



## A stylistic analysis of how modality contributes to the narratorial unreliability of John Self in Martin Amis' *Money*

Millie Finch

Martin Amis' novels have received as much critical acclaim as criticism. *Money*, first published in 1984, is arguably one of his most successful works – indeed, a two-part adaptation was later commissioned by the BBC (*Money* 2010). The novel tells the tale of John Self: a man 'addicted to the twentieth century' (Amis 1984: 91), a 'larger-than-life everyman figure of late capitalism' (Badrideen 2017: 443), 'utterly ignorant of the reality that surrounds him' (Doñate 2017: 74). He 'careens from New York to London and back on a veritable bender of gluttony and glamour' (Setz 2012: 64), and initially made his fortune by producing vulgar TV advertisements, all of which feature 'a big bim in cool pants and bra' (Amis 1984: 69). Given his 'dream in life' is to 'make lots of money' (92), and his 'futilely insatiable greed', he is all too easily lured into a 'labyrinthine scam' which eventually leads to his bankruptcy and destitution (Doan 1990: 70). As the autodiegetic narrator, Self's character and perspective is at the forefront of the reader's interpretation of the text. However, Self is unreliable in his narration, which poses a difficulty for the reader in their attempts to conceive the novel's action and their relationship with Self. Informed by Simpson's (1993) framework of modality, I seek to uncover how Self is construed as unreliable in a key excerpt from the novel. I then view my findings and interpretations in light of the novel's contextual influences to examine the potential reasons behind Amis' stylistic choices.

### Critical reception

*Money* has been described as a novel 'fully influenced by its age' (Doñate 2017: 65); an age characterised by the 'prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas', one in which everything could be bought and sold, and thus commodified (Jameson 1984: 36). 'Late capitalism, free-market policies and, enveloping all this, postmodern culture are the main motifs of both the novel and the decade of its publication (Doñate 2017). Set against this backdrop of excess, *Money* 'exemplifies a growing concern about the validity of traditional narrative structures' and 'their capacity to account for the increasingly complex determinants that operate upon, and within, modern nation-states' (Begley 2004: 80). As such, *Money* has been described in Bakhtinian (1984) terms as an 'Ich-Erzählung form of the confessional type' (Begley 2004: 197). That is, a narrative 'dominated by voice and self-consciousness rather than visualization and objectivity' (84). Amis' focus is 'not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself' (Bakhtin 1984: 47). This narrative style is 'a conversation of the most intense kind', as 'each uttered word responds and reacts...to the invisible speaker (197), whom Begley (2004) regards as the reader.

### Unreliable narrators

By focusing on 'how world appears to his hero' (Bakhtin 1984: 47) in response to the postmodern disjuncture in narrative, Amis creates an 'unreliable narrator'. This term gained

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recognition following the work of Booth (1961), for whom a reliable narrator is one 'who speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms)' and an unreliable narrator is one who does not (158–59). When the reader identifies the narrator as unreliable, a 'communion and even...deep collusion' forms between themselves and the implied author (307). Booth (1961) differentiates between those unreliable narrators who cannot be trusted on a personal level, and those who are 'inconscience' (unconscious), and simply misinterpret themselves or their fictional world (158-160).

Nünning (1984) argues such definitions mistreat reliability and unreliability as binary opposites and that the implied author is an obscure concept requiring refinement (16). She believes narratorial unreliability is not an objective quality, but the result of a reader's interpretation. Nünning does however, provide an extensive list of textual signals which index unreliability, points of which I will refer to as and when they become relevant in my analysis (27-28). Ultimately, Nünning believes a reader's subjective response determines whether the narrator is identified as unreliable whereas for Booth (1961) it is the norms of an implied author which inform perceptions of un/reliability. Both treat homodiegetic narrators as real people, as one ascribes the same characteristics to them as one does humans (Olson 2003: 99).

For Phelan and Martin (1999), 'narrators exist along a wide spectrum from reliable to unreliable (96). After realising a narrator's words cannot be taken at face value, the reader can either: '(1) reject those words and, if possible, reconstruct a more satisfactory account; or (2)...accept what the narrator says but then supplement the account' (94). Phelan and Martin (1999) identify six kinds of unreliability: misreporting, misreading, misregarding, underreporting, underreading and underregarding, which will be expanded on as and when they become relevant in the analysis of Self's narration (95). Importantly, their taxonomy should be viewed as a 'heuristic device designed to sharpen our perception of individual acts of unreliable narration' in a 'move away from the common assumption that reliability and unreliability are a binary pair' (96).

Olson (2003) goes on to distinguish fallible and untrustworthy narrators. Can the reader, as Olson suggests, attribute Self's misperceptions as the result of external circumstances rather than his inherent characteristics, thus making him fallible? Or does he strike the reader as being '*dispositionally* unreliable?' (102, original emphasis). To determine the fallibility of a narrator the reader must query the extent to which 'the narrator mistakes the information he has access to and the perceptions he has', whether they these mistakes are consistent and whether they can 'imagine circumstances in which the narrator would report infallibly?' (103). Some argue that by their very nature, homodiegetic narrators 'demonstrate the biased nature of our experience of reality' (Stanzel 1984 :11); they are 'subject to the epistemological uncertainty of lived experience' (Olson 2003: 101). Thus, the nuances between fallibility and untrustworthiness are useful for evaluating narrators if one does understand homodiegetic narratives to be inherently unreliable or biased.

### Analytical framework

I use Simpson's (1993) theoretical framework of modality to inform my analysis of Self's un/reliability. The framework rests on the assumption that 'much of the "feel" of [a] text is attributable to the type of point of view it exhibits' (46). 'Modality', which indicates 'a

speaker's attitude towards, or opinion about, the truth of a proposition', is at the core of this model (47). Thus, I argue there is an intrinsic link between a narrator's modal choices and their level of un/reliability.

Simpson (1993) distinguishes between 'category A' and 'category B' narratives, the former being homodiegetic and the latter heterodiegetic. Both categories can be narrowed further, though I focus my discussion on the former. Category A narratives accommodate positive, negative and neutral modal shades, sometimes fluctuating between the three at different stages in the narrative. McIntyre (2006) recognises that 'no text is likely to exhibit one type of narration alone' (29). Rather than index a weakness in Simpson's model, these categories enable an examination of 'the effects generated by *changes* in narration, and to look particularly at *how* specific points of view effects are created" (McIntyre 2006: 29, original emphasis).

A positive (A+ve) narratives are 'co-operatively oriented towards the reader', through the prominence of the deontic and boulomaic modal systems; this foregrounds the 'narrator's desires, duties, obligations and opinions vis-à-vis events and other characters' (Simpson 1993: 56, original emphasis). Meanwhile, the epistemic and perception systems are suppressed, 'so propositions are not predicated on the perhaps limited knowledge of the narrator' (56).

A negative (A-ve) narratives on the other hand, 'exhibit precisely those features of modality that are suppressed in A+ve narratives' (Tunca 2017: 170). Perception modality appears here, as a subcategory of epistemic modality (Perkins 1983: 81). In this system, the 'degree of commitment to the truth is predicated on some reference to human perception' (Simpson 1993: 51). These narratives successfully express 'bewilderment and estrangement', which can be amplified by the positioning of epistemic and perception markers (58). Epistemic modification following the proposition it governs, for instance, is far more disorientating as the information is 'immediately jeopardized' (60). Simpson notes that transitioning into A-ve sequences can 'relay the kind of self-questioning which often occurs at key stages in homodiegetic narratives' (59).

A neutral narratives are rare in comparison and are characterised by 'a complete absence of modality', with 'no psychological evaluation of actions, events or characters provided' (Neary 2014: 183).

*Money* is a category A narrative owing to the autodiegetic narrator. In my analysis which follows, I seek to uncover the modal shading which emerges in an extract to evaluate the un/reliability of Self. For, if for instance the epistemic system expressing the narrator's confidence or lack thereof in the truth of their proposition is prominent, it will inform whether, and on what grounds, and to what extent, he is reliable.

## Analysis

To examine the characterisation of Self and his unreliability as a narrator, I have chosen a moment in the narrative where he is in a position of ignorance. Thus, it will be telling how he responds to this epistemic deficiency. After 'an evening of pleasure and profit' and 'a drink or two' (Amis 1984: 123), he wakes 'face-down under a hedge or bush or some blighted shrub...' with an array of mysterious injuries and tries to discern what led to this point (Amis 1984: 122). In this extract (See Appendix), the narrative shifts between positive and negative

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shading. This fusion construes Self as a truly bewildered man and describing him as either reliable or unreliable becomes a complex task.

Deontic modality 'contains those words that express a speaker's attitude towards the degree of duty or obligation attached to carrying out certain actions' (Neary: 2014 :181). This system 'lays bare the psyche of the narrator', creating a positively shaded narrative (183). What follows is an examination of the deontic 'I had to' in:

*I had to* frisk myself, to make sure I still had my wallet, limbs, face, sick, being. Next, *I had to* run crying through the concrete concourses in dawn rain until my panic slowed and I recognized the city and myself in the matt and muffled streets. Then *I had to* find a cab and get back here.

(Amis 1984: 122, my emphasis).

The auxiliary verb 'had' expresses high modality and obligation on behalf of Self. The modal is used in a circumstantial sense, as it expresses necessity in his given situation (von Fintel 2006). By repeatedly using this phrase, Self attempts to victimise himself; however, this is unconvincing, for it is only due to his idiosyncratic predicament, for which he holds responsibility, that placed him in such a dire position initially. A responsibility he downplays in the evasive 'I had clearly gone out for a drink or two' (Amis 1984: 122). A sense of urgency is created through the anaphoric repetition of 'I had to'; Self appears to respond to his trauma in an almost robotic manner. Although these markers of positive shading should create the impression of an assured character, I argue they have the opposite effect here. Rather, they share with typically negatively shaded narratives, a sense of uncertainty. This interpretation owes in part to the repetition, which suggests the narrator is convincing himself of what actions he undertook, rather than being certain. Given his drunken state, where he finds it hard to recall events, this is certainly plausible. Secondly, the deontic modality demonstrates that Self lacks agency and must instead respond to that which has already been inflicted upon him. This supports Edmondson's (2001) assertion that as a narrator, Self is 'totally deluded...attempting to act in his world, but being acted upon by the larger context of his historical situation, the larger narrative line' (148). Thus, although superficially the modality is positive, upon closer examination Self's use of the deontic system here illustrates his distinct lack of control. While at times the reader is assumed to be 'an awed and envious spectator of his reckless escapades and moneymaking', they are positioned here as 'a sympathetic figure, providing him with reassurance' (Badrideen 2017: 455). His use of deontic modality construes him as both fallible and untrustworthy (Olson 2003). Fallible because his 'delu[sion], may mean he truly perceives the actions he took as obligations (Edmondson 2001: 148); however perhaps more convincingly untrustworthy because textual signals (Nünning 1984) such as attempting to direct the reader's sympathy beforehand, 'Listen, though – I had a problem here' (Amis 1984: 122), suggest he consciously alters his language to garner sympathy. Further, the poetic language present in 'I had to run crying through the concrete concourses in dawn rain' is comical when considered pragmatically (context-based). In combination with the deontic modal, it appears that Self visualises himself as a quasi-hero, simply carrying out his obligations for which he has no responsibility, but the reader understands this is not the case.

Following from this, the extract also contains instances of epistemic modality, typically found in negatively shaded texts. For example, the modal auxiliary 'must' appears in:

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I must be *very unhappy*. That's the only way I can explain my behaviour. Oh man, I must be so depressed. I must be fucking suicidal. And I wish I knew *why*.

(Amis 1984: 123, original emphasis).

Although 'must' has a high modality, typically demonstrating a speaker's confidence in their proposition, I argue that Self is void of such assurance. Once again, repetition undermines his intended effect. It mimics persuasive rhetoric, whereby Self tries convince the reader of his emotional state, but ironically it is himself that is the recipient and provider of this lecture. Thus, considering Doñate's (2017) remark that he is 'utterly ignorant of the reality that surrounds him', I argue he is also ignorant of the reality *within* him (74). For, when describing his internal psyche, it would perhaps be more convincing to use a neutrally shade phrase, such as 'I am depressed', or the *verba sentiendi* present in positively shaded narratives. However, Self's inability or reluctance to do so is indicative of his difficulty in identifying the cause of his emotions. The intensification from '*very unhappy*' to 'so depressed' to 'fucking suicidal' in combination with the modality resonates with Nünning's (1984) textual signals of unreliability. For instance, the repetition of epistemic modal 'must' demonstrates 'the narrator's high level of emotional involvement', which compromises his reliability (Olson 2003: 98). Self's 'attention-defecit-disorderd quality' is evident here, as he assigns with 'certainty', increasingly dramatic labels to his emotions (Miracky 2003: 139). Thus, the reader is privy to his fourth voice - that of 'of paranoia, of rage and weepiness' (Amis 1984: 108).

Developing this tone of self-pity, Self writes: 'And I wish I knew *why*' (Amis 184: 123). The boulomaic modal lexical verb 'wish' is expressive of his desire. Although closely related to the deontic system, which would typically create a positive shading, when examined in context, this statement contributes to Self's sense of confusion and thus unreliability. In terms of Nünning's (1984) textual signals, he admits his cognitive limitations and a gap in his knowledge through the epistemic modal (Olson 2003). Further, this reinforces the sense that the earlier uses of 'must' represented his attempts to convince himself of his feelings rather than asserting his state of being confidently. Another instance of boulomaic modality occurs in the phrase: 'I long to burst out of the world of money and into – into what?' (Amis 1984: 123). Initially, the verb 'long' does 'lay bare the psyche of the narrator', as the reader prepares to gain an understanding of his inner desires (Neary 2014: 183). However, this possibility is thwarted by the incomplete sentence, showing Self has no conception of what alternatives there are and what exactly it is he desires if it isn't money. Thus, 'the jabber of money' prevails and obstructs the reader and Self from identifying his aspirations (Amis 1984: 107). In this instance, one could perceive Self as fallible rather than untrustworthy, owing to the fact he occupies an age where everything is commodified (Jameson 1984). Thus, the reader can comprehend his inability to complete his sentence in relation to the cultural parameters which equate wealth with happiness.

Epistemic modality is enacted through modal auxiliaries, modal lexical verbs, modal adverbs and certain syntactic constructions (Gavins 2007: 110). By combining two of these in the phrase, 'I suppose it must look quite cool', Self's sense of dissatisfaction comes to the fore (Amis 1984: 123). The lexical verb 'suppose' sets up Self's consideration of the dichotomy between the perceptions and reality of his life. Then, there is the epistemic use of 'must', which has a high modality indicative of certainty (Suhadi 2011: 168). However, as it appears after 'suppose', which expresses epistemic probability, the force and assurance of 'must' is undermined. Further, the mitigator 'quite' increases the sense that Self, in his dire

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state, is unwilling to afford any positive attributes to the reality of his life. The overall effect of this is a negative shading whereby the clash between modals expressing probability and certainty present Self once again as unsure. This relates to Bakhtin's (1984) internal polemic discourse, where narratives exhibit 'a sideward glance at someone else's hostile word'; the hedging 'repudiates itself in advance' of response or rejection (196). Thus, Begley's contention (2004) that this is a narrative 'dominated by voice and self-consciousness rather than visualization and objectivity', is supported (84). The epistemic 'suppose' explicitly denotes subjectivity and following Nünning (1984), is therefore indicative of unreliability.

His use of the conditional tense increases his unreliability. Musing on what led to his present state, he writes, 'If there'd been a fight, then I must have won it' (Amis 1984: 122). The conditional tense is used to discuss situations which have not necessarily occurred, though Self combines it with the epistemic 'must', expressing certainty. This jarring effect demonstrates his unfounded arrogance, for even when he wakes up, beaten and in a ditch, he finds scope to make a boastful claim for which there is little evidence. I argue this presents Self as fallible, as once again he 'misreads' (Phelan and Martin 1999: 95) the situation due to his 'incapacity to look beyond his egotistic self so as to discern what is really going on around him' (Doñate 2017: 69). This is elucidated by the description of his back, 'scored with thirty or forty sharp red welts, regularly patterned, as if [he'd] slept on a bed of nails', which hardly evokes a sense of victory. Clearly, there is a contradiction between his account of events, even if it is unbeknownst to him (Nünning 1984). A negative shading is created via the 'proliferation of epistemic signifiers' (Neary 2014: 183), such as the comparative 'as if', which 'ha[s] some basis in human perception' (Simpson 1993: 58). Interestingly, in Self's comparison, he omits the opposition in his hypothetical fight. Despite the high epistemic modality of 'must', the reader can be under no false illusions that Self is trustworthy; rather, it only bolsters the impression that he is delusional. Further, the reader's suspicion that Self's statement is incongruous is confirmed later in the novel, demonstrating how 'literary unreliability offers the pleasure of suspense and detection', forcing them to 'revise all the previously read facts of the fictional world and interpret them in a new light' (Nünning 1984: 99).

I hope to have demonstrated how an analysis of modality can inform an understanding of narratorial un/reliability. Given the links between epistemic modality and the narrator's belief in their statement, and deontic modality and their sense of obligation, it seemed sensible to view the concepts of reliability and modality in tandem. The mixture of positive and negative shading in the excerpt ultimately construes Self as unreliable, for even when he expresses certainty through the epistemic system, and expresses himself as highly obliged in the deontic system, other textual cues undermine the sincerity of these claims. Whether he is fallible or untrustworthy (Olson 2003) remains to be concluded and would be informed by an analysis of further excerpts. Though, as noted by Nünning (2015) and Phelan and Martin (1999), reliability and unreliability need not be viewed as binary opposites. His egotism makes it hard to 'discern what is really going on around him', and thus relieves him of some responsibility for his unreliability (Doñate 2017: 69). Similarly, Doan (1990) contends that Self 'is never in possession of all the information he needs to understand what is happening', which suggests he is not intentionally deceptive (70) However, he still may 'dispositionally unreliable' (Olson 2003: 102, original emphasis). Amis uses unreliable narration, not only for the 'pleasure of suspense and detection' (Nünning 1984: 99), but to

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exemplify a growing concern about the validity of traditional narrative structures' and 'their capacity to account for the increasingly complex determinants that operate upon, and within, modern nation-states' where individuals are subsumed in cultures of excess (Begley 2004: 80). In fact, 'the subversion of the status of the narrator [is] an index of the questioning of representation at large' (Bernard 1993: 126).

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## Appendix

*On John Self's 35<sup>th</sup> birthday, he wakes up with limited recollection of the night before, which resulted in him waking up beaten and in a ditch.*

Morning came, and I got up ... That doesn't sound particularly interesting or difficult, now does it? I bet you do it all the time. Listen, though - I had a problem here. For instance, I was face-down under a hedge or bush or some blighted shrub in a soaked allotment full of nettles, crushed cigarette packs, used condoms and empty beercans. It was quite an appropriate place for me to be born again, which is what it felt like. Obviously, it hurts, being born: that's why you scream and weep. Next, I had to frisk myself, to make sure I still had my wallet, limbs, face, dick, being. Next, I had to run crying through the concrete concourses in dawn rain until my panic slowed and I recognized the city and myself in the matt and muffled streets. Then I had to find a cab and get back here. The guy wouldn't take me until I showed him money. I didn't blame him. I had dreamed - and who needs dreams with this kind of nightlife? - of torture, laughter, pincer-grips on the frail-tubed spine.

In the bathroom I stripped slowly before the mirror. Face first: there was a grey swelling over my left eye, and my rug was quite badly singed on the same side. A fight? I didn't think so. If there'd been a fight, then I must have won it. My body was all there, trembling, whimpering in the graphic light, but all there. I turned - and gasped. Dah ... Oh, Christ. My back, my great white back was scored with thirty or forty sharp red welts, regularly patterned, as if I'd slept on a bed of nails. Taking a two-fisted grip on my spare tyre, I was able to wrench round some flesh and get a good look at one of these bloodless wounds. An indentation, a red hole: I could insert my quivering pinkie to half-nail depth. I stepped back. No other damage. No new damage. My bumf-crammed wallet was intact: credit cards, eighty-odd dollars, thirty-odd pounds. My hangover was fine. My hangover had come through okay.

So. I had spent the night, or part of it, on a patch of earth in alphabet-land - Avenue B, deep down on the East Side. After an evening of pleasure and profit with my friends in Bank Street, I had clearly gone out for a drink or two. Bad idea! Oh very bad! Someone, at some stage, had worked me over with a tool, a spike or a blunt shiv. My shirt was punctured in places, but not my jacket - my good, my best jacket. It was now eight thirty. I bathed my face with water and felt hot fingers beginning to tickle my back. For ten minutes I vomited elaborately, with steamhammer convulsions that I had no strength to resist or contain. Then for twice that long I sat twitching on the shower's deck, the silver snout tuned to full heat and heft but doing nothing much to wash off my rot. I must be very unhappy. That's the only way I can explain my behaviour. Oh man, I must be so depressed. I must be fucking suicidal. And I wish I knew *why*.

Look at my life. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: But it's terrific! It's great! You're thinking: Some guys have all the luck! Well, I suppose it must look quite cool, what with the aeroplane tickets and the restaurants, the cabs, the filmstars, Selina, the Fiasco, the money. But my life is also my private culture - that's what I'm showing you, after all, that's what I'm letting you into, my private culture. And I mean *look* at my private culture. Look at the state of it. It really isn't very nice in here. And that is why I long to burst out of the world of money and into - into what? Into the world of thought and fascination. How do I get there? Tell me, please. I'll never make it by myself. I just don't know the way (Amis 1984: 122-123).