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Irony as a Metamodern Aspect in Kay Ryan's Selected Poems

A B S T R A C T

Metamodernism has been defined as a set of developments in philosophy, aesthetics and culture which have emerged from and are reacting to postmodernism. It is a recent current in contemporary literary theory and culture and together with postmodernism have become the two most predominant modes of present critical analysis. As a critical/cultural sensibility, metamodernism has been recognized as a new entrant to the writing of literary works in addition to the academic study of literature.

In this paper, metamodernism is explored as one of postmodernism 's proposed successors, in theory and practice. This paper highlights the basic poetics of metamodernism and tries to apply them to the analysis of Kay Ryan's selected poems. In specific, irony is explored in this paper as one of the metamodern aspects. Though reference is made to some of the major heralds of metamodernism, the primary model which will be discussed and utilized for interpretation is that construed by Timotheus Vermeulen and Van den Akker in their pioneering paper "Notes on Metamodernism" (2010)

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السخرية باعتبارها جانبًا متطورًا في كاي رايان

قصائد مختارة

وسن عبد الحمزة/جامعة واسط / كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية / قسم اللغة الانجليزية وآدابها / العراق
سحر عبد الامير حراج/ جامعة القادسية ، كلية التربية ، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية ، العراق
الخلاصة:

تم تعريف مصطلح الما بعد الحداثة على أنه مجموعة من التطورات في الفلسفة وعلم الجمال والثقافة التي نشأت وتفاعل مع ما بعد الحداثة. هو تيار حديث في النظرية والثقافة الأدبية المعاصرة ، وقد أصبح ما بعد الحداثة أكثر الأنماط السائدة في التحليل النقدي الحالي. كإحساس نقدي / ثقافي ، تم التعرف على الما بعد الحداثة كمدخل جديد لكتابة الأعمال الأدبية بالإضافة إلى الدراسة الأكاديمية للأدب.

تم, في هذا البحث, استكشاف الما بعد الحداثة كأحد خلفاء بعد الحداثة المقترحين , من الناحية النظرية والتطبيق. يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على الشعرية الأساسية لما وراء الحداثة وخاصة السخرية كأحد صفات الما بعد الحداثة ومحاولة تطبيقها على تحليل قصائد كاي رايان المختارة. على الرغم من الإشارة إلى بعض الدعاة الرئيسيين لما بعد الحداثة , وان النموذج الأساسي الذي سيتم مناقشته واستخدامه للتفسير هو الذي فسره تيموثيوس فيرميولين وفان دن أكير في بحثهما الرائد "ملاحظات حول الما بعد الحداثة" (2010) الكلمات المفتاحية: كاي رايان , السخرية , الما بعد الحداثة , بعد الحداثة .

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen an increase in the use of the term metamodernism when discussing contemporary culture, which is said to have progressed from postmodernism. This desire for change has emerged in the wake of many crises over the past two decades - from climate change to financial collapse to escalating global conflicts. History is declared prematurely end to be somewhat caricatured in the context of modernity debate about equilibrium. The discourse on modernity is characterized by deconstruction, irony, flexibility, relativism, and nihilism while not sacrificing everything one has learned from postmodernism, narratives, and universal truths. **(Ceriello 2018 :218)**

To put it another way, metamodernism doesn't just mean that were going back in time, but that were in the middle of a transition between modernity and postmodernism. It appears to be an educated ignorance, pragmatic idealism and mild fanaticism that oscillate between genuineness and irony, deconstruction and construction, indifference to and influence, as if this thing were within us. It is important to understand, comprehend, and comprehend. Nowadays, people know that sarcasm and sincerity don't necessarily have to be mutually exclusive. **(Ceriello 2018 :20)**

Linda Hutcheon argued in 2002 that the postmodern era had come to an end and that the developments that followed should be labeled with their own term. Metamodernism was proposed by Timothy Vermilion and Robin van den Acker in response to this call. At its core, metamodernism represents a balancing act between postmodernism and modernity. Modernist

satire aimed at pointing out human folly and vice as a means of correcting society. The role of satire has evolved since the rise of postmodernism, as the postmodern form replaces correction with the destabilization of grand narratives. **(Bran 2009 :51)**

Metamodernism is a state of fluctuations that deviates between modern optimism and the paradox of postmodernism in everything that is opposite, such as hope and melancholy, naivety and knowledge, sympathy and indifference, unity and pluralism, totalitarianism and fragmentation, and finally everything in between purity and ambiguity Ironist. The author coined the term. It's a mixture of irony and honesty, as anyone probably guessed. According to the author, it's the combination of irony and honesty in a unified aesthetic expression that defines it. As an example, he cites *Modern Family* and *Community* as examples. As a *Modern Family* fanatic, one can understand what it means by ironist, which is sarcasm or irony used to express a genuine feeling or make an important point. A great example of the pendulum we discussed earlier, this show oscillates between love and harshness, deep caring and selfishness—just like most of us humans. **(Christopher 2002 :256)**

Kay Ryan, born in California in 1945 and known in the modern period as one of the most revered voices, has authored several books of poetry, including *Flamingo Watching* (2006), *The Niagara River* (2005), and *Say Uncle* (2000). Her novel, *The Best of It* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. *New and Selected Poems* (2010) **(Ryan 1997 :44)**

To understand metamodernism, it is necessary to understand both the modernist and postmodern movements, both of which shaped the present tendency of postmodernism. Modernity includes everything from modern ideas and methods to the rapid expansion of cities and industrialization. This period of modernity spans the years from the end of World War I to the present day. It is all about how man thinks and controls the current world; Modernity, despite its old concept, has developed into a variety of styles, approaches, and expressions that have had a great impact on a wide range of fields, including politics, economics, and literature.

Humanistic philosophy, art, literature, architecture, politics, are aspects of metamodern. Metamodernism, as a whole, is the dominant cultural rationale today. Because of the contemporary cultural climate, it aims to transcend modernity and postmodernism. Its basic principle is that postmodernism of cynicism and detachment can be overcome by faith, trust, discussion, and honesty. Metamodernism, which arose in the first decade of the twenty-first

century, questioned the universality and truthfulness of antiquity, its fragmentation, and the skepticism of postmodernism. **(Christopher 2002 :258)**

Toward a story of modernity with no room for interpretation inside a thorough private metaphysical framework. In the early millennium, when the term metamodern began to take on new and additional meanings, it appears that this early use laid the ground for its later application. Vermeulen and Akker specifically say that they did not create or coin the word metamodernism and that it had a history of at least three decades prior to their study. These people claim first use of the term, but they don't claim originality in terms of the term itself. In any case, they made it clear that their interpretation of the phrase is in no way related to any previous Norwegian usage that might be traced back to the term's prior usage. To the best of our knowledge, our perceptions of how negotiations work, how they are structured, and what they are like are totally independent of anything else. Clearly, they were referring to a meta-swing between modernity and postmodernism. **(Vermeulen and Akker 2013: 13)**

Ihab Hassan began criticizing postmodernism in the early 1970s and continued to do so for several decades. Regina Roditi claims that Ihab Hassan was the first to criticize postmodernism in the 1970s. Hassan didn't start saying that sterile nihilism and frivolous play had degraded cultural postmodernism until the beginning of the century. **(Hassan 2001 :10)**

Not only Hassan, but also Frederick Jameson, Jürgen Habermas, and Linda Hutcheon were singing about the downfall of post-structuralism when they challenged the name postmodernism. Modernity is out of date. Artists, educators and intellectuals came to understand that the term postmodernism was no longer appropriate to define the cultural sensibility of the era. The old nomenclature had to be replaced since Linda Hutcheon considered it was outdated in light of the current situation. New terminology is needed to describe our current catastrophic position, Linda Hutcheon writes in the second edition of her book *The Politics of Post-Modernity* in 2002. The name postmodernism was not proposed by Hutcheon, but she predicted that other literary theorists and cultural academics would come up with a new phrase to better describe the contemporary predicament in which we find ourselves. Hutcheon feels the postmodern era has come to an end, despite the fact that her rhetorical methods and ideological critique are still flourishing in our contemporary 21st century environment. Postmodernism necessitates the creation of a new label for itself. **(Hutcheon 2002 :181)**

Vermeulen and Akkers paper, *Notes on Metamodernism*, has additional recommendations for the new concept, as well as examples of the term's modernity, pseudo-modernity, changing modernity, and postmodernity, among other things. **(Vermeulen and Akker 2010 :3)**

Both epistemologically and ontologically, metamodernism should be viewed of as a both-neither dynamic in order to fit into the established realm of postmodernism it's modern and postmodern at the same time, and it's neither. As a result, we are always shifting between the postmodern and the modern, but we are never either of those things at the same time. This metamodern is defined by this double-bind of a modern demand for achievement and postmodern uncertainty about the meaning of it all, according to the authors terms. **(Vermeulen and Akker 2010 :6)**. Vermeulen and Akker distinguish between this (both-neither) oscillating tension with some kind of postmodern in between (a neither-nor).

Kay Ryan was one of the country's most accomplished poets for years before she was discovered after working in secrecy. A group of friends contributed to the printing of the first set of *Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends* in secret in California in 1983. Kay Ryan's early work and writings have been disregarded by critics, which is unfortunate. In 1994, Kai Ryan got popular after appearing on *Flamingo Watching* for the first time. **(Fay 2008: 8)**

In recent years, she has received numerous honors, including the Ruth Lilly Poetry Award for Lifetime Achievement, the Pulitzer Prize for Best Poems: The New Yorker Edition, a Guggenheim Fellowship, three Pushcart Prizes, and most recently, a Foundation Fellowship MacArthur Award. He has also served as a consultant for the Academy of American Poets. **(McGurl 2010 :69)**

Her background, work history, educational background, publication history, and writing style have all contributed to Ryan's establishing herself as one of the most significant outliers in contemporary poetry. It is worth noting that Dana Gioia points out that nowadays, a poet who is that sophisticated, disciplined, and innovative is nearly always self-taught. Ryan has always considered himself to be an outsider in the institutionalized world of modern poetry, and his writing reflects this **(Gioia 1998: 138)**. Born in 1945, Ryan grew up in California Mojave Desert and the San Joaquin Valley, more than 3,000 miles away from the city's vibrant arts scene. He is a member of the American Ballet Theater. He is presently a resident of the city of New York. **(McGurl 2010 :69)**

She is described as like a desert plant whose autobiography matches her character by poet Jane Hirschfield, who also characterizes Kay Ryan as like a desert plant whose autobiography

matches her character (**Halstead 2007: 1**). She was raised by her parents, neither of whom graduated from high school. Her father worked as a digger, and her mother was an elementary school teacher.

As Ryan points out, she was brought up in a family that believes that being a poet elevates her social standing above that of her peers (**Fay 2008. 1**). As far as Ryan is concerned, she has never been a fan of the poet's image and continues to do so. This painting has a romantic feel to it, as well as a strong emotional undercurrent running throughout it. We are an affluent family that has little interest in how we are perceived in the society in which we live (**Halstead 2002: 2**). Kai Ryan's self-identification as a poet was validated in 2010 when she told the Dodge Poetry Festival audience that she wanted to be an extremely clever layman rather than a poet. Poetry had other ideas for me than driving a pick-up truck.

In her "The Walking Stick Insect", Ryan talks of South America often loses an antenna or leg—but always grows a new appendage. Often nature makes a mistake and a new antenna grows where the leg was lost.

*“Ripley’s Believe It or Not!
Eventually the
most accident, prone or war, weary walking sticks
are entirely
reduced to antennae with which they pick their way sensitively,
appalled by everything’s intensity”. (Ryan,2008)*

According to Ryan, she defines herself as an unreachable autodidact who, at one point in her life, didn't know how to write. Early in her career, she wrote a collection of poetry based on the cards of the Tarot deck, which was published in 1992. Her daily Tarot card exercise evolved into her own unusual approach of teaching herself how to write, which she still does today. Her explanation is as follows: Back in the 1970s, I purchased a regular tarot deck, which came with a small accompanying book that described how to read the cards, lay them out, shuffle them, and all of that. My problem is that I'm not a student and was completely disinterested in learning anything about the cards. Just for the sake of looking at them, I thought they were really cool. In any case, I did employ the books shuffling process, which was really intricate, and in the

mornings, I'd turn one card over and write a poem on whatever card had been turned over the night before. It's possible that the card represents Love, or that it represents Death. Writing as many poems as there were playing cards in the deck was my game, or project, for that day. However, because I had no control over which cards appeared, I would write some over and over again and some that I would never see again. That provided me with flexibility. I've always believed that writing poetry entailed exposing oneself completely. But back in the 1970s, the only models I had were those who ripped your clothes off, and I couldn't do that. I didn't want to be nude, even if that meant my intellect was bare. I wasn't interested in the heart or in love, either. The tarot card reading made me realize that I could write about anything, including love if necessary, while maintaining the appearance of not being exposed. (Fay, 2008: 3)

Though Ryan believes that her lack of literary ties contributed to the delay in the discovery of her work, she concedes that being isolated from the literary community allowed her to cultivate her writing without outside influence. The author continues, I believe that those who go on to become the most interesting writers are always going to come from, in some ways, terrible situations. In order to be a successful writer, a tremendous quantity of extremely private testing must take place. It's something that has to be dealt with. To be honest, I'm not sure how much holding hands with other people is a good idea. (Halstead 2007)

Open to any page in a collection by Ryan and one can tell this is a woman in love with language and wordplay. Her poems are compact powerhouses of language delivering mysterious wit and wisdom. They sound even better when read out loud. In *Winter Fear*, Ryan wonders out loud what I am sure many of us have thought during this year's long winter,

"winter Fear"

"is it just winter

or is this worse.

Is this the year when outer damp?

obscures a deeper curse

that spring can't fix,

when gears that / turn the earth

won't shift the view,

when clouds won't lift

*though all the skies
go blue. (Ryan,1999)*

Many of the poems in *Say Uncle* caution against complacency as in the title poem:

*“Every day
you say,
Just one
more try.
Then another
irrecoverable
day slips by.”*

Ryan seems to be saying that if we cling to the past, we won't be able to change when we need to:

*“Sometimes the
green pasture
of the mind
tilts abruptly.
The grazing horses
struggle crazily
for purchase
on the frictionless
nearly vertical
surface. Their
furniture-fine
legs buckle
on the incline,
unhorsed by slant
they weren't
designed to climb
and can't.” (Ryan,1999)*

Gioia said that “While Ryan cautions against complacency, she does not give easy solutions. She only offers small clues as to the rewards of living a life of risk and exploration, how “distance / burns us with love” and “waiting / is sustainable– / a place with / its own harvests.” And while she perhaps embraces action, she also cautions that, “Action creates / a taste / for itself”, how once you’ve begun to simplify, “it gets harder / not to also / simplify the larder, / not to dismiss / rooms, not to /divest yourself / of all the chairs / but one, not / to test what / singleness can bear, / once you’ve begun.)” As Dana Gioia and others have pointed out, her poems are lyrical, set up to solve problems or to consider ideas. They often seem to follow Frost’s famous dictate to begin in delight and end in wisdom. Both simple and complex, they are written in a language inventive (she sometimes makes up words) and exact. With compressed syntax and hidden or internal rhymes and much assonance, the poems turn back on themselves with a rapidity of image and sound. They are intricate and fast and demand rereading to savor their word play quirkiness and wit Ryan is a lyric voice full of humor, wisdom and humanity, and her short poems are quite comprehensible to intermediate learners.

CONCLUSION

Kay Ryan was very funny and the content of her poems really embodied her humor. It was really fascinating to learn Kay Ryan’s process of writing, such as obtaining her ideas from her surrounding, for example, reading that an angler fish undergoes 500 different modification in order to attain mimicry lead her to write Young Angler Fish. Or hearing the phrase mock playing monk leader her to write Monk Styles. Through the collection of poetry, she read, there was one reoccurring theme and that was the theme of nature. Therefore, majority of her poems were poetry of nature reflecting life. A few of my favorites from her compilation were: Doubt, The Hinge of Spring, and A Plain Ordinary Steel Needle can float on Pure Water.

In narrative and biography forms, she uses irony and humor to unravel the idiosyncrasies of language and the haplessness of human existence. She is fond of malapropisms and clichés, two linguistic devices that many poets consider taboo. She employs what she calls recombinant rhyme. In short, Ryan’s poems could be transgressed, a word that once enjoyed a currency and that some academics liked to say of the literature they liked. But the transgression was never obvious, and anyway, Ryan’s suspicion of buzzwords (like transgression, for one) was never

going to endear her to a certain set, at least in the early days of her career. It's funny how writers will all want to jump on the same bed till the springs pop out, Ryan famously wrote of that word transgression. Then they go jump on another one.

Ryan's poems didn't aim to be cruel. Nor did they assume the poet's personal traumas would necessarily interest a discerning reader. Nor did they succumb to the fragment, which lured so many of the previous century's poets down a dead end, where thoughts need not be completed.

Ryan's poems completed their thoughts, following unforeseen lines of thinking, roads less traveled, and a fork's most-slanted tine. They showed their work and obeyed logic, but not the logic of a Mr. Spock, a logic feeling around for firm footing. The Ryan poem often concealed a loose plank in its reasoning, through which a reader was apt to plunge. Indeed, many of the pithier responses to the Ryan poem—the blurbs on her books—are really just confessions of vulnerability to an underestimated power: the scrawny kid who pins the stronger arm (David Yezzi); the change-up that freezes its batter (Kate Moos). People come up and say, 'Oh, your poems are so funny,' Ryan would recount. I tell them, wait until you get home.

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