



## INTERTEXTUALITY AND IRONY IN POSTMODERN BRITISH FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the interrelation of intertextuality and irony as defining features of postmodern British fiction. Postmodern writers challenge the traditional concepts of authorship, originality, and narrative reliability by constructing texts that refer to and reinterpret previous literary and cultural works. Intertextuality serves as a means of establishing dialogue between texts and historical contexts, while irony functions as a critical and self-reflective device that exposes contradictions within language and ideology. Through the analysis of works by John Fowles, Julian Barnes, Jeanette Winterson, Martin Amis, and Ian McEwan, the study reveals how these techniques contribute to the creation of a multi-layered, self-conscious narrative structure. The article argues that the combination of intertextuality and irony not only defines the aesthetic nature of postmodern fiction but also reflects the broader philosophical skepticism characteristic of postmodern thought.*

Postmodern British fiction, emerging in the second half of the twentieth century, reflects a shift from traditional narrative forms toward self-reflexivity, ambiguity, and playfulness. Writers of this period deliberately blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, past and present, originality and imitation.

Among the techniques that define postmodern writing, intertextuality and irony hold a central position. Through intertextual references, authors create a network of meanings that connect their works with earlier literary, cultural, and historical texts. Irony, in turn, functions as both a stylistic and philosophical device that exposes the instability of truth and the subjectivity of interpretation.

The concepts of *intertextuality* and irony are among the defining features of postmodern British fiction. Intertextuality, first formulated by Julia Kristeva, emphasizes that every text is a “*mosaic of quotations*”, drawing on and transforming previous cultural and literary forms. This concept was expanded by Roland Barthes, who proclaimed the “*death of the author*”, arguing that meaning in literature does not belong solely to the writer but is created through the interaction between text and reader. In this sense, postmodern literature rejects the idea

of originality as independence; instead, it views creativity as a form of dialogue between texts, ideas, and traditions.

**Irony**, as discussed by Linda Hutcheon, serves as a central mechanism of postmodern thought and expression. For Hutcheon, irony is not only a rhetorical figure but also a mode of critical awareness - a way to expose contradictions, challenge authority, and invite active reader participation. Irony functions as both distance and engagement: it allows the writer to question while still remaining within the cultural system being questioned. Thus, intertextuality and irony often operate together in postmodern British fiction. Intertextuality provides the structure for reinterpretation, while irony gives tone and attitude - together they form a language of skepticism, play, and reflection that defines the postmodern aesthetic.

#### **Intertextuality in British postmodern novels**

Postmodern British authors use intertextuality as a deliberate narrative strategy to connect their works with earlier literary and cultural traditions. In John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), the Victorian era becomes a stage for postmodern experimentation. Fowles imitates the narrative style and moral tone of nineteenth-century fiction but simultaneously undermines it. The narrator comments directly on the story's structure, offers multiple endings, and exposes the artificiality of traditional narrative forms. Through these techniques, the novel becomes a conversation between past and present — between the determinism of the Victorian worldview and the freedom of postmodern uncertainty.

Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) takes intertextual play even further. The novel combines fiction, biography, and literary criticism, questioning whether an objective understanding of a writer or a text is possible. The constant references to Gustave Flaubert's works, letters, and characters turn the novel into a meta-literary investigation of truth and interpretation. The "search for Flaubert's parrot" symbolizes the endless pursuit of meaning - ironic, futile, yet deeply human.

Other postmodern writers, such as Jeanette Winterson, use intertextuality to challenge social and cultural norms. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, she rewrites biblical narratives to explore themes of identity, sexuality, and religion. The novel merges myth, fairy tale, and autobiography, creating a layered narrative that questions who has the authority to tell a story. Through these intertextual dialogues, British postmodern fiction exposes literature as a living network of voices — a system where meaning is produced through reinterpretation and recontextualization.

#### **Irony as a postmodern technique**

While intertextuality structures postmodern fiction, irony defines its tone. It becomes both a stylistic device and a philosophical stance that reflects distrust toward absolute truth and fixed meaning. In Martin Amis's *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984), irony serves as a social critique and a form of self-reflexivity. The novel's protagonist, John Self, represents the moral emptiness of consumer culture, while Amis's dark humor and self-referential commentary expose the absurdity of capitalist values. The fact that the author himself appears as a character deepens the metafictional irony - suggesting that even the act of writing cannot escape the world it critiques.

In Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), irony functions on a more emotional and philosophical level. The narrative leads readers to believe in the authenticity of a tragic love story, only to reveal that it is a fiction written by the protagonist, Briony, as an act of atonement for her past mistake. This twist transforms the novel into a reflection on guilt, imagination, and the moral limits of storytelling. McEwan's irony is subtle and layered: it exposes the tension between art and reality, between truth and illusion.

Overall, irony in postmodern British fiction operates as a means of questioning — it invites the reader to doubt the narrator, the story, and even the author. Yet at the same time, it opens

a space for empathy and reflection. This duality — skepticism and sincerity — is what gives postmodern irony its depth.

### Conclusion

Intertextuality and irony play a vital role in defining postmodern British fiction. Both strategies challenge traditional literary conventions and encourage readers to engage critically with the text. Intertextuality reveals the interconnectedness of literature and culture, while irony exposes the instability of meaning and the limits of representation.

By combining these techniques, postmodern British writers - such as Fowles, Barnes, Amis, and McEwan - construct narratives that are both playful and profound, questioning the very nature of storytelling. Their works demonstrate that in postmodern fiction, truth is not absolute but constantly rewritten through irony and intertextual exchange.

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