Instead, Amis offers a psycho-political explanation for that crazy era: It was all just anxious acting out under the threat of imminent sexual revolution was not just a time when “girls could act like boys” but also a time when women could finally act like adults.

We've heard this lamentation before, of course, most ferociously from Allan Bloom. Here it comes across in the same key as those complaints about Emancipation spoiling so many lovely plantations. There's no acknowledgment in “The Pregnant Widow” that the real movement is provided by the action of Amis ramming his themes down our throat. Half a dozen times he suspends the faint breeze of this story line with cheeky editorials or "Intervals," in which he -- "the voice of conscience" -- talks expansively about the Meaning of the Age, the Distress of the '60s, etc.

The sexual antics in the Italian castle play out as he's cramming through a syllabus of English novels, particularly those great comedies of manners by Jane Austen, in which a similarly privileged group of young people strategize about their potential attachments. But oh, how things have degraded since Jane set down that universal question. "When will they fall?" Keith wonders, "When will they fall, this woman? What'll they write about," Keith wonders, "when all women fall?"

"The Pregnant Widow" is one overlong, frequently hilarious but deeply aggravating answer to that loaded question from an author who portrays his female characters as breasts, bottoms or dead.

While Keith tries to figure out how he can dump Lily and bed Scheherazade, other characters pass through this summer sexcapade, all of them oddballs notable for their Dickensian peculiarities: The owner of the castle, for instance, is interested only in cheese. The cock of the roost is a hunky but very tiny Italian nicknamed Tom Thumb. Their friend Gloria has an enormous derriere that eventually alluring is Lily's strikingly gorgeous, frequently nude gal-pal Scheherazade (37-23-33), who complains piteously about how lonely she is at night. Yikes.

At the start of all this, Keith is a romantic -- granted, a libidinous, easily shocked romantic. Watching the debauchery around him, poor Keith can't help but feel "the tingle of license" and wonder, "Where were the police? Where on earth were the police? . . . It keptastonishing him -- how weak the prohibitions always turned out to be.

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That's funny, I know, but the cost of filling a long novel with bizarre tics and body parts instead of, say, actual characters eventually becomes apparent. And stacked on top of each other ad infinitum, these witty lines barely accrete into the shape of a plot. The only real movement is provided by the action of Amis ramming his themes down our throat. Half a dozen times he suspends the faint breeze of this story line with cheeky editorials or "Intervals," in which he -- "the voice of conscience" -- talks expansively about the Meaning of the Age, the Distress of the '60s, etc.

The point he most wants us to concede is that the sexual revolution was a tragedy, an ordeal of narcissistic trauma. (This point is conveyed far more effectively in the actual story when the novel's climactic act of sexual congress finally takes place in front of a mirror.) Amis insists that this was the period when "sex divorced itself from feeling" and became just "a play of surfaces and sensations." Readily available contraception, abortion and divorce upended everything, and the girls were "all busy acting like boys."

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Instead, Amis offers a psycho-political explanation for that crazy era: It was all just anxious acting out under the threat of imminent
nuclear annihilation. "Mortal fear might make you want to have sexual intercourse," he explains, "but it wouldn't make you want to love. Why love anyone, when everyone could vanish?"

But in the end, he doesn't really buy that mawkish generality either. His distress over the '60s seems to stem from a more personal and intense tragedy: the decline and premature death of his alcoholic sister. She flits around the periphery of this novel in the form of Keith's sibling, and in the final 100 pages -- which zip haphazardly through 40 years -- she becomes a much-freighted symbol for all those fragile women who drowned in the dark sea of sexual promiscuity. The destruction of old social constraints creates an exciting, new world, but it also leaves, in the words of the 19th-century Russian writer Alexander Herzen, "a pregnant widow."

That melancholy image rises powerfully in the final pages, but the emotional effect is not won fairly through the long sex comedy involving Keith and his friends or the scattered coda in which we find out "what happened to them all." Amis reportedly worked on this novel for four years before realizing it was actually two different books that would require extensive reworking. What remains here resembles one of his voluptuous women: a collection of body parts -- some awesome, some grotesque -- stitched together.

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