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LUCKY JIM – KINGSLEY AMIS AS THE MASTER OF PERIPHERAL CHARACTERS

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Kingsley Amis's iconic *Lucky Jim*, published in 1954, is a classic of its kind which has for decades delighted readers not only in Britain, but in numerous other countries.¹ Quite understandably, it has been the focus of critical attention in many publications, in which critics and literary pundits extolled its merits and hailed it, to provide just one epitomical quote, "one of the key books of the English 1950s" (Moseley 1993, 18-19). More to the point, the praise came from distinguished literary figures, a good example being Malcolm Bradbury, who acclaimed Amis's novel by referring to it as "one of the funniest modern comic novels" (1988, 208).

Most criticism concerning *Lucky Jim* discusses its academic dimension, focusing predominantly on the eponymous Jim Dixon, the hyper-ridiculed Professor Welch, his arty son Bertrand, and Margaret Peel, Jim Dixon's albatross colleague. Professor Welch, of whom Amis makes "a devastating portrait" (Gardner 1981, 27), is a despised oppressor whose presence permeates the novel and is regularly brought to the fore in Dixon's comments on Welch's habits, personality, and appearance:

Now, as Dixon had been half expecting all along, Welch produced his handkerchief. It was clear that he was about to blow his nose. This was usually horrible, if only because it drew unwilling attention to Welch's nose itself, a large, open-pored tetrahedron (86).

¹ In *Kingsley Amis: A Biography*, Eric Jacobs writes that by 1972 *Lucky Jim*'s paperback form sold one and a quarter million in America alone, and by 1995 it had been translated into twenty languages. (Jacobs 1996: 162). The first Eastern Bloc country to translate it was Czechoslovakia (Amis recalls this in more detail in his *Memoirs*; Amis 2004: 269–270). The Czech version, *Šťastný Jim* (first published 1958), has so far had three different translations, and has been reprinted several times.

As Laskowski observes, Professor Welch is “one of Amis’s comic triumphs” (1998, 84); however, much the same can be claimed of the other characters in *Lucky Jim*, successfully portrayed both in descriptive and dialogic passages. A case in point is Welch’s son, Bertrand, whom Bradford defines as “an artist of loud pretensions” (2001, 77), a claim which is also relevant in a literal sense, as one of Bertrand’s distinguishing features is the tendency to announce his presence with what in the novel is defined as “the baying quality of his voice” (41). Bertrand’s proprietorial manner is overwhelmingly manifest in his numerous boasts:

When I see something I want, I go for it. I don’t allow people of your sort to stand in my way. That’s what you’re leaving out of account. I’m having Christine because it’s my right. Do you understand that? If I’m after something, I don’t care what I do to make sure that I get it (208).

Obviously, the spotlight on the leading dramatis personae of Amis’s novel is explicable, but Amis, as Gardner observes, is “a novelist of detail” (1981, 30), particularly in his portrayal of characters, who, to quote Salwak, are “sketched ... with precision and economy” (1992, 66); consequently, it is the seemingly marginal, peripheral characters that contribute immensely to Amis’s literary masterpiece. The aim of this article is to revisit, as it were, *Lucky Jim*, in order to focus on a palette of background characters, and attach more prominence to their portrayal in the novel, while not entirely neglecting the main protagonists.

As has been said, *Lucky Jim* is peopled with characters whose appearance in the novel is often seemingly negligible, if not physically non-existent. The latter group comprises characters who are discussed somewhat in absentia. This is the case with Miss O’Shaughnessy, Miss McCorquodale, and Miss ap Rhys, the female students Jim hopes to have in his seminar. Although they are mentioned a few times in the text, their names is all that the reader is provided with. However, their marginality is counterbalanced by their symbolic relevance, as for Jim not being able to have them in his class underscores his shortage of luck: “So far, Dixon’s efforts on behalf of his special subject, apart from thinking how much he hated it, had been confined to aiming to secure for it the three prettiest girls in the class...” (28).

A character who seems to have a similar, symbolical function is Michel (not Michael, as the Welches, the epitome of pretentiousness, bestowed their sons with French names). The first mention of Michel is a joint entrance, his brother included: “the effeminate writing Michel and the bearded pacifist painting Bertrand” (2000, 13). However, unlike Bertrand, Michel remains a figure one hears of, rather than meets, a fact most convenient for Dixon: “Welch disclosed a few facts about the recent history of the effeminate writing Michel, a character always waiting in the wings of Dixon’s life but apparently destined never to enter its stage” (178).

For Jim, even though he has never met Michel, he remains nothing short of a replica of his vile parents, aptly defined by Stovel as “waxwork dummies” (1998, 168):

This Michel, as indefatigably Gallic as his mother, had been cooking for himself in his small London flat, and had in the last few days made himself ill by stuffing himself with filthy foreign food of his own preparation, in particular, Dixon gathered, spaghetti and dishes cooked in olive oil. This seemed fit punishment for one so devoted to coagulated flour-and-water and peasants’ butter-substitute, washed down, no doubt, by ‘real’ black coffee of high viscosity (178).

When Michel finally appears in the novel, it is only in Jim’s short account, which, along with insignificant descriptive details, reiterates the ‘effeminate’ feature and adds a comment on his paleness, thus additionally emphasising Michel’s insignificance: “One of them was clearly the effeminate writing Michel, on stage at last just as the curtain was about to ring down. He was a tall pale young man with long pale hair protruding from under a pale corduroy cap” (250). Inserting, as it were, the figure of Michel into the novel, with just a few tiny details available to the reader is a perfect example which substantiates the claim that Lucky Jim presents “a world of omnipresent detail” (Fallis 1977, 67).

Another group of characters comprises those who, though peripheral too, are given a verbal life, as it were, but only in limited capacity. These characters may be conveniently labelled as few-liners, or at best, paragraph-characters. One case in point is Miss Cutler, Dixon’s landlady. She is an example of how Amis employs characters whose function does not appear to contribute anything substantial to the import of the story, particularly that her only oral activity is to inform Dixon about a telephone call. Yet, somewhat disproportionately, Amis dedicates a detailed descriptive passage to Miss Cutler, from which one can infer that, much as she remains a background figure, she bears a symbolic importance:

Miss Cutler came into the room with a tray of tea and food. One of the oldest of her many black dresses shone softly at several points of her stout frame. The emphatic quietness of her tread, the quick, trained movements of her large purple hands, the little grimace and puff of breath with which she enjoyed silence upon each article she laid on the table, her modestly lowered glance, combined to make it impossible to talk in her presence, except to her. It was many years now since her retirement from domestic service and entry into the lodging-house trade, but although she sometimes showed an impressive set of landlady-characteristics, her deportment when serving meals would still have satisfied the most exacting lady-housekeeper (Amis 2000, 32).

This symbolism may be interpreted in the context of Miss Cutler being a well-organised, demanding and exacting person, her efficiency remaining so much in contrast with the erratic Welch, his complete lack of competence, and his inflated ego.

Another few-liner, though certainly not on a moral par with Miss Cutler, is the Principal, who appears in the novel to utter a few words, but more importantly to endorse his stature non-verbally:

The Principal, a small ventricose man with a polished, rosy bald head, gave one of his laughs. These strongly recalled the peals of horrid mirth so often audible in films about murders in castles, and had been known, in the Principal's first few weeks at the College just after the war, to silence the conversations of an entire Common Room (212).

In the final passages of Jim's speech on Merrie England, the Principal's idiosyncratic manner of laughing turns into "a loud homicidal-maniac laugh" (218), which perfectly epitomizes the grotesque of Jim's drunken performance.

Finally, a character who remains very much in the shadow, Evan Johns, introduced as an "office worker at the College and amateur oboist" (30), the latter fact undoubtedly securing him as Welch's pet, particularly that he is a keen participant of the musical soirées Welch organizes. Johns is sketched as a contemptible creature, mostly owing to his *modus operandi*, defined as that of "a silent mover, a potential eavesdropper" (34). In fact, he is a sycophant, loyal to the Welch family, least of all as their informer: "Johns came in at the door, carrying a sheaf of papers. Had he been listening?" (96). The scarce physical description of Johns provided in the novel perfectly tallies with his slippery nature, particularly well-rendered in the phrase "tallow-textured features" (34). Johns is not a character that vocalizes his feelings or opinions; on the contrary, he's most spare with words, and when he does utter a line or two, it is to vow a revenge on Dixon: 'You'll see,' Johns said. He went on looking at Dixon. 'You'll see,' he added, grinning (38). Consequently, Jim has a solidified opinion about Johns, reflected in labels such as "little sod" (23) or "little ponce" (118), which reveal mining Dixon's rating of Johns.

In the character typology concerning *Lucky Jim* one cannot omit those who are discussed, but do not appear until the very final passages of the novel. These could be called **this/that** characters, because they are non-existent for most of the story, and are usually referred to with determiners: "That Catchpole fellow" (9), "This Catchpole" (10), "that Caton chap" (14), "this Caton fellow" (82). The first of these, Catchpole, is Margaret's former attachment, whose main function in the novel is to sustain her claim that she has been deceived, and as a result attempted a (failed) suicide; the latter is Jim Dixon's publisher-to-be who ultimately turns out to be a fraud plagiarizing Dixon's one and only academic article. As has been said, Catchpole is present only in occasional references to his presumed malevolence, which are excessively accentuated by Margaret, each mention being what Dixon calls yet "another conference about Catchpole" (21), to which Dixon becomes most allergic. When Jim finally meets Catchpole in the flesh, the latter not only clarifies the misunderstanding and false accusations directed at him, but also comes

across as a sympathetic and likeable person. He also turns out to be one of those characters who, factually and symbolically, contribute to Dixon's final good fortune, in this particular case delivering him from the remnants of remorse for Margaret: "It had been luck, too, that had freed him from pity's adhesive plaster; if Catchpole had been a different sort of man, he, Dixon, would still be wrapped up as firmly as ever" (243).

The other of the two characters, L.S. Caton, plays a key role in the academic milieu, as a self-proclaimed editor who comes up with a fraudulent offer, which Jim believes to be a genuine one. For most of the novel Caton is a recurrent topic of Dixon's conversations with Professor Welch, which subsequently takes an epistolary form when Jim writes to Caton with great reverence expecting to have his article published: "Dear Dr Caton: I hope you will not mind my troubling you, but I wonder if you could let me know when my article..." (91). The one and only time Dixon has a chance to talk to Caton is a telephone conversation, from which he learns that, much like Welch, whom Dixon praises for his "terrifying expertise as an evader" (49), Caton specialises in the same *modus operandi*:

A rival to Welch had appeared in the field of evasion-technique, verbal division, and in the physical division of the same field this chap had Welch whacked at the start: self-removal to South America was the traditional climax of an evasive career (194).

Caton also resembles Welch in his rather disregarding attitude, manifest, for instance, in mispronouncing Jim's surname (Dickerson), which echoes Welch's manner of addressing Dixon using his predecessor's surname (Faulkner). Moreover, much as Welch, Caton tends to be vague to the extreme: "things are very difficult these days, you know / I wish you knew how difficult things are here / with things as difficult as they are / I'm afraid things are too difficult here" (193-194).

Among various ways of classifying characters in *Lucky Jim*, one cannot omit the category which McDermott refers to as "people who are shams" (1989, 63), adding later that "one of Amis's most characteristic figures, and strengths, is the hero-as-shit" (1989, 209). In fact, *Lucky Jim* heralds this particular Amis's trademark, attested in a number of his novels, to mention *One Fat Englishman*, *Take a Girl Like You*, or *The Green Man*. Whereas in the case of the three novels quoted above McDermott's remark implies the main protagonists, in *Lucky Jim* this could be extended to various characters who undoubtedly comprise L.S. Caton, Professor Welch, Bertrand, and Evan Johns, arguably top of the league.

A category intrinsic to *Lucky Jim* is one which Castronovo classifies as "anti-Dixon" (2009, 67), obviously encompassing all the figures mentioned above, as well as a handful more, but in particular exemplified by Jim's student Michie, whose appearance in the novel immediately establishes him as a threat against whom Jim has to feel on alert for a number of reasons,

the most important being the fact that Mitchie happens to be a surprisingly knowledgeable and inquisitive student:

Michie knew a lot, or seemed to, which was as bad. One of the things he knew, or seemed to, was what scholasticism was. Dixon read, heard, and even used the word a dozen times a day without knowing, though he seemed to. But he saw clearly that he wouldn't be able to go on seeming to know the meaning of this and a hundred such words while Michie was there questioning, discussing, and arguing about them. Michie was, or seemed, able to make a fool of him again and again without warning (28–29).

Michie, despite his marginality as merely one of the students, becomes a nuisance that could jeopardize Dixon's position, a threat most apparent in seemingly innocent verbal exchanges, such as the following: "Ah, Mr Dixon, I hope you're not busy.' Dixon knew exactly how well Michie knew exactly how and why he, Dixon, couldn't be busy" (97). Mitchie perfectly exemplifies the type of character to be found in the novel, whose physical presence is peripheral, but at the same time plays an important function in the plot, primarily as a serious impediment to Jim's academic survival.

As Massie observes, Amis's heroes are "unable to exist happily without the company of women." (1990: 17). In *Lucky Jim*, two key figures are women, in fact: Margaret Peel, whom McDermott hails an "outstanding predatory female" (1989, 60), and her counterpart, Christine Callaghan, who crowns Jim's final luck. The two women are binary opposites, the former being obstinately domineering, the latter subtle and unimposing. As Salwak puts it, "Margaret is everything Jim does not want in a woman: unattractive, predictable, tedious and neurotic." (1992, 72). Margaret, in her predatory dimension, could best be defined as a question-woman, whose interrogative tone puts Jim in a decisively awkward position:

'Do you like coming to see me?'; 'Do you think we get on well together?' 'Am I the only girl you know in this place?' 'Are we going to go on seeing so much of each other?' (11) 'Can't we talk about ourselves?; We've got so much to say to each other, haven't we?' (24).

The barrage of questions has its rather ominous grand finale with "How close we seem to be tonight, James.' ... 'All the barriers are down at last, aren't they?'" (25).

As opposed to Margaret's verbosity, which is most revealing of her predacious nature, Christine is portrayed in a more descriptive manner:

In a few seconds Dixon had noticed all he needed to notice about this girl: the combination of fair hair, straight and cut short, with brown eyes and no lipstick, the strict set of the mouth and the square shoulders, the large breasts and the narrow waist, the premeditated simplicity of the wine-coloured corduroy skirt and the unornamented with linen blouse (39).

This form of depiction corresponds with the way Christine is perceived by Jim, for whom she appears to be a “dream figure” (Clive 2009, 75), to use Amis’s own term which he proposes in an interview. Consequently, unlike in the case of Margaret’s company, which is as much overbearing as it is imposed, Christine’s presence is almost a gift from the gods: “As he left the bar with Christine at his side, Dixon felt like a special agent, a picaroon, a Chicago war-lord, a hidalgo, an oil baron, a mohock” (113).

Margaret and Christine as a juxtaposition work perfectly to epitomize two opposites. As has been said, Christine is unimposing, whereas Margaret is a beast of prey. However, the comparative mode here is even more evident in the descriptive passages which draw a clear-cut division between Margaret’s and Christine’s appearance, the former delivered in an almost graphic manner, emphasizing “how thin the flesh was over her jawbone”, and how “the tendons of her neck were prominent, together with the bones at the base...”, and exposing the “unmistakable downward curve of the mouth” (19-20). In contrast, Christine is the ultimate symbol of style and beauty:

She wore a yellow dress that left her shoulders bare. It was perfectly plain, managing, as if it had been intended just for that, to reveal as decidedly ill-judged Margaret’s royal-blue taffeta, with its bow and what he supposed were gatherings or something, and with the quadruple row of pearls above it. Christine’s aim, he imagined, had been to show off the emphasis of her natural colouring and skin-texture. The result was painfully successful, making everybody else look like an assemblage of granulated halftones (106-107).

Christine is not the only female who remains in sharp contrast to Margaret. A lesser character, Carol Goldsmith, whom McDermott ranks as “admirable” (1989: 61), despite her entanglement with Bertrand, proves to be sympathetic to Jim’s cause, and at the same time so much different from Margaret:

Dixon had been studying her face during this speech. The movements of her mouth were beautifully decisive, and her voice, abandoning its synthetic fuzziness, had returned to its usual clarity. These things helped to give her presence a solidity and emphasis that impressed him; he felt not so much her sexual attraction as the power of her femaleness (123).

However, an even more glaring example and the final blow to all that is despicable about Margaret comes when yet another marginal character appears in the novel; in fact, hardly a character at all, who is set beside Margaret:

While he was being given his change, Dixon studied the barmaid, who was large and very dark with narrow upper lip and rather close-set eyes. He thought how much he liked her and had in common with her, and how much she’d like and have in common with him if she only knew him (25).

This is a superb example of how Amis employs seemingly utterly unimportant figures, who have their fleeting appearances, yet their presence is contextualized and significant.

And, finally, a woman who tallies Margaret's unpleasantness, Celia Welch, remaining in the shadow of Professor Welch, yet a worthy wife of her buffoon husband. Her dictatorial and intimidating manner is transparent in lines such as "We're all waiting, Ned" (36) or "I'm waiting for an answer, Mr Dixon" (181). At the same time, this manner betrays her contempt for her husband's underling: "No, don't interfere, darling. It won't do any good. Mr Dixon is used to being talked to like that, I'm sure" (182). She is one more marginal character who is sketched vividly, and despite the few brief appearances, her imperial demeanour is well-expounded.

Lastly, three background characters who might be conveniently labelled as Dixon's allies, supportive and willing to provide necessary assistance. The first one, Bill Atkinson, an "insurance salesman and ex-Army major" (32) is Jim's lodging mate. Unlike Jim, he is a rational and assertive character, a feature particularly well-pronounced in his dealing with Margaret's hysterical fit: "Hysterics, eh?" Atkinson said, and slapped Margaret several times on the face, very hard, Dixon thought" (159). Atkinson's pragmatic manner is of much help to Dixon when it comes to understanding Jim's predicament and offering friendly assistance, a perfect example being his scheme to rescue Jim during the Merrie England speech Dixon has to deliver:

Over the whisky-bottle an hour and a half earlier, Atkinson had insisted, not only on coming to the lecture, but on announcing his intention of pretending to faint should Dixon, finding things getting out of hand in any way, scratch both his ears simultaneously. 'It'll be a good faint,' Atkinson had said in his arrogant voice. 'It'll create a diversion all right' (224).

The other ally is Alfred Beesley, to an extent Jim's alter ego for a number of reasons. First of all, he is the subordinate of Professor Fred Karno, towards whom he does not have as strong an aversion as Dixon has towards Professor Welch, but he is keen on "getting away from Fred Karno" (31), which is his standard fashion of relating to him: "This was how Beesley was accustomed to refer to his professor." (31). This academic communion, as it were, establishes an obvious platform of understanding between the two characters. As an academic himself, Beesley has an analytical approach to his professional milieu, one outcome of his ponderings being a suspicion that Dixon is a medievalist by sheer coincidence: "You don't seem to have any special interest in it, do you?" (33). Secondly, much as Jim, Beesley is also a pursuer of luck, particularly in the female-oriented department:

Beesley, notorious for his inability to get to know women, always came to functions of this sort, but since every woman here tonight had come with a partner (except for women like the sexagenarian Professor of Philosophy or the fifteen-stone Senior Lecturer in Economics) he must know he was wasting his time (107-108).

The final phrase seems to be intratextual, as it echoes Jim's conclusion on the nature of the relation he has with his students: "They waste my time and

I waste theirs” (214). And finally, Beesley is a character who shares Dixon’s propensity to consume substantial amounts of beer, probably even bests Dixon in this particular pastime:

Beesley was standing at the counter, morosely and tremulously raising a full half-pint glass to his mouth. ... ‘What’s this, Alfred?’ Dixon asked. ‘A bender?’ Beesley nodded without stopping drinking; then, lowering his glass at last, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, making a face, and referring to the quality of the beer by a monosyllable not in decent use, he said: ‘I wasn’t getting anywhere in there, so I came in here and came over here.’ ‘And you’re getting somewhere over here, are you, Alfred?’ Carol asked. ‘On the tenth half, just about,’ Beesley said (126).

It comes as no surprise that it is Beesley who voices his sincere “Best of luck, Jim” (221) before the commencement of the disastrous Merrie England speech, though admittedly, he is not alone here. The last of the three allies is Christine’s uncle, also remaining at the background, though much talked about, a fact best epitomised in Bertrand’s boast: “‘I had been promised a meeting with one Julius Gore-Urquhart, of whom you may have heard’” (47). He, too, is in the Dixon league, apart from his social and financial status, the common denominator being the “look of a drunken sage” (108), though his social status allows him to opt for distillates (whisky), rather than products of fermentation, Dixon’s choice, for obvious reasons. Gore-Urquhart generously extends his hospitality by offering Dixon drinks and cigarettes, but also proves to have an observant and analytical mind, which allows him to understand his plight: “‘How long have you been in this game, then, Dixon?’” (214). It is, in fact, Gore-Urquhart, Dixon’s final liberator, who gives him additional courage to deliver his lecture, which becomes a turning point in his career: “‘No need to worry; to hell with all this.’ He gripped Dixon’s arm and withdrew” (221).

Conclusion

Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* is not only a seminal campus novel, but a novel that is a literary landmark of the 1950s in Britain. Jim’s *loci classici* have been quoted in numerous critical works, with some lines, such as “nice things are nicer than nasty ones” (140), becoming part of what might be called the canon of literary quotes. Criticism concerning *Lucky Jim* is ample; however, re-reading *Lucky Jim* as a classic of its kind, a novel that belongs to the canon of the twentieth-century British literature seems justified, particularly that there are still areas worth highlighting such as the way in which Amis incorporates into his novel characters who seem marginal and devoid of any essential gravity, and which can easily be overlooked, while in fact they are literary gems. They are usually introduced with few references and few details, and often in a humorous manner, a good example being the terse reference

to Professor Barclay, specializing in music, and his wife, both of whom, by the way, Dixon finds agreeable, though this does not prevent him from making a rather irreverent, though funny remark: "She permanently resembled a horse, he only when he laughed" (Amis 114). This short descriptive comment epitomizes Amis's manner of sketching his characters, particularly the marginal ones, who have their moments of spotlight, and when this happens they are portrayed in a masterly manner. It seems that, among many other qualities of his oeuvre, this very feature makes Kingsley Amis an unquestioned master of peripheral characters, and his "gift for characterization" (Salwak 1978, x) is one of the reasons why his fiction is worth revisiting.

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Summary

LUCKY JIM – KINGSLEY AMIS AS THE MASTER OF PERIPHERAL CHARACTERS

Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* is a classic novel, popular both with readers and critics. It has been in print ever since the date of its first publication, 1954, and still attracts critical attention. Most criticism concerning *Lucky Jim* focuses on the academic milieu it delineates and its main representatives, Jim Dixon and Professor Welch. However, a discerning reader will immediately notice that Amis's novel is crowded with marginal characters, whose presence contributes immensely to Amis's masterpiece. The aim of this article is to revisit *Lucky Jim* in order to focus on a number of background characters and give more prominence to their role in the novel.

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