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**Postironic Sensibility in *My Appearance*
by David Foster Wallace**

**Postironia w opowiadaniu *My Appearance*
Davida Fostera Wallace'a**

Abstract

This paper aims to show how David Foster Wallace uses the story *My Appearance* to convey his ideas on postmodernism and irony. I argue that two sensibilities, ironic and post-ironic, are represented by the main characters David Letterman and Edilyn, respectively. I briefly outline the ways in which irony is problematic. Then I focus on how the battle between the ironic and the post-ironic is played out during an interview that the above mentioned characters participate in. I also write about the tension inherent in the notion of sincerity. I draw on the works of Adam Kelly and Lukas Hoffmann on postirony as well as a body of literature devoted to irony.

Key words: *irony, postirony, My Appearance, David Foster Wallace.*

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie opowiadania Davida Fostera Wallace'a jako tekstu ilustrującego poglądy pisarza na temat estetyki postmodernistycznej oraz ironii. Autorka stawia tezę, że bohaterowie tego opowiadania są uosobieniem dwóch postaw. Postawa ironiczna reprezentowana jest przez Davida Lettermana, a post-ironiczna przez główną bohaterkę, Edilyn.

W artykule podjęte zostały zagadnienia związane z używaniem ironii. Autorka przeprowadza również analizę ironii oraz postironii uwidaczniających się podczas wywiadu, w którym uczestniczą wyżej wymienieni bohaterowie. Zwraca także uwagę na wewnętrzną sprzeczność pojęcia szczerości. Opiera się przy tym na pracach Adama Kelly'ego i Lukasa Hoffmanna na temat postironii oraz na literaturze dotyczącej ironii.

Słowa kluczowe: *ironia, postironia, My Appearance, David Foster Wallace.*

Wallace's work, alongside that of Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, and Dave Eggers among others, is classified as post-postmodernism. The postmodern aesthetic is still present in their writing, but at the same time they go beyond postmodernism. Adam Kelly identifies the nineties as a transitional decade for American literature and *My Appearance*, published in 1989 bears a lot of resemblance to the fiction of this time. (Kelly, 2013) Discussion about what has succeeded postmodernism is at its early stage (Konstantinou, 2016, p. 37). But whatever the successor is, it takes the preceding movement as its point of reference. *My Appearance*, like Wallace's other post-postmodern fiction, for example the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, is a critical look at the question of omnipresent irony and postmodern aesthetic as well as an attempt to go beyond them.

Clare Colebrook in her seminal work *Irony. The New Critical Idiom* signals the difficulty with defining irony: "It [irony] can also refer to the huge problems of postmodernity; our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony. Irony, then, by the very simplicity of its definition becomes curiously indefinable." (Colebrook, 2004, p. 12) In this paper I discuss irony as an attitude or sensibility rather than a literary device or figure of speech. Since irony is part of the spirit of the times of postmodernism, Wallace as a post-postmodernist is also post-ironic. Most literature published on irony acknowledges the limitations of this mode and points toward an emerging post-ironic sensibility. There is a large volume of studies published on this topic including Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) and *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994), as well as Lee Constantinou's *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (2016). A detailed discussion of irony itself is beyond the scope of this essay, so I will only briefly outline the main reasons why irony is problematic.

Irony is elitist: it excludes those who do not understand it. The ironist is the one who is in the know, the domineering party, looking down on those who do not understand it. Lee Constantinou observes that “[t]he ironist thus simultaneously adopts a disposition towards taste and understanding, which he uses to affirm his status as part of an elect authority, a master of the cultural and symbolic field.” (Kostantinou, 2016, p. 31) This elitist approach to literature results in a kind of writing which can be understood only by the chosen few. Being ironic and understanding irony means assuring dominance.

The downside of irony is that used as a tool by the oppressed to rebel against oppressors, it offers no solutions. It can actually end up supporting what it tried to fight. Another limitation of irony as a weapon is that the ironist risks fossilizing in irony. Overusing its potential for negation, one becomes someone Wallace described, quoting Lewis Hyde, as “the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage.” (Wallace, 2014, p. 769) If irony as a defensive weapon starts to be used by default, it tends to stifle action. The ironist points at a problem but does nothing to deal with it. As a result, things can be destroyed but nothing is built. (McLaughlin, 2018, p. 161) What is even more problematic is that irony can be misunderstood, especially if there are not enough cues or markers of irony, and end up sustaining the subject it ridicules. A good example here could be literary and cinematographic works that intend to ironize violence or toxic masculinity but end up sustaining them.

Finally, irony used subversively becomes incorporated by popular culture and loses its edge. Wallace writes about this in *E Unibus Pluram*. He observes that irony, having exposed the hypocrisy of the nineteen fifties, was commodified and this led to an ideological stasis. (Wallace, 2014, p. 754) The language of advertising affected the way people communicate on a daily basis. Adam Kelly describes this special role of the language of advertising for the Americans of Wallace’s generation as “a previously peripheral discourse that had risen to paradigmatic status as the main form of public communication in the West.” (Kelly, 2010, p. 137) Irony started to be used by what it initially criticised. Wallace in his essays gives numerous examples of self-referential commercials of well-known brands which parody themselves making use of irony. Therefore, irony as a critical tool become ineffective and a new type of post-ironic sensibility is to replace it.

Postirony has been a field of research for numerous scholars, including the above mentioned Lee Constantinou and Lukas Hoffmann. Hoffmann writes about postirony in non-fiction works, including Wallace’s and describes the core intention of post-ironic literature produced by Wallace in the following way: “do not ignore the ironic but instead struggle with it actively; do

not seek refuge in quixotic sentimentality but instead incorporate the modernist aesthetics and postmodern “textual self-consciousness” to change it into something “real,” something sincere, something that makes the reader seriously engage with the narrative rather than making her feel comfortable because the narrative is not challenging enough.” (Hoffmann, 2016, p. 63) I argue that this post-ironic attitude is epitomized by the main character in the story *My Appearance*, Edilyn, whereas other characters: her husband Rudy, his friend Ron, and David Letterman himself represent the old exhausted ironic mode, which Wallace was critical of.

The main character in *My Appearance* is Edilyn, a middle-aged commercial actress who is invited to David Letterman’s show. Incidentally, the show, as it is depicted in the story, bears an uncanny resemblance to the real 1988 Letterman interview with the television actress Susan St. James. So, for fear of legal consequences, Wallace included a disclaimer stating that the stories were one hundred percent fiction. Marshall Boswell in *Understanding David Foster Wallace* observes that “he wants his readers to understand these “real” public figures: they are, in short, “the stuff of collective dreams.” Pop culture is our new mythos, the source of our contemporary archetypes. This means, in turn, that “David Letterman” is both a real person and an emblem of some archetypal idea shared by the culture [...]” (Boswell, 2004, p. 39) What Letterman stands for in *My Appearance* is irony that has trickled down into popular culture and permeated it. Letterman is feared as a host who savages his guests. His strong suit is an amalgam of surreal humour and irony. The show sometimes features practical jokes. They are an extra threat, making his guests look even more ridiculous (an actress in a Velcro suit flinging herself at a Velcro wall). The survival tactics of the guests are not to avoid ridicule (it’s impossible) but to become Letterman’s object of ridicule as gracefully as possible.

Initially, Edilyn cannot see anything threatening in the upcoming interview but her mindset changes under the influence of her advisors. Rudy, her husband, who is a producer and his friend, Ron take the interview more seriously and insist on her wearing an earpiece, so as to coach her on what she should be saying during the interview. Rudy and Ron are industry professionals and they attempt to prepare Edilyn for what they believe to be a serious battle, trying to predict what aspects of her career can be mocked. It is how well she handles the ridicule that matters. Rudy warns Edilyn: “The whole thing feeds off everybody’s ridiculousness. It’s the way the audience can tell he *chooses* to ridicule himself that exempts the clever bastard from real ridicule.” (Wallace, 2014, p. 110) However, as the interview is approaching, Edilyn starts

feeling anxious, she bursts into tears on the plane to New York and resorts to self-medicating with Xanax. Finally, as gets driven to the studio, the paranoia really sets in and she starts to suspect her conversation may be recorded in the car and later aired during the interview.

The ideas of irony, ridicule, and their detrimental effects have received considerable attention in Wallace's non-fiction, which cannot be separated from his fictional works. The reason for this is that, apart from its artistic qualities, his prose is often a vehicle for the ideas he grapples with in his essays and articles. Nicoline Timmer uses the term "critical fiction" to describe this kind of writing. "Wallace creates what could be called 'critical fiction', in that his work shows a heightened awareness of the twists and turns of the critical theory of the last few decades, and very 'knowingly' in his texts works his way through some of the most arresting contradictions and paradoxes of postmodern thought." (Timmer, 2010, p. 23) *My Appearance* seems to be such a text in the way it echoes Wallace's preoccupations he later voiced in the famous TV essay *E Unibus Pluram*. There he made the following statement about irony and ridicule: "I want to persuade you that irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive of those features of contemporary U.S. culture [...]. I'm going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture." (Wallace, 2014, p. 750) The battle between irony, represented by Letterman, and postirony, epitomized by Edilyn, occurs during the interview.

Prior to the interview Rudy and Ron identify Edilyn's two weaknesses that could become the subjects of ridicule: a commercial she did for a company producing sausages and her lack of notable success in feature movies – she is predominantly a television actress. Edilyn resolves that she will deal with these two booby traps by being honest about them. She may not be the next Judy Garland, but it does not mean she is bad at her job. Acknowledging that the commercial was done for money, she still calls it one of the "good honest attractive commercials for a product that didn't claim to be anything more than occasional and fun." (Wallace, 2014, p. 112) The word *honest* used in the context of advertising is supposed to set her commercial apart from those which are self-referential and ironic, like the ones that pretended to be the parodies of themselves seen on Saturday Night Live. So, by keeping it real and staying true to herself, she hopes to win the imminent battle.

David Letterman, as it has been mentioned, epitomizes postmodern sensibility. First of all, he makes fun of shows like his own. He mocks the flattering tone of talk show hosts. When the interview ends, he uses phrases like: it

was really “grotesquely nice” having her on and then adds that he hopes the audience was getting “the very most for its entertainment dollar.” The mocking, self-referential character of these phrases is in keeping with the postmodern zeitgeist. Self-referentiality is also manifested in the labels attached to his body parts and furniture in the studio. Letterman represents the postmodern self-awareness, ironic humour, and ridicule that create distance and leads to emptiness. “Make sure you’re seen as making fun of yourself, but in a self-aware and ironic way” is the advice Edilyn gets during her preparations for the confrontation with Letterman. (Wallace, 2014, p. 112) Rudy and Ron also warn her against being honest because sincerity is no longer in and, as they say, “[t]he joke is now on people who’re sincere.” (Wallace, 2014, p. 110) All-encompassing irony requires the ironist and the ironized to remain on guard at all times. It creates an oppressive kind of environment. As Timmer calls it “a certain cultural milieu, in which it is obviously a taboo to be sentimental and naïve and show ‘real’ feelings. The cultural norm is to show an attitude of irony and world-weariness, and to avoid seeming too soft.” (Timmer, 2010, p. 30) Letterman thrives in this kind of atmosphere and the guest is expected to either play along or end up being ridiculed. The ironic mode has two advantages: it offers protection from mockery and is a tool to obfuscate the truth and confuse one’s opponent.

The double meaning of the title also points to another theme in the story, which is establishing one’s identity. The narrator in this story is Edilyn and we see reality filtered through her consciousness. She could be classified as a homodiegetic narrator and the focalization in the story is internal. (Bal, 2017, p. 136) There is not a moment when this perspective shifts outside of her. Marshall Boswell observes that “Edilyn’s central conflict is to reconcile her real self and the content of her heart’s heart with her fabricated identity as a celebrity.” (Boswell, 2004, p. 55) In the course of the story Edilyn makes the following statements about herself: “a woman who simply cries when she’s upset and it does not embarrass her,” “a woman who dislikes being confused because it upsets her,” “a woman who lets her feelings show rather than hide them because it’s just healthier that way,” “a woman who acts,” “a woman with no illusions,” “a woman who speaks her mind because it is the way she has to see herself, to live.” (Wallace, 2010) What all these definitions have in common is honesty with herself and the world. As it has been stated this attitude is contrary to the tenets of postmodernism, which is all about pretence and show.

Nonetheless, Edilyn’s outlook on life is not just a return to naivety or sentimentality. She does what Wallace himself tried to do in his own fiction. Paraphrasing Wallace, Hoffmann describes the post-ironic attitude in the following

way: “[...] do not ignore the ironic but instead struggle with it actively; do not seek refuge in quixotic sentimentality but instead incorporate the modernist aesthetics and postmodern “textual self-consciousness” to change it into something “real,” something sincere [. . .].” (Hoffmann, 2016, p. 63) We see this during her confrontation with Letterman. As predicted, she is attacked for appearing in the sausage commercial. First, Letterman’s accuses her of compromising her integrity and selling out. She replies that she is an aging commercial actress, knows her limitations and needs money because she has a family to take care of. Playing along with Letterman she half-jokes about certain acting skills being required even for acting in commercials. Happy with the way Edilyn is handling the host, Rudy, readjusting his strategy, encourages her through the earpiece to stay honest. Letterman attacks again, suggesting that she must have done the commercial out of greed. This is a difficult moment for Edilyn and how she handles it is key in making the right impression. In keeping with the new honest approach to handling Letterman, Rudy prompts her to explain that she had some back taxes to pay. What Edilyn does, to everyone’s surprise, is resort to humour and irony. She says she did the commercial completely for free and “the feeling of a craft well plied.” (Wallace, 1989, p. 157) This takes Letterman by surprise to the point that his jaw drops, but then he bursts into laughter and the interview ends with cheers and a feeling of good will. Here, I would argue Edilyn emerges as a postironist because staying true to herself, she remains conscious of Letterman’s tactics. She does not let him make a fool of her or get defensive, but cunningly uses irony to defeat him, at the same time remaining forthright. This is in keeping with the precept of postironists as described by Hoffmann: using the postmodern self-consciousness and turning it into something real. It is Edilyn who wins the confrontation with Letterman, cleverly deploying his own weapon against him at the moment when he least expects it. The scene described above is reminiscent of Wallace’s comments in a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery. When asked about the element of play (associated with postmodernism) and his writing, Wallace replied: “You’ve got to discipline yourself to talk out of the part of you that loves the thing, loves what you’re working on. Maybe that just plain loves. (I think we might need woodwinds for this part, LM.)” (Wallace, 2012, p. 50) So, when there is a danger of sliding into sentimentality or pathos, Wallace undermines this seriousness with irony (the remark about woodwinds). Similarly, Edilyn avoids openly discussing the topic she finds uncomfortable and resorts to irony to relieve the tension. This attitude is typical of post-ironic sensibility.

The tension between the desire to seem honest and our anticipation of the reaction of other people was what haunted Wallace. Adam Kelly notices

that such double-bind scenarios were a common theme in Wallace's fiction. The double-bind situation with regard to sincerity occurs because, as Kelly writes: "[...] sincerity has the same structure as the gift: it can always be taken for manipulation, and this risk is fundamental – it cannot be reduced by appeal to intention, or morality, or context – because true sincerity, if there is ever such a thing, must take place in the aporia between the conditional and the unconditional." (Kelly, 2010, p. 140) *My Appearance* problematizes this conundrum on the intradiegetic and extradiegetic levels of the narrative. Rudy and Ron are the ones who try to be sincere with a "motive" – they want to have the upper hand and ultimately win the battle against Letterman. Edilyn's sincerity, in turn, involves "intent" but as the story develops the tension between "motive" and "intent" begins to weigh heavily on her. The clear-cut situation in which the main character wants to be sincere without an ulterior motive gets muddier and muddier as she is confronted with her advisors' strategy of handling Letterman. This culminates in Edilyn's rejection of using sincerity with a "motive" and undercutting the seriousness with irony.

The question of honesty becomes ambiguous also on another level, namely between Edilyn, the narrator, and the extradiegetic narratee. Edilyn tries (maybe a bit too hard) to define herself in the different ways that were mentioned above and all the definitions are supposed to highlight her sincerity. The problem is that when someone makes a point of asserting that they are honest, it raises doubts whether it is manipulation or the real thing. Obviously, there is no way of knowing because the reader sees reality through the protagonist's eyes only and as all first person narrators, she is not to be trusted. So, even though Edilyn assures others of her honesty, a lingering doubt remains. The story ends with Edilyn's victory over Letterman but at the same time a certain truth about her marriage transpires. As the pair returns home, celebrating their success, Edilyn maintains that she connected with Letterman and had fun during the interview. Rudy, however, is sceptical and does not believe his wife spoke her mind. Edilyn comes to realize that they perceive reality differently. She asks Rudy about his thoughts on their relationship and the story ends with her statement that asking this question was a mistake.

To conclude, *My Appearance* thematizes the problems of irony and its complicated antithesis – honesty. Irony as a mode of expression has the destructive power to hamper communication and erect barriers between people. The way to neutralize its insidious influence is through the post-ironic sensibility, which, however, does not mean the return to a pre-postmodernist aesthetic but the incorporation of certain postmodernist features to establish communication. However, irony cannot be ignored and it will never disappe-

ar simply because language has potential for negation. As Clare Colebrook states, “All speech is haunted by irony.” (Colebrook, 2004, p. 162)

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