

## 54. The Political Unconscious in Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam*: The Post-Cold War Paradigm Shift and Morality in the Era of the Late Capitalist Market<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Amsterdam* opens a new phase in Ian McEwan's writing career both for its differences from his earlier novels and short stories and for its Booker Prize success. Although the novel's early critics designate the novel as a lightweight diversion from McEwan's more serious subject matter, he earnestly dismisses these views and argues that while *Amsterdam* indeed differs from his novels written up to that point, this does not minimise the novel's significance. This article takes up McEwan's side in this debate in that *Amsterdam* is indeed a significant novel which reflects and reproduces perfectly well a post-Cold War paradigm shift in the world from a bipolar to a unipolar socio-political global order with which the previous power positions are forced, in the 1990s, to transform. McEwan's novel reflects this socio-political transformation, and it symbolically addresses the crises of power, authority, and direction by way of creating a tension, in its narrative, between moral obligation and self-interest, where moral duty aligns with left-wing politics and self-interest with right-wing politics. This article further argues that the novel does not only reflect and reproduce that historical-political context but also, when it is interpreted using Fredric Jameson's interpretative model for exploring texts' political unconscious, serves as a symbolic resolution of its given historical-political moment.

**Keywords:** political unconscious, morality, Fredric Jameson, Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*

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## Lan McEwan'ın *Amsterdam* Romanında Siyasal Bilinçdiři: Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Paradigma Değışimi ve Geç Kapitalist Pazar Çağında Ahlak<sup>3</sup>

### Öz

*Amsterdam*, hem yazarın önceki romanlarından ve kısa öykülerinden farklı oluşu hem de ona Booker Ödülü başarısını getirmesi sebepleriyle, Ian McEwan'ın yazarlık kariyerindeki yeni bir aşamanın başlangıcını işaret etmektedir. Her ne kadar ilk eleştirilenler bu romanı yazarın daha ciddi çalışmalarından bir sapış olarak tanımlasa da McEwan bu görüşleri ciddiyetle reddetmiş ve o döneme kadar yazmış olduđu romanlarından farkını kabul ederek yine de bunun romanın önemini azaltmadığını söylemiştir. Bu makale McEwan ile aynı görüşü benimsemektedir; *Amsterdam* gerçekten de Soğuk Savaş sonrası paradigma değışimini ve 1990'larda yaşanan küresel politikadaki eski iktidar konumlarını zorlayan iki kutuplu dünya düzeninden tek kutuplu dünya düzenine geçiři fevkalade bir şekilde yansıtan ve yeniden üreten önemli bir romandır. McEwan'ın romanı bu sosyo-politik dönüşümü yansıtır ve anlatısı içerisinde yarattığı 'ahlaki yükümlülük mü yoksa kişisel çıkar mı' gerilimi üzerinden, ahlaki yükümlülüğün sol siyasetle, kişisel çıkarın ise sağ siyasetle örtüştüğü sembolik bir yaklaşımla güç, otorite ve yönlendirme krizlerini ele alır. Bu makale ayrıca romanın yalnızca tarihsel-siyasi bağlamı yansıtıp yeniden üretmediğini, aynı zamanda, metinlerin siyasal bilinçdiřisini ortaya çıkarmayı vadeden Fredric Jameson'un anlamsal zenginleştirme yöntemi kullanılarak yorumlandığında, o tarihsel-siyasi bağlama sembolik bir çözüm sağladığını da ileri sürmektedir. En nihayetinde McEwan'ın *Amsterdam*'ı, bu köklü değışim döneminde güç, otorite ve yönlendirme krizlerini ele almaya çalışan sembolik bir eyleme dönüşür.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** siyasal bilinçdiři, ahlak, Fredric Jameson, Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*

<sup>3</sup> **Beyan (Tez/ Bildiri):** Bu makale "*Ian McEwan'ın Beton Bahçe, Kayıp ve Amsterdam'da Düello* romanlarında siyasal bilinçdiřisinin incelenmesi" isimli doktora tezi çalışmasından üretilmiştir. Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduđu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

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## 1. Introduction and theoretical background

Although the novel's early critics designate the novel as a lightweight diversion from McEwan's more serious subject matter (Childs, 2006, p. 125; Vine, 1998; Moore, 1999), he earnestly dismisses these views (Begley, 2010, p. 103) and argues that while *Amsterdam* is indeed "distinct from [his] novels written over the last ten-year period," this does not minimise the novel's significance (Bold Type, 1998). According to McEwan's own view of his novel, *Amsterdam* draws its power being a satire and should best be understood as a satirical comedy. Fredric Jameson's approach to literary criticism, as it is outlined in his seminal *The Political Unconscious*, which he terms 'semantic enrichment,' asks that critics consider any literary work within its historical-political context. This is particularly relevant for works of satire, where their relationship to their context is often starkly clear and even necessary for their signification (Highet, 1972, pp. 17, 231-238). However, how a text's historical-political context is thought to function differs between Jameson's model and a conventional historical criticism (1991, p. 81). Rather than merely examining how *Amsterdam* reflects and critiques its immediate historical moment, Jameson's framework would treat the literary work as a *symbolic act* that has more engagement with that historical-political context and that seeks to resolve a real socio-political contradiction within that context. Here, Jameson borrows extensively from Karl Marx to underline that any context, as explained by Marx's historical materialism, is an arena of class struggles where two antagonistic classes oppose each other over their mutually contradictory class interests. Such an interpretation moves beyond simply noting the novel's—be it a satire or not—reflection of contemporary follies, aiming to understand the deeper symbolic resolution the work proposes, a concept that will shortly be discussed.

Another point where Jamesonian literary analysis contrasts with the same in a more conventional sociology of literature manner is the location of the context. While social or historical criticism assumes context to exist independently and outside the text, Jameson considers it to be within the text, waiting to be uncovered. Here, Jameson draws upon Althusserian and Lacanian theories to discuss how and why context is "nonrepresentational" and is an absent cause "which cannot be directly or immediately conceptualised by the text" (1991, p. 82). Essentially, since it is not possible for the text to directly represent the 'real,' it goes on to re-textualize the real by way of inventing an intermediary subtext between itself and the real where the latter gets sublimated. This subtext becomes a sort of shadow of the real context where a real social contradiction gets sublimated into an ideological impasse—usually a binary opposition—that functions as "the symptomatic expression and conceptual reflex of ... [that] social contradiction" (1991, p. 83). Additionally, Jameson argues, when the subtext's ideological/symptomatic impasse gets "addressed and 'resolved' by the formal prestidigitation of narrative" (1991, p. 83), its resolution simultaneously serves as the symbolic resolution of the real social contradiction. This means that any analytical undertaking that aims to reveal a real social contradiction underlying a narrative has to, first, address its symptoms as they appear in this intermediary subtext.

Finally, the role that is played by ideology also varies between the two approaches. The conventional approach assumes an autonomous external reality outside the text from where ideology works to deliberately shape the narrative. Conversely, for Jameson, the very creation of the narrative is an ideological act that aims, albeit symbolically, to shape the external reality. Jameson posits that

ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions. (1991, p. 79)

When it comes to the practical task of carrying out the analysis, then, Jameson suggests initiating the analytical task within the text, moving outward through a process of symptomatic analysis contrasting with the conventional approach that seeks to move inward assuming a more straightforward correspondence between the internal and external elements.

Following the procedures suggested by Jameson in his own analytical work, the analysis here seeks to move outward by, first, detecting the central antinomy in the subtext. This central antinomy needs to be discovered beneath the more immediate surface of the text. Following this discovery, the interpretative act will, by way of using the Greimassian semiotic square, enlarge this central antinomy into a broader system of antinomies which underlies the whole narrative. Here, the contribution of the Greimassian square is to reveal how an 'ideological closure' operates on the narrative, which means that when a narrative movement starts out with a central antinomy, it locks itself within its boundaries and unavoidably restricts its frame of thought. Therefore, it can only conjure up so many alternatives to resolve the impasse as can be mapped out by the square. The final task is to take this system—the central antinomy, its implications and contradictories, its resolution as suggested by the narrative's closure—as symptoms of an underlying real social contradiction. Analysing the symptoms as such will, in the end, reveal that the text is indeed a symbolic act trying to resolve, albeit symbolically, a real social contradiction in its political unconscious.

## 2. Analysis and discussion

*Amsterdam*'s straightforward plot opens with two friends' rivalry—the main characters Clive Linley and Vernon Halliday—with two other characters—George Lane and Julian Garmony—over who is a better person and who deserves Molly the more. The opening scene is George's wife Molly Lane's funeral whom the other three men also dated and had a romantic relationship of great personal import with. This rivalry sets the central contradiction in the immediate surface of the text (Figure 1).

It should be noted that this surface opposition of macho rivalry belies the underlying antinomy in the narrative's subtext. Truly, it might be possible to consider their rivalry to be "an acrimonious personal squabble" in Brooke Allen's words (1999, p. 60) regarding how they were all in love with Molly. Yet, even if lovers' jealousy might seem as the reason for the dispute, it overlooks *Amsterdam*'s satirical significance. It is not necessary here to delve into how *Amsterdam* satirises its contemporary society's morals as several critics already underline the importance of registering the centrality of the theme of morality in *Amsterdam* (for instance: Wells, 2010, p. 85; Gray, 1998; Moseley, 1999). Upon closer analysis, then, the rivalry betrays its more abstract basis. Above all, ex-lovers never discuss nor think of Molly and their past in sexual or romantic terms. More than love, lust or possession, Molly symbolises social status. When Clive remembers her, for instance, he remembers a woman who turned him into a better person, and he prompts Vernon to talk about the things he might have learned from her (McEwan, 1998,<sup>4</sup> p. 8). Vernon agrees and discloses: "I can never remember sex, ... [b]ut I do remember her teaching me all about porcini, picking them, cooking them" (*Am*, p. 8). All in all, Molly becomes a mentor and a guide to a better moral stature. Therefore, Clive and Vernon's unease stems not from Molly's romantic entanglements with George and Julian but from her political and moral alignments. In other words, what concerns them more than her affairs with George or Julian per se are her involvement with a wealthy libertine and a conservative politician respectively ("Forecasts", 1998, p. 60). Since they see

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth to be cited as *Am*, short for *Amsterdam*.

themselves as morally superior to the latter, Clive and Vernon struggle to come to terms with how Molly was close to those two just as she was to them.

Having said that, it will now be better understood how the story progresses with a close focus on moral stature and moral choices, and not by macho male rivalry. Clive and Vernon, a locally famous national classical music composer and an editor who manages a well-known national newspaper, initially hold a suitably superior moral position compared to most of the novel's other characters. They symbolise self-sacrifice and moral duty. In contrast, the other characters, especially their rivals, epitomise self-serving efforts and personal advancement. In other words, underneath the rivalry, the narrative is structured around opposing moral viewpoints, with the main contrast being between moral duty and self-advancement (Figure 2).

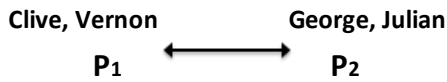


Figure 1. Claim to moral superiority



Figure 2. Concepts creating the central contradiction in the narrative

The narrator takes great care to depict Clive and Vernon in a positive light. He focuses on their presence in their respective workplaces—the artist's studio and the editorial floor—where they are shown as hardworking, diligent, conscientious, selfless, and also modest, respectful, generous, and considerate public figures. The narrative clearly highlights Clive's creative abilities, which he uses in service to his country and nation when needed—at the story's present, composing the Millennial Symphony for the British Nation. Vernon derives his power from journalism, the fourth estate of democracy, which is crucial in western democracies—at the story's present, grappling with reversing the long decline in his newspaper's circulation. It is emphasised that they are neither politicians nor businessmen: one makes art by “dreaming up sounds” (*Am* p. 139), creating entire symphonies, and the other reveals and spreads the truth.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, George and Julian contradict the other two as entirely self-serving individuals. George's depiction is that of a corrupt and wealthy but just as much of an unsophisticated man who has “pleading, greedy eyes” (*Am* p. 5). The man's selfishness gets highlighted by how he treats Molly on her sickbed. As a businessman running a publishing “empire” (*Am* p. 52), George lacks the genuine concern for journalism that Vernon claims to have. He publishes purely for commercial gain, producing trivial books on urban myths and similar subjects. Julian similarly gets his share of the narrative's harsh criticism. His portrayal, as the serving Foreign Secretary in the conservative government, is of a hypocritical man, a racist, a corrupt and chauvinist political figure. He “ha[s] made a life in the political marketplace with an unexceptional stall of xenophobic and punitive opinions” (*Am* p. 13).

Soon after these oppositions are established, Clive and Vernon face critical moments that challenge their moral standing. McEwan introduces the concept of making wrong choices early on, starting the novel with a short epigraph from a poem by W.H. Auden titled “The Crossroads”: “The friends who met here / and embraced are gone, / Each to his own mistake;.” The epigraph foreshadows how Clive and Vernon will each fail to keep up their initial standings due to a mistake shortly after their paths cross at the funeral. Each friend makes a ‘morally corrupt’ choice by opting for “self-advancement” (*Am* p. 126) over

“moral duty” (*Am* p. 119) when it matters. The former, for instance, ignores a woman who was trying to fight off a male assailant who eventually rapes her so that he can finish the composition of his symphony. The latter, on the other hand, exploits a private secret shared between Molly and Julian Garmony by publishing a sensational story to boost his newspaper’s circulation. Clive’s failure in keeping up with his moral duty is more concrete and disgraceful because of the nature of the crime, whereas Vernon’s is more abstract. Ultimately, these actions place Clive and Vernon on the same moral level as those they once looked down upon for their lack of ethics.

In summary, although the narrative prominently features a conflict between different male characters, this apparent contradiction reveals a deeper system in the subtext where the main opposition is understood in terms of moral standpoints: choosing self-advancement versus giving it up for moral duties when necessary. Resolving this tension will be the eventual objective of the narrative movement. This is where the first two steps of the interpretative act get completed and it becomes necessary to project the findings onto a Greimassian square. Upon being represented on the square (as in Figure 3 below), moral duty indicates immorality  $\bar{P}_1$  as a contradictory category while self-advancement the category of morality  $\bar{P}_2$ . Consequently, moral duty is associated with morality, whereas self-advancement is linked with immorality.

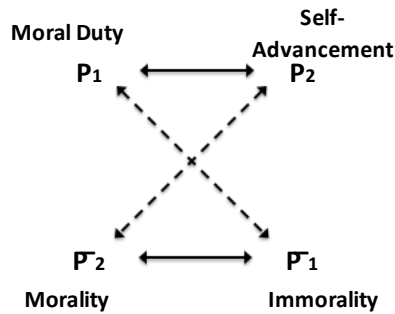


Figure 3. Broader implications of the central antinomy on a Greimassian square

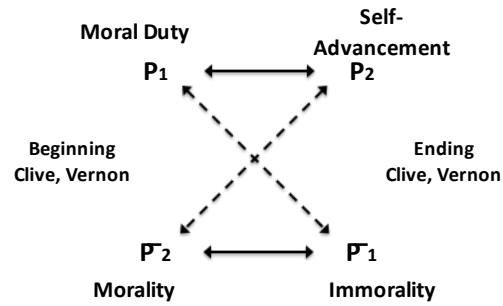


Figure 4. How Clive and Vernon’s initial stature changes

In binary oppositions, seme  $P_1$  is the position of desire while  $P_2$  becomes the one to be avoided. On the surface, *Amsterdam* prioritises moral obligations against plainly seeking one’s self-interest, an act that might lead to socially harmful results such as violating people’s privacy or ignoring others’ plight. According to Patrick Henry, *Amsterdam* appears to be

a warning about the dangers of immorality and the manipulation of others, a reminder that the authority of a cultural figure such as a preeminent editor or composer must be used for admirable causes—like McEwan’s protests against Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. (2008, p. 84)

The novel hence coheres as its author’s tribute to admirable causes and a warning against his society’s moral decay and social corruption. It might then easily be argued that *Amsterdam* serves to glorify moral obligations, Goodness, as opposed to self-interest that conflicts those obligations, Evil, if one is to appropriate Robert Kohn’s words about a “battle between Good and Evil” in *Amsterdam* (2004, p. 99).

Consequently, the story moves towards an ending where Clive and Vernon try each other for having chosen poorly, that is, in contradiction of their moral obligations and are found guilty. Each one faults

the other while failing to recognize his own misconduct. Vernon chastises Clive, saying, “[t]here are certain things more important than symphonies. They’re called people,” and gets reprimanded by Clive in return: “And are these people as important as circulation figures, Vernon?” (*Am* pp. 119-120). Each believes that although his friend “had not broken the law[,] there had to be consequences” for these actions (*Am* p. 147). Consequently, the narrative turns them into each other’s executioners, facilitated by the unlikely events meticulously woven into the plot since the opening scene.

Having lightly joked at her funeral about how helpless Molly must have been in her final years and how they “would have killed her with a pillow or something and saved her from everyone’s pity” (*Am*, p. 8), they agree to “do the same for [one another]” (*Am*, p. 57) should either show symptoms similar to Molly’s. Coincidentally, each later encounters a newspaper article reporting that “in Holland some unsavoury types with medical degrees were offering a legal service to eliminate [one’s] inconvenient elderly parent. ... All one needed was the aged parent’s signature in duplicate and several thousand dollars” (*Am*, pp. 142-143). Vernon, unaware of the fact that Clive is making similar plans, resolves to stick to their agreement because he believes “clearly Clive had lost his reason and something had to be done” (*Am*, p. 149). Vernon calls Clive knowing that he is going to be in Amsterdam for his symphony’s rehearsals, “pretend[s] to make peace, in order to invite himself to Amsterdam” (*Am*, p. 149). Ultimately, each believes the other has descended into immorality and evil. They describe this as a ‘loss of reason’ because they both think they have tried to reason with each other to correct the perceived error in the other’s judgment.

Eventually, Clive and Vernon succeed in killing one other off. This outcome indicates “how much McEwan despises his characters” (Lezard, 2021), as they suddenly turn into farcical buffoons in their final scene:

[Clive’s] hands ... were shaking now as he tipped the powder into Vernon’s champagne ... Then he stood and took a glass in each hand. Vernon’s in the right, his own in the left. Important to remember that. Vernon was right. Even though he was wrong.

Only one problem now preoccupied Clive ...: how to persuade Vernon to take this drink before the doctor came. ...

As Clive was looking round for somewhere to put down the drinks, he saw Vernon coming toward him with a big smile. Unfortunately, he had two full glasses of his own.

“Clive!”

“Vernon!” ...

“Look,” Clive said. “I had a drink all ready for you.”

“And I got one for you.”

“Well ...”

They each presented a glass to Lanark. Then Vernon offered a glass to Clive, and Clive gave his to Vernon.

“Cheers!” (*Am* p. 162-164)

McEwan appears to take delight in the duo’s tragicomic demise: their naivety while accepting the drink from each other’s hands, the unwitting smiles of triumph on their faces, and the overall tone of the narrative in the scene all work to compromise their self-proclaimed pursuit for moral justice in killing each other.

David Malcolm's interpretation of their end suggests that "[t]he moral could scarcely be clearer if the narrator set it out: 'Thus perish the hollow men.'" (2002, p. 194). He adds that "Vernon and Clive are duly punished—fired, disgraced, ridiculed" (2002, p. 194). Kohn agrees with this view, stating that the "novel comes to a satisfying conclusion, the two compromised friends punished for their hubris and greed" and for turning their backs on their moral obligations (2004, pp. 100-101). Lynn Wells interprets the whole enterprise as a "critique of popular or 'low' culture as devastating as that on elite or 'high' culture" (2010, p. 89) while Monica Cojocaru complements these arguments by stating that "[e]uthanasia, [as] McEwan seems to suggest, might be the sole remedy for the megalomania and moral degeneracy of a generation for which Clive Linley and Vernon Halliday stand" (2012, p. 15).

While such interpretations are pertinent, they fail to notice that the program of morality which the novel seemingly puts forward openly malfunctions. The reason is that although Clive and Vernon appear on the axis of  $P_1-\bar{P}_2$  when the novel opens and then slide over to the opposite side with their respective mistakes (Figure 4), George and Julian should already be seen there, marking the  $P_2-\bar{P}_1$  axis all along. If veering into the 'evil' side brings about Clive and Vernon's deserved punishment, the question why George and Julian are not so punished points towards where the interpretative act needs to turn to next.

Starting with George, it is clear he embodies the archetype of the antagonist when it comes to moral duties. Beyond his initial immoral stance, he is the catalyst for much of the narrative's action. It is him who rummages through Molly's possessions to find Garmony's photographs. While giving Vernon the photos with the aim of getting them published, George states "[t]he copyright was hers, and as the sole trustee of her estate, I effectively own it. It goes without saying, I shall expect the Judge to protect its sources" (*Am*, p. 56). Yet, it is revealed in the end that "Molly [has] assigned the copyright to Linley" (*Am*, p. 175). Additionally, despite offering the photos to Vernon purportedly to help save the *Judge* from going bankrupt, "George, concealing his identity behind an agent, went on the open market with the pictures... Eight other newspapers put in bids, and Vernon had to quadruple the original price to secure the deal" (*Am*, p. 101). George is a troublemaker through and through, willing to turn his back upon anyone for profit. For instance, when the publication of the photos creates a public backlash, he asks the administrative Board to fire Vernon. When public opinion turns against Vernon, the Board ponders the dilemma: "How could they sack an editor to whom they had given a unanimous vote of support last Wednesday? Finally, after two hours of meandering and backtracking, George Lane had a good idea" (*Am*, p. 127). Completely disregarding his role in Vernon's predicament, Lane acts in his own interest and abandons Vernon. Finally, the reader learns of George's master plan. While *en route* to Amsterdam to escort the coffins back to England together, George turns to Garmony and, with feigned sincerity, says: "You know, I think you came out of it bloody well. ... Most men would have hanged themselves for far less" (*Am*, p. 176). As noted by Earl Ingersoll, this indicates that "George apparently was certain [the photographs] would appear in print, causing Garmony enough embarrassment to hang himself and Vernon to be publicly condemned as his murderer" (2005, p. 135).

In spite of all his misdeeds, the ending is a resounding victory for George. Firstly, despite the scandalous nature of the affair's conclusion, the publicity Vernon generates for the Judge leads to a rise in circulation figures, the "best in seventeen years" (*Am* p. 113), translating to a profitable outcome for George. Secondly, in the novel's closing scene, the narrator, having previously relayed the story from Clive and Vernon's perspective, now adopts George's viewpoint. The reader sees George full of joy. Returning from escorting Vernon's coffin, he contemplates visiting Vernon's widowed wife Mandy, indulging in his own thoughts:



[H]e found his thoughts turning pleasantly in other directions: Garmony beaten down, and trussed up nicely by his lying wife's denials of his affair at her press conference, and now Vernon out of the way, and Clive. All in all, things hadn't turned out so badly on the former-lovers front. This surely would be a good time to start thinking about a memorial service for Molly. ... Yes, a memorial service. St. Martin's rather than St. James's, which was favoured these days by credulous types who read the sort of books he himself published. (*Am* p. 178)

Essentially, George has successfully removed all three men he viewed as rivals. Furthermore, he is arranging Molly's memorial service as a lucrative publicity opportunity for his publishing empire. On top of all this, the reader hears his plans about Mandy: "[h]e'd known Mandy for years. A great girl. Used to be rather wild. Perhaps it was not too soon to ask her out to dinner" (*Am*, p. 178). In other words, if interpreted romantically, George achieves victory on multiple fronts: defeating his adversaries, securing profit, and potentially winning the affections of Mandy.

As for Garmony, he also survives the narrative. The narrator points out that "in the country at large the politics of emotion may have bestowed forgiveness, or at least tolerance, but politicians do not favour such vulnerability in a would-be leader" (*Am*, p. 174). Thus, despite losing all hopes to be elected prime minister, Julian remains a VIP (*Am*, p. 174), retains the moral support of the nation, and reconciles with his wife and children. Although his political career may now adopt a lower profile, he is poised to continue it. Yet, all this is made possible by Rose, his wife who easily lies to the public in order to save Julian's career.

Frank Dibben is another character who is rewarded at the end as he succeeds Vernon as the editor of the *Judge*. Frank "Cassius" Dibben, nicknamed after the Roman conspirator, proves to be a manipulative figure. The reader witnesses how he publicly defies Vernon while secretly calling him into meetings after work to pressure Vernon into publishing the photographs. Frank hides his true feelings towards Vernon and praises Vernon to encourage him to publish the photographs. He claims to want to support Vernon and be of use, but he insists on not openly aligning himself with Vernon to maintain his own strategic advantage (*Am*, p. 106). Despite the reader easily seeing through Frank's backstabbing and double-dealing, Vernon fails to recognize it, perhaps due to his desperate need for an ally. Frank seizes an opportunity: if Vernon succeeds, the paper is going to sell more and pay more, and the editor will owe Frank a favour. If Vernon fails, he will be fired, and Frank, perceived as having stood against Vernon throughout the ordeal, will replace him. Ultimately, Frank's plans succeed, and he becomes the next editor of the *Judge*, benefiting from the paper's highest circulation figures in seventeen years, thanks to Vernon's efforts.

Therefore, while the narrative initially appears to be propelled by the conflict between morality and immoral self-advancement and seems to punish characters based on these values, the evident triumph of characters like George, Julian, Frank and Rose at the end does not align with that interpretation, as they escape any such punishment. Reconsidering, as the next step of the interpretative act, this problematic narrative conclusion as the symptom of a contradiction in the underlying context helps clarify its reasons behind. Jameson's approach, which emphasizes the analysis of texts within their historical and cultural contexts, allows for a deeper understanding of the underlying forces at play in *Amsterdam*.

According to Jameson's model, once a narrative becomes entrenched in its inherent system of contraries and contradictories, it attempts to reconcile these opposing forces by forcing semes into synthetic combinations. The potential for progression, innovation, or breakthrough lies in the possible combinations of the semes as they are laid out in the square (Figure 5 below). They offer the narrative

the possible directions it might take and also chances to resolve the fundamental contradiction at its heart. Referring once again to Jameson, the semiotic square

can ... “reduce” a narrative in movement to a series of “cognitive” or ideological, combinatory positions; or it can rewrite a cognitive text into a desperate narrative movement in which new positions are generated and abandoned, and in which terms ceaselessly amalgamate in order to achieve the release of this or that ideal synthesis (1987, p. xvii)

Here, Jameson outlines how any narrative movement would try out all possible syntheses to find a way out of the impasse. He further details the workings of these combinations and names them. If  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are combined, it becomes  $S$ , or the place of complexity and utopia while combining their direct contradictories with one another,  $\bar{S}_1$  and  $\bar{S}_2$ , one gets  $\bar{S}$ , or the place of neutrality:

[T]he two compound or “synthetic” positions of  $S$  and  $\bar{S}$  offer still greater conceptual enlargements,  $S$  standing as a complex or utopian term, in which the opposition of “white” and “black” might be transcended ..., whereas  $\bar{S}$  stands as the neutral term, in which all of the privations and negations are assembled ... Finally, the transversal axes map the place of tensions distinct from the principal or binary one, while the synthesis hypothetically proposed by uniting the two sides of the square ... designates alternative conceptual combinations. (1987, p. xiv)

In simpler terms, the narrative attempts to break free from its deadlock by combining semes in four specific ways, as illustrated in Figure 5. However, in line with the underlying socio-political antinomy that drives the narrative, it tends to gravitate towards a particular synthesis as it strives for a breakthrough.

Jameson posits that narratives can integrate different positions through actants, aligning characters with contradictions or combinations. The characters who represent these positions might be laid out as in Figure 5. If the triumphant characters George, Julian, Frank, and Rose occupy the utopian position, a deceased Molly would occupy the neutral one. On the other hand, Clive and Vernon occupy the position of both Good and Evil as discussed above: at the outset, Clive and Vernon are depicted as moral idealists, upholding strict ethical principles and valuing universal adherence to these rules (Sobel, 1987, p. 277). Their early actions emphasise the importance of moral obligations over personal gain. However, their subsequent errors in judgment cause them to abandon this moral idealism, leaving this position unoccupied by any other character. In their transformed roles, Clive and Vernon embody moral nihilism, a viewpoint that dismisses moral values and duties, refusing to acknowledge any moral wrongdoing (Pratt, n.d.; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2019).

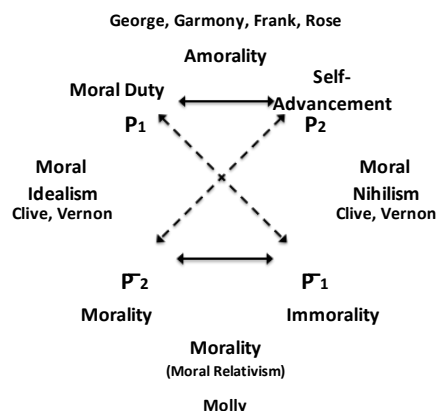


Fig. 5 Synthetic combinations and their actantial manifestations in the narrative

Consequently, with the eventual demise of Clive and Vernon, the narrative effectively removes the presence of evil by the end of the novel. This outcome may create the impression that good has triumphed over evil, as the wrongdoers are efficiently removed from the story. However, as previously noted, the absence of characters embodying goodness persists after Clive and Vernon are no longer in that role. This suggests that the narrative does not offer a clear resolution in either direction. In essence, while it does not conclude with the wrongdoers escaping unpunished, neither does it end with the victory of moral ideals or pure goodness. Instead, the narrative navigates Clive and Vernon's transition from positions of virtue to positions of wrongdoing, allowing them to be publicly held accountable for their actions, merely to provide a sense of closure and justice, satisfying the desire for retribution, while also diverting attention from other characters of similar immoral standing who escape punishment. These narrative choices indicate a move towards a more complex resolution in the story's conclusion.

As mentioned earlier, Molly occupies a neutral position along the axis (Figure 5). She is the neutral term because the moral stature she symbolises is not available to the society in *Amsterdam* anymore. Unlike the absolute polarity between idealistic and nihilistic morals mentioned earlier, Molly is the potential reconciliation of morality/immorality semes from a relativist standpoint, attributable to a feminine principle of benevolence. Molly engages with all the characters, hence with all moral stances, in the story, demonstrating an open and accepting attitude. However, her funeral at the beginning of the narrative and her absence throughout the rest of the story suggest that her role as a reconciler cannot be preferred in the narrative's resolution. Furthermore, no other female character steps in to fill the void left by Molly. Rose, a pediatrician-surgeon, initially appears to share Molly's nurturing qualities by aiding her husband in restoring his public image. However, Rose is actually complicit with the Conservative Party's media manipulators, using her professional identity for political purposes (Malcolm, 2002, p. 195). The narrative details how the Party orchestrates a television appearance to counteract and discredit Vernon's news story:

The party managers thought long and hard about the matter and made some reasonable decisions. One was to allow cameras into a well-known children's hospital that morning to film Mrs Garmony emerging from the operating theatre, tired but happy, after performing open-heart surgery on a nine-year-old black girl called Candy. The surgeon was also filmed on her rounds, followed by respectful nurses and registrars and hugged by children who clearly adored her. Then, captured briefly in the hospital car park, was a tearful encounter between Mrs Garmony and the little girl's grateful parents.

... While the sobbing father heaped half a dozen pineapples into the arms of the surgeon, a voice-over explained that one could rise so high in the medical hierarchy that it became inappropriate to be addressed as 'doctor'. It was Mrs Garmony to you. (*Am*, p. 121)

The narrator keenly describes the devious and disgraceful tactics employed by the party managers, who exploit a poor immigrant 'black girl' to elicit sympathy and support for a politician who is hypocritically known for his "xenophobic and punitive opinions" (*Am*, p. 13). Furthermore, the narrator depicts Rose's readiness to let her professional identity be exploited by media manipulators as an ultimate betrayal of common ethical principles and medical ethics. The whole charade of a benevolent doctor finding joy in her exhaustion after surgery in a moving moment of tearful parents expressing gratitude, serves to compensate for the absence of such qualities of benevolence, self-sacrifice and love in Julian Garmony.

The doctor's collaboration goes beyond being passively useful for the Party's counterattack; Rose actively participates the endeavour by openly lying. Talking to the press following the hospital scene mentioned above, she announces that "she was glad to be able to put the record straight and make it clear that there was absolutely no foundation to the rumour. Molly Lane was simply a family friend, and the Garmonys would always remember her fondly" (*Am*, p. 124). However, Rose's disdain for Molly was already made clear when she privately expressed her relief that Molly is dead: "Molly Lane's letters, the ones that stupidly indulged his grotesque cravings. Thank God that episode was over, thank God the woman was dead" (*Am*, p. 95). In other words, Rose also turns into a hypocrite like her husband when she goes on to denounce Vernon's character on moral ground, announcing that Vernon has "the moral stature of a flea" (*Am*, p. 125) and that "love was a greater force than spite" (*Am*, p. 124).

As a result, Rose does not fulfil the role of benevolent and empathetic female that Molly once embodied. This suggests that the narrative rejects a welcoming reconciliation as a viable resolution. Instead, the story gravitates toward a more complex synthesis, which it ultimately adopts in its conclusion.

At the narrative's conclusion, what sets the only remaining characters apart from Clive and Vernon comes to define the complex synthesis the narrative opts for. The four surviving characters can be seen as embodying a sense of 'amorality,' which is at odds both with Clive and Vernon's moral idealism and their subsequent moral nihilism, as well as Molly's benevolence and relativism. While the latter three options operate within the realm of morals, even if in different ways, amorality operates differently. Unlike moral idealism, moral nihilism, or moral relativism, which involve affirming, denying, or contextualizing moral values, amorality is indifferent to morality and moral judgments by and large. This indifference grants the amoralist a perspective that transcends such concerns. From this transcendent position, the amoralist does not perceive an inherent contradiction between concepts like moral duty and self-advancement, and can choose to disregard them as they see fit.

In Anita Superson's definition, an amoralist "recognizes the existence of moral considerations [but] remains unmoved" (2009, p. 127). Joel Marks (2013) states, as an apology for amorality, that the "morality is not an element of our best explanation of the world as we know it" (p. 17) and goes on to add that "[a]morality is guilt-free" (p. 48). Thought of within the context of unconstrained capitalism in the post-Cold War era, that refers to the impersonal operations of the free market, which prioritise profit above all else. How corporations of the period embrace the maxim to "forget about human issues and concentrate simply on profits" is already an established notion (Donaldson, 1982, p. 78). William Quigley describes corporations as "huge amoral behemoths" that operate without regard for moral codes (2003, p. 2). Similarly, James Hazelton (2005) explores why public companies are inherently amoral, emphasizing that their actions are motivated solely by profit maximization (p. 378). He discusses

corporate social responsibility projects to illustrate that businesses only take part in endeavours that would benefit the society or the environment when it aligns with profit motives (p. 367). Numerous studies suggest that the capitalist pursuit of profit is inherently amoral, as indicated by Beth Stephens's (2002) article title. Within the capitalist free-market, participants are aware of moral codes but remain indifferent to them due to the market's inherent focus on profit and loss. In this context, moral duties are only pursued when they coincide with the goal of maximizing profit, as Hazelton argues.

In a similar manner, George, Julian, Frank and Rose are rewarded for their indifference to moral codes, except when those codes can serve their self-interests. This narrative conclusion elevates amorality to the ideal synthesis at the end of *Amsterdam*. This synthesis resolves the original antinomy by incorporating it into a new antinomy that acknowledges but remains unaffected by moral considerations unless they are profitable or prevent losses. This represents a shift away from old dichotomies toward new ones, reflecting a paradigm shift. Therefore, in accordance with Jameson, this conclusion is taken to be the symptom of an underlying real social contradiction: the paradigm shift of the post-Cold War era. Considered in Jamesonian terms, then, the contradiction in *Amsterdam*'s first subtext becomes a projection and the false ideological appearance of a real social contradiction featuring in its nether subtext: the paradigm shift of the post-Cold War era.

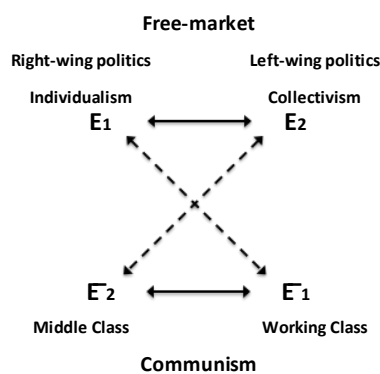


Fig. 6 Cold War and post-Cold War politics

Following Jameson's argumentation, it is hence revealed that *Amsterdam* implicitly acquiesces to the hegemonic worldview of the unconstrained free market in the post-Cold War 1990s. This underlying real historical-political context can be visualised as shown in Figure 6. The terms that are preferred to denote the antinomy in this underlying context are 'left' and 'right', with the acknowledgement that, as Norberto Bobbio elaborates, these terms can be ambiguous both descriptively and evaluatively in political contexts, unlike their clear-cut connotations in religious allegory (1996, pp. 35-37). Steven Lukes similarly warns that " 'left' and 'right' are classifications that are both cognitive and symbolic: they promise understanding by interpreting and simplifying the complexities of political life, and they stimulate emotions, awaken collective memories, and induce loyalties and enmities" (2005, p. 602). Nevertheless, both scholars, along with many others, emphasise that this distinction has endured since its inception during the French Revolution and remains a fundamental political dichotomy. For instance, Rodney Carlisle (2005) dedicates two substantial volumes to explaining this primary political distinction and antinomy in his *Encyclopaedia of Politics: The Left and The Right*. Steven Lukes himself refers to it as "the grand dichotomy" (p. 602).

In this article, these two fundamental terms are employed in their most conventional meanings, as Roger Scruton analyses in *A Dictionary of Politics*. According to Scruton, the left is “the polar opposite of right” and is “[hostile] to private property” (1986, p. 260). The left advocates for “social ownership as the ideal alternative” and embodies “egalitarian leanings” within at least a welfare state framework (Scruton, 1986, pp. 260-261). Conversely, the right, as defined in Scruton’s *Dictionary*, is “defined by contrast to (or perhaps more accurately, conflict with) the left” (1986, p. 408). The right supports “private property, not as a natural right, but as an indispensable part of the condition of society,” and values “the irreplaceable worth of the individual as opposed to the collective” (1986, p. 408). Essentially, the right represents individualism, while the left stands for collectivism. This right versus left polarity in the real context hence corresponds to the central antinomy in the text’s immediate subtext: self-advancement versus moral duty.

During the Cold War, the primary divide was between the leftist communist bloc and the rightist capitalist bloc. This divide aimed to categorize all aspects of life into binary value judgments such as right/wrong, good/bad, moral/immoral, fair/unfair, and rational/illogical, among others. Although delving deeply into the Cold War is beyond the scope of this study, John Lewis Gaddis provides a succinct account of this bipolarity at the Cold War’s core, stating that

[i]t was a division of the world into two hostile camps. It was a polarization ... into antagonistic spheres of influence. It was an ideological contest, some said between capitalism and communism, others said between democracy and authoritarianism. ... It was a struggle that took place within each of its major adversaries as supporters and opponents of confrontation confronted one another. It was a contest that shaped culture, the social and natural sciences, and the writing of history. (1992, p. 234)

Gaddis highlights that the confrontation between communism and capitalism, or the left and the right respectively, was not only a clash of military or economic forces but also a struggle between two opposing claims to truth, rightness, goodness, and moral superiority. As Gaddis notes, each side tended “to attribute a positive value to their own political programmes and a negative one to those of their opponents” (Bobbio, 1996, p. 37). This ideological conflict is mirrored in Clive and Vernon’s tendency to judge their own and others’ actions according to similar moral dichotomies, such as moral/immoral, right/wrong, or good/bad.

This ultimately establishes that the underlying socio-political conflict driving the political unconscious of *Amsterdam* is the contradiction of bipolar Cold War politics and the challenge of resolving this in the post-Cold War unipolar world order. The British social, political, and cultural landscape was inevitably shaped by this paradigm shift. During this transitional period, as polarized value judgments became obsolete, societies from both sides of the Cold War had to find new ways to make sense of their lives and create meaning. Nick Bentley highlights the impact of this crisis on British culture and worldview in the 1990s.

During this transitional period, when polarized value judgments became obsolete, societies from both sides of the Cold War had to find new ways to make sense of their lives and create meaning. Nick Bentley underscores the impact of this crisis on British culture and worldview in the 1990s:

Two international events, standing at either end of the 1990s, had a crucial political and symbolic resonance for British culture. At one end was the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent dismantling of the Communist regimes of eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. At the other end of the 1990s, or at least close enough to represent a symbolic shift in world politics, were the events in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 (9/11). (2005, pp. 2-3)

Building on Bentley's emphasis on the political and symbolic significance of the end of the Cold War, it is evident that *Amsterdam* serves as a symbolic act attempting to address the crises of power, authority, and direction during this period of profound change.

### 3. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to conduct a symptomatic analysis of the antinomies within Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam*'s narrative to uncover the novel's alignment with the hegemonic worldview of the unconstrained free market of the post-Cold War 1990s. During this decade, the global political landscape shifted from a bipolar to a unipolar world order, causing traditional power structures to collapse. McEwan's novel reflects this global and domestic socio-political transformation, symbolically addressing the crises of power, authority, and direction during this period of significant change. The evolving dynamics of power challenge and necessitate the adaptation or abandonment of old paradigms. For those who derive their identity and importance from these obsolete conflicts, this transition is a pivotal moment for redefining themselves, their roles, and their social influence. The novel's tension between moral obligation and self-interest reflects this real crisis of the post-Cold War era, where moral duty aligns with left-wing politics and self-interest with right-wing politics.

In grappling with the contradictory shift in socio-political realities, *Amsterdam* portrays the binary oppositions of Cold War bipolar politics and British neo-conservative politics as moral dilemmas. The novel eliminates characters who cling to these outdated binary categories, rather than abandoning them for a new kind of politics: free-market politics. Essentially, *Amsterdam* bids farewell to certain hegemonic binaries but ultimately, due to its inability to break free from the ideological constraints of its narrative, submits to the dominance of the unconstrained capitalist market, as described in Fukuyama's 'end of history.'

As extensively discussed, Clive Linley and Vernon Halliday meet their demise in a mutual vendetta, unable to reconcile with the shifting socio-political landscape and clinging to outdated dichotomies that define them. Conversely, characters like businessman George Lane, newspaper deputy editor Frank Dibben, and Tory Foreign Secretary Julian Garmony, along with his surgeon wife Rose Garmony, rise to prominence by embracing the imperatives of the evolving socio-political environment. With Clive and Vernon's demise, the narrative bids farewell to the old order—as in McEwan's words (Bold Type, 1998)—while embracing the ascendancy of George, Frank, Julian, and Rose. In this new paradigm, traditional antagonisms dissolve under the sway of the unchecked capitalist market, where everything is commodified for profit. It's the ability of George, Frank, Julian, and Rose to transcend the morality/immorality dichotomy and opportunistically utilise moral positions for self-advancement that leads to their triumph.

This article is based on a chapter from the doctoral dissertation completed by the author.

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