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## Criticism through Comedy on the Twentieth Century Society and Redbrick Universities: An Analysis of *Lucky Jim* by Kingsley Amis

*Yirminci Yüzyıl Toplumunu ve Redbrick Üniversiteleri Üzerine Komedi Yoluyla Eleştirisi:  
Kingsley Amis'in Lucky Jim Eserinin Bir Analizi*

**Mehtap DEMİRTÜRK\***

### Abstract

The twentieth century was a period of change, with two world wars and ongoing developments in technology and industry that started in the previous century. Various effects of those developments were witnessed in different societies, cultures, languages, and works of literature, and all have affected the Higher Education system, especially in the United Kingdom. The old universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, accepted students only through references and they did not satisfy the demands of the growing populations in big cities that needed manpower in the industry. Those demands created new institutions described as Redbrick Universities, which embraced students from different backgrounds without any reference; thus, the debates between the old and the new universities began. While the Redbrick universities were accused of having unsatisfactory academic foundations with their ineligible instructors, the old universities were criticized for capturing all useful advantages and resources. After the Second World War, the debates led to the emergence of the campus novel, and one of its successful examples is *Lucky Jim* by Kingsley Amis. This novel presents the character Jim (James) Dickinson as a non-idealistic, lazy academician who only cares about money and has weaknesses in his private life. Among other passive academic figures, he also tries to please the head of the department and his characteristics present critiques about the structure of these new institutions as corrupted academic communities. In the novel, besides the academic world, twentieth-century society is severely criticized, for its understanding of love, class division, and female figures. Throughout the novel, the readers encounter that a person may get everything he/she desires with the help of luck rather than success, so this study aims to present the processes Amis used to break conventional values through comedy to criticize the changing society of the century.

**Keywords:** *Social Criticism, Redbrick Universities, 20th Century Society, Campus Novel, Lucky Jim.*

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## Öz

Yirminci yüzyıl, iki dünya savaşı ve bir önceki yüzyılda başlayan teknoloji alanında ve sanayide süregelen gelişmelerle yoğrulan bir değişim dönemidir. Bu gelişmelerin çeşitli etkileri farklı toplumlarda, kültürlerde, dillerde ve edebiyat eserlerinde görülmüştür ve bunların tümü, özellikle Birleşik Krallık'ta Yükseköğretim sistemini yakından etkilemiştir. Geleneksel olarak, Oxford ve Cambridge gibi eski üniversiteler sadece referans yoluyla öğrenci kabul etmekteydiler ve bu sebeple de sanayide insan gücüne ihtiyaç duyan büyük şehirlerde artan nüfus taleplerini karşılayamamaktaydılar. Bu talep, Redbrick Üniversiteleri olarak adlandırılan, farklı altyapılardan gelen öğrencileri hiçbir referans olmaksızın kucaklayan yeni kurumların ortaya çıkmasına neden olmuş, böylece eski ve yeni üniversiteler arasındaki bu tartışma başlamıştır. Redbrick üniversiteleri yetersiz eğitmenleri ile kalitesiz akademik kurumlarına sahip olmakla suçlanırken, eski üniversiteler de tüm faydalı olanakları ve kaynakları ele geçirmekle eleştirilmekteydi. İkinci dünya savaşından sonra bu tartışma, kampüs romanının ortaya çıkmasına neden oldu ve bunun başarılı örneklerinden biri de Kingsley Amis'in *Lucky Jim* adlı eseridir. Bu roman, özel hayatındaki zayıflıkları ile sadece parayı düşünen, idealist olmayan, tembel bir akademisyeni gözler önüne serer. Romanın baş karakteri, diğer pasif akademisyenler gibi, bölüm başkanını memnun etmeye çalışır ve eser bu özellikleriyle, yozlaşmış akademik topluluklara sahip olduğu düşünülen bu yeni kurumların yapısına yönelik eleştiriler sunar. Romanda, akademik dünyanın yanı sıra aşk anlayışı, sınıf ayrımı ve kadın figürleri basitleştirildiği için yirminci yüzyıl toplumu ciddi şekilde eleştirilmektedir. Roman boyunca okuyucu, bir insanın başarısından çok şansının yardımıyla başarıyı elde edebileceği ile karşılaşmaktadır, bu nedenle bu çalışma, Amis'in değişen yirminci yüzyıl toplumunu eleştirmek için geleneksel değerleri komedi yardımıyla kırmak zorunda kaldığı süreçleri ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Toplumsal Eleştiri, Redbrick Üniversiteleri, 20. Yüzyıl Toplumu, Kampüs Romanı, Lucky Jim.*

## Introduction

The nineteenth century was a period of change for the British Empire because of the Industrial Revolution which created a demand for manpower in the fields of technology and science in big cities. That economic development needed new universities to meet this demand besides the ancient ones established in the seventeenth century, so those universities grew into important institutions of education. As time passed, the new universities became famous in those industrial regions, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. They were called Redbrick Universities whose name was created by “Edgar Allison Peers”, a “professor of Spanish at Liverpool” or they are also described as Civic Universities considered “Britain’s ‘modern’ universities” (Whyte 7). Since their priority was on scientific and technological skills, they open their doors to the students “who had previously been excluded by their class, beliefs, or gender” by accepting them without any reference or background information unlike the ancient institutions (Whyte 8). While these new institutions were criticized by the older foundations such as Oxford and Cambridge for the Redbrick universities included “low status, poorer students, mean facilities and lack of institutional purpose and attainment” (Silver 175), the Redbrick universities also attacked the system of a university that “Oxbridge” pointed out, for it had “all the advantages, including those of resources, residence, and the networks that led to the most influential jobs and to privilege” (Silver 180).

These debates between the old and modern universities also affected the literature as a result of the various changes in societies, thus as a genre, the campus novel emerges after World War II. It presents various works dealing with real or fictional settings of universities in a comic sense. According to Malcolm Bradbury, universities are appropriate places to solve social and political problems in England. In the 1950s, educational qualities and cultural values are assessed there to have a better society (27). In the 1970s, the campus novel varied its form with the development of society and universities themselves (Bradbury 27). Some critics involve the campus novel in 'Post-war Academic Novels' which form character stereotypes and subjects in universities by pointing to the public values which are criticized by Kingsley Amis, David Lodge, and Malcolm Bradbury. These writers have satirical works related to the lives of people in the second half of the twentieth century, and these works present universal values to their readers through allegory, satire, morality plays, and class differences (Kenneth 156). Regarded as one of the best comic novels of the twentieth century, *Lucky Jim* is an academic (campus) novel that includes the satire of an academician and his social world in England after World War II. By using both comedy and satire, the writer Amis derides the society he lives in, and he creates characters from different kinds of social classes thus he makes the gap between them obvious.

In the twentieth century, conventional reliabilities of society, religion, and culture seemed to have begun to collapse because of a mixing of cultures and classes in speedily enlarging urban centres as "discontinuities from traditional" ones (Giddens 16). The previous order is disrupted by challenging the traditional ways of human experience through "the revision of convention radicalised to apply [...] to all aspects of human life, including technological intervention into the material world" (Giddens 39). After WWII, the Labor Party wins the election in England, brings social reforms to improve the situation of the working class, and establishes the Welfare State. Hence, the working class's conditions heal. The writers of the period write about the new order that changes the structure of society, resulting in a crisis of identity, estrangement, and deracination, all of which are recalled by characters who are enraged and defiant. This new period welcomes new experimental works which are in search of fresh ways to express, reflect, and criticize the social order. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how Kingsley Amis used comedy satirically as a social critique of Redbrick universities.

## **2. *Lucky Jim* as an Example of Criticism on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Redbrick Universities**

The British novelist, poet, critic, and teacher Kingsley Amis had written since the age of eleven. From 1949 and 1961, he lectured on English at the University College of Swansea and served as Visiting Fellow in Creative Writing at Princeton University. In the early 1960s, he became the Fellow and Director of Studies in English at Cambridge. Throughout his scholarly carrier, Amis gave lectures, wrote reviews, and columns, and published four collections of poetry, a collection of lectures on science fiction, five novels, and a volume of short stories (Bradford 6). In 1946, he met Philip Larkin and the influence of Larkin and his days at Swansea University contribute to the origin of *Lucky Jim*. In his interview, he uttered:

I happened to visit Philip Larkin, who was on the library staff at Leicester University. The young man surrounded by bores whom for various reasons he doesn't dare to offend—that was all there. The contribution of Swansea, so to speak, was just to give me information about how things were run: what the faculty is, who the registrar is and what he does, what classes are like, what exam responsibilities are like, et

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cetera. But there's no character in the book, however minor, who was actually there at Swansea. (*The Paris Review* 5)

Larkin and Amis's lectures provided the background of his first novel *Lucky Jim* (1954) which gained great success in the literary world.

*Lucky Jim* tells the story of Jim Dixon (James Dickinson) who is a medieval history teacher at a British university. He tries to do his best to impress the Head of the Department, Professor Welch, whom Dixon is not fond of, and he has to put up with him to stay at the university. His professional struggle combines his 'on and off' relationship with Margaret. She always makes use of her emotional 'so-called' weaknesses to keep him in the relationship. On the arty weekend at the Welch's, he meets Christine who is the girlfriend of Professor's son, Bertrand. Bertrand treats her badly, and he cheats on her. Both experience bad relationships, Christine and Jim kiss. Later, Jim gives a lecture about 'Merrie England'; he is drunk, mocks the Professor, and finally passes out; thus, this disaster causes him to put an end to his employment. However, Christine's famous and wealthy uncle Gore-Urquhart offers him a job in London and finally, Christine agrees to be with him. At the end of the novel, the new couple walks past the Welches on the street; Jim is highly confident with his new pretty girlfriend and his well-paid job, and he has the last laugh for them.

Since *Lucky Jim* is a work of campus novel, its protagonist is an academician, Jim Dixon, but this book does not present a perfect hero to its readers as in traditional genres. The novel includes an anti-hero who is aware of his weaknesses. He is not a handsome man, and he is presented as "fair and round-faced, with an unusual breadth of shoulder that had never been accompanied by any special physical strength or skill" (8). Dixon does not have idealistic opinions on the academic world as well. When his colleague Beesley asks him why he is a medievalist, he answers that he does not have any special interest in it and adds:

(...) the reason why I'm a medievalist, as you call it, is that the medieval papers were a soft option in the Leicester course, so I specialized in them. Then when I applied for the job here, I naturally made a big point of that, because it looked better to seem interested in something specific. (Amis 33)

The academic world is just a job opportunity for him; it is not an idealistic dream. In order not to lose his job, he tries to please Professor Welch, and he says what Welch wants to hear, even though Dixon does not like him. Since Dixon is not a successful or ambitious academician, he cannot focus on preparing his lecture 'Merrie England'. He calculates any kinds of time-wasting activities such as "a minute off for being introduced to audience, another minute for water-drinking, coughing, and page-turning" (165). He has only a page and three lines of script. He hopes that his friend Barclay finds him a book on medieval music which will cover twenty minutes and he prepares even his apology sentence "(...) 'having let my interest run away with me'. Welch would absolutely eat that" (166). Yet, he still needs more information and finally, another friend Johns says that he has notes on 'The Age of Chaucer', and Dixon cheers up because "he might be able to construct the rest of his lecture entirely out of others' efforts" (169). These non-academic behaviours of the protagonist are the reflection of the main criticism about Redbrick Universities, for the common perspective about these institutions is that "the professor and lecturer for doing too little research and teaching" (Silver 180) and this

creates “the weaknesses of the redbrick universities” in “the conduct of their academic staff, the nature of their organization, the quality of the educational experience” (Silver 181). Many critics evaluate them as “nothing more than a pale and failed imitation” of the old ones (Whyte 9).

Lawrence Stone believes that there should be a close relationship between society and its university, and this emerges as “one of the most potentially illuminating, but most practically obscure, aspects of the process of historical change” (v) because universities do not only consist of buildings, gardens, instructors, or students, these institutions stand “at the bidding of a particular civilisation, to grow up in their own way” (Driver 25). In these distinctive communities, the most criticized thing is naturally the academicians. In this novel, Dixon is also fond of alcohol and smoking and these bad habits drag him into funny incidents. He is invited to the arty weekend at Welch, and he does not feel comfortable among the Welch family, their son Bertrand, and his girlfriend Christine. Additionally, he argues with Margaret at the very time they get closer. Then, he leaves the party and goes to the pub. In the morning, he realizes that he has burned bedclothes and a table in his sleep with his cigarettes. He is afraid of getting fired and “he started carefully cutting round the edges of the burnt areas of the bedclothes with the blade. (...) the cause of disaster wasn’t so immediately apparent” (63). Yet, he is not satisfied with the result, and “this time he made jagged cuts into the material, little inlets from the great missing areas” (65). Finally, he confesses it to Christine, and she suggests remaking the bed by putting all the mess at the bottom and says, “they’ll think you tore them with your feet in a nightmare or something” (73). So, she helps him, and they tidy the bed and move the table into the junk room. His drinking habit also puts an end to his academic career. Another incident happens on the lecture day of Merrie England, which is really important to Dixon, for if he is successful and he pleases others, his probation will be under guarantee. However, his presentation turns into a disaster because of his drunkenness. He is in a panic and thinks that he will burst into tears. He begins to imitate the voices of Welch and the Principal and then he reads faster. “[T]he local worthies were staring at him with frozen astonishment and protest (...) shouts, whistles, and applause came from the gallery” (226), he begins to lose consciousness and passes out. That is the final straw, and he gets fired. With the help of these funny examples, Amis presents the ineligible academician in both a community and on campus.

Dixon has a tricky characteristic and throughout the novel, the readers come across his comic lies and deceptiveness. For instance, before participating in the arty weekend, he cautions his friend to call him. In the early morning, he calls as he promised, and Dixon announces that his family is in the city and that he must leave. In fact, it is a lie to escape, and this lie nails the counter after he leaves. In another tricky event, Dixon calls the Welches to have information about whom Bertrand goes to the summer ball to inform Catherine. As soon as Mrs Welch answers the phone, she asks, “That’s Mr Dixon, isn’t it? (...) what you did to the sheet and blankets on your bed...” (99). He suddenly interrupts her and pretends as if he is a reporter “No, Mrs Welch, there must be some mistake. This is the *Evening Post* speaking. There’s no Mr Dixon with us, I’m quite sure” (99). He continues his lie by asking questions to Bertrand and he learns Bertrand’s plans about the ball. Another example of deceptiveness appears at the end of the ball. Dixon offers for Christine to leave the ball and says that he will order a taxi and wait for her. After twenty-five minutes, he can see neither Christine nor the taxi, but suddenly

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a taxi stops and asks, “Taxi for Barker” (129), he knows that the taxi is ordered for Mr Barclay. He again pretends as if he is Mr Barclay and orders the taxi to wait on the next street until he will come back with his friend. At that moment, Mr Barclay and his wife appear and ask him if he sees a taxi for them. He lies and says, “I just came out to get a breath of fresh air” (130). After Christine goes out and joins him, Dixon sees the same taxi again and talks to him secretly, and then he says they will walk. However, the reality is that “we’ve pinched their taxi, (...) it’s parked just round this corner” (132) and all the way, he continues being Mr Barclay. Although Dixon is not an honest and hardworking person, at the end of the novel, he gets what he desires: a wealthy and pretty girlfriend and a satisfying job in London as it is said in an old song at the beginning of the novel: “oh, lucky Jim, how I envy him”.

Amis criticizes the academic world of the twentieth century in *Lucky Jim*. The clarity and realism of his writing style and language make it seem as though the characters' conversations are happening in our everyday lives. He constructs his language on comic elements without using metaphors. For instance, when Dixon and Beesley are talking, Beesley utters as a ‘life-like’ character:

If we institute an entrance exam to keep out the ones who can't read or write, the entry goes down by half, and half of us lose our jobs. And then the other demand: “we want two hundred teachers this year and we mean to have them.” All right, we'll lower the pass mark to twenty per cent and give you the quantity you want, but for God's sake don't start complaining in two years' time that your schools are full of teachers who couldn't pass the General Certificate themselves, let alone teach anyone else to pass it. It's a wonderful position, isn't it? (Amis 170)

The passage demonstrates Amis' ability to employ satire and humour to shed light on the shortcomings of the academic world. It invites readers to reflect on the challenges and contradictions present within educational institutions, questioning the efficacy and integrity of the system.

After World War II, the most important thing is to have a proper job even among academicians in prestige universities. Most of them prefer earning money rather than teaching qualified lessons to successful students. The critic Terry Eagleton also discusses the academic world after the war as follows:

Intellectuals are seen as faintly sinister figures, bohemian and nonconformist, treasonable clerks whose heartless celebrations pose a threat to the unreflective pieties of ordinary life. But they are also pathetically ineffectual characters—crumpled figures of fun pursuing their ludicrous abstractions at a remote distance from the bustle of daily life. The anxiety and resentment they inspire can thus be conveniently defused by a sense of their farcical irrelevance (Amis 93).

It is as if this passage was written to define Professor Welch. The readers do not witness his academic profession except for being the Head of the History Department. He never utters anything about history; even in his daily talks, most of the time he does not finish his sentences. He is fond of music and tries to involve in the ‘artistic world’. Dixon really hates him, but he has to put up with him, in the beginning of the novel, his thoughts are:

He pretended to himself that he'd pick up his professor round the waist, squeeze the furry grey-blue waistcoat against him to expel the breath, run heavily with him up the steps, along the corridor to the Staff Cloak-room, and plunge the too-small feet in their capless shoes into a lavatory basin, pulling the plug once, twice, and again, stuffing the mouth with toilet-paper. Thinking of this, he only smiled dreamily... (Amis 9-10)

Throughout the novel, Dixon's dreams have continued with these kinds of funny expressions. He finds solace in these playful fantasies, as they allow him a momentary escape from the frustrations of putting up with his boss. In his mind, he creates various absurd scenarios where he can find some peace and satisfaction as a temporary break.

The novel suggests that the twentieth century's 'love' is not sacred, or it is not hard to access, Dixon remains in between Margaret and Christine. He expresses both their bad and good sides and he does not blindly love or like one of them. When he is alone with Christine at Welch's, he asks her if she is in love with Bertrand or not. She answers, "I don't much care for that word" (143), and continuously gives open-ended answers. Dixon utters "If you can tell me whether you like greengages or not, you can tell me whether you're in love with Bertrand or not" (144). As she states that she is not sure, he tells: "What about rhubarb? Ever since my mother stopped forcing me to eat, rhubarb and I have been conducting a relationship that can swing between love and hatred every time we meet" (144). Dixon compares love with ridiculous and abnormal kinds of fruit, and he oversimplifies the term. To him, it is not a complicated issue, but a simple one that a person may easily determine whether a relationship is a love or not.

Kingsley Amis has different female characters in his novel than the previous century's female figures. They are not stuck at home anymore. In *Lucky Jim*, when Dixon is introduced to Christine, he always calls her 'the Callaghan girl' in his mind, and he dislikes her. Because she is a woman of a higher class, using her surname shows his frustration about his lower class. As time progresses, he realizes that she is not a snob, show-off, or pedant. However, she has a complicated relationship with Bertrand, and he cheats on her. She speaks out: "[Bertrand] came back with a lot of things about me being my own mistress, and I was to do what I wanted to do, and wasn't to feel I was tied in any way. It made me feel rather mean" (196). She is a viable woman, and she does not need any kind of protection from men; she has her own job, and she does not like to be told what she should do. This attitude astonishes Dixon, he "was interested by this conventional absence of conventional sensitivity; for almost the first time in his life a woman was behaving in a way alleged to be typical of women" (198). Christine is a modern woman who is independent in living her life and making her own decisions.

Through the other female character – Margaret, Amis criticizes the manipulative women figures. At the beginning of the novel, she commits suicide because his boyfriend Catchpole leaves her for another woman. When Dixon visits her, she makes fun of her suicidal attempt and utters, "if someone had shaken me and said, 'Come on, you're not going, you're coming back'" (18); from that moment she and Dixon get close; but it is hard to say that it is a relationship. She often quarrels with him and then she apologizes and continuously expresses how good Dixon is. They have an unbalanced relationship, and after Dixon warms towards Christine, every move of Margaret starts to irritate him, and he thinks "she was a neurotic" (77). After a while, "He would not waste any more time trying to conciliate her" and he speaks up to her "you must stop depending on me emotionally like this. (...) I've quite lost whatever interest I may have had in you as a woman..." (158). Suddenly, she has a 'so-called' hysteria crisis, and she presents one of the most comic crying scenes in literature. Dixon's friend Atkinson comes in and slaps her hard several times on the face and makes her drink whisky. She

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regains her consciousness, reapplies her make-up, and says, “stop worrying about me; I’m perfectly all right. Now I must be off, or I shall miss my bus” (163). Through the end of the novel, readers learn that her hysteria crises and suicide attempt are counterfeit. Catchpole and Dixon come together, and they realize that Margaret had two bottles of sleeping pills that day and informed both men separately. Catchpole says, “We were supposed to be there, then, and see what we’d driven her to, I knew she was neurotic, but not as neurotic as that. (...) She was never in any danger of dying at all” (236-237). Hence, the character of Margaret presents a satire on historical hysteric, emotional women.

### Conclusion

As a splendid example of the campus novel, *Lucky Jim* presents the academic world of the post-war twentieth century and the novelist creates an anti-hero who is not successful, idealist, brave or love-struck. He has weaknesses such as alcohol, smoking, deceptiveness, and telling lies. The only purpose of his academic career is to earn money. Thus, the characteristics of the protagonist are disparate from the traditional ‘heroic’ characters, and he is also not a qualified academician. The only mission that he fulfils is to please absent-minded Professor Welch who is a useless figure in a corrupted academic society. Hence, as criticized by ancient universities such as Oxford and Cambridge defenders, instructors are not enough to create a university community or culture. Their main purpose is not about education. In the novel, conventional meanings of love are also simplified. Additionally, characters do not know whether they really love someone or not. While Amis presents Christine as an example of a modern upper-class woman, he also presents the representative of a conventional woman with Margaret. In the end, the readers realize that the modern woman has a real world, but all the emotionally unbalanced acts of the conventional figure are not real. Women are not stuck at home anymore in the twentieth century, even though they pretend to they are. At the end of the novel, the protagonist negotiates the class division by having a relationship with a woman of a higher class and he gets a job that he desires with the help of his luck. Hence, his academic career improves only with his chance without his knowledge of English literature. Consequently, Amis breaks traditional rules and values, and he uses comedy to criticize the changing society. *Lucky Jim* serves as a sharp critique of the shifting academic, romantic, and societal landscape of its time. Through its subversive characters, examination of class dynamics, and satirical approach, the novel encourages readers to question traditional ideals and embrace a more nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in human relationships and societal structures.



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