing language of the novel. In view of this, the leading theme of the book seems to be the motive of the homicide, albeit the author also attracts the reader's attention to the search for and discovery of the identity of the murderer. The remaining elements of the story, such as the time of the crime and the way in which the woman will be killed, are unknown both to the victim and to the detective.

Nonetheless, with reference to Todorov's typology of detective fiction, one is prepared to concede that *London Fields* is also equipped with certain features typical of the thriller. To begin with, in a dual narrative structure, the discourse dominates over the story. Yet, the story is not suppressed by the plot. Rather, it performs the function of the prologue and the epilogue, in which the narrator

endeavours to present the arcanae of the crime to the readers. Unlike a typical thriller, which “does not reserve its surprises for the last lines of the chapter” (Todorov, 163), Amis’s book offers its readers an unpredictable ending, a bewildering solution, similarly to the whodunit (e.g. in Agatha Christie’s story *Murder of Roger Ackroyd*). Notwithstanding this, a stunning revelation at the final pages of this novel is radically different from the one we may find in the traditional detective story. First of all, in *London Fields* Samson Young, a narrator and a detective at the same time, turns out to be a culprit. Furthermore, having killed Nicola Six, the main female protagonist, he commits suicide. Such an unconventional ending hardly fits the classical genre of this fiction.

Taking into consideration the role of “the detective’s immunity” (Todorov, 160), it is hard to say whether the figure of Samson Young could be placed among the characters of the whodunit or the thriller, since he is neither a mere observer of events nor he falls prey to an imaginary killer. What also remains puzzling is the fact that together with the death of Sam Young, his narration draws to its close, but not the book itself. At this point we realize that we have just read a crime story written by a person who attempted to resolve a detective puzzle and who endeavoured to create an impressive novel. The end of the book shows, however, that he failed as a detective and a murderer on the one hand, and as an artist on the other hand: “That’s what murderer feels like. I failed, in art and love” (Amis, 467).

As a writer, Samson Young appears to have no godlike control over the actions occurring within the narrative (Finney 1995). His constant doubts as to the credibility of this story testify to his unreliability as a narrator: “This is a true story but I can’t believe it’s really happening. It’s a murder story, too...I can’t believe my luck. And a love story...this is the story of a murder. It hasn’t happened yet. But it will. (It had better.)” (Amis, 1).

Like other protagonists of the book, Samson Young’s life lies in the hands of his author, Martin Amis, whose fictional alter ego could be found in the figure of a playwright, Mark Asprey, also known as Marius Appleby. The initials of the latter which evoke those of the writer are introduced by Amis as a part of artistic strategy. By means of this linguistic game, the author makes the readers aware of his presence in the novel. This quintessentially postmodern device draws attention to a highly ambiguous role played by the narrator; on the one hand, he appears in the book as one of the characters of the story, and, on the other hand, he is the author and narrator of the novel who creates and annihilates the protagonists (Finney 1995). Amis plays a game with the readers and treats his characters like puppets in a theatrical show. Being also a literary murderer, he condemns the main narrator, Sam Young, to death, who, in turn, kills the second narrator, Nicola Six. To take the analogy further, the writer takes control over Sam’s and Nicola’s narratives who are aware of the power writing can exercise over their lives (Finney 1995). In this view, Martin Amis’s novel corresponds to George Burton’s statement according to which “all detective fiction is based on two murders of which the first,

committed by the murderer, is merely the occasion for the second, in which he becomes the victim of the pure and unpunishable murderer, the detective” (qtd in Todorov, 159). In *London Fields* the author is simultaneously a detective and a killer. In addition, he performs the role of a professional playwright who, thanks to his developed narrative style and all the linguistic sophistication, plays games with his naïve narrator and the readers making us aware that the book we are studying cannot be limited solely to the narrative of Samson Young. He suggests that we should keep a distance between a fictional narrative style and its creator who “is himself locked in his solipsistic state of non-narrative being” (Finney 1995).

There is no denying that the enigmatic role of the author of *London Fields*, as well as his metafictional endeavours and games concerning the proliferation of worlds, and the multilayered narrative structure evoke analogous writing techniques used by the detective story writers from the late 1950s and 1960s, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Flan O’Brien, Jorge Louis Borges or Carlos Somoza. The works of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jorge Louis Borges influenced to a great extent Amis’s novel, in particular the motif of the labyrinth and the idea of “being locked in the hermetic world,” as well as the fascination for interpretations inside interpretations. The same holds true for the position of the narrator and the importance of the plot. Apparently, in *The Erasers* and *The Death and the Compass*, similarly to *London Fields*, the world is entirely subjective, the plot is reduced to minimum and the nonexistent role of the narrator is developed to the utmost limits. As Alain Robbe-Grillet once stated: “The true writer has nothing to say. What counts is the way he says it.” For that matter, Martin Amis, following the examples of his contemporaries, violates other classical rules of detective fiction which emphasise the importance of the plot, the objectivity of the narration and the omniscient role of the narrator.

Another issue discussed by Tzvetan Todorov with reference to all the three genres of detective fiction, that is the whodunit, the thriller and the suspense, is the aspect of the mystery. In *London Fields* we encounter its two kinds; the first one is a pure curiosity (we wish to find out the identity of a murderer), the second one is a suspense (our interest is sustained by the expectation of what will happen). For this reason, Amis’s novel bears a closer resemblance to the suspense, in which our attention is focussed both on the explanation of past happenings and on the future of the characters rather than to the thriller, which centers around the events.

Taking into account the setting, a social and cultural background of the novel, *London Fields* conforms to the standards of a typical thriller. As Todorov states: “Indeed it is around these few constants that the thriller is constituted: violence, generally sordid crime, the amorality of the characters” (Todorov, 162). In keeping with this, Amis’s book is also equipped with various features which could be incorporated into a typical crime ‘milieu,’ such as: a delineation of the criminal underworld, a description of domestic violence, the lack of ethics and moral stan-



dards, a spread of pornography, etc. Needless to say, the author's intention is not merely to exhibit the problem of crime, sex and homicide, but, first and foremost, to expose a wicked, corruptive side of human nature. Such a highly moralistic and philosophical book displays the caricatures of contemporary British society, referring to the figures of a working class petty criminal, a woman of ill repute, a romantic intellectual and a frustrated writer. Furthermore, this postmodern novel constitutes the apocalyptic vision of the Earth and humankind at the threshold of a new millennium. Even a pastoral title of Amis's story, which seems inadequate to its inner-city setting, symbolizes sinister, menacing energies spreading over the contemporary world.

As far as the very subject matter is concerned, *London Fields* evokes other well-known thrillers and crime stories, which fall into the category of the so-called hard-boiled detective fiction, indubitably one of the most popular subgenres of the American crime literature established and popularised by such prominent writers as Raymond Chandler (*Farewell, My Lovely*), Dashiell Hammett, John Bringham (*My Name Is Michael Sibley*) or Mickey Spillane. At first glance, Amis's novel bears a close resemblance to this type of fiction in terms of its seeming realism and plausibility. It appears to represent a standard crime story in which the behaviour of the characters, their motives and actions, as well as all the events have their rational, lucid explanation. Moreover, the implicit moralistic and didactic premise of the book as well as the writer's reproof of the corruptive nature of his protagonists, especially the behaviour of the detective and simultaneously the culprit, indicate close links with the authors' comment on the background and morality of the detectives (sleuths) in hard-boiled fiction, most notably in the works of Raymond Chandler. Nonetheless, with reference to the apparent graphic description of the events and characters, on closer inspection one may notice that *London Fields* only partially echoes the realistic model of narration employed by hard-boiled detective story writers. In fact, the so-called true-to-life aspect of the book constitutes one of the two worlds, or realities, depicted by the author. Apart from this physical reality exists another, internal one in which are locked the main figures of the drama. Each of them leads their own lives and acts according to their own rules. Paradoxically enough, they all exist in virtual reality, hyper-reality or in the surrealistic world. This is true especially to Keith Talent whose life is thoroughly absorbed by modern communications and media, in particular by porno movies and reality shows. He becomes thrown by the author into a Baudrillardian world where "images without originals," or simulacra (Pope, 132), no longer represent anything beyond themselves (Finney 1995). In view of this, Keith Talent symbolizes a contemporary human puppet that is easily manipulated by mass media and global communication. As for Nicola Six, her life and identity are very problematic. This puzzling female protagonist is portrayed as the incarnation of male sexual fantasies:

Nicola, I'm worried about you, 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.

(Amis, 260)

From the above quotation it transpires that Nicola Six is devoid of her true identity and exists only as a figment of the protagonist's imagination. In this respect, she may be regarded as the embodiment of sexual energy which lures men and then leads to their downfall. On the other hand, being one of the main characters of the thriller, she falls victim to Young's artistic frustration and professional discontent.

The remaining protagonists of the drama, Guy Clinch and Samson Young, are also locked in their own hermetic worlds. The former, being one of the potential suspects of Nicola's murder, perceives the reality from the perspective of a romantic idealist and, therefore, it is difficult for him to come to terms with a corruptive, amoral picture of the contemporary society. The world he endeavours to build is not authentic. Similarly, Samson Young is locked in his fictional world. Being involved in writing a crime novel, he strives to keep life and fiction separate from each other (Finney 1995). In order to do that, Sam is forced to exclude some important materials from the book, for instance, the figure of his American girlfriend, Missy. As he says: "Missy had to go. For reasons of balance. Reasons of space" (Amis, 435). However, Sam soon points out that his theory is unfeasible, seeing that: "In fiction (rightly so called), people become coherent and intelligible – and aren't like that. We all know they aren't. We all know it from personal experience" (Amis, 240).

In view of this philosophical and metaphysical aspect of milieu depicted by Amis in his postmodern novel, one may examine the issue of the motive and the mystery of the crime referring to Todorov's typology of detective fiction and Van Dine's classical rules. According to the traditional model of detective stories, which comprises the whodunit, the thriller and the suspense novel: "everything must be explained rationally; the fantastic is not admitted" (qtd in Todorov, 163). As for Martin Amis's book, the homicide of the main female protagonist ought to be examined in at least three dimensions: literary, psychological and philosophical. On the one hand, Nicola Six's death could be regarded as a result of a mounting tension between her and Sam, and as a sign of Young's seething anger brought about by his unrealized artistic ambition. In this respect, Martin Amis's postmodern novel conforms to the principles of a classical thriller owing to the fact that Sam Young's decision to commit crime on someone who hurt his feelings as a writer, may have a rational elucidation. On the other hand, the suicide of the murderer and simultaneously the narrator of the story could be considered as a rare feature of a classical detective fiction. Nevertheless, coming back to the crime, it is tempting to suggest that Sam's murderous act was carefully planned according to the pattern of the thriller; he endeavoured to write a perfect crime story or drama. Despite the narrator's emotional involvement in the creation of the

novel, Sam's suicide betokens his loss of control of the writing material. Paradoxically enough, he feels as if he were defeated by his victim when he writes in the final chapter of the book: "She outwrote me. Her story worked. And mine didn't." (Amis, 466). In fact, Sam Young's life and narrative are skillfully manipulated by the author who uses him and other protagonists of the novel to play the game with the readers, because his aim is to make them study the book thoroughly in order to solve the criminal puzzle on their own. On this score, *London Fields* could be called a metafictional thriller. Last but not least, the murder of the female protagonist, which constitutes the main plot of Amis's book, could be understood in a metaphysical sense. In view of this, Nicola Six stands for our planet which becomes devastated by a nuclear war at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Head, 212). Needless to say, Amis uses the imagery of "mother earth" with reference to his (anti)heroine and concomitantly cultivates her role as "male fantasy figure" (Amis, 260) in order to underline his satirical point. As contemporary critics state: "Nicola's status as male fantasy figure is thus indicative that the planet is in terminal decline, since the destructive subversion and manipulation of woman/planet is identified as the disastrous impulse of self-destruction" (Head, 212).

Finally, when examining the language of Amis's book, one ought to take as a point of departure Todorov's rules concerning a narrative style of the thriller. In *The Typology of Detective Fiction* we read that in the crime novel: "descriptions are without rhetoric, coldly, even if dreadful things are being described; one might say 'cynically'" (Todorov, 163). In this respect, *London Fields* bears a close resemblance to the classical thriller. Amis uses a plain, lucid, colloquial language devoid of any turgidity or pomposity, in particular with reference to the plot (discourse). The narrator strives to reconstruct faithfully all the events and the behaviour of the main characters of the drama employing a plain, transparent style, typical of the thriller. Needless to say, one cannot fail to notice that in the prologue and epilogue his language becomes considerably different, more personal and emotional – Sam Young expresses his uncertainty and doubts as to the credibility of the story he is about to present. On that score, he transmits the conventions of the thriller. Furthermore, the suicide of the narrator and simultaneously the murderer, again, casts a shadow on *London Fields* classified as the thriller. Finally, the act of the homicide is not depicted to the reader, contrary to the traditional crime story which places the emphasis on the ruthless manner in which the murder was committed (Todorov, 163).

As it was previously pointed out, Martin Amis invariably plays metafictional games with the reader as well as makes implicit jokes of the narrator (Finney 1995). In doing so he constantly attempts to make us read closely the text, to force us to be not mere observers, but active participants in the events described in the book. The author's intellectual game with the readers echoes similar artistic techniques employed by Tom Stoppard, Ira Levin or Alain Robbe-Grillet. The works of these artists reflect the lack of an autonomous identity of the supposed

author, the absence of an omniscient creator of the play, the awareness of the presence of the audience (Tom Stoppard) (Beachcroft, 12, 13), the author's torturing and teasing game with the audience, the enigmatic closure and unsolved criminal puzzle (Alain Robbe-Grillet), as well as the readers' feeling of being lured into an intellectual trap set by its writer (Ira Levin *The Deathtrap*). As far as *London Fields* is concerned, Amis deploys additionally miscellaneous postmodern linguistic strategies in order to promote an aesthetic effect, such as pastiche, multiple viewpoint, reflexivity and open intertextuality. All these literary devices reflect postmodern discourses, like advertising, game and chat shows, magazines, TV and tabloid news, interactive video or computer games (Pope, 128). The writer strives to incorporate this genre and to caricature its figures, following the examples of Charles Dickens and Jonathan Swift.

In conclusion, Martin Amis's *London Fields* constitutes an interesting illustration of contemporary detective fiction. Such an intellectually riveting novel attests the reader's unabated interest in this literary genre and reflects marked alterations that detective and crime stories have undergone in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Martin Amis and other postmodern writers, among others Paul Auster, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Ian McEwan, and playwrights, such as Tom Stoppard, Anthony Shaffer and Ira Levin, have demonstrated that at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it has been no longer possible to adhere to the classical standards of detective fiction laid down by S.S. Van Dine in 1928 and Tzvetan Todorov in 1966. Postmodern literature and art have demanded of its writers a new look at the literary world and artistic realia. Thus, together with the pivotal constituents of detective fiction, such as the presence of the detective, the criminal, the victim, the existence of mystery, suspense and, finally, a dual character of a narrative text, postmodern novelists, among whom Amis is very well-known, have frequently incorporated in their books the elements of surrealism, hyper-reality, pastiche as well as metafictional linguistic games and subjective narratives.

## References

### Primary texts

- Amis, M. 1989. *London Fields*. London: Penguin Books.  
 Todorov, T. 1988. "The Typology of Detective Fiction." In: Lodge, D. (ed.). *Modern Criticism and Theory. A Reader*. London and New York: Longman.

### Selected critical texts

- Beachcroft, Th.O. 1964. *The English Short Story II*. London: Longman, Green & CO LTD.  
 Childers, J. and G. Hentzi (eds.). 1995. *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Cuddon, J.A. (ed.). 1991. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell Reference.
- Harrison, Ch. and P. Wood (eds.). 1993. *Art in Theory 1900–1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell.
- Head, D. 2002. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lane, R.J., R. Mengham and Ph. Tew (eds.). 2003. *Contemporary British Fiction*. Cambridge, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Pope, R. 1998. *The English Studies Book. An Introduction to Language, Literature and Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Symons, J. 1962. *The Detective Story in Britain*. London: Longman.

### On-line sources

- Finney, B. Narrative and narrated homicide in Martin Amis's *Other People* and *London Fields*. <http://www.csulb.edu/~bfinney/MartinAmis.html>. Access Date: 23 September, 2005.
- Marling, W. The Critical Response to Hard-boiled Detective Fiction. <http://www.case.edu/artsci/engl/marling/hardboiled/Critical.html>. Access Date: 7 February, 2007.
- McHale, B. What Was Postmodernism? <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/fictions-present/tense>. Access Date: 23 August, 2008.
- <http://www.intercoursewiththedead.com/trap.htm>. Access Date: 23 August, 2008.