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Apocalyptic Metafiction in Four British Novels

by

Mark S. MacLeod ©

A thesis submitted to the Department of English

in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

thesis advisor: Dr. Frederick M. Holmes
Lakehead University Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada
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Abstract

A postmodern novel displays a self-conscious attitude toward its own fictional status. Elements of the text undermine the illusion of reality within that text. Until recently this type of narrative, sometimes referred to as metafiction, was less evident in the work of British novelists, who have tended to prefer traditional realism, than in fiction by their French and American counterparts. Four novels published in Britain within the last ten years, which are characterized to a varying extent by forms of metafictional expression, are: Waterland by Graham Swift, Small World by David Lodge, Blackeyes by Dennis Potter and London Fields by Martin Amis. Although the premise of realism in each novel is never fully relinquished, the technique of metafiction, as Patricia Waugh has commented, subverts purportedly objective realism in order to challenge the coercive rhetorical structures of literature, history and other texts whose agendas are supported by now suspect empirical assumptions (1-7).

This problematic effect also qualifies a variously manifested apocalyptic vision of cultural decadence and failure. The ultimate prospect of death looms over chaotic, indeterminate human affairs suggesting futility, absurdity or fatalism. Alienation portrayed in the novels as a response to a perceived absence of existential

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significance is tinged with irony, whether the mood is morbid or comic. The focus of this thesis will be on the fusion of metafiction to realism, which, in these otherwise arbitrarily chosen works, elicits irony in the depiction of an apocalyptic theme. An introductory chapter will discuss historical influences on these contemporary English novels pertaining to their self-conscious and apocalyptic aspects. The following four chapters will deal with each of the chosen novels in turn in order to explore their particular relationship to apocalyptic metafiction.

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Introduction

The manifestations of postmodernism in novels by contemporary British authors including Graham Swift, David Lodge, Dennis Potter and Martin Amis constitute literary descendants of an established tradition in the English novel which has long offered an alternative perspective to conventional realism for the fictional presentation of experience. When Joseph Conrad chose to frame his symbolic portrait of evil and colonial exploitation, Heart of Darkness (1902), inside the narrative device of Marlow's shipboard tale, he was using the basic metafictional structure of a story within a story. The artistic self-consciousness usually attributed to postmodern fiction undermines realism, and is evident in this foregrounding method which functions here to qualify the authority of the narrator's story by framing his subjective perspective. In his study of the self-conscious novel, titled Partial Magic, Robert Alter claims a distinction between artifice intended to be a means of verisimilitude, as in the convoluted narratives used by some modernist writers, including Conrad, and that of truly self-conscious fiction which overtly questions its own mimetic validity (xiii). However, Alter later acknowledges an aspect of Conrad's perspective which he describes as "reflecting through fiction on the illusion-masked abyss of emptiness over which everything human is built, including the fiction" (137). This

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attitude also characterizes a type of self-conscious fiction referred to as apocalyptic metafiction. Darkly cynical in its view of reality, Conrad's work relentlessly attempts to probe the irony in human actions and show their moral implications, although his texts often suggest the difficulty in making objective judgements. The horror of what happens to Kurtz, as witnessed and recounted by Marlow, is also an apocalyptic vision depicting the end of a nightmarish journey into the human psyche. Kurtz's failure as a cultured individual to deal with his own unlimited freedom and responsibility in the jungle results in his moral corruption, and is paralleled in the sham notion that the presence of civilized Europeans will bring beneficial progress to Africa. Aesthetically driven by modernist-symbolist disaffection with the representation of experience and character through the traditional methods of realism, Conrad's novella may be considered a somewhat tentative precursor to a notable stylistic and thematic tendency in postmodern British fiction published in the last thirty years.

Among critics who do not consider postmodernist fiction to be a sharp break with modernism, Gerald Graff, commenting on the works of Henry James and Joseph Conrad, notes they combined two qualities: "an intense dedication to unravelling the secret springs of motive and action with an acutely developed sense of the ultimate futility

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of such an enterprise" (235). The humanist concerns expressed by nineteenth-century realism to portray the individual in his social milieu are qualified in modernist novels by experiments in technique driven by aesthetic doubts and in postmodern fiction like that of Swift, Lodge, Potter and Amis by a further loss of faith in the ability of art to represent reality which itself is seen as only provisional. This skepticism is coupled with a self-conscious display of the novel's status as artifice.

As in <u>Heart of Darkness</u>, the otherwise disparately fashioned novels <u>Waterland</u>, <u>Small World</u>, <u>Blackeyes</u> and <u>London Fields</u> depict, more or less self-consciously, an ironic response to failure or loss, although sometimes with humour rather than pathos. Martina Sciolino asserts that postmodern fiction, based as it is on an awareness of lost values and beliefs, can be compared to the psychological state of mourning: "Fiction takes fiction-making as topic as the mourning subject replaces his or her own ego temporarily for the lost love-object or idea. Hence the narcissistic impetus of contemporary texts" (144).

Apocalyptic metafiction, if it is understood to denote any form of textually parodic or self-reflexive view of crisis, failure or doom, either serious or farcical, can be traced farther back in the English novel, at least to Laurence Sterne's radically digressive

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The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy (1759-67). In this "cock and bull" tale which teasingly confronts mortality, the narrative is routinely interrupted with tangential asides mocking the usual linear advance of the storytelling process toward an ending, with humorous ramblings in which both the narrator's and the characters' affairs ultimately come to nothing. Between the bleak fatalism expressed in Heart of Darkness and Sterne's archly self-deprecating wordplay is a range of fictional perspectives encompassing much of what is now viewed as the postmodern attitude in contemporary British fiction.

Alter describes the historical tradition of the self-conscious novel starting with Cervantes's Don Quixote, and credits its origins in English literature to the works of Henry Fielding (xiv). Both Shamela and Joseph Andrews parody what might be regarded as the prurient excess of sentiment in Samuel Richardson's novels, whose intended realistic legitimacy derives from psychological detail using the epistolary convention. Fielding's obtrusive, ironic narrator in Tom Jones draws attention to the rhetorical qualities of narrative and becomes a model for the self-reflexiveness of Sterne's Tristram (39-41). Alter notes, however, the element in Sterne's novel which sets it apart from Fielding's comic style:

> The comedy of Tristram Shandy is clearly of another order--not the affirmation of artifice

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> as a means of constructing models of harmonious integration but the use of laughter as the defense-action of an embattled psyche, its chief means of confronting the terrors of loneliness, frustration, pain, of its own inevitable extinction....Sterne's novel begins with the act of conception that is supposed to lead to the birth of the hero, but a death-Yorick's-is the most prominent event of the first volume. The famous black page, prefaced by the double quotation of "Alas, poor Yorick!" reduces death to a literary and typographical joke, yet paradoxically confronts us with death as an ultimate, irreducible fact, the final opaqueness beyond the scope of language and narrative invention... (42)

Tristram's ostentatious wit in dealing with an existential dilemma blends a morbid subject with an absurd manner and, as Alter has observed, this playful acknowledgment of death is in itself a realistic depiction of a human response. Contemporary works of apocalyptic metafiction also use artifice to qualify their own views of disaster, and the subversive nature of self-conscious narrative, which questions the ability of fiction to convey experience, offers the perhaps dubious solace that within the postmodern sensibility aspects of reality itself may be considered a fiction.

The aesthetic value of recent examples of such fiction, as in their literary predecessors, is a product of more than just these characteristics of textual narcissism or apocalyptic subject matter. In both Heart of Darkness and Tristram Shandy the rhetorical effect of language, used realistically to depict irony in the workings of human nature, is also an essential

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determinant of their artistic impact. Although complete objectivity is elusive in value-judgements, it is apparent that the usual canon is not dominated by self-conscious or apocalyptic works, even if they date back to the beginnings of the novel as a genre. This discussion in fact aims to show that a realistic depiction of irony in the four novels by Swift, Lodge, Potter and Amis is critical to whatever effect they may have as postmodern works.

The connection of apocalyptic metafiction with irony and realism characterizes Graham Swift's Waterland, where the relationship of personal and public history to the present and the future is depicted in a problematic, discontinuous fashion. Linda Hutcheon cites this novel as an example of what she terms "historiographic metafiction": a narrative whose parodic or self-reflexive text points to the coercive, linguistic patterns of history and fiction which reproduce the agenda and social structures of the prevailing culture (5). The intent of postmodernism in such a text, as Hutcheon states, is to reveal an inherent process: "that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning" (xii-xiii). Although Swift's novel does foreground its own provisional status in the narrator's shifts between the present and the story of his family's past, the sense that conventional history is illegitimate

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as a received ideology and arbitrary construct appears secondary to the realistic unfolding of an immanent sense of failure. Blending traditional realism with metafictional elements to reveal ironies, this novel may be viewed as representative of the usual British approach to experimentation in the contemporary novel, which has been less radical than some American postmodernist works whose techniques using an excess of narrative interruption, parody, or contradiction more decidedly signal the artifice of the text.

As a critic of postmodern fiction, Graff asserts "that the revolutionary claims which have been widely made" for its ostentatious wordplay and parody are overrated, and that such techniques are ultimately trivial, an expression of "a reactionary tendency, [and] one which reinforces the effects of technocratic, bureaucratic society" (219). Certainly postmodernism is a ubiquitous phenomenon in contemporary western culture: exhibited in self-conscious, parodic theatre, film, television shows, magazines, comic-books, music, the newsmedia and visual arts, in addition to literary fiction. In this regard its expression could not now be considered avant-garde or revolutionary in the sense that the first examples of this type of literature would have been. However postmodern fiction attempts to alert us to the mimetic pretensions of traditional realism, and reveals as Larry McCaffery notes:

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> the way that words beguile, mislead, and shape our perception...the way imagination builds its own realm out of symbols....the way that reality and commonsense are disguised versions of ideologies that are foisted on individuals by institutions that profit by the acceptance of these illusions. (xvii)

Like the classical period of ancient Rome, postmodern fiction is interested in the rhetorical power of language. As a contemporary movement, it is philosophically connected to theories of both Marxism and Structuralism in its concern with the socio-economic underpinnings of culture and the power of language.

In Small World, David Lodge illustrates the postmodern sensibility as he mixes literary theory with sexual exploits in a richly plotted narrative of comic contrivance and parody which questions cultural assumptions about fiction and reality. With several prominent allusions to other texts and provocative discussions of literature and criticism, this is to some extent a novel about literature. A product of its self-reflexive elements, Lodge's satiric portrait of academic politics and romance is also fundamentally apocalyptic in its view of existential and literary matters. The validity of the characters' experience and the future of academic criticism are in doubt. The effect of this novel is sometimes unsettling despite the humour, and Lodge in his own literary criticism has stated: "The difficulty for the reader, of postmodernist writing, is not so much a matter of obscurity (which might be cleared up) as of

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uncertainty, which is endemic, and manifests itself on the level of narrative rather than style" (Modes of Modern Writing 226). Uncertainty in Lodge's novel extends to the implications and validity of the text itself, which self-consciously foregrounds the fictionality of experience in metafictional asides commenting on its own status as artifice.

With an increasingly rapid pace of social change, a condition of twentieth-century life has necessarily been a fundamental uncertainty felt by individuals regarding their future security in an unstable world, together with a loss of faith in traditional values. These personal uncertainties sometimes manifest themselves in art as a hesitancy to represent viable standards whether in terms of ideology or aesthetics. The morally instructive and confidently mimetic, realist Victorian novel gives way in the modernist English novel to examples of ironic cynicism in Conrad's fiction, and the experimental narratives of Virginia Woolf. In overtly postmodern works such as The French Lieutenant's Woman by John Fowles, existential doubts about the nature of reality are self-consciously expressed in devices such as the incongruous appearance of the author's contemporary persona in the historical time-frame of the novel, and in the alternative endings which flag the artificial status of the text, further undermining its legitimacy. A tenet of the postmodernist attitude is that the ability of art to

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convey truth is illusory because reality, grounded in the false networks of signification on which the structures of culture are based, is itself illusory. Although authors as long ago as Cervantes displayed their doubts concerning the limitations of language in the novel, readers were usually willing to suspend their disbelief for the sake of the pleasures of immersion in a created world. If this is still the case, there is now, however, a pervasive cultural scepticism in place of beliefs once generally accepted. In The Death of the Novel Ronald Sukenick describes the empirical basis of traditional realism which has now been questioned:

> Realistic fiction presupposed chronological time as the medium of a plotted narrative, an irreducible individual psyche as the subject of its characterizations, and, above all, the ultimate concrete reality of things as the object and rationale of its description. (41)

Some contemporary British fiction features typically postmodern visions of fragmented personality, disrupted sequence, heightened artifice and the absence of discernible meaning.

With its stylized fusion of elements from popular genres and other media, and a complex web of self-reflexive narrative levels, Dennis Potter's novel, Blackeyes, is, in some aspects, nearer to a fully postmodern work than the works of Swift, Lodge or Amis, although it is still not radically unrealistic or self-conscious in the manner of some American fabulation or metafiction. A labyrinthine murder story, it reflects the

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author's successful career as a writer of scripts for British television and the American movie industry through virtually seamless transitions between visually realized scenes and its parody of the commercial nature of society. Dealing with death, corruption and the loss of creativity, Potter's novel is also an apocalyptic view of decay in contemporary England.

Commenting on British literature as a product of cultural influences in The Social Context of Modern British Liteature, Malcolm Bradbury notes that in a situation "where the past is dead and the present is dying", our attention becomes forward looking (3). However, the tendency toward an apocalyptic vision in some recent metafictional novels, if considered in light of Sciolino's concept of loss and mourning, could be seen as a reactionary artistic response to our alienated relationship with the past. A radical process of historical transformation has been occurring for a long time in Western culture. As Bradbury himself observes: "The point about the industrial revolution, which distinguishes it from all other revolutions, is that it never stops" (Social Context 5).

That the four rather arbitrarily chosen novels which are the subject of this thesis are part of a larger observable trend in contemporary fiction is probably due to more than the effect of writers coping with change. Apart from the usual modern and postmodern preoccupations

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with cultural decay, the collapse of traditional values, the provisional nature of reality, the limitations of language and general existential uncertainty, each of these novels was published during the 1980s, and is partially a reflection of "fin de siecle" sentiment. This presentiment of imminent collapse accompanied by an awareness of decadence can be associated with the attitude that originated the term near the end of the nineteenth century, and with chiliastic predictions as the end of the millennium approaches.

Frank Kermode explores the apocalyptic concern of literature throughout history in The Sense of an Ending. He describes this involvement as a fundamental human need to acknowledge the import of an individual person's life and death in connection with that of the larger world's, that is: "a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end" (4). Although the secularization of society and the failure of previous theological predictions of apocalypse to materialize have qualified the religious expectancy of catastrophe for many, there exists nevertheless a general acceptance that the End, though it has not happened, may yet happen. With regard to literature, Kermode extends this process of accommodation further to state: "And although for us the End has perhaps lost its naive imminence, its shadow still lies on the crises of our fictions; we may speak of it as immanent" (6). Today's fiction reflects this

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immanence in doomsday scenarios of nuclear holocaust, plaçue, and disasters caused by man's callous exploitation and destruction of the natural environment. Whether these themes are depicted in literary fictions or the popular genres of science-fiction or thriller novels, their appeal is strong and probably linked to the fact that the threats they depict are plausible.

Martin Amis creates a grotesquely rendered apocalyptic world in his novel London Fields. In this dark portrait of England at the end of the millennium, both society and the earth's atmosphere are sick while nuclear war and other planetary cataclysms are suggested as imminent threats. Mortality is a central thematic issue as the plot centers on the murder of one of the novel's main characters who orchestrates her own death. Even the narrator is dying. The metafictional quality of the story derives from the highly self-conscious, exaggerated style of its narrative which parodies the conventions of mystery and romance while telling a story about writing a story.

Amis's novel is postmodern in its surreal excess and like the novels by Swift, Lodge and Potter, it may be said to undermine the ostensible mimetic authority of traditional realism and the received text. However, like other works of postmodernism it does focus on traditional subjects, as Brian McHale posits:

> Postmodernist fiction may be unrealistic, but antirealism is not the sole object of

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> representation. Indeed, two of the favoured themes to which it returns obsessively are about as deeply coloured with "traditional" literary values as anyone could wish. What could be more traditional than love and death? (222)

Each of the four contemporary novels which are the focus of this discussion contains some form of love story, and each deals with death, or at least the death of ideals. It is not surprising that apocalyptic metafiction, from the cough-racked banter of Tristram Shandy, to Marlow's reminiscence of his alter-ego in Heart of Darkness, to postmodern examples, should be fundamentally involved with the question of death. McHale suggests that metafiction mimics the process of death by crossing ontological limits, and thus "through vacillation between different kinds and degrees of 'reality' ....Postmodernist writing enables us to experiment with imagining our own deaths, to rehearse our own deaths" (232).

Apocalyptic metafiction may be recognized as handling issues central to human interest such as love, ambition and death, while it functions to signal the provisional and illusory nature of reality imposed by coercive texts. However, British authors have usually been relatively conservative in favouring a largely realistic premise in their fiction as a means of representing traditional values in literature. Malcolm Bradbury describes this humanistic concern in The Novel Today as "an attempt to salvage a modern humanism, to

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maintain the idea of character against the swamping text" (19). If the conservatism described here has declined in the years since Bradbury made this comment, metafictional novels are, in my view, still dependant for their aesthetic impact on a sufficient level of realism in order that the reader may have an emotional communication with the text based on recognition of the common ironies which underscore human experience. The following chapters will discuss Waterland, Small World, Blackeyes and London Fields regarding their thematic and ontological linkages, in order to explore particularly the relationship of apocalyptic metafiction to realism and irony.

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Chapter one

Waterland

> Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. (Swift 291)

In Graham Swift's Waterland (1983), the antithetical juxtaposition suggested by the title's oxymoronic status is echoed in paradoxical associations throughout an apocalyptic narrative which self-consciously questions the functions of history and fiction. The narrator, a middle-aged London history teacher, is obsessed with the relationship between his own experience, the processes of history and the telling of stories. He has become an anachronism: his subject to be subsumed at the high school where he teaches into what the administration considers the more socially relevant discipline of general studies. His wife has just committed a shocking offense, abducting a baby from an unattended shopping cart at the local supermarket and has been subsequently confined to a mental hospital. The teacher's notoriety through this association is compounded by his own recent behaviour in the classroom, since he has largely dispensed with the authorized curriculum in favour of telling the students (and the reader) discursive accounts of his youth and family background in the English Fens district. Attempting to convince his sceptical pupils that the study of history can yield an understanding of today's problems and help them adapt to an uncertain future, his reminiscences of childhood events and

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explanations of regional history fail to offer consolation for the estrangement of his wife, his childless marriage, and the impending loss of his teaching position.

These self-conscious and rather pedantic narratives are what constitute the bulk of the text in Swift's novel, which features very little dialogue. However, in the story's disjointed alternations from past to present an imaginatively rendered and vividly realized Fenland setting is depicted that is rich in metaphor, and offers some compelling portraits of characters floundering in a swamp of sometimes tragic determinism. A pervasive sense of impending failure or disaster is evoked as individual and family fortunes collapse, natural catastrophes recur and the threat of nuclear annihilation is acknowledged as a factor in some of the characters' current feelings of unease. This apocalyptic view is sustained in a self-conscious narrative which ultimately subverts its purported insistence on the legitimacy of traditional notions of history and fiction and their functions as tenets of humanism. Alan Hollinghurst elaborates on the novel's apocalyptic and metafictional stance:

> ...the very ambivalence of its title is a warning of the book's quicksand uncertainty and obscurity. For the primary paradox is that its prodigal imaginative vitality is at the service of a vision of life that is appallingly bleak, where life in the imagination is virtually all there is left. (1073)

The text's manifest uncertainty, symptomatic of

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postmodern fiction, breeds doubt not only about what portions of narrative are history or fiction, but also about the differences between textual history and fiction.

Waterland has been described as overly pedantic and eager to make its ideological points, even at the expense of its artistic impact. This criticism which could as legitimately be applied to much postmodern fiction has been levelled at Swift's novel by Michiko Kakutani who observes: "his displays of technique and cerebral dexterity tend to hamstring, rather than support, his imaginative transactions. As a result, '*Waterland*' is a curiously passionless book" (25). William H. Pritchard has complained that although the book's self-reflexive text is usually imaginatively impressive, "there is also a quotient of hot air" in what could be deemed as some instances of narcissistic excess (9). However, I would argue that the work's unsettling impact as an apocalyptic vision stems from this metafictional attitude, blending realism with a self-consciously didactic narrative that functions ironically to invoke uncertainty as to meaning, intent or validity.

Swift prefaces his ambivalent conception of history and fiction in the first of the novel's two epigraphs:

> Historia, ae, f. 1. inquiry, investigation, learning.
> 2. a) a narrative of past events, history. b) any kind of narrative: account, tale, story. (ix)

This definition for the Latin root of history indicates

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that the word's etymology contains the basis for the inherently dubious distinction between the objective recounting of historical events through empirical knowledge and the imaginary discourses of fiction. The other epigraph: "Ours was the marsh country" (ix), is taken from Charles Dickens's novel Great Expectations (1861). This specific quotation from an earlier work dealing with failed prospects, if interpreted metaphorically, suggests an indeterminate region, neither terra firma nor clear water, where, in the contemporary novel, cognitive bearings and philosophical footings may be lost. Linda Hutcheon explains the postmodern interpretation of history and literature:

> What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past....In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past "events" into present historical "facts". (89)

While Waterland reflects this problematic relationship, it also assumes the realistic premise of traditional nineteenth-century English novels such as Dickens's, in its descriptions of family history and the natural history of the Fens.

The novel begins with the high school history teacher, Tom Crick, in the middle of one of his unsanctioned lessons, telling the class about his childhood in the Fens where his family "lived in a fairy-tale place" (1). The Cricks have always had a penchant

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for telling stories: "Made-up stories, true stories; soothing stories, warning stories; stories with a moral or with no point at all; believable stories and unbelievable stories; stories which were neither one thing nor the other" (1-2). This range of narrative intention is encompassed by the teacher's obsessive digressions and his official subject: the French Revolution and the contemporary relevance of history for his students.

The disdain for the study of history expressed by Lewis Scott, the headmaster and former science instructor, underscores an avowedly utilitarian perspective undermining Crick's views. Scott "believes that education is for and about the future" (18). He disapproves of Crick's recent classroom behaviour, referring to the story-telling departures from the syllabus as "these circus acts" (21). In a disillusioning affront to Crick's thirty-two year teaching career, Scott announces "We're cutting back on History" (4), and justifies the bureaucratic decision with a summary of his pedagogic philosophy, declaring that the school system should ideally provide children: "with a sense of his or her usefulness, with an ability to apply, with practical knowledge and not a rag-bag of pointless information" (19).

Crick is himself unsure of the validity of his vocation, reflecting that in the school administration's and his students' view, his sanity may have been

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compromised by his "long dabbling in the hocus-pocus" (18) of history. He has transgressed the boundaries of propriety and professionalism with his fairy-tale sessions on the Fens and family history. Functioning as Swift's narrator and authorial voice he also spans ontological borders in the self-conscious fashion of metafiction. This subversive aspect is indicated in a self-deprecating admission to his pupils: "old Cricky was trying to put himself into history; old Cricky was trying to show you that he himself was only a piece of the stuff he taught. In other words, he'd flipped, he'd gone bananas..." (5). The history master had, as Scott reminds him, been working on a book, "The History of the Fens", but he disregards the suggestion that he complete it as a sabbatical project, in favour of continuing his new classroom lessons. These involve recounting the central story of his life which issues from an evening in 1943 when he, his widowed father and mentally retarded brother Dick find the body of one of his school friends, Freddie Parr, floating by their lock-keeper's cottage.

Crick is taunted in the classroom by a troublesome student named Price, a character who persistently states the novel's apocalyptic concerns. Affecting a corpse-like pallor by wearing off-white make-up, and denigrating history as fairy-tale material, Price asserts that what is important "is the here and now" (5). He frequently interrupts his teacher's steadfast attempts to explain

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the traditional justifications for the study of history. Once, Price interjects with an ominous pronouncement that history is "probably about to end" (6), giving voice to the general anxiety about the future which his classmates share. The headmaster is also uneasy, speaking of building a bombshelter in his home for the sake of his children, and keeping liquor in his office filing cabinet to cope with an ulcer caused by worry over the uncertain future awaiting the school's pupils. Crick's wife Mary appears to be obsessed with the imminent apocalypse, suddenly becoming religious and attending confession for the first time in almost forty years. He is appalled by the books she is reading with their eschatological titles: *If Jesus Returned* and *God or the Bomb* (111). Paralleling the forebodings of catastrophe in his students' dreams of nuclear war and his wife's reading interests, Crick sees his own world coming to an end and attempts to find the cause by ransacking the past for answers.

Much of the narrative in Swift's novel functions as a didactic explanation of history in which the teacher is simultaneously searching for clues to explain the problems of his own life. Crick reminds his young classroom listeners that history starts with the question why:

> And what does this question why imply? It implies--as it surely implies when you throw it at me rebelliously in the midst of our history lessons-dissatisfaction, disquiet, a

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> sense that all is not well....History begins only at the point where things go wrong; history is born only with trouble, with perplexity, with regret. (92)

Although Swift's pedantic spokesman offers up convincing explanations of conventional historicism, he undermines those same assumptions with self-conscious "histrionics" (115) and brooding admissions of failure: "It's a curious thing, Price, but the more you try to dissect events, the more you lose hold of what you took for granted in the first place--the more it seems it never actually occurred, but occurs, somehow, only in the imagination..." (121). The recognition of the illusory nature of experience is in accord with postmodern scepticism of empirical analysis. Crick extrapolates from this sentiment with his explanation of the paradox suggested by the regressive tendencies in revolutions, arguing that "What we wish upon the future is very often the image of some lost imagined past". (122)

Postmodern fiction and theory make narrative problematic by questioning its validity, and contemporary historiography reflects this concern. Linda Hutcheon, describing Waterland as an example of "historiographic metafiction", also observes that this type of postmodern literature:

> like both historical fiction and narrative history cannot avoid dealing with the problem of the status of their "facts" and the nature of their evidence, their documents.... The epistemological question of how we know the past joins the ontological one of the status of the traces of that past. (122)

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Hutcheon's term for this genre also denotes the parodic intertextual connections between fiction and history in which the postmodern novel mimics or refers to earlier narratives self-consciously in order to subvert them.

The story that Swift's narrator recounts in an almost unbroken monologue blends actual historical events with fictional history and the fictional present. Although these individual elements are realistic within their separate narrative frames, the net effect of this structure is metafictional, and can be compared to Heart of Darkness. The fragmented, nonlinear history that Crick addresses to his students is, like Marlow's impressionistic shipboard tale, a story within a story, and this elementary foregrounding technique provides the framework within which the ostensibly realistic narrative segments are undermined. In the manner of most first-person fictional perspectives, Swift's history teacher is subjective, and the reliability of the text he delivers is problematic. He colours this temporally disjointed history with his own perceptions and prejudices; he is an actor in his own story and therefore his reporting must be suspect. This unreliability is complicated by the layer of ontological perspectives in the narrative: Tom Crick the young boy in the middle-aged man's memory, Crick the history master earnestly trying to justify his profession through argument and anecdotal digressions while he faces forced retirement and his wife's

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breakdown; and behind these surrogates, Swift the author.

In Waterland the usual linear chronological sequence of conventional realism is replaced by the fractured time frames common in postmodern fiction. The novel's opening scene introduces the teacher describing his boyhood spent at the lock-keeper's cottage on the River Leem, where his superstitious father told stories. The physical presence of this setting is evoked in concrete, vivid images, as he recalls the oppressive flatness of the Fens:

> Flat, with an unrelieved and monotonous flatness, enough of itself, some might say, to drive a man to unquiet and sleep-defeating thoughts. From the raised banks of the Leem, it stretched away to the horizon, its uniform colour, peat-black, varied only by the crops that grew upon it--grey-green potato leaves, blue-green beet leaves, yellow-green wheat; its uniform levelness broken only by the furrowed and dead-straight lines of ditches and drains, which, depending on the state of the sky and the angle of the sun, ran like silver, copper or golden wires across the fields and which, when you stood and looked at them, made you shut one eye and fall prey to fruitless meditations on the laws of perspective. (2)

Passages describing the past convey a sense of realism as legitimate as those set in the present, undermining the ontological supremacy of the "here and now" as the foundation of significance. Swift deftly reproduces the impressions of a genuine reminiscence in sensuous detail, including the narrator's olfactory memory of the lock's particular odour:

> Then the water in the enclosure above it, like the water in the lock-pen, would be smooth and placid and it would give off that smell which is characteristic of places where fresh water

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> and human ingenuity meet, and which is smelt over and over again in the Fens. A cool, slimy but strangely poignant and nostalgic smell. A smell which is half man and half fish. (3)

Jumping from these Fenland recollections to the present scene at a London school in 1980, Crick's classroom lectures on the associations between history, fairy-tales and "the here and now", profess a view of existence based on humanist-empiricist assumptions. These notions are undermined by the text, however, as the contemporary relevance claimed for historical continuity, with its cause and effect logic, is questioned not only by the disbelieving students and the science-oriented headmaster, but also by the reader, who must assess the illogical events in the history master's discontinuous, self-conscious narrative.

Waterland may be considered as a meditation on the past and its implications for the conscience. Crick's interest in history is driven by his own experience, starting with the circumstances surrounding Freddie Parr's death in 1943. As the narrative alternates from the teacher's ancestry and youth in the Fens to his impending retirement, it becomes clear that deterministic forces have to some extent shaped his life. Acknowledging that he cannot deny the past, Crick had attempted to accommodate himself to it through a lifetime of study. Swift draws a parallel between the cumulative, reality-shaping effect of history and that of its texts, highlighting a postmodern awareness of the coercive

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nature of literature as a received cultural construct:

> And he made do precisely by making a profession out of the past, out of this thing which cannot be eradicated, which accumulates and impinges--whose action, indeed, was imitated by the growing numbers of books (works of history, but--more recently--also of natural history) which filled the first-floor room of the Greenwich house (109)

When on a summer's day the young Tom Crick sees the drowned body of Freddie Parr, who he knew could not swim, fished out of his father's lock with a large bruise on his head, he begins to be concerned with the question why, suspecting that his friend's death was not accidental. His suspicions are confirmed later that day when Mary Metcalf, who will become his wife, reveals that in order to protect him, she had told his older brother Dick that Freddie had fathered the baby she was carrying, and that Dick must have killed Freddie. Tom's lifelong obsession with history stems from his attempts to come to terms with his complicity in this affair, and is predicated by Mary's flat confession of the import of her news: "Which means we're to blame too" (30). She then undergoes a nightmarish abortion which renders her permanently barren, and when Tom later explains to his brother, the uncomprehending "potato-head" (27), that he is the product of an incestuous union of their mother and grandfather, Dick subsequently drowns himself.

The sequence of these events, mimicking the operation of memory, is fragmented during the course of Swift's recursive narrative, however, so that Dick's suicide, as

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the final critical incident in the legacy of guilt and tragedy that the history teacher's life perpetuates, is not disclosed until the final scene. While the novel's main storyline consists of Crick alternating between lectures on the relevance of history and recalling before his students the fateful events of his youth, another narrative traces the saga of his Fenland ancestors from the seventeenth-century: the phlegmatic Cricks and the entrepreneurial Atkinsons. There are also digressions on the natural history of the Fens, including the migratory and sexual characteristics of the eel, the struggle of land reclamation to overcome seepage and the inevitable formation of silt, an expository tract on phlegm, and the ominous aspects of the "East Wind" (234). These diverse narrative threads signal the contrived status of Swift's text.

If, as Del Ivan Janik has observed, Waterland can be viewed as both a series of history lessons and a "manifestation of man's need to tell stories to keep reality under control" (83), it can also be understood as a typical postmodern work, self-consciously toying with the boundaries that constitute fiction and history. Swift uses metaphorical language persuasively to compare the effect of history with a natural phenomenon. The reclamation of land in the Fens serves as the central metaphor: "So forget, indeed your revolutions, your turning-points, your grand metamorphoses of history.

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Consider, instead, the slow and arduous process, the interminable and ambiguous process-the process of human siltation- of land reclamation" (8). The essential ambiguity of human progress through history is analogous to the description of the underlying physical foundation of the novel's Fenland setting:

> The Fens were formed by silt. Silt: a word which when you utter it, letting the air slip thinly between your teeth, invokes a slow, sly, insinuating agency. Silt: which shapes and undermines continents; which demolishes as it builds; which is simultaneous accretion and erosion; neither progress nor decay. (7)

Crick's tone is pedantic as he recounts the annals of drainage and sluice building, suggesting nihilism and futility in the water-logged efforts of his forebears who had been employed in land reclamation since the eighteenth-century:

> When you work with water, you have to know and respect it. When you labour to subdue it, you have to understand that one day it may rise up and turn all your labours to nothing. For what is water, children, which seeks to make all things level, which has no taste or colour of its own, but a liquid form of Nothing? And what are the Fens, which so imitate in their levelness the natural disposition of water, but a landscape which, of all landscapes, most approximates to Nothing? (11)

This bleak vista suggests the physical essence corresponding to a nihilistic view of existence which the history teacher may have embraced, given the nature of his own situation: having lost the companionship of his wife in a childless marriage, and having been confronted with the phasing out of his life's work.

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Crick's lessons on the history of the Fens chronicle the devastation, and progress-levelling effects of periodic flooding, including those of the historical past such as the Great Flood of 1874, and a deluge in the more recent and impinging past which ruined the lock-keeper's cottage, his childhood home, ultimately precipitating his father's death from pneumonia in 1947. This recurring calamity also washed away, probably forever, the now economically redundant Atkinson Sluice on the River Leem, which had been constructed in the era before railways. A man-made boundary that was industriously fashioned to separate river and land, it is obliterated by the blind force of nature, creating a vast, unnavigatible swamp. The phlegmatic Cricks have instinctively resigned themselves to the inevitable regressive tide of nature: "Because they did not forget, in their muddy labours, their swampy origins; that, however much you resist them, the waters will return; that the land sinks; silt collects; that something in nature wants to go back" (15).

Waterland, if essentially realistic in each of its narrative components, is more than a revision of a conventional nineteenth-century English novel, depicting the impress of a particular social milieu on character in the manner of Eliot's The Mill on the Floss (1860), or Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891). Swift's novel, like many modern novels, is characterized by

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impressionism and concerned with the failure of institutionalized beliefs or values. It is also thematically postmodern and metafictional in its self-consciously sceptical attitude toward the status of fiction or history as representations of reality. Crick, as Swift's spokesman, is basically cynical about the role of history despite his professed respect for it:

> I present to you History, the fabrication, the diversion, the reality-obscuring drama. History, and its near relative, Histrionics....for there are very few of us who can be, for any length of time, merely realistic. So there's no escaping it: even if we miss the grand repertoire of history, we yet imitate it in miniature and endorse, in miniature, its longing for presence, for feature, for purpose, for content. (34-35)

As Crick recounts his family past, including the rise and fall of the Atkinson brewing and transportation empire, it becomes clear that he is interested in story-telling as much as history, effectively underscoring the interrelatedness of the two forms of narrative as a response to experience. The flatland dwelling Cricks had always used stories to cope with their fatalistic, melancholy view of experience, whereas the Atkinsons who were originally from the uplands of Norfolk, attempted to surmount their reality with visions of progress through enterprise, first in the barley trade, and then in brewing and the construction of waterways. The history teacher assigns a story-loving attitude to his Crick ancestors which could be extended to anyone who has to endure the "flat monotony of reality" (15): "How did the

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Cricks outwit reality? By telling stories. Down to the last generation, they were not only phlegmatic but superstitious and credulous creatures. Suckers for stories. While the Atkinsons made history, the Cricks spun yarns" (15). Swift's history-recounting narrator is by implication telling a story himself that is complete with superstitious elements. These include the reference in his autobiography to a folk belief that a live fish in a woman's lap will cause her to become sterile. Prophetically, he recalls when Mary had a squirming eel slipped into her skirt by his brother, and later a horrific abortion administered by a witch-like crone in a filthy thatched hovel leaves her unable to have children.

In the postmodern sensibility, where ontological zones are tenuous, reality may be considered as a fiction and vice-versa. Crick suggests that this is the case when he recalls the fear he experienced as a player in the too-real drama of Mary's disclosed pregnancy and Dick's murder of Freddie Parr. Tom was unsure of her story that the baby was in fact his rather than Dick's, and afraid of what his brother had done, or would do. The teacher's history lesson also questions how often people actually experience their immediate reality:

> How many times, children, do we enter the Here and Now? How many times does the Here and Now pay us visits? It comes so rarely that it is never what we imagine, and it is the Here and Now that turns out to be the fairy-tale, not History, whose substance is at least for ever

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> determined and unchangeable. (52)

Since Crick has also admitted that his discipline is a "fabrication" and "reality-obscuring drama" (34) akin to histrionics, Swift's novel in effect questions the legitimacy of any conception of reality. Robert Alter observes this subversive aspect of self-conscious fiction:

> Ultimately, there is no reality but consciousness, and consciousness is conceived as a tireless maker of poetic constructs, an inventer of endless imaginary--or if you will, fictional-events that order the data of experience, make the world real. The implicit conclusion... is that, finally, fiction is our reality. (154)

Paradoxically Waterland, as fiction, would be as real as the reality that it self-consciously parodies; and the enveloping thematic concern in Swift's novel about historical relevance and man's story-telling nature is characterized by this postmodern uncertainty regarding the ontological limits of fiction and reality.

As a work of apocalyptic metafiction, Swift's text uses Crick's story of his family history to illustrate the hollow assumptions supporting traditional notions of progress. The lessons trace the changing fortunes of the Atkinsons' commercial empire, which, paralleling the reach of the British Empire, were near their zenith during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Crick recalls how his grandfather, Ernest Atkinson, was the first head of the "Atkinson Brewery and the Atkinson Water Transportation Company" (136) "to assume his legacy

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without the assurance of its inevitable expansion" (137). He was more conservative than his father who, in his long tenure as a member of Parliament, had increased the scope of the family interests beyond the fading prospects of brewing and waterways to envision the grandiose policies of imperial progress. Ernest attempted to recover the more solid basis of his family's original reputation, when the Atkinson name was "first and foremost the name of a beer" (77), and by 1911 had developed his "Coronation Ale" (148), commemorating the ascension of the empire's new regent. Hoping to overcome the declining fortunes of the Atkinson brewery, Ernest had intended the new beer to duplicate the success of the family's famous ales of the past, but this ambition, like other hopes of improvement in Swift's text, is mocked by failure, and results in the ultimate destruction of the brewery.

In his classroom references to the French Revolution, Crick asserts that as a historically progressive transformation, it paradoxically contained a contrary movement which involved: "the idea of a return. A redemption; a restoration. A reaffirmation of what is pure and fundamental against what is decadent and false. A return to a new beginning..." (119). Like the French revolutionaries cited in his lecture, Crick's grandfather had this desire to renew, but was fated to succumb to the apocalyptic future which would haunt his descendants. As Swift's fatalistic narrator instructs the class-

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disrupting Price: "history is the record of decline" (122). Ernest Atkinson, disillusioned by the loss of his wife, his failed entry into the political arena (which he had hoped to transform), and the collapse of the family's commercial holdings, also lost his hold on reality, signalling the tenuous nature ascribed to reality in Swift's metafiction. Falling in love with his daughter Helen, he asked if she would bear a child by him who he hoped would be "the Saviour of the World" (197). She agreed, provided that he would consent to her marrying the shell-shocked veteran, Henry Crick. Helen became pregnant with her father's child and after the marriage, Ernest committed suicide: "confirmed in the belief that this world which we like to believe is sane and real is, in truth, absurd and fantastic" (202). This sentiment is itself substantiated when the Cricks' first-born child Dick, who was to have been "the Saviour of the World", turns out, in another of Swift's ironies, to be a "potato-head". Now, years later, Tom's wife has "lost her mind" (272) having stolen a baby she thought had been "sent by God. Who will save us all" (284). Her vision of a threatening doom is the current manifestation of the apocalyptic experience and madness which repeat themselves in Crick's family history.

For the history teacher, besieged by a past recalling madness and loss, his deranged wife has now become "only a story" (285), another element of his narrative which

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has to be explained. His obsessive empiricism is ridiculed by the disaffected Price, who charges: "'You know what your trouble is, sir? You're hooked on explanation. Explain, explain. Everything's got to have an explanation'" (145). The disparity between the contingent events of "the here and now" and the ordered narratives of historical or fictional texts is problematic for Swift's very self-conscious narrator whose recurring discussion of this relationship undermines the reader's confidence in the mimetic pretensions of literary artifice. Corresponding to both the time-span dealt with in Waterland and the rise of the novel as a genre, is a transition described by Gerald Graff, of the attitude toward rationalism and its relation to humanistic concerns:

> On the philosophical level, the critical philosophies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of empirical science dissolved the ancient connection between rational, objective thought and value judgements....Industrialism intensified the separation of fact and value by monopolizing objective thought in the form of technology, commerce, and in our own time bureaucracy, administration, and social engineering. In advanced industrial society, "reason" appears commonly as a cause of alienation rather than a potential cure, a value-free, depersonalized, finally aimless and irrational mode of calculation which subserves the goals of arbitrary power....with the proliferation of technological knowledge and the spread of the behavioral sciences, modern man comes to have a sense of being oppressed rather than enlightened by rational explanations. (223-224)

Crick's attempts to rationalize history are

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questioned by his students and his own conscience as being futile, self-serving or irrelevant to the "here and now". However, these explanations are indications of his intellectual involvement with experience. The history teacher claims that such "curiosity" (168) about people and their actions is fundamental to the human condition. This quest for causality which drives historical investigation is characterized by a paradoxical limitation, as Crick observes in one of his class lectures: "history is that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge" (94). Although he has long been fascinated by stories and history books, his relationship to these interests has changed from when, as a boy, he could innocently "Jump from one realm to another" without making associations or asking himself "where the stories end and reality begins" (178). The narrator thus foregrounds the postmodern uncertainty regarding divisions between purported reality and the texts of fiction and history.

The entire structure of Swift's novel is indirectly concerned with these ontological distinctions. From the present setting framing the remaining history lessons before the teacher's forced retirement, the narrative shifts to his fragmented reconstruction from memory of the events in his past which now haunt him. This thematic focus necessarily involves epistemological and

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ontological considerations since the narrator of Waterland is attempting to understand previous experience. Brian Mchale posits that the distinguishing feature of postmodern fiction is the primacy of concern with ontology rather than with problems of knowledge which characterize modern fiction (11). Swift's novel, reflecting English traditions, is not radically metafictional because of its realistic premise, but it does mix both ontological and epistemological concerns in its thematic focus.

Following Mary's revelation of complicity in Dick's murder of Freddie Parr, the former dilettante becomes an entangled participant in the historical narrative as Tom inspects the chest containing secrets which his grandfather entrusted to his brother. Inside it are the remaining bottles of Ernest Atkinson's potent "Coronation Ale", some of his journal notebooks (which Tom will later study), and a letter addressed to Dick. Tom explains the letter's contents to his distraught brother and, now years later, the history master broods on the tragic consequences of his involvement in these impinging documents of history:

> Once I toyed, once I dabbled in history. Schoolboy stuff. Harmless stuff, textbook stuff. But it never got serious--my studies never began in earnest--until one August afternoon, a prisoner myself of irreversible events, I unlocked the past inside a black wooden chest... (276)

After the revelation of Dick's incestuous lineage the

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parodic "Saviour of the World" drowns himself, and Tom spends the rest of his life trying to deal with his conscience, trapped as Michael Wood describes in "a network of irrevocable deeds, a cage of consequences" (48).

Swift's narrator is fascinated by story-telling and history because "it helps to drive out fear" (208), an apocalyptic anxiety which is rooted in "The feeling that all is nothing" (233). Crick realizes that fictions are built on the human need to make experience meaningful: "there's no saying what heady potions we won't concoct, what meanings, myths, manias we won't imbibe in order to convince ourselves that reality is not an empty vessel" (35). The narrative in Waterland questions the role of myth, as defined by Frank Kermode, in the recollection of past experience. Kermode compares fiction to myth, noting that fiction, unlike myth, is known to be imaginary and meant to "make sense of the here and now"; whereas myth "makes sense in terms of a lost order of time" (39). Having lost long ago the innocence of youth, Crick's reminiscence may be founded on myth as he recalls the scene of Dick's fatal plunge into the River Ouse: "Did he move first or did I shout first? And did I really shout aloud, or did the words only ring in my brain (and echo ever after)" (309)?

The apocalyptic view in Waterland is revealed on a thematic level throughout the course of the discontinuous

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narrative. Placing himself in the context of history as the subject matter for his lessons, Crick's recounting of his family past suggests the futility of human existence. Reiterating the metaphor of land reclamation, which recalls the novel's main setting and the ambivalence of its title, he tells his students that "It's progress if you can stop the world slipping away" (291). His own experience supports this fatalistic attitude as the legacy of tragic determinism extending from his grandfather's incestuous obsession and suicide, to Freddie Parr's murder and Mary's abortion, to his culpability in Dick's suicide, surfaces years later in his wife's dementia and the scandalous kidnapping which has brought his career to an abrupt end. Deprived of the support of his wife and of progeny, his life-long discipline is held in disrespect by the students and a headmaster more concerned with "the here and now" and with a future menaced by nuclear holocaust. The novel's final scene, returning to the events of 1943, depicts the drowning of Tom's brother in starkly figurative terms: "And the smell of silt is the smell of sanctuary, is the smell of amnesia. He's here, he's now. Not there or then. No past, no future. He's the mate of the Rosa II.

And he's the saviour of the world..." (308).

Dick's suicidal plunge into the Ouse after drinking the last of his grandfather-father's powerfully intoxicating "Coronation Ale" is the symbolically culminating act

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stemming from the marriage of the enterprising Atkinsons who "emerged from beer" and the "stick in the mud Cricks" who "emerged from water" (54).

The thematic concern with apocalypse in Waterland is at odds with the narrator's self-conscious intention to show the relevance of history as a cyclical process. Although Crick's investigation of the past and chronic story-telling would seem to offer little solace in dealing with his own experience, his obsessions have afforded a recognition of the continuity of apocalyptic presentiment:

> Yes, the end of the world's on the cards again--maybe this time it's for real. But the feeling's not new. Saxon hermits felt it. They felt it when they built the pyramids to try to prove it wasn't true. My father felt it in the mud at Ypres. My grandfather felt it and drowned it with suicidal beer. Mary felt it...It's the old, old feeling, that everything might amount to nothing. (232-233)

Swift's novel, like Conrad's earlier example of apocalyptic metafiction, Heart of Darkness, also illustrates a perspective undermining the myth of progress. The history teacher asserts near the end of his narrative: "There's this thing called progress. But it doesn't progress. it doesn't go anywhere" (291). Crick's autobiography mentions his wartime view of desolation, threatening the near destruction of civilization. Years earlier, the Atkinson brewing and water transportation empire had been washed away in a catastrophic flood and a tide of changing social conditions, obliterating the

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achievements of previous generations.

In the novel's apocalyptic vision, a recurring historical pattern of growth, decay and catastrophe is acknowledged, and this awareness can be related to Kermode's explanation that while living in their moment of history, people feel the need to connect human birth and death with the larger life span of the world, and that stories are developed which provide continuity with the world's beginning and end (4-6). Although previous intimations of the apocalypse have been discredited, a "sense of an ending" is now sustained in the apprehension of "immanent" destruction (4-6). Swift's history teaching narrator reflects on this ongoing preoccupation with doom:

> Once upon a time people believed in the end of the world. Look in the old books: see how many times and on how many pretexts the end of the world has been prophesied and foreseen, calculated and imagined. But that, of course, was superstition. The world grew up. It didn't end. People threw off superstition....and the world believed it would never end, it would go on getting better. But then the end of the world came back again, not as an idea or a belief but as something the world had manufactured for itself all the time it was growing up. (291)

Waterland blends the realism of a traditional English depiction of setting and character with postmodern self-reflexive elements in its treatment of an apocalyptic theme. Its form is not as radically metafictional as the form of some novels, including the muc' more self-conscious example of Sterne's Tristram

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Shandy. Although the discursive narrative in Swift's novel does not progress in the normal chronological sequence, the frame-breaks are not so disruptive that they destroy coherence or credibility. The fragmented alternations from past to present correspond with the mind's habitual rehearsals of scenes from memory as it deals with immediate experience and anticipates the future. This mirrors the action of history which incorporates and regresses while it advances. Swift's use of metaphor colours his realistic premise, creating associations which reverberate in ironic parallels. Dick's suicide may be compared to the fate of the Christian Saviour of the world whose death was meant to atone for sin, but in Swift's novel the basis of the narrator's eschatological fear is only increased by Dick's death.

Tom Crick's apocalyptic narrative projects an uncertainty toward the interpretation of his experience which undermines his didactic purpose. The history teacher is himself immersed in and controlled by the lessons of history which he would impress upon his students. His objectivity is suspect since he was an active player in the events whose ostensible factuality he recounts from memory. Wayne Booth, commenting on the involvement of the narrator as a rhetorical factor in the novel, proposes in The Rhetoric of Fiction that artistic nihilism would require a lack of resolution in which

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value and meaning are questioned:

> Such a work might simply convey an all-pervasive sense that no belief is possible, that all is chaos, that nobody sees his way clearly, that we are all engaged in a "journey to the end of night."....There are many nihilisms in fiction, from Conrad's heart of darkness to the recent programs of doom inspired by the ever-present image of that final bomb blast. (297)

Waterland is nihilistic in its bleak portrait of the futility of land reclamation and enterprise, of Tom Crick's personal saga of loss and tragedy, and of the ironic failure of the narrator to understand or control his own experience despite the rhetoric of his professed faith in the lessons of history. With its dark view regarding human pretensions of advancement, and its narcissistic style, Waterland is a postmodern variant of earlier works of apocalyptic metafiction. As in the cited examples of Sterne and Conrad, form and content fuse to depict the irony which characterizes human affairs, creating an impression of failure and existential uncertainty. Like its typically English predecessors, Swift's novel confronts the reader with sufficient realism to produce a disturbing recognition as it prompts the questioning of values and experience.

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Chapter Two

Small World

"It is so narcissistic. So 'opeless." (Lodge 118)

David Lodge's Small World (1984), subtitled An Academic Romance, self-consciously parodies literary conventions in a comic, yet apocalyptic portrait of cultural decay which posits the collapse of traditional assumptions concerning literature and experience. Apprehensions of failure or futility suggested in the affairs of the novel's characters are viewed through an ironic perspective shaped by metafictional elements in the text. While gently mocking the pretensions of a coterie surrounding some itinerant professors of English literature, Lodge undermines his fairly realistic narrative with postmodern scepticism, questioning, as in Swift's Waterland, the authority of the novel's mimetic representation of reality.

As a work of postmodernism, Small World incorporates the features of popular genres in order to subvert their validity. Frederick M. Holmes observes that Lodge's novel mimics the quest structure of romance (47) as it traces the amorous intrigues of its numerous characters, but argues that both the reader and the novel's main protagonist are frustrated in the search for a legitimate encompassing structure of meaning with which to comprehend experience (48, 49-50). A nihilistic absence of certainty characterizes the outcome of romantic and

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academic ambitions played out in farcical coincidences created in the novel's highly contrived plot. Such a relationship can be unsettling even as it entertains. Lodge excuses his narrative's compromise with realism in advance with an epigraph quoting Nathaniel Hawthorne:

> When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a novel. (n. pag.)

Small World is self-consciously problematic in the treatment of its romantic sub-plots. Siegfried Mews observes that it may be viewed as "a romance about romance, a mock metaromance-but not necessarily a convincing example of the genre" (723), and with its satiric depiction of an academic setting, he describes Lodge's work as a "campus novel" (712). Although Small World is an engagingly comic work of fiction, it is also representative in its satiric portraits of what may be considered an apocalyptic, or, sometimes, mock-apocalyptic vision of failure, decay, or futility. Lodge's novel depicts the foibles and disappointments of the proponents of various theories of literary criticism and, by association, questions the validity of the theories themselves. While indicating the limitations of literature as an art form, the effect of reading his metafictional text suggests the ultimate futility of experience. The choice of Small World as the novel's main title offers the initial suggestion of the limits

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constraining the ambitious horizons of jet-setting academics and literary figures whose professional and personal affairs span the globe because their progress towards realization of their desires is often illusory.

David Lodge has stated that this is "a novel about desire, and not just sexual desire but also the desire to succeed", while asserting that in a satirical approach, gratification is denied because it is not deserved (Haffenden 159). Such desire is thwarted or held up for ridicule in virtually all of its manifestations in Small World which is thematically concerned with failure. Despite the novel's humorous dalliance with romance, and its metafictional qualities, Lodge claims that the "major plot is about the unattainability of one's desire, which is the message of the realistic novel" (Haffenden 162). This is an apocalyptic message of failure and is illustrated in the fruitless pursuits undertaken by the novel's main characters. Persse McGarrigle, the naive young professor from Limerick who falls in love with the beautiful Angelica Pabst, chases her around the world only to realize at the novel's end that he was "in love with a dream" (326). Such fascination with an imaginary ideal is a characteristic of romance, while the uncertain relationship of reality to the imagination is a primary concern of postmodernist fiction and contemporary criticism.

Lodge illustrates unfulfilled desire in both

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romantic and academic pursuits. Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp are among other academics in Small World who are being considered as candidates for appointment to the highly coveted UNESCO Chair of Literary Criticism. The jockeying for position by the various contenders forms another major unfulfilled ambition in this novel since none of the aspiring applicants will be selected. Zapp, the brash American from bustling Euphoric State University, is a much-published critical theoretician whose self-acknowledged career goal is to become "the highest paid professor of English in the world" (42). Presumably, he would have realized that exalted status had he won the UNESCO prize. Swallow, who has enjoyed considerably less professional acclaim with his single book on Hazlitt, teaches at a much smaller redbrick university in the English Midlands. He is somewhat unfashionable in literary circles as an exponent of the value derived from reading literature for its traditional Arnoldian virtues. These two characters are also confronted with emotionally significant failures or loss on a personal level. Swallow's passionate attempts to rekindle an interrupted extra-marital affair are doomed to extinguishment in an embarrassing scene, while Zapp's relations with his ex-wife are reduced to little more than the minimum civil obligations dictated by social propriety.

As apocalyptic metafiction, Small World exhibits a

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loss of faith in the legitimacy of human progress, which it reflects through the subversive postmodern tendency to parody other works of literature. Rather than moving forward, this form of narrative offers debased parodic images of the literary past. The opening passage of the novel's "Prologue" mimics that of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, as the natural cycle of springtime's renewal is invoked to compare modern day academic conferences to medieval pilgrimages. Lodge's satiric tone is established in the paragraph following it with the observation that both such excursions permit "the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austerely bent on self-improvement" (Prologue, n. pag.). However, a conference is a less ennobling activity than a religious pilgrimage. This understated narrative sarcasm initiates a suggestion of doubt in the notion that movement or endeavour is necessarily a means of progress. The fallacy of progress is a thematic concern, both in postmodern works like Waterland, and in earlier examples of the self-consciously apocalyptic novel, including Tristram Shandy and Heart of Darkness.

In the novel's first chapter, another literary allusion refers ironically to springtime, used in this case to suggest a mock despair and desolation, with a quote taken directly from the opening words of The Waste Land: "APRIL is the cruellest month" (3). T. S. Eliot's

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poem is recalled silently by Perrse McGarrigle as he contemplates the dismal setting for the annual conference of University Teachers of English, held this year at the rather shabby campus of Rummidge University and organized by Philip Swallow who chairs the English department there. While spring is normally associated with rebirth, and in romance is a suitable time to start a quest, Lodge's reference is undercut with satire hinting at the spiritual malaise evoked in Eliot's modernist vision of alienation in a barren world. The quoted section of The Waste Land is subtitled The Burial of the Dead, and Lodge's novel self-consciously raises the spectre of literary criticism's death as a socially relevant discipline, in addition to the demise of the novel as a viable art form. When asked by Morris Zapp if he "could knock off a paper on the future of criticism" to present at a conference Zapp will be hosting, Philip Swallow remarks candidly: "I don't think it has much of a future" (65). Near the conclusion of Changing Places (1975), Swallow had affirmed his respect for "the great tradition of realistic fiction" (250), fearing that it was becoming an anachronism, and had issued a fatalistic decree: "Well, the novel is dying, and us with it" (250). In Small World when Ronald Frobisher, a celebrated author who has been frustrated for some time by writer's block, is asked by an interviewer whether the novel is dying, his not unreasonable response is: "Like all of us, it has

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been dying since the day it was born" (177). While this assessment suggests entropy rather than an apocalyptic prophecy, it nevertheless implies an ending in human terms.

More damning than these bald statements of cynicism for the state of literary culture and society is the sarcastic irony which undercuts more optimistic assumptions made by some of the characters concerning their own affairs. This ironic acknowledgment of personal failings or shortcomings is an essential feature of apocalyptic metafiction whose inherent self-consciousness mocks notions of achievement. While Persse might have naively anticipated that he could improve himself at his first academic conference, and "find out what's going on in the great world of ideas" (15), the turnout for Swallow's event is considered less than inspiring by the other attendees, as reported in the narrator's dry summary. Elitist pretensions are ridiculed:

> ...the real source of depression, as the conferees gathered for the sherry, and squinted at the little white cardboard lapel badges on which each person's name, and university, were neatly printed, was the paucity and, it must be said, the generally undistinguished quality of their numbers. Within a very short time they had established that none of the stars of the profession was in residence--no one, indeed, whom it would be worth travelling ten miles to meet, let alone the hundreds that many had covered. (4)

As a former professor himself, Lodge describes the invariable outcome of such conferences with authoritative detail, and his satirist's eye often focuses on the

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physical manifestations of irony or comic incongruity. For this he cites the influence of Bakhtin, whose theory of the carnivalesque embraces the novel as a parodic and subversive form of literature which, throughout its history, has asserted the primacy of bodily functions against the restraints and pretensions of social institutions (Haffenden 167; Morace 4). In a passage with scatological implications for literary criticism, Swallow finds he has mistakenly used the first pages of his Ankara lecture on ""The Legacy of Hazlitt"" (190) for toilet paper. As a satirist, Lodge has more faith in the conventions of the novel and literature than what is sometimes expressed by his fictional creations. The inevitable disappointments and pitfalls of conference attendance are ridiculed by the narrator with details which create earthy humour:

> Long before it was all over they would have sickened of each other's company, exhausted all topics of conversation, used up all congenial seating arrangements at table, and succumbed to the familiar conference syndrome of bad breath, coated tongue and persistent headache, that came from smoking, drinking and talking five times as much as normal. The foreknowledge of the boredom and distemper to which they had condemned themselves lay like a cold, oppressive weight on their bowels (which would also be out of order before long) even as they sought to disguise it with bright chatter and hearty bonhomie, shaking hands and clapping backs, gulping down their sherry like medicine. (4)

While the effect of this cursory description of academic gatherings is self-deprecatingly comic, apocalyptic elements of spiritual despair, futility and desperation

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are also suggested.

The "small world" that Lodge's globe-trotting literary circle inhabits is a socially restricted and somewhat barren landscape of lecture halls and hotel rooms where an esoteric discourse in the riddles of post-structuralism and deconstruction alternates with less elevated chatter reflecting the quirks, petty jealousies and insecurities of the conversants. Fundamental uncertainty is manifested on theoretical and personal levels, and as Holmes notes, Lodge's text is characterized by "a deep epistemological scepticism" (52). The problematic view of knowledge, common in modernism, is heightened in this postmodern narrative where the basic functions of language are questioned and existing conventions of literature and criticism are habitually parodied.

In Morris Zapp's Rummidge lecture, provocatively titled, "*Textuality as Striptease*", Lodge satirizes serious literary criticism, suggesting a dead-end situation in the discipline. Zapp cites his former optimism, describing himself as "a man who once believed in the possibility of interpretation....[and] that the goal of reading was to establish the meaning of texts" (24). Later he realizes that this was impossible "because of the nature of language itself, in which meaning is constantly being transferred from one signifier to another and can never be absolutely possessed" (25). As

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a critic himself, Lodge presents an insightful dialogue between the humanist position and radical post-structuralism, even as he ridicules them. Proceeding from his axiom that "every decoding is another encoding" (25), Zapp's otherwise cogently developed argument eventually degrades into a ludicrous overindulgence in sexual analogy, parodying the work of noted critical theorists Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. Reading is compared to striptease and documented with references to Freudian psychology:

> [Reading is]...an endless, tantalizing leading on, a flirtation without consummation, or if there is consummation, it is solitary, masturbatory. [Here the audience grew restive.] The reader plays with himself as the text plays upon him, plays upon his curiosity, desire, as a striptease dancer plays upon her audience's curiosity and desire....When we have seen the girl's underwear we want to see her body, when we have seen her breasts we want to see her buttocks.... Freud said that obsessive reading (and I suppose that most of us in this room must be regarded as compulsive readers)--that obsessive reading is the displaced desire to see the mother's genitals. (26-27)

However, Zapp's overall contention that teasing is enjoyable, even if textual meaning is illusory, is profoundly unsettling for the conservative Swallow, who resignedly chides the speaker for having "succumbed to the virus of structuralism" (27). Through Swallow, Lodge effectively represents the dismay that many traditionalists feel toward what they view as the current sickness afflicting literary criticism, and this complaint reflects a central concern of apocalyptic

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metafiction, regarding uncertainty and the futility of effort:

> I refer to that fundamental scepticism about the possibility of achieving certainty about anything, which I associate with the mischievous influence of continental theorizing. There was a time when reading was a comparatively simple matter, something you learned to do in primary school. Now it seems to be some kind of arcane mystery, into which only a small elite have been initiated. I have been reading books all my life--or at least that is what I always thought I was doing. Apparently I was mistaken. (27-28)

Unable to refute the logic of Zapp's nihilistic conclusion that truth is unknowable, a frustrated Swallow asks: "Then what in God's name is the point of it all" (28)? Indicative of the novel's essentially bleak philosophical outlook, Zapp evades this crucial question in a cynical reference to the maintenance of their social positions and academic institutions. In their contrasting views of the same epistemological dilemma, Zapp and Swallow represent two polarities of response expressed in apocalyptic metafiction ranging from ironic acknowledgement to fatalism. If the intellectual rigour of Zapp's witty argument cannot be denied, neither can Swallow's beleaguered commitment to humanist values. Their differently interpreted recognition of futility underscores Lodge's satiric discourse.

Like other self-conscious fiction, <u>Small World</u> foregrounds its own artifice, signalling the unreliability of the text and creating uncertainty for the reader about accepted distinctions between art and

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supposed reality. This subversive characteristic is often manifested in paradoxical juxtapositions or intertextual references. When Perrse, whose role in the novel parodies the romantic hero, first introduces himself to Angelica, she asks him if his name is the short-form of that of the Grail legend figure, Percival, to which he replies teasingly: "It could be...if you like" (9). She also remarks on the connection of his name with "The Ballad of Persse O'Reilley" in Joyce's Finnegan's Wake. Later when Perrse mistakenly has sexual intercourse with Angelica's twin sister, Lily, the narrative invokes Zapp's parody of Roland Barthe's literary-sexual analogy: "He parted her thighs like the leaves of a book, and stared into the crack, the crevice, the deep romantic chasm that was the ultimate goal of his quest" (325). For Perrse, this experience does not yield spiritual fulfilment, and following Zapp's post-structuralist argument comparing the act of reading to sexual curiosity (Holmes 52), "the attempt to peer into the very core of a text, to possess once and for all its meaning, is vain" (27). This parallels the Derridian concept of "invagination" as explained in Angelica's MLA presentation:

> What we think of as the meaning or "inside" of a text is in fact nothing more than its externality folded in to create a pocket which is both secret and therefore desired and at the same time empty and therefore impossible to possess. (322)

Lodge's self-conscious text incorporates overtly metafictional passages suggesting ironic interconnections

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between story-telling processes and reality. When Philip Swallow confidentially relates the events of his affair with Joy Simpson to the visiting Morris Zapp, Swallow's wife Hilary enters the room in a faded nightgown just like the one Philip had described as belonging to Joy. This scene confuses the relationship between fiction and reality. The fictionality of experience is also implied when Swallow resumes his affair with Joy later in the novel, considering himself "again a man at the centre of his own story" (217). His greater involvement with life ironically appears to increase his appreciation of the fictional nature of experience. During the recounting, Zapp comments jokingly that "There should be nothing irrelevant in a good story" (67), as if Swallow's tale was just fiction, and later he waves his cigar in approval of the story's "solidity of specification," which, he affirms, "contributes to the reality effect" (68). Zapp's remarks, recalling Henry James's criterion for realism, illustrate a tendency of characters in Small World to analyze their own lives in relation to the world of literature, signalling the fictional status of the larger context of the novel (Holmes 4-5).

In his postmodern depiction of campus romance and academic intrigues, Lodge deliberately undermines the philosophical and cultural integrity of the "small world" he satirizes. His ridicule of literary figures follows them on a succession of far-flung conferences where they

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are concerned as much with their own personal ambitions as with the critical dilemmas involving various aspects of literature and contemporary theory. The legitimacy of the participants' scholarship is even questioned in some cases. During the Rummidge conference, Perrse is confronted not only with the love interest of Angelica distracting him from his first exposure to structuralism, but also Robin Dempsey's rather spiteful account of Swallow's career. Dempsey and then Rupert Sutcliffe, another of Swallow's colleagues, suggest that Swallow's position as chair of the Rummidge English department is due more to good luck than academic merits. Similarly, Perrse reveals to Angelica that he was only hired at Limerick because of a mailing error which the school was too embarrassed to acknowledge, whereby he received an invitation for an interview that was meant for a prize scholar with the same last name. These ironic biographical details compromising the professional reputations of two of the more sympathetic characters in the novel suggest the hollowness of achievement which is a main issue in apocalyptic metafiction, and illustrate Lodge's intent to spare none of his main protagonists from criticism regardless of their ideological positions concerning literature.

Although the ostensibly comic focus of Small World is on the pretensions associated with academic and amorous pursuits, the acknowledgement of death and its

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eschatological implications forms a significant apocalyptic subtext in the narrative. Lodge himself has a Catholic background and has explored issues concerning his religious faith in his previous work. In addition to writing an MA thesis on "Catholic Fiction Since the Oxford Movement", he has published comic depictions of the marital conflicts arising from church edicts on birth control, both in The British Museum is Falling Down (1965) and the partly metafictional novel How Far Can You Go (1982). The first reference to an orthodox view of Christian guilt in Small World occurs during a discussion of Persse's cousin Bernadette, who may have had an abortion. Perrse's uncle, who also happens to be Morris Zapp's former landlord (one of the novel's numerous arbitrary coincidences parodying the romance convention), speculates with Perrse on the wayward girl's ultimate fate:

> "...Who knows, she may have died that way, in a state of mortal sin." Jumping rather hastily to this sad conclusion, Dr. O'Shea crossed himself and sighed. "Let us hope that the good Lord gave her the grace to repent at last" (34).

Persse McGarrigle is the central protagonist in Small World since most of the novel's subplots, including the one involving Bernadette, cohere around his experiences, and as a devout Irish Catholic, he is also the main vehicle for introducing religious issues with apocalyptic import. Observing a group of Muslims at prayer as he walks through Heathrow airport reminds

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Persse "of the sorry state of his own soul... he felt an urge to make an act of contrition in some consecrated place before entrusting himself to the air" (122-123). At the airport chapel Persse prays that he will find Angelica and "his own purity of heart (for he interpreted her flight as a punishment for his lust)" (124-125). Lodge's satire does not extend to undercutting the fundamental humanity of his main questers: McGarrigle, Swallow and Zapp, who are drawn with more depth than the other academic and literary caricatures.

While the exaggerated chivalry of Persse's Catholicism is also an object of mockery, his anachronistic view has apocalyptic import, illustrating the collapse of traditional values which confronts him as he attempts to maintain the integrity of his own religious convictions. He must negotiate a confusing labyrinth of academic politics, competing literary theories, pornography and prostitution in his frustrated pursuit of Angelica. At the Rummidge conference he indicates his own considered belief in a divine order, pointing to what he feels is more than a natural coincidence, and his imaginatively compelling though unproven argument for teleology represents a vision of hermeneutics that in the modern world has been largely displaced by faith in empirical science and, increasingly, by epistemological uncertainty:

> "Have you ever thought, Angelica," said Persse, "What a remarkable thing it is that

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> the moon and the sun look to our eyes approximately the same size?
> "No," said Angelica, "I've never thought about it."
> "So much mythology and symbolism depends on the equivalence of those two round disc-shapes in our sky, one presiding over the day and the other over the night, as if they were twins. Yet it's just a trick of perspective, the product of the relative size of the moon and the sun, and their distance from us and from each other. The odds against its happening like that by chance must be billions to one."
>
> "You don't think it was chance?"
> "I think it's one of the great proofs of a divine creator," said Persse.
> "I think He had an eye for symmetry."
> "Like Blake," Angelica smiled. "Have you read Frye's Fearful Symmetry, by the way? An excellent book, I think." (39)

This crucial passage has a more significant function in Lodge's novel than as a pretext for romantic conversation or merely as an opportunity to make literary allusions. Acting as a touchstone for what has been lost or is dying, Perrse's commitment to a system of values rooted in religion is contrasted with the decayed level of emotional involvement and absence of philosophical integration in Small World, manifested here by Angelica's humanistic and dryly intellectual appreciation of literature. Iris Murdoch, in her polemical sketch "*Against Dryness*", has complained of the loss of scope in the modern English novel: "We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world" (26). The assumptions of liberal humanism which Murdoch criticizes

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are supplanted by a more fundamental self-consciousness and uncertainty in Lodge's postmodern text, however. In Small World neither God nor man maintains complete legitimacy as the foundation of significance within the general dissolution of belief.

Illustrating Lodge's contention that in a realistic novel unmerited desire should be thwarted, Persse's romantic aspirations are sometimes at odds with his religious principles, leading to a guilty conscience. However, this relationship is mocked through exaggeration in the parodic framework of the text's metafictional structure. Such ridicule is evident when Perrse mistakenly purchases baby food instead of condoms: "He took the frustration of his design to be providential, an expression of divine displeasure at his sinful intentions" (48). The puritanical expectation of retribution for sexual impropriety and other forms of wrongdoing, or the corruption of ideals, evokes an apocalyptic threat of the day of judgment, and Small World contains many satiric glimpses of social or philosophical decadence, including the various pornographic and sex-for-hire venues where Perrse searches for Angelica.

Another central protagonist who is a parodic arbiter of standards is Morris Zapp, the novel's chief exponent of post-structuralism as a means of understanding the frustrating deferral of significance inherent in the

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functions of language. His maxim, "every decoding is another encoding", in an unusual reversal of the convention of intertextuality, has actually been quoted nonfacetiously by Lodge in one of his own critical essays (After Bakhtin 90). Small World, with its portraits of unrealized ambition and its dissolution of epistemological certainty, lends itself self-consciously to interpretation through Zapp's chosen theoretical approach which explores a given text's subversion of its own structures of meaning. Lack of intellectual fulfilment is also suggested in Zapp's cynical portrait of fellow academics in which he indicates to Hilary Swallow the somewhat absurd and futile aspects of what he feels are symptoms of cultural decadence:

> "The nineteenth century had its priorities right. What we really lust for is power, which we achieve by work. When I look around at my colleagues these days, what do I see? They're all screwing their students, or each other, like crazy, marriages are breaking up faster than you can count, and yet nobody seems to be happy. Obviously they would rather be working, but they're ashamed to admit it." (59)

When Hilary subsequently reveals that Philip has had an affair with one of his students the resulting narrative irony is compounded by the form of evidence produced: a Xeroxed copy of the girl's examination sheet containing an indictment describing Swallow's sexual advances, as part of an inept answer to a question asking how Milton tried to "justify the ways of God to man" in Paradise Lost (60). That Lodge chose to mention this epic

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dealing with man's fall from grace as part of a metafictional device, suggests apocalyptic associations. The girl's facile response to the question is given in a laconic, incoherent summary together with an attempt to blackmail the department into awarding her a passing grade on the exam. Her indifferent treatment of a work from the literary canon, and its eschatological subject matter, is juxtaposed with the sordid business of implicating the teacher in the facts of his illicit behaviour. The document suggests a general decline in education and corruption of moral character.

Swallow himself seems to vindicate Zapp's theory concerning the work ethic. He is restless and unsatisfied. At one point he complains: "Books used to satisfy me....But as I get older I find they aren't enough" (78). This disillusionment undermines Zapp's citation of the Russian formalist contention that art defamiliarizes life. When asked what the object of his frequent academic trips is, Swallow sighs:

> "Who knows? It's hard to put into words. What are we all looking for? Happiness? One knows that doesn't last. Distraction, perhaps--distraction from the ugly facts: that there is death, there is disease, there is impotence and senility ahead." (66)

Expressing an apocalyptic recognition of failure and futility, this fatalistic attitude by a central figure, who ironically is also the novel's chief spokesman for traditional humanistic values in literary criticism, underscores what may be the impetus behind the

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professional and erotic quests which most of the characters in the novel are engaged in. Northrop Frye describes the effect that the awareness of mortality has had on the imagination:

> One of the most fundamental of human realizations is that passing from death to rebirth is impossible for the same individual; hence the theme of substitution for death runs all through literature, religion, and ritual. Redemption is one form of substitution, though one more satisfying to theology than to romance. (89)

For Perrse, redemption will be through his religious faith, although his immediate happiness is sought in the quest for Angelica; while Philip Swallow will seek what he terms "distraction" in a renewed affair with Joy Simpson. Hilary Swallow would be redeemed in her husband's love and a fulfilling occupation. Morris Zapp and some of the other academic figures would receive solace in the UNESCO prize. For Desiree Zapp and Ronald Frobisher, who are professional authors, redemption in each case depends on overcoming writer's block.

However, traditional romance fiction is a genre, as Patricia Parker observes, "which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object" (4). Persse's admiring ticket clerk, Cheryl Summerbee, describes this type of narrative as: "the quest of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality" (259). Such fulfilment, as a respite from anxiety regarding ambition and belief in

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Small World, is illusory, however, because the assumption of achievement is undermined by the text's subversion of meaning and certainty. Lodge's postmodern academic satire parodies romance conventions with its self-reflexive style, exaggeration of coincidence, and its ridicule of the questers and their desires mocking the validity of progress as it apprehends failure.

The threat of death is an anxiety which impinges on the main characters in Small World with more concrete immediacy than the previously noted dialogue expressing fatalistic philosophy. Persse McGarrigle, despairing at his failure to rescue Angelica from her decadent life in Amsterdam's red-light district, reflects that his "life was laid waste, his occupation gone. The summer stretched before him barren as a desert" (205). He finds that he is "Indifferent to life" (206) when the airplane he is flying on is forced to make an emergency landing, although other passengers and crew members are terrified. In another brush with death, the fictionality of experience is again alluded to in an intertextual reference, as the row-boats ferrying Perrse and his summer-school class on a literary sightseeing pilgrimage to the Lake Isle of Innisfree threaten to sink. A particularly traumatized man (who later reveals that he is the father of Bernadette's illegitimate child), cries with apocalyptic dread that the storm is "God's judgement upon me" (254).

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Philip Swallow's fatalistic outlook, and more particularly his encounter with Joy Simpson, as related in the fireside story told to Morris Zapp, were influenced by his terrifying experience on the near-disastrous flight to Genoa. Until the plane managed to land safely, Swallow thought that death was imminent. He tells Zapp about the invigorating effect of his subsequent love affair: "It was as if, having passed through the shadow of death, I had suddenly recovered an appetite for life" (71), and he describes their intercourse in stark, metaphysical terms: "I felt I was defying death, fucking my way out of the grave" (74). However, in Lodge's ironic narrative of unfulfilled desires, Swallow fails in his belated attempt to resume the relationship. At the conclusion of the novel Swallow indicates resignation to this personal defeat with a metafictional analogy implying his experience of life as a fiction: "Basically I failed in the role of the romantic hero. I thought I wasn't too old for it, but I was" (336). Mocking the ontological distinctions between narrative and reality, Lodge's text also recognizes here the limitations of the body implied in Bakhtin's description of carnivalesque parody.

Swallow is traumatized by the chance confrontation with his son while accompanying Joy on a sightseeing tour of the Masada. Humiliated in front of a leering collegue, he effectively relinquishes his love affair (with

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apocalyptic symbolism) on the historical site of the Jewish mass suicide, and subsequently "seems to go into shock" (303). Attributing his friend's apparent illness to heat stroke, Zapp remarks prophetically that "It sure was hot as hell out there" (304). The mock-apocalyptic atmosphere builds to a crisis when the conference is abandoned in a panic just as Rodney Wainwright has delivered the last of his uncompleted paper on the future of criticism and now faces impending disgrace in front of his peers. The suspicion that Legionnaire's disease is the cause of Swallow's deteriorating condition expresses a puritan sensibility in the novel, when this affliction is assigned a mock-eschatological significance:

> Legionnaire's disease! that dreaded and mysterious plague....It is what every conferee these days secretly fears, it is the VD of conference-going, the wages of sin, retribution for all that travelling away from home and duty, staying in swanky hotels, ego-tripping, partying, generally overindulging. (306)

While the atmosphere is farcical, Morris Zapp's disastrous academic conference is associated with the theme of apocalypse when he sarcastically recalls a terrifying plague from history in his reference to Swallow's illness as "the Black Death" (307).

Zapp's irony regarding the apocalyptic reflects his own encounter with the prospect of death earlier, when he was abducted by terrorists and held for a ransom which his ex-wife flatly refused to pay. Bargaining for his life while reminding her of his essential contribution to

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her lucrative development as a feminist writer, Zapp's desperate petition reflects a typical postmodern concern which questions the idea of the author as autonomous creator. The harrowing experience, connecting death with absurdity, appears to have instilled a fatalistic element of humanism into Zapp's philosophic attitude toward literary criticism. Following his presentation at the MLA forum on "The Function of Criticism" (316), where Arthur Kingfisher would decide who would be the successful candidate for the UNESCO chair, Zapp admits that he had "rather lost faith in deconstruction" (328). He qualifies his axiomatic contention that "every decoding is another encoding" with an ironic recognition of his own mortality:

> ...death is the one concept you can't deconstruct. Work back from there and you end up with the old idea of an autonomous self. I can die, therefore I am. I realized that when those wop radicals threatened to deconstruct me." (328)

However, Zapp undercuts his humanism by still suggesting the postmodernist experience of life as a fiction which one could "deconstruct".

As a work of apocalyptic metafiction, Small World connects Zapp's ironic acknowledgment of death with satiric illustrations of the futility of human pretensions. Lodge's main post-structuralist spokesman and the most impressive critic in the novel, by privately conceding uncertainty while publicly arguing the veracity of his theory as a means of advancing his reputation,

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subverts the general credibility of literary criticism and the integrity of its proponents. Zapp expresses cynicism toward Swallow's professed belief in the traditional values attributed to an appreciation of literature, ridiculing Swallow's announcement that he is in love again with a structuralist critique of the textual constructs which experience is fabricated upon:

> Hasn't he learned by now that this whole business of being "in love" is not existential reality, but a form of cultural production....For a man who claims to believe in the morally improving effects of reading great literature, Philip Swallow (it seems to Morris) takes his marriage vows pretty lightly. (249)

In addition to this criticism of character and social convention, Zapp openly questions the values and standards of the literary world that he is a part of. Through an absurd misinterpretation of a critical review, the formerly unremarkable Swallow is suddenly being considered seriously as a contender for the UNESCO prize. Zapp joins a fellow American academic in mocking their English counterpart's credibility:

> He's having a huge success with a totally brainless book about Hazlitt," says Morris, "Rudyard Parkinson gave it a rave review in the TLS. The British are on this antitheory kick at the moment and Philip's book just makes them roll onto their backs and wave their paws in the air. (235)

This contempt for the work of one's peers that is so commonly expressed by characters in Small World does more than undermine the prestige of the critical discipline and the authority of literary theory. Such pervasive

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cynicism regarding their own profession ultimately questions the spiritual integrity of the characters themselves. Rather than objective investigation of competing ideas in the interests of scholarship, the academics in Lodge's satire are often depicted as caricatures engaged in petty, self-serving schemes driven by an over-inflated ego. Their affairs manifest the absence of a pivotal vision of truth or value in Lodge's novel. Rudyard Parkinson, who views his own writing "like sex: an assertion of will, an exercise of power" (99), finds it useful to his own prospects for the UNESCO chair to praise Swallow's book at the expense of Zapp in his manipulative review. In Lodge's metafictional text, influential historic and contemporary literary figures including Jessie Weston, Roman Jakobson, Julia Kristeva and Northrop Frye are cited in the same narrative context as these parodic fictional academics, underscoring the novel's subversive confusion of reality and fiction.

The literary figures parodied in Small World sometimes appear in alternative fictional contexts. While searching for Angelica in Lausanne, Persse is confronted with characters who appear to have materialized out of scenes from The Waste Land. This episode extends the novel's incorporation of intertextual concordances and allusions to the point where both Lodge's protagonist and the reader might wonder if they are within the ontological boundaries of another text. Such a tactic

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disrupts the reader's sense of reality described by the text and implies the fictionality of purported reality. Some of McGarrigle's academic acquaintances are actually engaged in a performance of street theatre dramatizing Eliot's poem which, as one of the participants ominously reminds Perrse, was first drafted in that city where the poet was "recovering from a nervous breakdown" (263). The Waste Land is "perhaps the most prominent of Lodge's numerous sources" (Holmes 54), and, as an apocalyptic vision of cultural decadence and futility, significantly conflicts with the novel's ostensible status as simply "an academic romance". As Holmes observes (54), a parallel is drawn between the unromantic gratification of lust that Felix Skinner with his "horrible teeth" (160) indulges through his basement copulations and that of the "carbuncular" clerk in Eliot's poem (III; 231). As with the clerk and his "bored" typist (III; 236), "Felix's exploring hands encountered no defense" (160) from his secretary.

Subversive intertextual connections are also made between Small World and Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance. The retired academic, Sybil Maiden, reminds Perrse of the influence of Weston's book on The Waste Land, reiterating Weston's explanation of the Grail legend: "that its true meaning was to be sought in pagan fertility ritual" (12). Lodge's novel follows the pattern of the Grail romances with Persse fulfilling the role of

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the knight who revives the lost vigour of an ailing Fisher King by asking a ritual question (Holmes 13-15; Mews 720-721). This is supposed to manifest an expression of "The life force endlessly renewing itself", as described by Miss Maiden in her paraphrase of Weston (12). At the MLA conference, Persse asks Arthur Kingfisher the question which apparently revitalizes the literary doyen who had been suffering from both sexual impotence and intellectual bankruptcy. Kingfisher appoints himself to the UNESCO Chair, after responding to McGarrigle's prompting with what he evidently views is an epiphanic insight: that "what matters in the field of critical practice is not truth but difference" (319). However, no authoritative theory of criticism has been proffered to extricate the discipline from the quagmire of seemingly discordant and sterile interpretations represented in Small World (Holmes 54). Lodge's postmodern text offers no credible structure of significance to support an intellectual renewal and effectively parodies the central romance convention described by Weston.

The malaise of epistemological and spiritual uncertainty affecting literary academics in Small World assumes the proportions of a crisis in the crux baffling Rodney Wainwright during his futile attempts to complete a paper for Zapp's conference on the future of criticism:

> ...how can literary criticism maintain its Arnoldian function of identifying the best of

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> what has been thought and said, when literary discourse itself has been decentred by deconstructing the traditional concept of the author, of authority? (84, 140, 299).

Mews observes that the repetition of this philosophic quandary through the novel "assumes the significance of a leitmotif", revealing Lodge's "basically traditional orientation" with "disquieting implications" for the reader (726). The critical developments acknowledged by this question would necessarily imply the recognition of loss: a failure of ideological assumptions for those who view literature from a humanistic perspective. Lodge himself has indicated that he is uncomfortable with the estranged relationship between the general reader and the increasingly abstruse discourse of the literary academic. In a recently published book of critical essays dealing with the intellectual legacy of Bakhtin, he expressed his own cynicism regarding criticism: "A vast amount of it is not...a contribution to human knowledge, but the demonstration of professional mastery by translating known facts into more and more arcane metalanguages" (8).

Small World ends with a semblance of finality on "the last day of the year" (338), having resolved many of its romantic subplots with a mood of reconciliation and optimism traditionally expected from a comic novel. Kingfisher's heralded sexual and intellectual rejuvenation is followed by the revelation that he and Miss Maiden are Angelica and Lily's long lost parents.

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The impending marriages of several of the characters are announced, while both Ronald Frobisher and Desiree Byrd are blessed with inspirational recovery. Although these promises of renewal conform to romance conventions suggesting the cyclical patterns found in Weston's interpretation of the Grail legends, the main spiritual and philosophical enterprises described in Lodge's satire are left unrealized. Persse McGarrigle, as the novel's romantic hero, has yet to find "his own Grail" by securing "the love of a good woman" (12). Although he belatedly realizes that the starry-eyed ticket agent, Cheryl Summerbee, was in love with him, she has quit her job to travel on her savings, and could now be anywhere in the world. His new romantic focus is therefore still lacking in substance: he has no assurance that he has not mistaken a fleeting infatuation for love. Morris Zapp, Philip Swallow and the other academic contenders for the UNESCO prize are never presented with Kingfisher's visionary scheme explaining what the function of criticism should be. As Holmes states, "the conclusion asserts concord without ever convincing us that it has been achieved" (54). The cumulative effect of the novel's satire of human pretensions and various aspects of contemporary criticism becomes mock-apocalyptic when combined with numerous comic references to death and expressions of cultural cynicism. Metafictional elements in Lodge's Small World create epistemological

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uncertainty by self-consciously pointing to the artifice of the narrative, mocking its mimetic pretensions, and undermining by association the credibility of the novel's subject matter, which is the literary world.

The implication that literary significance is illusory and that the critical discipline is faced with a failure of ideological confidence are two unsettling aspects of Lodge's postmodernist text. Gerald Graff describes the decay of literature's cultural status as a product of a critical development in which doctrines positing an infinite variety of possible interpretations for "literary texts have popularized the view that these texts have no determinate meaning, that their meaning is a function of the speculation brought to them by readers and critics" (247). Graff connects this loss of textual authority commonly advocated in contemporary theory with a disturbing failure of assurance in literary culture:

> As criticism has advanced in methodological rationality there has been a corresponding erosion regarding the collective sense of the rationale of literary study. The demoralization which has resulted from this in the teaching of literature can scarcely be estimated. (245)

While Small World illustrates the anxiety and social decay implicated in these theoretical issues, its main focus is on human nature's ironic response to failure on a personal level. Acknowledging the influence of Bakhtin in his statement that "Comedy reasserts the body" (Haffenden 167), David Lodge's satiric depiction of

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decadence in literary circles is founded on an earthy recognition of the limitations associated with corporality. Within a comic narrative which depicts ultimate significance as indeterminate, the questers constrained in this parodic, "small, narrow world" (339) illustrate revelations characterizing apocalyptic metafiction: that futility undercuts every notion of progress, that failure looms on the horizon of all human affairs.

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Chapter Three

Blackeyes

> "And now she considered herself to be little more than words written by a sick old man." (Potter 64)

Dennis Potter's tightly written novel Blackeyes (1987) is both a metafictional murder mystery containing an indictment of sexual exploitation, and an apocalyptic portrait of dread and spiritual decay culminating with a suicide. Melancholy is the dominant mood evoked. This is presented in a self-consciously satiric and ambiguously rendered narrative context. The story revolves around Jessica, a former model whose experience in the London fashion industry has been fictionalized into a bestseller by her elderly uncle, Maurice James Kingsley. Incensed by the surprising success of his book, which was largely based on her own letters and their conversations, she is more profoundly disturbed by the trauma resulting from a past injury ultimately revealed as the sexual assault which he had committed against her during her childhood. She decides to rewrite his narrative as a means of revenge. These two conflicting stories are interwoven within Potter's intricately layered text, which also contains passages representing two other narrative perspectives: one is the rather mysterious figure who may or may not be the voice of the authorial consciousness, and the other is the disaffected advertising copywriter, Jeff Richards. The name used by Kingsley for his

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characterization of Jessica, "Blackeyes" is also an apt title in a figurative sense for the emotionally bleak, sometimes morbid view of decadent culture drawn in Potter's black satire.

In addition to criticizing the commercial aspects of contemporary society manifested in sexist advertising, Potter's postmodern novel also undermines conventional assumptions about literature. On a more fundamental level than either Waterland or Small World, the inherently metafictional structure of Blackeyes blurs assumed distinctions between reality and fiction. With its narrative labyrnth of story within story and counter story, Potter's text illustrates an effect which questions the validity of realism. In his description of postmodernist fiction, Brian McHale relates this effect to the consciousness of dreaming, asserting that:

> ...it systematically disturbs the air of reality by foregrounding the ontological structure of texts and of fictional worlds....This is the difference between experiencing fiction as a dream unfolding in the mind, and experiencing it as the moment of wakening from the dream into reality, or the moment of slipping from reality into dream; or the experience of being aware that you are dreaming in the midst of the dream itself, while you are dreaming it. (221)

When such texts break ontological boundaries, reality becomes provisional, a construct dependent upon the narrative frame of reference and point of view for its apparent legitimacy. The experience that was the basis of Kingsley's story of Blackeyes is mediated through

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Jessica's perception, while both Kingsley's and Jessica's versions are enclosed as conflicting, alternative fictions in Potter's meta-narrative.

Blackeyes begins with a scene suggesting a textual concern with frame and perspective. The novel's opening sentence also gives the initial ominous clue as to what Jessica's character and intention are: "The lovely Jessica sat at a small white table in front of a smaller white page, and although she looked so neat and demure there was murder in her heart" (1). She is attempting to describe Kingsley's thoughts for her own story of a fashion model's life. Within the first chapter of Potter's text, the point of view shifts from this overview of Jessica writing about Kingsley, into Kingsley's dream of Blackeyes, and then into the final paragraph of Kingsley's novel depicting the suicide of Blackeyes. The reader is confronted with a puzzling Chinese-box construction of enclosed narrative levels forming the mystery which shrouds Blackeyes, the novel. This confusion of narrative context or frame undercuts the authority of mimetic representation, and has been described by Patricia Waugh as characteristic of postmodern fiction: "Contemporary metafiction draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins" (29). Jessica's introduction acknowledges the

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difficulty of depicting realities framed by separate ontological states, although her own troubled dreams have already been violated by what she regards as her uncle's corrupted perspective:

> She had learnt already that it was as difficult as it was tedious to try and describe the disturbing events in her own broken-into dreams, let alone the almost incomprehensible darkness in someone else's. But before the ink could flow, she needed to slither and splash into the rotting swamp behind the bony walls of the old man's head. (1)

Kingsley has an unsettling experience when he is later confronted with merging ontological contexts. Looking out his window he thinks he sees Blackeyes walking down the street, "the same dark lady as in his dream, his text" (13). He questions the logical incongruity of her presence, asking himself if she "was out of his own story, then how could she be embodied" (13) outside? Suspicious that someone is interfering with his thoughts and his text, Kingsley's confusion becomes a vehicle for Potter's metafictional intent to foreground the artifice of fiction, by highlighting the effect of context on perspective.

Visually manifesting contextual frames, these scenes of Kingsley staring out his window, and Jessica at her desk, may also reflect Potter's cinematic experience as a writer of television and film scripts, representing the textual equivalent of a camera zoom shot. Abrupt shifts of context and perspective in Blackeyes mimic the montage

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device used in cinema where the effect of diverse visual settings is usually given more emphasis than narrative continuity. Jessica wants to deconstruct Kingsley's text because his jaded point of view does not express her own perception of the true historical record of her life: "And now she had to start all over again, dismantling his narrative, reclaiming herself" (4). Reading her uncle's account of her first audition, Jessica feels as if she may be succumbing to his version of her biography, and the reified persona he has created in her image:

> The room and the people were as she had described them, but he had diminished her into an entranced automaton. The trouble was that the strange and lost blankness he had cast over Blackeyes was beginning to fall upon her, too. Jessica was finding it more and more difficult to piece together an alternative account: but this, being the later one, was what was needed to rescue the sad girl in the fiction and the angry woman in her real life. The last word was the one which mattered. (17)

Potter's shifts between parallel texts also problematize the sense of reality for the reader. The metafictional suggestion that life is a fiction and that progress is a myth was represented largely on a thematic level in Waterland and Small World. However, in Blackeyes, the reader is confronted with these implications through fruitless attempts to determine the ultimate truth of the enclosed narratives. As Waugh notes, a foregrounding of ontological frames is central to the disruptive function of metafiction:

> The alternation of frame and frame-break (or

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> the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of illusion through the constant exposure of the frame) provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction. (31)

The alternative contexts in Blackeyes build an apocalyptic view of personal failure and social decay, hinging on sexual politics. With a hint of lewdness which its septuagenarian author was oblivious to, *Sugar Bush*, the title of Kingsley's book, "had, in the publisher's phrase, done the novel no harm at all" (2). The sad tale of sexual exploitation ends with the suicide of Blackeyes, who walks into London's Round Pond and drowns "without a ripple" (8), as if she were an object incapable of causing a reaction in her own story. Making "little attempt to give the girl any sort of character or personality" (2), Kingsley had seldom presented the narrative from her perspective "making her docility or sometimes astonishing passivity the central theme of the story" (2). Although Jessica had supplied the raw data of events in her life, hoping the book would humiliate her uncle, Kingsley's patronizing fiction had instead produced a characterization of Blackeyes which was antithetical to Jessica's real experience of outrage, and was an affront to her sensibility as a woman:

> In the book, the bloody book, Kingsley had reduced the girl to a zombie yet again, turning her matter-of-fact description and matter-of-fact contempt into a mute psychosis. How many times, she wondered, would allegedly sympathetic accounts of the manifold ways in which women were so regularly humiliated be nothing more than yet further exercises of the

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> same impulse, the identical power? (36)

In Jessica's revision of the story, she avenges herself by murdering her uncle before assuming the role of her fictionalized double and re-enacting the suicide depicted in Kingsley's text. Blackeyes is written out of the final scene, escaping her ultimate victimization, while both her creators are dead. However, within the metafictional interplay of Potter's layered narratives, the reader cannot be sure what really happened.

The popular success and critical accolades garnered by Kingsley's novel are treated ironically in the meta-narrative, satirizing the decadence of contemporary literary culture in Britain. Kingsley himself is seen as an unlikely candidate for such acclaim. With his last published novel written over twenty years earlier, he is a somewhat decrepit, anachronistic and creatively spent figure:

> He had, so far as was known, degenerated into a rather unsavoury eccentric with odd opinions, bizarre habits, and dated, almost fin-de-siecle mannerisms. A faded relic heavily reliant upon scrounging from his remaining few acquaintances and the necessarily meagre patronage of almost equally seedy producers nearly as old as himself....there had been little hint that his dried-up old frame was going to produce such a late bloom. (2)

Kingsley is given to sleeping with a teddy-bear, whom he also secretly confides in, and at times addresses with such endearments as "You sweet little bitch" (11). He affects a ludicrous "Literary Voice" (12) with which he

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delivers magniloquent quotations from the canon that are generally both unsolicited and out of context. In Potter's novel these pedantic outbursts, parodying the classics, undermine the prestige of literature. Jessica is contemptuous of her uncle's academic prentensions, referring to him in her narrative as an "old fart" and "pompous driveller" (133). Even while he is sprawled on the floor of Jessica's apartment in a drunken stupor, as she kicks him in the ribs, Kingsley manages to summon forth a final orotund recitation from what he grandly termed "his 'magic casement'" (10); in this instance Tennyson:

> '"Dear as remembered kisses after death,"' he sobbed, keeping the mannered boom in place even as his throat convulsed. '"And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd."'....
> '"Deep,"' he boomed, with a glint of triumph in the tears at his eyes, '"as first love, and wild with all regret; O Death in Life, the days that are no more."' (170)

Prophetically, these morbid words of despair, evoking the apocalyptic tone of Potter's encompassing text, are Kingsley's final literary reference before Jessica stomps on his offending throat with her spike heeled shoe, killing him in revenge for molesting her when she was a child. The sordid manner of his demise and the parodic treatment of his character, like the academic caricatures in Lodge's Small World, undermine through satire his credibility as an exponent of literature.

In addition to this characterization of Maurice James Kingsley as a fraudulent blow-hard, some of

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Britain's cultural institutions are ridiculed by association. Although Jessica realized that in her uncle's conception Blackeyes really amounted to little more than "a doll" (155) and was just another appropriation of female experience to be expressed in male terms, his book was being touted as a likely candidate for the Booker Prize. The literary establishment had chosen to overlook any flaws in this belated offering by an aged colleague since:

> There are few things more likely to coax generosity out of British literary critics than such an opportunity to cloak their sentimentality, conservatism, and beleaguered nostalgia in the pleasures of the longer perspective. A crick in the neck from looking backwards was considered to be the sweetest of aches in these circles, especially when the work which causes it is the effort of a man who is so old that he can no longer be counted as a genuine rival. (3)

If the intellectually "exhausted" (3) old guard critics were also titillated by prurient aspects of sexual exploitation in his novel, youthful proponents of the fashionable media interpreted the book as a politically correct depiction of gender inequality, finding laudatory examples of satire and irony where none were intended. In a mock-apocalyptic vein, Potter satirizes the overzealous praise of some of the more radical reviewers, who "went into those dyslexic paroxysms of enthusiasm by which the young and half-educated affect to celebrate the twilight of what they think of as the Western World" (3).

Mark Wilsher, the reporter from KRITZ magazine who

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attempts to interview Kingsley about *Sugar Bush*, likes to think of himself as a "New Journalist", a somewhat dubious designation described less charitably in Potter's text as "a new kind of journalist without the capitals" (56). Kingsley is scandalized by the young man's demeanour, viewing him as an embodiment of the decline in literacy standards. Though he does appear to be semi-illiterate, speaking an almost incomprehensible argot, the young reporter soon realizes that Kingsley lacks both the talent and experience to have produced the story of Blackeyes on his own, and decides to expose the old fraud. The interview is abruptly terminated, however, when Wilsher discovers the teddy-bear under the covers of Kingsley's bed, initiating a long-dreaded and traumatic humiliation for Kingsley. The mutual contempt felt by Wilsher and Kingsley, like that of Jessica for her uncle, discredits the status of literary figures in this novel. Both Kingsley's and Jessica's artistic merits are also criticized by the somewhat mysterious narrator, identified as "the present writer" (135), who possibly represents the privileged ontological perspective behind Potter's meta-narrative. Kingsley is cited for "the sententious redundancy" of his quotations, while Jessica "seemed to have no idea of how to construct a paragraph" (135). This narrator, however, acknowledges his or her largely editorial function, having "used the old fellow's narrative as the basis of my own account" (135), and

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conceding that apart from some poorly written fragments, "Jessica's amendments to the story suit me very well" (159). Potter's foregrounding of Jessica's and her uncle's stories against this alternative critical narrative emphasizes the fictionality of his novel, and as in Waterland and Small World, questions the ability of texts to reproduce experience accurately, whether their narratives are ostensibly historical or literary.

The commercial and sexist agendas of the fashion and advertising industries are also satirized in Potter's novel as indicators of social decadence. In her degrading performances for Stilk and Jamieson, and in the exploitative posing she was subjected to for leering photographers and tyrannical directors, Blackeyes had been used as an instrument of commodity fetishism. As she read her uncle's text, Jessica attempted to understand the process of her own reification:

> At what point, she wondered, had she sashayed across the line between using her body for these clothes, that product, this PR adjunct, and letting her soul itself become an object of trade? And how was she to reclaim herself, taking back what could be hers alone? Surely, not by words, merely words. (80-81)

Jessica's expressed doubt concerning the limitations of language further undermines the status of competing texts whose artifice and provisionality are foregrounded in Potter's metafiction. Jeff Richards, the young advertising copywriter in Kingsley's novel, is another author who is cynical about the value of his own writing

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in his work "as a paid liar" (173) for the fashion business, "churning out demeaning and vulgar rubbish" (117) for an ethically bankrupt commercial establishment.

Richards also expresses a profound fatalism that is shared by the other two narrator-characters in Blackeyes: Jessica and her uncle. In a segment of Kingsley's text which develops a tentative romance between the model and the copywriter, Jeff reflects on a parodic ball-room scene full of middle-aged couples dancing to nostalgic music: "They are trying to hold on to something that is gone....The petals will fall to the floor, the flesh sag out of the corset" (113). Considering the option of suicide if he has to face a future involved in selling consumer goods, Richards acknowledges his own corporality in a nihilistic vision of decay:

> But I will grow old. There's nothing I can do about that. The songs will play, but they will not compensate, cannot assuage. Sentences will be written, by way of art or in trade, and they will make no difference. I am staring down now through the crumbly earth into the pit of my own grave, and the bones of my head are grinning back at me. (113-114)

Jeff's apocalyptic sentiment is more influential in Potter's novel than his brief appearances as the character described in Kingsley's narrative would warrant. Chapter 24 of Blackeyes is narrated by Jeff in the first person, as a part of what seems to be Kingsley's text, since it ends in the old man's quirkily pretentious style.

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However, it is also possible that the meta-narrative of Blackeyes could be attributed to the voice of Richards, who may actually be the figure identifying himself as "the present writer". This would distance Potter's authorial consciousness another level or frame from his text. It could be interpreted that Jeff, the would-be novelist in Kingsley's narrative, is the one who is speaking in the concluding sentences of Blackeyes when, upon Jessica's revisionist substitution of herself for Blackeyes, the narrator comments smugly:
"As her lungs filled, she had the satisfaction of knowing that Blackeyes was free. Well, sort of free, anyway, for it is me that is waiting outside her door, ready to claim her" (184). This teasing revelation which ends Potter's self-reflexive mystery had been set up earlier in a passage of Kingsley's text when Jeff tells Blackeyes that the novel he is working on is about a man who is obsessed with watching the woman next door. In a related intertextual connection, Jessica thinks she sees someone looking at her through the window just after she has killed her uncle. Potter weaves an ingenious mesh of reflexive narrative frames which posit an unsolvable conundrum regarding the intended identity of the meta-narrator, whether he should be Jeff, Potter, or, perhaps, God.

In the style of a murder mystery, Blackeyes contains the requisite scenes of police examining the corpse,

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looking for evidence and questioning suspects. Postmodern fiction often parodies the detective genre, and the convention of withholding information to create suspense is a central feature in this case since the exact nature of Kingsley's offense, Jessica's revenge, and their relationship within the meta-narrative is not revealed until the end of Potter's novel. Inspector Blake's investigation into Jessica's death is analogous with the involvement of the reader, who must deal with the intertextual clues of the novel's shifting narratives. Perhaps more important with regard to the creation of mood are glimpses of the policeman's emotional state of sadness, echoing the novel's tone, and suggesting this traditional authority figure's function as an arbiter of reader response to Potter's apocalyptic text. The girl's death troubled Blake to such an extent that "Her face infiltrated his dreams" (120), and he found himself "in a deeper and deeper melancholy" (121), studying one of her portfolio photos that he had taken without authorization. His "rather more explicable grief" suggests a resignation to intimations of his own mortality: "You are past fifty, it said. You've had it, old mate" (121). Blake's fatalism, like that of Philip Swallow in Small World, is not particularly remarkable in someone of middle-age, but as in Lodge's novel, it supports the thematic structure of apocalyptic metafiction in which the ultimate significance of

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experience within the text is indeterminate, and where futility and failure impinge on the characters' consciousness.

The sadness expressed by the policeman can be indirectly connected to the voice behind Potter's meta-narrative. Inside the frame of that text, Jessica, in a passage of her narrative, attempts to reconstruct a scene from her past which evokes a deep-seated melancholic despair:

> Not all the details were in place. These were a few selected out of an enormous number of other possibilities. But for all of them, there was an ache at the back of the sky, a tinge of nerves behind the shapes, a cry beyond the sounds. Memory still waited recovery beyond any one sequence of recollection. The smallest flicker at the limits of effort yielded up yet more inaccessible layers of loss and despoliation. (49)

The traumatic root of Jessica's anguish is ultimately revealed in the flashback to the damning childhood incident when her uncle molests her in his car. For Kingsley, the same long-repressed event is likely associated with a chronic sense of dread which threatens the collapse of his inflated self-image at any moment:

> Like many who are much given to bluster, Kingsley was hollowed out with pockets of an old and inexplicable fear, but his was far more dangerous than most of such inner hauntings. He heard among the solitary furnishings, so to speak, low breathings coming after him, and sounds of indistinguishable motion. The panic that was always near the skin threatened to break, and he held himself very still until the peril had passed. (10-11)

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In an earlier flashback describing the scene leading to the offense, Kingsley has a sudden and devastating realization of "the failure of what had once been the most personal, the most tender, and the most valiant of hopes" (93). Seeing the banality and meretriciousness of his last three published works for the first time, he knew he could not fulfil the idealistic course he had set for himself in adolescence;

> ...the vocation of literature: a vocation, properly so called, which had to be approached with at least as much fear, awe and reverence as that necessary for the priesthood. If he were to serve it, then assuredly the scourges of self-discipline and the rigours of faith that would have to be called forth from him, bent as though in prayer over the page, demanded nothing less than the total commitment of his being: a commitment which took its measure only from his abilities, the equivalent of grace. Talent, in other words. Talent, the old coinage. And if the talent fell short, then everything else about the calling, the commitment, was nothing but an empty and posturing impertinence. (94)

With the comparison of his literary ambition to priestly vows, "this cruel revelation" (94) of artistic failure takes on apocalyptic import for Kingsley in a bitter apprehension of futility: "And each inner cry without a trace of irony, that normal compensation for the defeated, the disappointed and the self-deceiving" (94). The tragic personal consequences of such a dispiriting acknowledgment for Kingsley are manifested in his subsequent association of this "calamitous truth" (94) with the presence of the young Jessica sleeping in the car, leading him into a horrid act of degradation: an

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ultimately fatal connection for both of them.

Jessica's sexual victimization, from her fateful violation when a little girl to her adult exploitation in the fashion industry, has instilled a profound cynicism into her narrative outlook. The futility of endeavour which mocks ambition is suggested figuratively in her efforts to recollect someone from her past who might be related to Kingsley's fictional creation, Jeff Richards:

> ...the young copywriter who imagined himself approaching a city of gold. She knew that all such places, magical in each distant prospect, emptied their buckets of sewage over the walls. The gates stayed locked, so that all you got at the end of your pilgrimage was a splatter of filth. (132-133)

Blackeyes is criticized by Nick Kimberley for being "a hollow act of auto-deconstruction" despite its impressive narrative control, literary finesse and trendy exposition of women's abuse by men (30). In another review, Francis King describes the book as one "more to admire for the dexterity of its dissection of the dead than to love for the eloquence of its celebration of the living" (40). Both of these observations reflect the thematic and structural status of Dennis Potter's text as a spare but deftly-crafted work of apocalyptic metafiction. Like Waterland and Small World, this novel self-consciously foregrounds the artifice of narratives, questioning mimetic assumptions of literature. The passages recording the humiliation of Blackeyes in her first audition, her assault at a party, and her

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manipulation by bullying directors while filming commercials, depict the sexist and reifying processes of a decadent consumer culture. Although the alternative narratives in Blackeyes frustrate the reader's search for an authoritative interpretation of the text, the sense of realism created in each narrative within Potter's metafiction credibly supports his apocalyptic portrait of spiritual collapse. Jessica and her uncle deconstruct each other's stories of Blackeyes before the meta-narrator effectively deconstructs their lives in the final murder-suicide, while their purportedly fictional character, Blackeyes, is released by simply disappearing from the novel. Confronting the reader with this confusion of ontological frames does not, however, negate the fully-realized depiction of Kingsley's angst or Jessica's despair. The futility experienced by the reader in the assimilation of contradictory narrative perspectives extends from Jessica's soul-destroying treatment as a woman, and her uncle's failure as a writer, leading to the meta-narrative's final revelations of their grim fate.

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Chapter Four

London Fields

"Death is much on people's minds" (Amis 1).

Martin Amis's bitterly comic novel London Fields (1989) depicts a spiritually bleak urban landscape set in the final year of this century. The relationship of four characters linked by the impending murder of one of them is recounted in a narrative which self-consciously signals its own artifice, describing a dystopian vision of personal failure and social decay. This portrait is shadowed with apocalyptic references to various cosmic, natural and man-made disasters threatening the earth at the end of the millennium. The author's prefatory note attempts to justify what Amis suggests is the understated insistence of the book's title. He also mentions *Time's Arrow*, *Millennium*, *The Murderee*, and *The Death of Love* (n. pag.) as among the more obvious alternatives, indicating the portentous content of the text to follow. His rather ostentatious explanation would seem to be incongruous given the bucolic setting evoked in the choice of *London Fields;* however, the fatalistic perspective in Amis's novel is ironic.

The narrator, Samson Young, is a journalist who is terminally ill with an unspecified ailment hinted to be associated with radiation sickness. In response to a personal ad, he has temporarily exchanged his New York flat for the more luxurious London apartment belonging to

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Mark Asprey, a successful English playwright and romance novelist. A seamy pub tellingly named the Black Cross becomes the fateful intersection in the lives of the novel's four protagonists. There, Young meets Nicola Six, who plots her own murder through a lover's triangle with a small-time crook and aspiring darts champion named Keith Talent and an upper-class businessman named Guy Clinch, who is honourable but naive to a fault. Nicola's manipulative involvement with these three men leads to her being murdered, not as expected, by one of the two suitors, but by the the narrator, who subsequently commits suicide. Despite grim plot elements, this large and digressive novel's tone is more ironic than tragic, with the characters functioning mainly as deterministic caricatures in numerous overtly farcical scenes. The fatalism and futility evinced through Amis's dark humour are genuine, though not morbid, and London Fields, like other works of apocalyptic metafiction as diversely fashioned as Small World or Tristram Shandy, has the quality of illustrating the sometimes comic ironies paradoxically linked with prospects of failure or doom.

The narrator's pose of modest reportage is enclosed by the novel's metafictional asides commenting on the nature of authorship and the text's status as fiction. Young's first-person account begins with the claim that he is actually recording "a true story" (1) (later revealed to be based on the narrative in Nicola's diary),

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in which, omnisciently, he knows the details of a murder that is about to happen. Intimidated by what he perceives as "the looming bulk of Mark Asprey's corpus" (39), he feels compelled to assure the reader of the merits of his own journalistic integrity:

> My memoirs, my journalism, [are] praised for their honesty, their truthfulness. I'm not one of those excitable types who get caught making things up. Who get caught improving on reality. I can embellish, I can take certain liberties. Yet to invent bald facts of a life (for example) would be quite beyond my powers. (39)

A teasingly ambiguous "M.A." (n. pag.) initials the author's foreword, implicating Mark Asprey as a possible surrogate for Amis. Young self-deprecatingly admits to his good fortune for the receipt of this found story: "Novelists don't usually have it this good, do they, when something real happens (something unified, dramatic and pretty saleable), and they just write it down" (1). He recalls his former lack of creativity, considering himself "less a novelist than a queasy cleric, taking down the minutes of real life" (3), and later reminds the reader facetiously: "Boy, am I a reliable narrator" (162).

At the conclusion of the novel any surety of verisimilitude is dispelled, however, with the existential doubt of a dying man, as Young, having swallowed a suicide pill, records his final thoughts in two brief letters. In the terse note to Mark Asprey, he indicates his own suspicion with a final postscript

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asking: "You didn't set me up. Did You" (468)? This is followed by the emotion-charged message to Keith's Talent's daughter, Kim, in which he writes provocatively: "I feel seamless and insubstantial, like a creation. As if someone made me up, for money. And I don't care." (470). This ironic acceptance of nihilism undercuts the entire novel. Amis's postmodern text, like the self-conscious narrative in Tristram Shandy, foregrounds the fictionality of experience within metafictional context which apprehends a threatening doom with irony.

Luc Sante criticises Amis's novel for its postmodern tendency to depend on what he views as superfluous gimmickry:

> The toying with authorship and voice and point of view and destiny serves no purpose, except as packaging: some backdated flash for the squares, some makeshift complexity for the professors. The world crisis tease is even less pertinent, merely there to simulate historical significance. (46)

Such a complaint would be valid except that the metafictional structure of implied story within story, creating mimetic and ontological uncertainties, is central to the apocalyptic import of London Fields. In the hour before his death, Amis's narrator acknowledges the bitter revelations confronting him with regard to his version of Nicola's narrative: "She outwrote me. Her story worked. And mine didn't. There's really nothing more to say" (466). Having committed murder, he recognizes in himself the culpability which he had

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earlier attributed to Keith Talent: "No. I was the worst guy. I was the worst and the last beast" (466). The admission of failure and guilt assumes eschatological significance here: "I failed in art and love. I wonder if there's time to wash all this blood off my hands" (467). These apprehensions of personal defeat and mortality framed in a self-reflexive, parodic text are qualities of apocalyptic metafiction, a form of narrative which also has the compensatory effect of creating an ironic view of death and loss.

Echoing Sante's objection to the novel's seeming obsession with presentiments of global catastrophe, Martyn Harris further condemns pseudo-portentousness at the expense of fully-realized characters: "Instead of character the book offers chronocentrism-the conceit that your own age is more special, more scary, more apocalyptic than any other" (34). If this millennialism, so often expressed in contemporary fiction, is unfounded, despite current environmental dilemmas, nuclear proliferation and chiliastic concordances, it is nevertheless precisely the point. Regardless of whether the intent is to be serious or parodic, the prophetic warnings of Armageddon and planetary destruction in Amis's text are not fulfilled at the conclusion of the novel. Such rumours rather serve to lend universal significance to the fate of his individual characters. As Frank Kermode observes: "what human need can be more

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profound than to humanize the common death" in order to relate individual mortality with the larger context of the end of the world (7)? The rather pathetic figures in Amis's satire of spiritual and social decay are vehicles for his exuberant style, their grotesque affairs traced against an encompassing background of approaching doom which extends the fatalistic note of the text. These characters may lack the depth of motivational scope that Harris asserts is necessary to generate a sympathetic response in the reader (34), but as Gerald Graff states: "In postmodernist fiction, character, like external reality, is something 'about which nothing is known', lacking in plausible motive or discernible depth" (234). Empirical assumptions of an observable cause and effect relationship governing human behaviour have lost their former authority.

Having arrived in England after what is revealed as a ten year absence, Young notes his impressions of the city's decline in images of physical corruption: "London's pub aura, that's certainly intensified: the smoke and the builder's dust, the toilet tang, the streets like a terrible carpet" (3). His apocalyptic forebodings intensify following a cursory look at his host's car:

> "Giddiness and a new nausea, a moral nausea, coming from the gut, where all morality comes from (like waking up after a disgraceful dream and looking with dread for the blood on your hands). On the front passenger seat, under the elegant rag of a white silk scarf, lies a

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> heavy car-tool. Mark Asprey must be afraid of something. He must be afraid of London's poor. (3)

In the climactic murder scene, it will be the narrator who ultimately uses such an implement to bludgeon Nicola Six. This is foreshadowed several times through the novel in reiterated passages cryptically describing the murder victim climbing into a car and recognizing her killer without naming him: "'You,' she will say, in intense recognition: 'Always you'" (15). The sense of time running out is conveyed to the reader early in Young's narrative: "I'm on deadline too here, don't forget" (1).

Physical degradation with time is a central thematic concern in London Fields, complementing the novel's apocalyptic issues. The heartfelt symptoms of time's ravages are bitterly acknowledged by Amis's spokesman: "And meanwhile time goes about its immemorial work of making everyone look and feel like shit. You got that" (26)? As Zbigniew Lewicki observes, manifestations of both entropy and apocalypse "co-exist in contemporary fiction, expressing the conviction that people have no ultimate power over the universe" (115). This is evident in the fatalism of the characters in Amis's postmodern text. In an early hint that he is dying, Young cites a Doctor Slizard who told him he will "have about three months more of this to get through, and then everything will change" (14). On a personal level this would

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indicate the entropic effects of a fatal illness leading perhaps for Young, who is Jewish, to an apocalyptic revelation in religious terms at death.

Nicola Six, the femme-fatal "murderee" (15), is like the narrator, aware of her own imminent mortality. She was born with precognition, and knows in a self-fulfilling prophecy that she will die on the night of her thirty-fifth birthday, which is also the expected date of a total eclipse and Guy Fawkes night. As a child she had experienced another vision describing the inevitable nuclear holocaust: "On television at the age of four she saw the warnings, and the circles of concentric devastation, with London like a bull's-eye....She knew that would happen, too. It was just a matter of time" (16). Her discarded diary, which Young uses as the basis of his thriller story, "was therefore, just the chronicle of a death foretold" (17). For Nicola, death will be apocalyptic in its prophetic certainty: "...the real death, the last thing that already existed in the future was growing in size as she moved forward to confront or greet it....It was fixed. It was written" (18). As the author of her own death, Nicola has cast the three men involved with her in the deterministic mould of her plot with its grimly defined ending.

Keith Talent, assigned the role of murderer in Young's version of Nicola's story, expresses a pragmatic attitude toward mortality in his consolatory remarks when

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she returns from a funeral for an older woman who used to be her employer: "'Still. Does you credit,' Keith went on. 'Show respect. Even if it's just for some old boiler. Comes to us all as such'" (38). Keith's laconic fatalism implies a simple recognition of ageing's entropic processes, and as the chief picaresque figure in Amis's satire his amoral outlook precludes eschatological considerations. The ravages associated with corporality are considered from the ironic perspective of a reduced life expectancy in the novel, and Keith himself would acknowledge the grotesque effects of hard living on his idol, the former paragon of darting circles and his daughter's namesake, Mr. Kim Twemloe:

> The guy was like a god to Keith, no matter about his orange-peel face. Let others dwell on that funny lump in his side, that walking frame. He had a good head of hair, for thirty-eight. Just that some of us live so full, our flames burn so bright, that the years go past not singly but six or seven at a time, like the years of dogs. (461)

A similar attenuation of Keith's life is noted by the dying narrator, who also extends this entropic acceleration to the world of nature when he comments ominously: "It's not just the animals who aren't living so long" (135). Young, wistfully considering his own previous concern with the dangers of sexually-transmitted diseases, observes that a formerly repressed fatalism has resurfaced in the general sentiment which underscores the novel's apocalyptic awareness of mortality and human pretensions:

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> Besides, we all know that we're not going to live forever. We do know that. We forgot it for a while. For a while, the live-forever option looked to be worth trying. No longer....We subliminally accept that life has been revised downward... (281-282)

Nicola Six understands time as an entropic force: "Don't we feel time as a power, and doesn't it feel like gravity" (297)? She connects her own notion of the "death of love" (196) with the corruption of the planet, whose viability appears to be near exhaustion at the close of the millennium, apprehending the apocalyptic import of living in the last days of the world:

> We havn't been around very long. And we've turned the earth's hair white. She seemed to have eternal youth but now she's ageing awful fast, like an addict, like a waxless candle. *Jesus, have you seen her recently?* We used to live and die without any sense of the world getting older....We used to live outside history. But now we're all coterminous. We're inside history now all right, on its leading edge, with the wind ripping past our ears. Hard to love when you're bracing yourself for impact. And maybe love can't bear it either, and flees all planets when they reach this condition, when they get to the end of their twentieth centuries. (197)

Nicola had wanted to be in control by writing the narrative for her death, but she recognized that a larger apocalypse was at hand: "And now the twentieth century had come along and after several try-outs and test drives it put together an astonishing new offer: death for everybody. Death for everybody, by hemlock or hardware" (297). She is Amis's most articulate interpreter of the malaise afflicting the planet. The universal doom suggests to her a nihilism fatal to the survival of love,

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and she compares her sense of imminent collapse to the historic extinction of the dinosaurs:

> She played with the idea, trying to combine it with the death of love, and imagined the heavy richness of a distempered paradise, where something was not quite right; and here the ancient creatures slowly sensed that their world had begun to fall away. They smelled the death ubiquity. (298)

Nicola knows instinctively as the writer of a diary and creator of a murder plot when narratives are about to end. She understands the fictionality in experience suggested by the dinosaurs' record: "Their story was over. More than that, their reality was concluded. You can feel it coming" (298).

In addition to such metafictional allusions, London Fields contains numerous puns and intertextual references foregrounding the interconnections between the artifices of fiction and those undermining the reality of life. As Mick Imlah notes, Nicola controls Guy Clinch and Keith Talent through "a parody of love" and "a parody of sex" respectively (1051), indicating the fictionality of these human experiences. She is the creative source for Samson Young's "snappy little thriller" (3), which follows the narratives found in her notebooks and her actions. The ailing journalist-narrator refers the reader to Norman Cohn's historical study The Pursuit of the Millennium (1957), as one of the few books that can still engage him. Commenting cynically on the failures of past chiliastic movements, Young mentions an ancient text with

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a seminal relationship to millennialism: "Even the Old Testament expected the Apocalypse 'shortly'. In times of mass disorientation and anxiety..." (64). However, several of his own novel's chapter headings are characterized by an apocalyptic intonation, including: *The Dead-End Street*, *The Event Horizon*, *The Doors of Deception*, *Going Out With God*, *Horrorday*, and *The Deadline*.

Amis's metafictional layering of stories and self-conscious juxtaposition of texts undermine the authority of narrative, placing an ironic aspect on the novel's satiric and apocalyptic subject matter. For the reader, apocalyptic metafiction creates epistemological uncertainty suggesting an ironic response to the depiction of various manifestations of failure which must be suspect inside a text whose ultimate significance and ontological boundaries are also suspect. Sending Guy Clinch on a ludicrous journey to America in order to inform his wife's dying mother about his illicit affair, Nicola gives him a book which is an eye-witness account of the atom-bombing of Hiroshima. Reading the book, Guy reflects on the incongruous associations of the bomb's name, and its disturbing implications for his own relationship with Nicola:

> "Enola Gay" was the plane that flew the mission to Hiroshima. The pilot named the aircraft after his mother. He was once her little boy. But Little Boy was the name of the atom bomb. It killed 50,000 people in 120 seconds. (445)

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The bomb's apocalyptic message is repeated in the devastating revelation for Guy that Nicola has perhaps duped him with her pathetic story of an orphaned friend she called Enola Gay who had a little boy and whose rescue from cruel circumstances would perhaps yield her own salvation, if only she had the money she needed.

Like other postmodern texts, London Fields mocks cultural assumptions about the mimetic value of literature, and as apocalyptic metafiction, it questions notions of personal achievement associated with literary production. While the mortally ill Samson Young is anxiously hoping to complete his novel in progress as an artistic legacy, he receives an insulting letter from Mark Asprey, cruelly disparaging his previously published work. The condescending playwright boasts of having purchased Young's *Memoirs of a Listener* for "a mere 98 cents" (301). With sarcasm, he cites its "poignant charm" which, he writes:

> is afforded by the helpless contortions of your prose. But why do you think anyone wants to hear about a lot of decrepit old Jews? Still, I admire your nerve. An autobiography is, by definition, a success story. But when some pipsqueak takes up his pen as the evenings lengthen--well, full marks for gall! And the remainder shops do deserve our full support. (301)

The ridicule of artistic pretension continues within a metafictional context, as Asprey then recommends a romance novel titled *Crossbone Waters* without telling Young that he had in fact authored it, publishing under

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the pseudonym of Marius Appleby. The American and Nicola Six do not agree on the merits of the book, which, to the reader, is clearly an example of pulp fiction, and she baits him with her praise comparing Asprey's art to that of an acknowledged master: "There's a purity in his work that reminds one of Tolstoy'" (305). Young sheepishly finds that although he regards the book as rubbish he is compelled to finish reading it anyway. The attraction that this form of literature seems to have for Amis's narrator, regardless of Nicola's disingenuous praise, illustrates ironic aspects of the relationship between reader and text sometimes indicated self-consciously in postmodernist narratives: that people will immerse themselves willingly in a known fiction, and that it is impossible to define the limits of various fictions as they overlap each other and what is supposedly real experience:

> God knows why I persist with *Crossbone Waters*. I guess it emboldens me: that stuff like this gets published. ...In his skiff or whatever, with his sweaty fatigues and his trusty guide Kwango, Marius Appleby retraces the old pirate routes of festering Borneo....Marius vows to possess Cornelia....On her way out, after her swim, she faces the travel writer boldly, without shame, as noble beauties will. And he raptly notes that her breasts are *proud* and her hair-colour *natural*.
> ...The whole thing is like this: a thesaurus of miserable cliches. It's an *awful* little piece of shit. But I guess I'll keep going. The thing is, I really want to know how Marius makes out with Cornelia. (324-325)

In his recommendation, Asprey had described *Crossbone Waters* as "non-fiction" (302). Paradoxically, Young later

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finds some magazines containing photographs of Asprey and Cornelia Constantine with a caption asking "DID THEY OR DIDN'T THEY?", followed by conflicting statements in the accompanying article: "'The book is all lies,' say Cornelia and her lawyers. 'What happened happened,' Asprey insists" (433). However, in his final note to Young, Asprey contradicts himself, conceding that his book was false as Cornelia had claimed. These conflicting statements confusing the fictional or real status of a text within a text subvert the legitimacy of all texts.

Within the metafictional narrative of London Fields, Nicola fabricates differing illusions for Keith Talent, Guy Clinch and the narrator. She tells Young the story of deceptions she uses to control Keith and Guy, omitting the fact that it is Young who will be her murderer, rather than Keith, as he had expected. After Young finds a photograph revealing that Nicola and Asprey were once lovers, he wonders about the implications because Asprey knew that he had been at the airport. Amis thus sets up the alternative possibility, in his novel's postmodern confusion of narrative frames, that the author of the meta-narrative may in fact be Asprey rather than Young.

Nicola makes teasing videos of herself to create pornographic fantasies for Keith, and Amis subverts accepted conventions regarding the distinctions between this type of expression and other ostensibly more legitimate forms in his distorted parody of the issue.

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Finding Keith with tears on his face during a viewing of one of her calculated performances, Nicola is herself impressed by the depth of Keith's emotional response: "How she had underestimated her Keith! Pornography awakened all his finer responses. It wasn't just the sex. He really did think it was beautiful" (332). Through association of an emotional response normally attributed to art with the prurient aspects of sexual exploitation, Amis mocks the elevated status assumed for the purportedly respectable narratives which include literary and historical texts. Keith is eventually reduced to a leering voyeur of Nicola's contrived romance with the naively earnest Guy. However, the reality suggested within the ontological frame displayed on the television screen affects Keith with enough intensity to question the privileged status of real experience. Watching the screen as Nicola manipulates Guy to a crescendo of unfulfilled desire becomes an awe-inspiring experience for Keith in Amis's baroquely stylized text:

> "Oof," said Keith. He whistled hoarsely, and those blue gawpers filled with all their light. Blimey. No, you don't--you don't do that. Not. To a guy. You don't, he thought, as his flipper reached down for his chopper. You don't do that to a guy. (402)

In a cynical ploy to garner the intellectual admiration of Guy Clinch, Nicola affects an intense literary interest, coupled with false innocence. This parody of artistic appreciation and romantic sensibility mocks the traditional values accorded to the study of

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literature as a means of spiritual fulfilment. Amis shows literature being used solely for a base material motive, discrediting its normally understood role as art. When considered with Young's willing participation in planned murder for the sake of publication and Asprey's shallow commercialism, literary production becomes an unsavoury occupation serving a sometimes illicit agenda. Initially, Nicola claims this newly-acquired sensitivity herself, as she coyly dazzles her high-minded admirer through an answering machine:

> You see...Dear Guy, thank you for all the sentiments you have awoken in me. It was wonderful to learn that I *could have* these feelings. My reading, in future will be much vivified. I shall look at Lawrence with new eyes. (157)

Later, she casts the tabloid-reading Keith in a fatuous role as an aspiring student of the classics, and, with the quiet resolution of a martyr, alludes to her lengthy involvement as a teacher, speaking of "work in remedial reading" (342). Like the postmodern narratives of Swift, Lodge and Potter, Amis's novel ridicules the pretensions of teachers and other literary figures who advocate the cultural merits of literary or historical texts. Nicola's pose, which is so obviously a fabrication in a text which suggests the fictionality of experience, questions the credibility of teaching in the real world. Pretending an altruistic relationship, Nicola muses with Guy about suitable study material, based on her own refined tastes: "I was thinking perhaps 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. Or

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'Bright Star'. It's a favourite of mine. Do you know it? 'Bright Star! Would I were steadfast as thou art'" (342)? Whether quoting from the literary canon, or mentioning television, the news, weather reports, magazine articles, photographs, pornography, tabloids, or various poems, letters, diaries or other narratives of the characters, such intertextual references in Amis's novel function to question the authority of the received text. The inherent fictionality in communication between people is recognized by Nicola as she observes dryly of people like Keith: "They believe in each other's lies just like they believe in television" (342).

Like the Perrse McGarrigle character in Small World, Guy Clinch operates as a parodic moral arbiter in a decadent world. While Amis's fatalistic narrator also expresses an appreciation of personal failure, social collapse and the felt threat of imminent destruction, he is a more cynical spokesman, a dying man who is knowingly, if vicariously, participating in a murder scheme. Guy, moreover, who has wealth, family and a gullibility of absurd proportions, "whose humour always came fom the overflow of happiness, never from the undertow of irony" (154), is faced with his own degradation and the loss of his marriage, in addition to the manifestations of corruption in the people around him. His wife, ironically named Hope, appears to be having an affair with her tennis coach, while their only

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child is a monstrous inducement to birth control, whom Amis dwells on comically, if excessively, in repetitive cartoon-like scenes. Enduring these domestic disappointments, Guy's exaggerated sense of chivalry as the honourable gentleman allows him to fall prey to Nicola's skilful entrapment, but also places him at odds with the contemporary social reality. Within Amis's metafictional parody, Guy enacts the literary code of a romantic hero who is absurdly out of context, mocking by association the legitimacy of the reality that contains him. When, on the street one day he pauses in an act of charity, his anachronistic response is cast in relief:

> One doesn't often see the blind in the streets now. One doesn't often see the very old. They stay inside. They don't come out much, not any more. Not this year....Guy strode forward. He took the blind man's blind arm. "Would you like a hand, sir?" he asked. "Here we are," he said, guiding, urging. On the far kerb Guy cheerfully offered to take the blind man further--home, anywhere. Sightless eyes stared at his voice in astonishment. Guy shrugged: offer the simplest courtesy these days and people looked at you as if you were out of your mind. And then the astonishment became general, for the blind man tapped his way to the nearest wall, and dipped his head, and used his eyes for something they were still good at. Tears came from them readily enough.
>
> Guy reapproached the blind man with embarrassment and some panic.
>
> "Leave him," said an onlooker.
>
> "Leave him alone, for fuck's sake," advised another. (222)

This scene underscores a fundamental decline in the human condition where an isolated kindness evokes despair: "They can take it, so long as *no one* is kind" (222). Although Guy is perhaps the only one of Amis's gross

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caricatures with enough semblance of ethical integrity to warrant empathy, his ludicrous naivety makes him an object of ridicule who functions as an uneasy witness of things coming to a sorry end, of lost standards which are themselves suspect in their metafictional setting:

> The post-office, whose floor stayed wet in any weather, was a skating rink of drunks and supplicants and long-lost temper--and self-injury, Guy thought, noticing how nobody noticed the woman in the corner rhythmically beating her head against the join in the wall. He queued for a callbox, or milled for a callbox, the queuing idea, like the zebra-crossing idea, like the women-and-children-first idea, like the leave-the-bathroom-as-you-would-expect-to-find-it idea, having relinquished its hold in good time for the millennium. (364)

Returning from his fool's errand at Nicola's request to announce their relationship to Hope's senile mother, Guy's absurd perspective as an actor in a grotesque parody of romance seems to have succumbed to a fatalistic recognition of the apocalyptic future, as he reflects on the failed expectations and bleak prospects shared by some old women he sees in a concourse:

> All of them had been adored and wept over, presumably, at one point, prayed to, genuflected in front of, stroked, kissed, licked; and now the bald unanimity of disappointment, of compound grief and grievance. It was written on their mouths, on their lips, marked in notches like the years of a sentence. In their heads only the thoughts that just wouldn't go away, cold and stewed, in their little teapot heads, still brewing beneath frilled cozies of old-lady hair...
> Whatever it was women wanted, few of them ended up getting it. (431)

In its consideration of social decline and

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mortality, London Fields, with its setting at the close of the millennium, also suggests an apocalyptic concern with the collapse of ideology. Reflecting its postmodern stance, Amis's novel displays a nihilistic loss of faith in the achievements and beliefs of Western culture. The narrative's metafictional structure undermines the validity of mimetic representation, empirical knowledge and the boundaries of fact and fiction in experience, through its confusion of authorship and textual frames. More specifically, Amis questions the integrity of contemporary society's foundations, regarding the family, the nature of love, and the estimation placed on life.

In connection with this failure of traditional values, Luc Sante argues: "The book's subject is cheating, primarily" (45), and states as a criticism, that "The deadly accurate pinpointing of human weaknesses has no counterweight in acknowledgement of human value" (46). Sante observes that Keith's description in the novel is that of a small-time swindler, "a *cheat*" (Amis 6) in every facet of his personality, that Guy is unfaithful to his wife, and that by planning her murder, Nicola betrays the fundamental biological imperative (Sante 46). As Nicola herself states: "They say that everything wants to persist in its being. You know: even sand wants to go on being sand. I don't believe that. Some things want to live, and some things don't" (396). Samson Young is also involved in this betrayal of nature,

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becoming an accomplice in suicide, a murderer and finally, committing suicide himself. By extension, the meta-narrator is cheating the reader of full comprehension, with the questions raised in unanswered narrative threads and unexplained textual elements. These include: the question of ultimate authorship; the exact cause and nature of Young's fatal illness; his relationship with Missy Harter and Sheridan Sick; the substance of the various allusions to impending nuclear or meteorogical catastrophe; and the full significance of *London Fields* as a geographical or metaphorical location in the narrator's past.

The novel's awareness of corruption and threatening destruction, whether personal, social or cosmic, suggests eschatological angst, although not necessarily from a genuinely religious footing. For Guy Clinch, a dawning nihilism is associated with apocalyptic images in the street:

> For some reason the physical world was feeling more and more nugatory. He thought that perhaps this was a consequence or side-effect of the time he was living through: the sudden eschatology of the streets; the tubed saplings and their caged trash, marking the place where each human being might be terribly interred... (271)

The moment of apocalyptic climax in Amis's text, coinciding with Nicola's murder, is November 5, 1999. Regardless of whether other warnings of nuclear confrontation, and assorted cosmic and environmental disasters, take place, a full solar eclipse is scheduled

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for that day. This strange natural phenomenon, agreeing with chiliastic predictions at the close of the millennium, suggests the traditionally envisaged physical manifestation of apocalypse. However, within Amis's postmodern text, the significance of such concordances must be suspect. As the event approaches, Guy looks with trepidation at the ominously low sun:

> The sun shouldn't be coming in low at us like this, filling windows and windscreens with rosy wreaths of dust, setting the horizon on fire like this, burning so aslant like this, at this terrible angle, making everything worse. You want it out of your sight. Look round a corner--and there's nothing, the street is gone, it's just fire and blood. Then the eyes themselves burn through and you can see the wet asphalt sizzling in its pan. The sun turns slums into crystal battlements. But the sun shouldn't be doing this, branding our minds with this idea, this secret (special burning, special fire), arrowing in low at us all the time like this. (365)

The passage, evoking Biblical apocalyptic imagery, and hinting of a personal eschatological concern beyond the scope of the anxiety connected with a merely astronomical event, implies a mock-portentousness when considered within the discrediting framework of its metafictional context.

The religious view of apocalypse is also mocked directly in London Fields. In the chapter titled "*Going Out With God*", Nicola is described as having spent enough time in church during her childhood to acquire a self-serving interest in religion. She at one point imagined that she had a relationship with God but soon

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ended it in favour of one with the Devil. She now associates this fantasy and her own death with the larger apocalypse: "When God got mad he was a jealous God. He said that if she didn't come across at least one more time He'd wash his hands of the whole planet" (133). Heedless of the threatened retribution in this imagined scenario, Nicola expresses her contempt in a brazenly assertive credo of humanism:

> He promised plague, famine, mile-high tides, sound-speed winds, and terror, ubiquitous and incessant terror, with blood flowing bridle deep. He threatened to make her old and keep her that way for ever.
> She told Him to fuck off.
> To my everything. He is *nothing*. What I am I wish to be, and what I wish to be I am. I am beyond God. I am the motionless Cause. (133)

The inclusion of this blatant disrespect for the wrath of God in Young's text sets up Nicola, as the author of both her own fate and that of the three men involved with her, for an eschatological judgement in religious terms. Alternatively, in Amis's subversive vision of culture, she could be viewed as a god-like figure herself, who creates the narrative context for her own world. Nicola's profound morbidity, which easily encompasses diverse aspects of postmodern nihilism, suggests an ironic acceptance of the universal doom:

> She welcomed and applauded the death of just about anything. It was company. It meant you weren't quite alone. A dead flower, the disobliging turbidity of dead water, slow to leave the jug. A dead car half-stripped at the side of the street, shot, busted, annulled, abashed. A dead cloud. The Death of the Novel. The Death of Animism, the Death of Naive

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> Reality, the Death of the Argument from Design, and (especially) the Death of the Principle of Least Astonishment. The Death of the Planet. The Death of God. The death of love. It was company. (296)

Although each of the four protagonists in London Fields meets with his or her personal debacle, the world survives the day of the eclipse, "horrorday" (437), and Amis's novel self-consciously teases the reader with its prophetic scenarios of destruction that are unfulfilled. The narrator reflects on previous dates of millennial crises through history, noting that this sentiment seems to be permanent condition: "In the year 999, in the year 1499, in the year 1899 (and in all the years between: the millennium is a permanent millennium)" (369). Young considers the present situation to be different, however, because man now has the "hardware" (369) to destroy his environment. The ailing planet is likened to a ghastly human visage: "Can you see him through the smoke and heat-wobble? His scalp churns with boils and baldspots and surgeon's scars. What hair is left is worried white" (369). Young's apprehension that he is living during the end-times recalls Harris's objection to the novel's pretentious chronocentrism. The fact that the world continues does not discredit millennialism as an issue, however. Frank Kermode describes the relationship of apocalyptic thought to past deadlines which never materialized:

> The great majority of interpretations of Apocalypse assume that the End is pretty near.

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> Consequently the historical allegory is always having to be revised; time discredits it. And this is important. Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited. (8)

Undermining the narrative credibility of the threatening doom apprehended by the novel's characters, Amis's postmodern narrator self-consciously flaunts his own provisionality and that of his text in mocking asides: "Sometimes (I don't know) I take a knight's jump out of my head and I think I'm in a book written by somebody else" (409). These subversive devices foreground the artifice in experience and reflect the ironic distancing suggested in the attitude to disaster conveyed by apocalyptic metafiction.

In Young's final chapter, aptly titled *The Deadline*, Nicola's orchestrated fate is realized even if the motivational substance necessitating it is not, highlighting similar arbitrary conventions in the thriller genre. Despite her professed morbidity and the novel's apocalyptic setting, Amis supplies no convincing reason why her character must be suicidal, or be murdered. Although she has compromised both Keith and Guy's marriages, and caused their public humiliation, their murderous response seems archly forced, a comic parody. This exaggeration is illustrated after Keith loses the crucial preliminary match and his chance at television darting stardom. Accepting the condolences of a supporter, he is characteristically philosophical in his brutal resolve:

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> But tonight's been a valuable experience for me. For my future preparation. Because how's your darts going to mature, Malcolm, if you don't learn?"
> "That's the right attitude, Keith."
> "Because she's dead. Believe it. You know what she is, Malcolm? She's a fuckin organ-donor. Do that and live? No danger. She's history, mate. You hearing me?" (462)

Ironically all three of the men in Nicola's life are ultimately willing to kill her, and through its parody of the femme-fatale relationship and generally corrosive portraits of women, Amis's metafiction expresses hints of misogyny. Guy Clinch, by effectively delegating the capital offense to Young, is consistent in his parodic representation of the effete upper-class fool. As the narrator comments: "'Isn't it always someone else? Who does it'" (465). Clinch is free from the consequences of his fatal dalliance with Nicola, except for his pact with Young: to attempt a reconciliation with his wife "on his hands and knees" (467), and to ensure the care of Keith's abused daughter Kim. Keith as the novel's picaroon figure is presumably free to carry on as a "*cheat*" with the solace of his numerous girl friends, although his "fate is of course more uncertain" (467). The atmosphere thus created in this parody of a love triangle and murder is more ironic than tragic.

London Fields depicts a grotesque vision of the near future where neither individuals nor society appears to work, in which substance-abusers and sexual predators mingle, featuring dysfunctional families and rumours of

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doom on the news. Amis's dystopia is rendered in both a scathing and acutely voiced style. The experience suggested is bleak enough, despite the various chiliastic red-herrings and often farcical atmosphere, to drive three of the four protagonists to the moral abyss of murder, two of them to suicide. While laughing, the reader expects that death is imminent, if not immanent. In Young's *Endpapers*, he advises Mark Asprey: "Be my literary executor: throw everything out" (468). Perhaps this fatalistic despair is in answer to the bitter derision which concludes Asprey's previous note:

> You don't understand, do you, my talentless friend? Even as you die and rot with envy. It doesn't matter what anyone writes anymore. The time for mattering has passed. The truth doesn't matter any more and *is not wanted*. (452)

With an implication of wasted effort, the significance of Young's story deconstructs itself in a self-reflexive confusion of narrative frames. Brian McHale suggests that such postmodern texts "are also, as if inevitably, about death, precisely because they are about ontological differences and the transgressions of ontological boundaries" (231). Like Tristram Shandy, this work of apocalyptic metafiction is more comic than morbid as it confronts us with the issues of death and failure, while mocking its own mimetic validity. Lacking heirs or the artistic legacy which had been the object of his labour, Young, at the end of his life, looks to little Kim Talent as a tenuous promise of continuance. Keith Talent, the

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most dynamic and vividly realized figure in the novel, has been told by numerous court officials and women that "character is destiny" (7), and recognizing that his is bad, he perseveres gamely. It is examples of human nature such as these in Martin Amis's dark but ironic anatomy of decay that offer some hope for the future.

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Conclusion

> But go thou thy way till the end *be*: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days. (Daniel 12:13)

The expectation that human affairs are finite, or at least a recognition of mortality, has underscored concern with the value of an individual life in Western literature since pre-Christian Hebrew texts. Apprehensions of the apocalyptic continue to produce eschatological considerations in contemporary fictions, even if they are without specifically religious foundations. During the history of the self-conscious English novel, a thematic awareness of death or failure has sometimes been linked to parodic, self-reflexive narratives which foreground their provisional status as artifice. The consumptive narrator in Tristram Shandy mocks the progress of his story in playful digressions eliciting a comic response to the futility of his situation. Marlow's inherent subjectivity as a morbid commentator on the implications of Kurtz's degradation stems from the basic metafictional structure of the story within a story used in Heart of Darkness. Both Sterne and Conrad gave expression to nihilistic doubts regarding the validity of progress while undermining the mimetic authority of their texts. The four postmodern works which have been the subject of this discussion are, if arbitrarily chosen, recent examples of these qualities of apocalyptic metafiction in the English novel.

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Each of the novels by Swift, Lodge, Potter and Amis is characterized variously by elements commonly attributed to the influence of postmodernism, including nested stories, confusion of textual frames or the narrator's identity, parody, exaggeration, intertextual references and disjointed sequence. Such techniques exhibit artistic self-consciousness and cultural cynicism reflecting a loss of faith in the tenets of empiricism, and more particularly, literary realism. The subversion of a realistic premise in these texts suggests an ironic attitude toward the thematic exposition of failure. If the narratives display a view of cultural nihilism surpassing the scope of the modernist vision, their fatalism is not necessarily darker. Alan Wilde explains the evolving artistic perspective from modernism to postmodernism in terms of irony:

> In short, the characteristic movement of ironic art in this century describes a double and seemingly contradictory progression, which, on the one hand, recognizes the increasing disintegration of an already disjunct world and, on the other, not only submits but (again in some cases) assents to it, or its inherent possibilities. (15-16)

However, contemporary apocalyptic metafiction shares a fundamental sentiment dating back to Biblical expressions of millennialism. Graham Swift's phlegmatic history teacher, Tom Crick, gives perhaps the most succinct and general description of this response to experience: "It's the old, old feeling, that everything might amount to nothing" (233).

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