



A metamodern disclaimers of postmodernism in literature

نبذ الميتاموديرنية لما بعد الحداثة في الأدب

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Received:03/11/2021

Accepted: 05/12/2021

Published online :01/12/2021

ABSTRACT :

When writing a piece of literature, authors utilize aesthetic tools that reference to a certain art movement. In Metamodernism, these authors use many new artistic elements that correspond to the Metamodern values to address the Postmodern irony that nullifies seriousness and sincerity from literature. This issue is important because Postmodernism denies literature from any form of truth, especially through irony. Hence, contemporary progressive literary thinkers are attempting to reconstruct truth by adopting new aesthetic tools in the novel such as "postirony", "new sincerity" and "empathy" to promote the Metamodern rejection of the Postmodern literature. Besides, these literary tools are also used to serve the Metamodern cause of reconstructing arts and society. This new trend in literature is shown to have a significant influence on the novel and in turn on the reader and society.

Keywords: Metamodernism; Postmodernism; Postirony; New Sincerity; Empathy.

الملخص:

يستخدم المؤلفون الأدوات الجمالية التي تشير إلى حركة فنية معينة في الأدب. في الميتاموديرنية، تستخدم العديد من العناصر الفنية المعاصرة التي تتوافق مع قيم هذه الحركة الفنية لمعالجة سخرية ما بعد الحداثة التي تلغي الجدية والصدق من الأدب. تعد هذه المسألة مهمة لأن ما بعد الحداثة تحرم الأدب من أي شكل من أشكال الحقيقة، وخاصة من خلال السخرية. وبالتالي، يحاول المفكرون الأدبيون التقدميون المعاصرون إعادة بناء الحقيقة من خلال اعتماد أدوات جمالية جديدة في الرواية مثل "ما بعد السخرية"، "الصدق الجديد" و "التعاطف" لتعزيز رفض الميتاموديرنية للأدوات الأدبية لما بعد الحداثة. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، تستخدم هذه الأدوات الأدبية أيضا لخدمة القضية الميتاموديرنية التي تتمثل في إعادة بناء الفنون والمجتمع. ويظهر أن لهذا الاتجاه الجديد في الأدب تأثيرا كبيرا على الرواية، وبدوره على القارئ والمجتمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الميتاموديرنية ; ما بعد الحداثة ; ما بعد السخرية ; الإخلاص الحديث ; التعاطف.

Résumé :

En composant une œuvre littéraire, les auteurs emploient des outils esthétiques liés à un mouvement artistique en particulier. S'agissant des auteurs Métamodernes, ils ont recours à de nombreux nouveaux éléments artistiques correspondant aux valeurs de ce mouvement pour lutter contre le postmodernisme qui nie la littérature de toute forme de vérité, en particulier par l'ironie. Les Métamodernes tentent de reconstruire la vérité en adoptant de nouveaux outils esthétiques dans le roman tels que la "postironie", la "nouvelle sincérité" et "l'empathie" pour promouvoir le rejet métamoderne de la littérature postmoderne. Ces concepts esthétiques sont également employés



afin de servir la cause Métamoderne de reconstruire les arts et la société. Par conséquent, une nouvelle tendance littéraire ne peut être étudiée sans tenir compte de ces concepts esthétiques littéraires étant donnée leur influence significative sur le contenu et la forme du texte ainsi que le lecteur et la société.

Mots-Clés : Métamodernisme ; Postmodernisme ; Postironie ; Nouvelle Sincérité ; Empathie.

Article:

1. INTRODUCTION:

Whether it is a structure a feeling according to Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker or a movement according to Hanzi Freinacht, Metamodernism is the successor of Modernism and Postmodernism. Instead of rejecting the previous movements, Metamodernism is a genuine quest for truth and meaning through oscillating between Modernism and Postmodernism. It is an attempt of reconstruction in literature to fulfill the needs of the contemporary reader, which is truth. A group of daring progressive thinkers in arts, sociology and politics have been working on the Metamodern approach, providing its literary tools and values. These thinkers have realized that Postmodernism has come to a dead end by rejecting truth and meaning and failing to offer any solutions that the contemporary society has been yearning for. Their approach does not hinder the prefixed Modernisms; it rather swings back and forth between them while moving beyond their limits. Theorists such as Vermeulen and van den Akker approach Metamodernism by molding it in a number of literary tools in which the most prominent ones are “postirony”, “new sincerity” and “empathy”. This paper hypothesizes that these literary tools are crippling the Postmodern irony and deconstruction and finding their way into literature to give it meaning unlike Postmodernism that destroys it. By the end of this paper, these tools will have been explained in order to help spread awareness about the Metamodern approach that most scholars in academia still ignore by referring to the most recent studies in Metamodernism. This paper has a theoretical nature, but will refer at times to some Metamodern literary works, which are *Bleeding Edge* by Thomas Pynchon and *The Marriage Plot* by Jeffery Eugenides, as well as *Oprah’ Book Club* TV program.

2. POSTIRONY:

Irony being the most celebrated concept in Postmodernism has received a lot of attention and reflection among scholars in contemporary literature, which ended up with a backlash against it. Irony has been the defense mechanism of Postmodernists, but contemporary thinkers have realized that it has become toxic to art and culture. Thus, writers sought to move on from it by oscillating between irony and sincerity, which in turn resulted in the emerging concept of “postirony”. The Metamodern zeitgeist embraces this new concept as one of its literary tools because this concept is sincere and does not refuse meaning unlike irony, which is skeptical, offensive at times and makes everything sound ridiculous without offering any solutions. Therefore, writers and artists in general are trying to adopt postirony in order to break free from being labeled Postmodernist by trying to provide meaning and suggest solutions to society.

Metamodernism did not create the notion of postirony, but it soon picked it up and fostered it as it goes in line with the Metamodern principles. In Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s theory, Metamodernism uses irony “to counter the modern aspiration, while in postmodernism they are employed to cancel it out. That is to say, metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire, whereas postmodern irony is inherently tied to apathy” (Vermeulan & van den Akker, 2010, 7). Hanzi Freinacht chooses to call it sincere irony for the fact that it allows him to use sarcasm to show his



aestheticism and vulnerability (Freinacht, 2017, 33). David Foster Wallace was among the first theorists who were committed to denounce irony as he noticed that literature and culture in American society have made sure to have this ironic gulf that kept distance from honest beliefs and opinions. This indicates that irony is a “denial of any stopping point that might interrupt its own continuing reflection. On this view, irony initiates (more precisely, takes place in) an infinite movement, perhaps regress, perhaps progress, that violates the supposed boundaries of every context in which it appears: it is irony that irony affirms, not just this or that single turn” (Lang, 1996, 571). Wallace’s thoughts about irony are considered to be a legacy after his death because he understood that it is “not a rhetorical mode that wears well [as it] serves an almost exclusively negative function. It’s critical and destructive; a ground clearing . . . But irony’s singularly useless when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks” (Wallace, 1993, 67). Clearly, the Metamodern theorists and thinkers are aware of the dangers of irony as it escapes meaning and truth, especially that its expansion has been exceedingly spread if not out of control. Indeed, Metamodernism makes sure not to fall in the same mistake of Postmodernism that denies previous institutions; it has adopted the notion of postirony to bring its quest of restoring truth to completion.

Writers like Thomas Pynchon and Jeffery Eugenides step away from irony as they recognize postirony in literature. Pynchon, who is one of the pioneers of irony in American literature, started to fear the consequences of mere irony. Irony was used by this author with idealistic motivations, hoping that it might help Americans break free from capitalist servitude. Likewise, Eugenides considers irony an intrinsic element of the Postmodern society, but he is concerned that it would cause intellectual morbidity. Their concerns are understandable because the dark Postmodernists are people in academia who ended up taking a lot of antidepressants due to their critical and negative attitude that is expressed through irony (Freinacht, 2017, 310). Accordingly, these American writers began to transcend irony and utilize postirony to allow readers to have a better access to their convictions and help give meaning and build a universal truth. In this manner, these authors become Metamodern advocates who dare to be vulnerable enough to speak truth.

Jeffery Eugenides’s *The Marriage Plot* is a novel that illustrates the Postmodern Bildungsroman, according to Konstantinou, because this contemporary literary work responds to the Postmodern irony through a realistic mode. One of the good examples of postironic Bildungsroman in Eugenides’s lines is when Mitchell who is the religious figure who experiences moral and psychological growth throughout the novel was asked if he was Christian, he “hesitated to answer. [because he knew that t]he worst thing about religion was religious people” (Eugenides, 2011, 214). Moreover, Eugenides consciously rekindles the Victorian Bildungsroman, making his main character, Madeleine, a bookworm who is fascinated by the late Victorian fiction. Eugenides writes, “Madeleine felt safe with a nineteenth century novel. There were going to be people in it. Something was going to happen to them in a place resembling the world. Then too there were lots of weddings in Wharton and Austen. There were all kinds of irresistible gloomy men” (Eugenides, 2011, 48). What is postironic though is the fact that Madeline had “become an English major for the purest and dullest of reasons: because she loved to read” (Eugenides, 2011, 20)

Konstantinou states that *The Marriage Plot* may persuade us to read its realistic style ironically and consider it to be a metafiction, but its main character, Madeleine, considers the idea that the deconstruction of love sets free to be invalid. When the novel comes to an end, we feel that Eugenides is calling us to understand the fragility of the Postmodern theory along with his characters as we are invited to affirm his direct approach, to join Madeleine in becoming neo-



Victorianist (Konstantinou, 2017, 97). Eugenides's story concludes on a disillusioned realism note, with the character Mitchell going through his own *Bildung* and being connected with the author himself. The main marriage storyline of the novel ultimately fails, but for a greater feeling of realism and historicism. The novel, thus, dramatizes the trip of its characters, author, and suggested readers, all of whom emerge from the postmodernist quagmire on solid ground, having rolled back both postmodern form and postmodern substance, as tired but non-cynical realists (Konstantinou, 2017, 97).

Ultimately, postirony is a Metamodern literary tool par excellence as it features the Metamodern embrace of the Postmodern irony while marrying it with a profound sincerity to promote the quest for truth and meaning. The marriage between the Postmodern rigid irony and the Metamodern sincerity that is full of hope makes postirony a significant Metamodern literary technique. Accordingly, postirony is what contemporary writers need in order to review the Postmodern ideas and point at the Postmodern failures. Yet, deploying postirony in literature can be very challenging and hard to detect as it is still immature comparing to irony that is still being used. All in all, postirony is irony being constantly stripped out of its cloud skepticism and injected with sincerity; this is an attempt to conquer both Postmodernism and its literary tools to create a more meaningful literature, which comprises satisfying answers.

3. NEW SINCERITY:

New sincerity is a Metamodern trend in contemporary literature, which came as a reaction to the Postmodern sterile irony. This trend evokes the hope that the Metamodernists aspire for in literature as it grants freedom of thoughts and communicating them to readers in all honesty. New Sincerity has, actually, made its first debut in post-9/11 narratives as Postmodernism clearly failed to offer deep analyses of historical events in literature; it was the time or never to break free from the Postmodern constraints and introduce sincere art. American fiction after Postmodernism started to reject ironic modes, which Postmodern writers themselves started to consider outdated Postmodern tools that cannot serve the contemporary art and society anymore.

Thomas Pynchon, who is one of the prominent Postmodern novelists, is known for his extreme use of irony. However, it is noticeable in his last novel entitled *Bleeding edge*, in which the key events that underline the novel are those of 9/11, that his use of irony is extremely toned down that it is nearly absented. This author illustrates various theories regarding the 9/11 events in all sincerity and hints to the fact that the corollary boundless information input available on the internet regarding those events is unreliable. By saying that "[o]ut in the vast undefined anarchism of cyberspace, among the billions of self-resonant fantasies" (Pynchon, 2013, 327), Pynchon gives a realistic account of what is actually happening as the issue of fake news on social media is confusing internet users and putting into question the credibility of what should be trustworthy sources such as the media and political parties and institutions, including Donald Trump, the previous President of the United States, and the pro-Brexit campaign. Indeed, New Sincerity is considered to be the opposite of irony as it rejects obscurity of meaning.

New sincerity has become an approach in literature embraced by contemporary American writers in their fiction as it serves their endeavor in restoring meaning. Sincerity returns in the form of a recollection of belief, ethics and a revived curiosity in reality. Although it is perceived to be a denial of Postmodernism, the new sincerity is strongly influenced by the Postmodern cynicism and disbelief in respect of grand narratives and abstraction. Because writers are realizing that sincerity is



what the Metamodern readers are yearning for, “irony [. . .] is now kept in check by sincere undertones and overtones” (Gibbons, 2017, 86). Indeed, new sincerity primarily names an aesthetic response by a generation of novelists to challenge the older forms of expressive subjectivity that coalesced in the period during which they began writing.

Vermeulen and van der Akker popularized new sincerity as a valid trend in art that was first manifested in David Foster Wallace’s writings, bringing with it hope and meaning that were lost. Wallace not only used new sincerity in fiction, but he was also transparent about it in his non-fiction, which was a sincere call to start using it as a tool, describing American writers who embrace it as “rebels” against Postmodernism. The next generation of literary rebels in the United States may easily be a strange group who dare to back away from ironic observing and have the infantile audacity to genuinely embrace and embody single-entendre ideals, risking condemnation (Wallace 1993, 81). Freinacht agrees with Wallace’s reasoning as he believes that being a Metamodernist, or a rebel against Postmodernism, according to Wallace, means being sincere with theological enthusiasm. Freinacht persists firmly on this view by saying that “the joke is on anyone who lacks that same sincerity, who never dared to be vulnerable” (Freinacht, 2017, 114).

New sincerity is a literary tool that allows us to tackle big subject matters in society with unprecedented openness, which demonstrates its genuine attempt to find solutions. A sincere stance, according to Freinacht, will grant us integrity and empower us to discuss sensitive subjects such as racism, conservatism and exaggerated feminism with an understanding of the others’ values instead of wasting energy on being cynical and not reaching any solution. The Metamodern feeling is sensed by many theorists who started to tackle such subjects sincerely without any constraints such as “Judith Butler [who] is perhaps the most celebrated exponent of an argument that places performativity at its centre, identifying in the repetition of acts both the naturalisation of oppressive gender norms and the means of subverting those norms” (Kelly, 2017, 9). These theorists realize that discussing matters such as gender through the New Sincerity lens in contemporary literature is crucial as they are subjects which have never been given an authentic genuine solution. On that account, the only way to tackle sensitive and contemporary subject matters and reaching solutions instead of sitting, criticizing and watching is to embrace the Metamodern fostered new sincerity in literature.

The American history gave birth to new sincerity through a series of events that date back to the 1980s leading up to 9/11, which became the hallmark of sincerity. Kelly investigates the most prominent events that have led to the formation of the New Sincerity concept in American history:

The decades leading up to the 1990s were transformative ones for the U.S. in a number of seismic ways. The late 1960s through the 1980s saw a drastic reimagining in the way American citizens viewed the inner workings of their government; the geopolitical landscape which had held sway since the end of World War II was reshuffled for the first time in generations; the idea/ideal of American exceptionalism was questioned like never before; and demographic shifts, the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, and growing recognition of previously marginalized populations changed the perception of what it means to be “American.” (Kelly, 2017, 27).

This indicates that New Sincerity is neither random nor exclusively Metamodern, but it is being revived and stressed upon in Metamodernism in American culture and arts. This revival was mainly



felt in the Post-9/11 World, creating a Post-9/11 America, Post-9/11 theories and a Post-9/11 fiction. The dominant feeling in the Post-9/11 world was that art and society could not handle the constraints of irony anymore, which is why irony “was [soon] replaced by soft, sweet sincerity. Somewhere, an eagle shed a single tear. . . This radical new ethos has a name. It's called: The New Sincerity” (Thorn, 2006, 1).

Sunyoung Ahn explains that the Postmodern escape from honesty could not explain the America after 9/11; the attacks altered the nature of cultural life itself and made Postmodernism redundant as it was no longer mirrored in the new America with its basic concepts of cynical isolation and ethical relativism (Ahn, 2018, 236). He adds that all attempts to restore Postmodernism and go back to the norms failed because Americans understood that obscurity was being promoted again and that they were being kept away from the political scene and truth (Ahn, 2018, 237). Therefore, the first Metamodern writers such as Wallace were conscious enough to understand that they needed to promote sincerity in order to comfort their readers and guide them towards the truth that the Americans needed to move on to.

New sincerity is a cultural a paradigm, yet is also a Metamodern literary tool that operates in literary texts. It is expressed technically in the return to storytelling as a means to communicate with readers and offering them hope; the characters evoke a sense of earnestness, which in turn demonstrates the writer's commitment to reconstruct the narratives. When sincerity confronts irony, the characters become more realistic and complex, which encourages readers to identify and empathize with the social conditions these characters represent. When inspecting contemporary literary works, we feel how new sincerity emanates effortlessly from the literary text, which urges us as readers to share the burden with the writer. Indeed, new sincerity as a literary tool is the interpretation of the vulnerability of both the characters and the writers who let their guard down in fiction to make it relatable to readers; it is accepting discomfort for the sake of meaning.

4. EMPATHY:

The negative events in recent history created a dominant feeling of despair, and the Metamodern thinkers were quick to understand that there is a drive for empathy in contemporary culture. These thinkers are aspiring to make empathy the dominant feeling in hopes to overcome persistent cultural and social problems such as racism and gender inequality. The world has been witnessing so much violence as people started to realize that the systems in control of the political scenes want things to remain as they are. The most recent example of the drive for empathy in the American society would be the brutal assassination of the African American citizen, George Floyd, in 2020 by the police. This shows clearly how the society is suffering, yet the reaction of the people from all ages, ethnic groups and cultures demonstrates the Metamodern drive for empathy. For the Metamodern progressive thinkers and scholars, literature can induce empathy and guide people towards awareness and truth; empathy can heal societies from their wounds and give voice to all social groups while also including them in the creation of solutions.

Progressive thinkers believe that empathy wrapped in the Metamodern sincerity in literature can have a major positive impact on society. In *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen declares that “novel reading cultivates empathy that produces good citizens for the world. [She affirms] the robustness of narrative empathy, as an affective transaction accomplished through the writing and reading of fiction” (Keen, 2017, xv). This means that the sincerity of the author and his/her characters nurture empathy in readers who are members of society. There is a dominant urge in



popular culture to overcome the Postmodern mainstream of irony and adopt the feelings of empathy instead. Indeed, Postmodernism has always demonstrated an intense rejection of empathy by always making sure to overshadow it. *Seinfeld* as one of the most famous Postmodern programs in American Television, is one of the best examples that demonstrate how Postmodernism oppresses empathy by making sure no emotional bonds get created between the audience and the characters by abusing humor and cancelling seriousness (Rustad and Schwind, 2017, 139).

The world today, however, is aware that empathy has to be restored if progress and truth are what is aimed for. In fact, one of the core values that the Metamodern politics commits to is empathy as the later creates a social environment instead of a political program where everybody's needs are considered in order to make real progress (Freinacht, 2017, 111). The environment that empathy creates manifests the Metamodern hope as "the figure of utopia has reappeared across the arts in the past few years, often alongside a renewed sense of empathy" (Vermeulan and van den Akker, 2014, 55). Accordingly, the Metamodern writers have a broad toolbox that enables them to cope with the social conditions and face dilemmas because empathy allows the authors to create a social process for them and their readers.

The contemporary author utilizes empathy and the empathetic narrative technique as an endeavor to restore human connections, and in turn reconstructing society. Metamodernism oscillates towards Modernism to bring back empathy that was rejected by the Postmodern writers as the Metamodernists realize the importance of empathy in reconstruction. Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot*, for instance, is a Metamodern novel which is all about empathy, especially in the character of Madeleine who listens to Leonard who is manic depressive and does her best to be there for him and help him feel loved and appreciated. While fiction is evidently popularly accepted to build reader empathy, today's novelists address empathy from various perspectives; they use it in their texts in a way that reflects the empathetic bonds between characters or by simply using it as a theme for the sake of revealing the complexities of social ties (Keen, 2007, 111).

Moreover, contemporary writers deploy empathy as a tool to unravel mysteries from the past by going back in time . Yet, it is important to note that sometimes empathy is also present in a text in a negative manner while expressing toxic relationships between characters and their vulnerability. In the character of Leonard in *The Marriage Plot*, Eugenides takes us back in time to understand where his manic depression comes from. This writer unravels the tragic events that Leonard lived growing up, while also revealing the fact that this character is a victim of parents who were also victims of the American capitalist society. This means that the narrative of empathy enables the reader to understand the complexities of characters and their relationships in a novel through character identification. Anybody who experienced depression can easily relate and feel the anxiety of Leonard when Eugenides writes that "[d]epression is like a bruise that never goes away. A bruise in your mind. You just got to be careful not to touch it where it hurts. It's always there, though" (Eugenides, 2011, 260). This means that this narrative enables readers to identify with characters emotionally and mentally, and relate to the social issues that lead them to ruin.

Nevertheless, there are readers who still cannot let their guard down and still resist empathy and tend to appreciate irony. These readers are likely those who have been nurtured by the Postmodern academic mode. However, novels of empathy are on demand as the majority of readers regard empathy as one of the ideal pleasures about reading fiction, and they prefer reading literature that allows them to see themselves in its characters. According to Keen, one of the major contributors to empathy in reading is the famous American TV host, Oprah Winfrey, who uses her fame to inspire



readers to read mindfully. Winfrey and the authors she hosts have been attempting to enable readers to grasp social dilemmas such as injustice through character identification in order to enable change in society (Keen, 2007, 112).

In fact, Winfrey has been doing exactly what Freinacht says we need to do in order to restore values and reconstruct society. In her book club, “the possibility of universal feelings, shared by humankind, is a baseline assumption. This popular belief echoes the attitude of many psychologists toward human emotion” (Keen, 2007, 114). It is easily understood that evoking empathy is Winfrey’s main goal in her show. She clearly understands that the power of empathy created between the author and reader allows us to reach meaning and solutions:

Oprah Winfrey’s very influential guidance on how to read a novel contributes to the contemporary scene’s unprecedented cultural valuation of empathy, which in turn participates in an optimistic understanding of the process of social formation. This emphasis has become widespread in the cultural commentary on books. The choices that readers make for themselves, and perhaps even more importantly, for children, are felt to contribute to social renovations that stem from empathy (Keen, 2007, 116).

This means that Winfrey has been promoting Metamodernism as she understood that readers have been longing for what can make them relate their lives and sufferings to for relief, meaning and social restoration. Hence, bringing back empathy to the novel created 21st century mindful readers who are inclined to make positive change.

Despite of the fact that authors have certain empathetic messages they intend to communicate, the readers’ experience with the novel can be unpredictable. Empathy is certainly not a tool used to put pressure on readers to feel it; its effectiveness lies in its sincerity that evokes meaning and comfort. Mindful reading can help resolve deficiencies in social aspects, which in turn would induce empathy and thereby compensate for weaknesses in social interactions. Most readers affirm that they experience empathy while reading fiction, and they even recognize when empathy is blocked by the writer. Indeed, readers who appreciate empathy and are able to identify with characters are likely Metamodern.

5. CONCLUSION:

Postirony, new sincerity and empathy are aesthetic literary elements that give Metamodernism its literary value, which is about reconstructing literature and society in restoring truth. The aesthetic pleasure associated with reading fiction using these elements elevates to the creation of meaning from the literary texts. They are deployed to convey the Metamodern vision of literature and its positive impact on society. Hence, Metamodernism aesthetically invites us to identify its artistic elements and how they differ from Postmodernism while having an aesthetic appreciation of it, which blends beautifully with its values and aims. In summation, Metamodernism is a disclaimer of Postmodernism, longing to correct what has been rejected to restore truth and reconstruct societies.

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