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CHARACTERS' POSTIRONIC SELF-REFLECTION THROUGH NEW SINCERITY PRINCIPLES: A CASE STUDY OF DONAL RYAN'S NOVEL "THE SPINNING HEART"

Abstract

This research focuses on the characteristic features of ideological and artistic trends of metamodern fiction and its stylistic features. One of the defined features of the contemporary state of literature is postirony, which is pervasive. Taking into account the ability of postirony to penetrate all spheres of matamodern society and literature in particular, the phenomenon should be considered as a transcultural concept. In the context of our research, we clarify the ontology of the concept "postirony" and its direct influence on metamodern literature. Another significant highlighted artistic trend is New Sincerity, which marks the shift from postmodernism to metamodernism. Therefore, the article identifies a number of New Sincerity principles that determine its relationship with irony, manifesting the emergence of metamodern postirony. The principle focus of the study is the stylistic realisation of postironic self-reflection through the defined principles of New Sincerity. The methodological section outlines the stylistic features of postironic portrayal of the characters through the principles of New Sincerity in the novel "The Spinning Heart" by contemporary Irish writer Donal Ryan. The stylistic analysis of the postironic self-reflection of the characters in the author's metamodern narrative based on the principles of New Sincerity and considering stylistic devices at different language levels (lexical and syntactic), shows their undeniable influence on the readers' understanding of the author's postironic and sincere narrative. This analysis demonstrates the author's refusal to use irony in depicting fictional reality, fostering a serious attitude of the reader.

Keywords: metamodernism, postmodernism, postmodern irony, postirony, New Sincerity, stylistic analysis.

Анотація

Статтю присвячено дослідженню характерних рис ідейно-мистецької течії метамодернізму в стилістичній площині художньої літератури. Однією із характерних ознак сучасного стану літератури є постіронія, яка має всеосяжний характер. З огляду на здатність постіронії проникати в усі сфери метамодерного суспільства та літературу зокрема, її доцільно розглядати як транскультурне поняття. У контексті нашого дослідження з'ясовано онтологію поняття "постіронія" та її безпосередній вплив на метамодерністську літературу. Інший мистецький напрям, що перебуває у фокусі наукової розвідки, Нова Щирість як одна з визначальних рис переходу від постмодернізму до метамодернізму. У статті виокремлено низку принципів Нової Щирості, які визначають її зв'язок з іронією, стверджуючи появу метамодерністської постіронії. У центрі дослідження – стилістична реалізація постіронічної саморефлексії через окреслені принципи Нової Щирості. У практичній частині дослідження окреслено стилістичні особливості постіронічного зображення персонажів через принципи Нової Щирості в романі сучасного ірландського письменника Донала Райана "Серце на шарнірі". Стилістичний аналіз постіронічної саморефлексії персонажів у метамодерністському наративі автора на принципах Нової Щирості з урахуванням стилістичних засобів виразності різних мовних рівнів (лексичного та синтаксичного) засвідчує їхній беззаперечний вплив на розуміння читачами постіронічної та щирої авторської оповіді, демонструючи відмову автора від використання іронії в зображенні вигаданої реальності та формуючи серйозне ставлення з боку читача.

Ключові слова: метамодернізм, постмодернізм, постмодерністська іронія, постіронія, Нова Щирість, стилістичний аналіз.

Introduction. In contemporary literary criticism, numerous describe new literary tendencies, contemporary literary genres or our ironic attitude towards them. Characterized as "a collocation of cosmopolitan, transatlantic, diasporic, regional, and planetary" (James & Seshagiri, 2014), current literature is reconsidered and reconceptualized in such genres as "postironic Bildungsroman", "credulous metafiction", "relational art" (Konstantinou, 2012), "historioplactic metafiction" (Toth, 2017), "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon, 2002) using such metamodern strategies as: "performatism" (theorized by Raoul Eshleman) and "dialogism" (novels by Jennifer Egan) (Azadanipour et al., 2021). As Kielkiewicz (2013) points out, "postmodernism does not have to be an exclusive philosophical framework of Postmodernity and other trends may appear, or perhaps those already implicitly existing will be conceptualized". James and Seshagiri (2014) state that "at a moment when postmodern disenchantment no longer dominates critical discourse creative practice, the central experiments and debates of twentieth-century culture have acquired new relevance to the moving horizon of contemporary literature". However, these discussions do not cover all the peculiarities of the current literary process which we experience today – a period that definitely deserves closer readings and deeper investigations.

Postmodernism has gone beyond the limits of irony as its determinant feature as Linstead and Collinson (2005) argue. "If arguments that we have moved beyond or past postmodernism can have any credence then they must surely also convince us that we have moved beyond irony as the defining modality of response of the postmodern" (ibid.). Metamodernism, as a current state of today's society, literature and art like any other ideological and artistic tendency, presupposes a number of characteristic features, and postirony among them, which can be traced both at generic and stylistic levels.

Since postirony becomes an indispensable feature of consciousness of a contemporary postmodernist, we can describe its all-embracing nature and penetration into all spheres of metamodern society. Another artistic trend, New Sincerity, is also becoming a defining feature of the poetical shift from postmodernism towards new trends of metamodernism. According to Kadagishvili (2013), "Metamodernism that tends to be serious, pompous, sets out to change irony and sneer. It swings to and fro, that gives a vibration, fluctuation between different opinions, purposes and outlook. The main messages that Metamodernism can send to these spheres of activities are reflexivities obtained without irony on traditional background".

Therefore, the relevance of our research is to elicit how the principles of New Sincerity and postirony can be used in creating fictional characters in the author's metamodern narrative, namely through their self-reflection.

Aim and objectives. The aim of the article is to identify stylistic features of postironic portrayal of the characters through the principles of New Sincerity in the novel "The Spinning Heart" by Donal Ryan (2012). The research seeks to define the concepts of postmodern irony and metamodern postirony and elucidate the difference between them and elicit the principles of New Sincerity. It also aims to identify the stylistic realisation of postironic self-reflection through these principles in the novel under analysis.

Literature review. Hedinger (2014) defines metamodernist postirony as "a critique of the implications of a relativised concept of truth", opposing it to postmodern irony, emphasising that postirony is not a new artistic concept, but a logical development of irony itself, the result of the transformation of society and "world free from sarcasm and cynicism".

McLaughlin (2013) sees the phenomenon of metamodernist postirony not as an instrument of escaping from the cynicism and insincerity of postmodern irony, but as a way to reassess such reality. Meanwhile Leal (2017) notes that postirony arises by its own

and replaces postmodern irony with “sincerity and authenticity” just in time the ironic and satirical depiction of senseless reality ceases to be an effective writing tactic. “Sincerity” and “honesty” are becoming defining concepts at the request of the new postmodern society, and appearing in the postmodern ironic narrative, they create a new type of irony.

Another key concept of our study within metamodernist literature is New Sincerity. According to Bolaño Quintero (2021), “after decades of postmodern deconstruction, there comes a period of reconstruction”. Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017) believe that metamodernism focuses on education and “a sense of earnestness and hope” opposed to the postmodern “cynical attitude towards reality”.

As a literary trend, New Sincerity opposes the ironisation of the cultural product and the cynical detachment of postmodernism. Instead, it proposes to rethink sincerity by reviving interest to ordinary social problems, personal emotions, and open communication between the author and the reader. In order to reestablish honesty in literature, David Foster Wallace called for the discovery and rediscovery of “quaint, naïve, anachronistic” fiction that would approach “plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions” (Colton, 2020). Eggers (2001) proposes to perceive the author’s sincerity “with an open heart” and to abandon interpretability in favour of absolutising such categories as “truth”, “trust”, “sincerity”. According to Freinacht (2017), metamodernist postirony is supposed to be sophisticatedly ironic and sincere, and both at once.

Konstantinou (2016) emphasises the expediency of depicting the problem of personality formation using the postironic language. The development of the central fictional characters goes from the naive origin of the (ironic) crisis phase and is restored through the postironic state. In this context, irony becomes a particular step, a temporary state of the character from which one has to escape, symbolising the metaphorical conflict between postmodernism and postironic realism, marked emotionally and intellectually. Konstantinou stresses the existence of a special type of realism in such fiction and calls this concept “storytelling neorealism”, when in one way or another the plot and characters pass through naivety, overcome irony, cynicism and eventually come to postirony (postironic state) (ibid.).

Methods and methodology. This study employs a methodological framework grounded in the principles of New Sincerity that were suggested by David Foster Wallace (1993), Adam Kelly (2010), Jonathan D. Fitzgerald (2012). These principles are crucial as they manifested their relationship with irony and contributed to the emergence of metamodern postirony. Specifically, the principles include:

- the desire to go beyond the ideological framework of postmodernism and affirm the ethical principles of honesty, sincerity, unambiguity, and humanity, returning realism to literature;
- restoring a trusting relationship with the reader;
- affirming the truthfulness of the author’s values, confirming the unambiguity of the author’s narrative;
- searching for new writing tactics to implement the anti-ironic and anti-cynical position of metamodernism.

In this study we offer a stylistic analysis of the main characters’ self-remarks in the novel “The Spinning Heart” by contemporary Irish writer Donal Ryan, which involves identifying stylistic means and techniques at different language levels, including lexical and syntactic.

The suggested analysis of the characters’ postironic self-reflection through New Sincerity principles makes it possible to understand the characters’ existential crisis in their relationship with others and with themselves. Postironic self-reflection of the fictional characters through the prism of New Sincerity implies the rejection of ironic perception,

cynicism, ambiguity and the understanding of the "bitter truth" of the characters' self-identification.

Results and discussion. The novel "The Spinning Heart" delves into the lives of 21 characters in an Irish town after the Ireland's financial collapse of 2008. Leaving the community high and dry and the local builders betrayed, a crooked employer runs away. Lack of money, desperation, conflicts, insults and personal tragedies ultimately culminate in violence. Justine Jordan from "The Guardian" highlights how "with each internal monologue we deeply inhabit the speaker's confusion and uncertainty ... the testimony of his [Ryan's] characters rings rich and true – funny and poignant and banal and extraordinary – and we can't help but listen".

Now let us take a closer look at the specific examples of postironic self-reflection in the main character, Bobby, as explored through the New Sincerity principles and the relevant stylistic devices: *"We went to a play inside in town one time; I can't remember the name of it. You couldn't do that without a wife. Imagine it being found out, that you went to see a play, on your own! With a woman, you have an excuse for every kind of soft thing [...] On the way home in the car, tears spilled down my face."* Reflecting on his visits to the theatre with his wife, Bobby ironically and sometimes humorously ponders about the involuntarity nature of such cultural leisure due to the condemnation of the working class, to which Bobby himself belongs: *"to see a play, on your own!"*. Thanks to his wife, Bobby is able to reveal his emotional side, which he sincerely admits he values: *"tears spilled down my face"*. Focusing on stylistic devices of the syntactic language level of the utterance let us define the role of parallelism, inversion and exclamation in creating postironic presentation of the characters of this novel.

With the help of parallel confrontation of the pronouns in the similar syntactic pattern *"I can't ... You couldn't"* Bobby unconsciously stresses the social sameness of the men in the community. Stylistic inversion gives a reader an emotional stress to the unit *"with a woman"* placed in an initial position. Along with the expressive rhetorical exclamation *"Imagine it being found out, that you went to see a play, on your own!"* they are aimed at dragging the reader's attention to the idea that a man (any man of the town) cannot visit a theatre on his own. These stylistic devices make the character sound persuasive in his irony and sincerity.

Bobby's low self-esteem and guilt over his professional failures haunt him and are expressed in bitter, self-ironic and honest lines: *"You don't need brains to shovel shit and carry blocks and take orders from rat-faced little men who'll use you all day and laugh at you all night and never pay in your stamps"*. Following the principles of New Sincerity Donal Ryan's writing tactic here is to establish a trusting relationship with the reader by revealing the character's weaknesses, with the help of metaphorical expressions in the description of Bobby's work: *"you don't need brains to shovel shit"* and *"take orders from rat-faced little men"*. The use of polysyndeton as stylistically motivated repetition of a preposition *"and"* creates a rhythm, similar to Bobby's routine working process he is sick of.

Bobby's relationship with his father is a source of profound psychological turmoil. Lack of the father's love becomes an eternal burden for Bobby throughout adulthood, destroying his personality and levelling out all his positive qualities. Bobby's resentment develop into a destructive hatred of his father, which Bobby sincerely admits, but is unable to overcome: *"I wouldn't like to see his eyes while I killed him; he'd be laughing at me, I know well he would. He'd still be telling me I'm only a useless prick, a streak of piss, a shame to him, even and he dying. He wouldn't plead, only laugh at me with his yellow eyes"*. By ironically highlighting the father's lowliness at the hypothetical moment of murder by his own son, Bobby reflexively lets the feeling of hatred pass through him, turning the fantasy into his

own bitter reality. By the constant repetition of the pronoun “*he*” (polysyndeton) Bobby admits his toxic addiction to his father and by comparing himself to “*a useless prick, a streak of piss*” in the eyes of the father admits hopelessness of their relationship. This passage exemplifies one of the main principles of New Sincerity realized in this textual fragment – returning realism to literature, portraying raw human emotions.

Moreover, postironic self-reflection can be a substantial characteristic of another character’s self-reflections. Reflecting on the circumstances of her life, Lily has few regrets, as she honestly confesses her messy nature, in her inherent ironic manner: “*There was something more about me that drew men’s eyes. It was years and years before I knew what the word for that thing was. I was wanton.*” The intentional tautological repetition of the word “*years*” stresses Lily’s ironic acceptance of her “*nature*” withing the years.

Lily’s ironic and dismissive attitude is expressively captured through the use of the imperative clause “*Imagine...*” when referring to her son’s father’s family and compensated by a sense of personal victory over their arrogance and snobbery. Despite losing her own dignity and self-respect, Lily triumphantly notes that she is the cause of their loss of reputation, and they are no better: “*They’re big farmers, the McDermotts. Imagine if they knew there’s a solicitor inside in the city, the son of a whore, who’s kin of theirs. It’d frighten the life out of them to think of him with his brains and badness!*” Using such a syntactic device as antithesis: “*They’re big farmers*” – “*the son of a whore*” the author stresses on the social contrast between Lily and the McDermotts, but ironically proves their equality on the personal level.

Ironically comparing the emotional connection to his sons with a ledger, Josie alludes to the nature of their relationship and the faulty values of his parenting, focusing on material goods for his sons as both the cause and result of the younger son Pokey’s disruptive behaviour: “*I confused providing for them with rearing them*”. Josie makes a sincere and honest confession about her true feelings for Pokey, taking responsibility for the actions of the son who lacked his father’s love: “*He had a ledger inside in his head on which every single move I made was entered, and it never, ever balanced in his favour. I started resenting him, and nearly hated him. I did hate him. God forgive me, I should confess that*”. With the help of comparison (with a ledger on the basis of its functions), the reader is offered quite a formal father’s attitude to one his sons.

The character who is capable of self-reflection through sincerity and ironic self-criticism is Réaltín. Reflecting on the vain hopes that her parents had for her (including giving her a name that means “*star*” in Irish), Réaltín reminds us: “*Little star, my name means. Some star I am.*”, emphasising the irony of this very fact, with the help of such a syntactic device as inversion in the utterance. Later on, she makes the reader understand the non-ironic but bitter truth of this statement. Réaltín’s tragic hopelessness, in the context of the wrong life choices, results in hysterical outbursts of straightforwardness and desperate honesty in the relationship with her father, where Réaltín also confesses: “*Daddy starts looking at the ceiling and humming and scratching his chin. He tries to block my shrill, crazy voice from his poor old ears. He tries to keep my horrible words out.*” The enumeration of the verbs “*starts looking*”, “*humming*”, “*scratching*”, along with the polysyndeton as the repetition of the preposition “*and*” and the anaphora “*He tries...*” at the beginning of the sentences used to create a dynamic, desperate and emotional atmosphere of no escape.

One more desperate attempt to shout out her sincerity to the alienated environment is Bridie. Having lost her son, she does not need formal consolation from the priest or God himself, rudely ironising their “*sincere*” intentions: “*I told John Cotter to go way and fuck off for himself one time. There aren’t too many have actually said that to a priest in spite of all the auld bile you hear people spouting these days [...] I told him where to go and*

where to shove his Scriptures... ..I screamed on and on and on and there was no quieting me." Bridie acknowledges her sincere disdain for the insincere people around her, almost proud of it *"there aren't too many have actually said that to a priest"*, and is not afraid of her position, using the invective constructions *"...to go way and fuck off for himself..."* on the lexical level as a stylistic device. Other syntactic stylistic devices such as polysyndeton as the repetition of the connective words *"and on"* and the anaphora *"I..."* at the beginning of almost each sentence make Bridie's reflection of the situation desperately dramatic and realistic. According to New Sincerity principles the author's narrative proves to be realistic and honest, confirming the ambiguity of his position and humanistic values despite any religious or social prejudice.

Reflecting on their own life positions, choices, values and attitudes towards others, Donal Ryan's characters sometimes deliberately draw a contrast between their image in cynical social expectations and sincere self-perception, where they appear defenceless, confused, frightened and lonely. The contrast between the ironic and cynical perception of the character by others and the postironically sincere one can be seen in the example of Brian: *"It's only the want of a ride is making me all emotional at the moment. That's the pervasive influence of popular culture: I think I'm sad over Lorna. It's all this shite on MTV. On an intellectual level, I couldn't give a shite about her. It's a strange dichotomy, so it is; feeling and knowing."* When he talks about his ex-girlfriend, Brian hides behind cynicism instead of admitting his true feelings: fear of love, or leaving home for Australia.

In the next line, Brian (being afraid of his honesty) explains the reason for his fears, revealing the tragedy of the fear to upset his parents and open up to his true feelings. This pathetically ironic form of sincere presentation emphasises Brian's hidden intelligence and emotionality: *"We're all afraid of our lives of upsetting our parents. Why is it at all? Why have we to be bound by this fear of the feelings of others? Is it because my actions will always affect them? [...] Will the Earth's largest ocean be deep enough to drown my guilt? Whoo boy, I have to stop thinking. I'll be writing in a diary next, like a right prick."* The combination of intellectual, highly poetic lexics: *"a strange dichotomy"*, *"be bound by this fear"*, *"Will the Earth's largest ocean be deep enough to drown my guilt?"* and invective-colloquial: *"the want of a ride"*, *"shite"*, *"give a shite"*, *"a right prick"* of his speech again proves the contrast of Brian's personality. At the syntactic level the usage of numerous rhetorical questions proves the fact that Brian is desperate in getting the answers, the understanding and sympathy.

Analysing the characters' self-reflection on their lives, relationships with the others, their dubious life choices, from the perspective of postirony through the principles of New Sincerity, we can identify certain features that are characteristic of all of the above characters: ironic self-criticism, reflecting on the events of their own tragic lives and their own mistakes (*"to see a play, on your own!"*, *"some star I am"*, *"It's only the want of a ride is making me all emotional"*); and a sincere and highly emotional conviction in their own imperfection and wrong life path choice (*"tears spilled down my face"*, *"I did hate him"*, *"I'm sad over Lorna"*, *"we're all afraid of our lives of upsetting our parents"*, *"will the Earth's largest ocean be deep enough to drown my guilt"*). As a result, the combination of ironic and honest self-reflection makes us feel the tragedy of the characters' fate. From the perspective of post-ironic sincerity the author can convincingly reveal the interpersonal relationships of the characters, explaining their motivation through the ironic and sincere self-reflection which, according to metamodernism nature, "oscillate from both and between" like a pendulum: from mockery to bitter truthful sincerity impossible being separated. Another advantage of the postironic perception of the characters of Donal

Ryan's novel using the principles of New Sincerity is the author's achievement of the reader's reflection, through an honest and realistic portrayal of a tragic life routine.

Withing a brief analysis of the stylistic means at different language levels we can define such syntactic stylistic devices as *parallel constructions*, *inversions*, *rhetorical exclamation and questions*, *metaphorical expressions*, *polysyndeton*, *comparisons*, *tautological repetitions*, *imperative clauses*, *antithesis*, *enumeration* and *anaphora*. The syntactic stylistic devices used in the characters' postironic self-reflection through New Sincerity principles function as a tool to show a personal drama of each character in true-to-life, though desperate, routine and hopeless atmosphere of the town and its community. At the lexical level *colloquial (invective)*, *poetic* and *lexics* are used to reflect the authentic speech of the unpretentious Irish working-class society or show the impossibility of the characters to sound "emotionally naked" in public.

In this context, the above described research on the syntactic and lexical stylistic devices used in postironic self-reflection through New Sincerity principles in the novel "The Spinning Heart" by Donal Ryan can be presented through the quantitative analysis (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

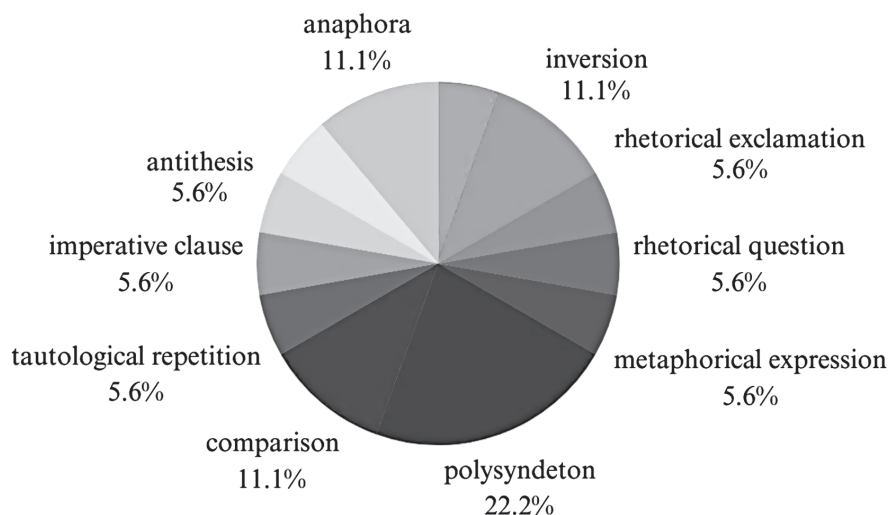


Fig. 1. Diagram of the quantitative analysis of the syntactic stylistic devices of the research

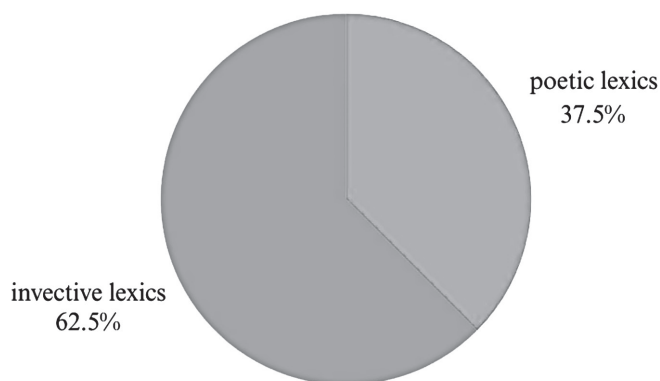


Fig. 2. Diagram of the quantitative analysis of the lexical stylistic devices of the research

Self-reflection of the characters allows the author to give each of them individual traits through syntactic and lexical stylistic devices. At the same time, the polyphonic voices of Donal Ryan's characters isolate each of them from the general community of a small town, where everyone is left alone with themselves and their own struggles.

Conclusions. Within the research tasks of the paper the author clarifies the definitions of such concepts as postmodern irony and metamodern postirony and theoretically actualizes the difference between them. The principles of New Sincerity are applied to identify the stylistic realisation of postironic self-reflection in the novel under analysis. These principles include the desire to go beyond the ideological framework of postmodernism and affirm the ethical principles of honesty, sincerity, unambiguity, and humanity, thereby returning realism to literature. They also involve restoring a trusting relationship with the reader; affirming the truthfulness of the author's values, confirming the unambiguity of the author's narrative, and searching for new writing tactics to implement the anti-ironic and anti-cynical position of metamodernism.

Therefore, it is demonstrated that the aforementioned principles are used as stylistic devices in the creation of the fictional characters. These devices, particularly in the characters' self-reflective considerations, enable the writer to avoid ambiguity and manipulation of the reader's perception, thereby restoring realism to literature by affirming the ethical principles of honesty and humanity and the truthfulness of the author's values.

Aiming to identify stylistic features of postironic portrayal of the characters through the principles of New Sincerity in the novel "The Spinning Heart" by Donal Ryan prove metamodern postirony to become a crucial marker of metamodern literature and play a key role in the interpretation of the novel under analysis. The usage of the lexical and syntactic stylistic devices of the main characters' self-reflection shows their undeniable influence on the readers' understanding of the author's postironic and sincere narrative.

Hence, the use of postirony in the portrayal of the characters demonstrates the author's conscious refusal to use irony in depicting fictional reality, while simultaneously forming the reader's serious attitude to the author's narrative, allowing the author and the reader to communicate honestly and effectively. It is important to acknowledge that postirony and the analysed principles of New Sincerity are the tools of free and honest communication in the fictional metamodern environment, where all the participants (the reader, the author and the characters) express themselves sincerely and are able to find a common ground.

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