



IRONIC ILLUMINATIONS:

*An exploration of Spirituality and Metamodernism in How to be Both and Klara
and the Sun*



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Abstract:

This thesis explores the intertwining of Metamodernism and spirituality in the contemporary British novels *How to be Both* by Ali Smith and *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro. It draws on the theoretical framework of Metamodernism with its emphasis on oscillation, the concept of *both/neither*, and re-mystification. This study examines how the novels engage with spiritual themes and motifs and human experience. Through close textual analysis, the thesis argues that these works challenge traditional binaries in regard to time, gender and the nature technology divide, and offers a more complex and nuanced understanding of the interconnected relationship between the self, society and spirituality.

Keywords: Metamodernism, Contemporary literature, Spirituality, Existential Questions, Neoromanticism, *Klara and the Sun* (2021), *How to be Both* (2014)

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Introduction

Amidst the waning of the Postmodern era, a new and captivating paradigm emerges that integrates spirituality within a nuanced and thought-provoking framework. Various scholars, artists and cultural commentators have grappled with the notion of a shifting cultural landscape marked by a departure from Postmodernism towards something else. They have put forth terms such as remodernism, hypermodernism or altermodernism, alongside the semantically void post-postmodernism to capture the essence of this transformation. In this context, Linda Hutcheon, considered an authority on Postmodernism, posed a challenge to her readers, “post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first century.”¹

In 2010, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker presented their seminal article, “Notes on Metamodernism”, which gained significant attention and acclaim. Their proposal of Metamodernism provides a compelling framework that resonates with the shifting landscape of contemporary culture and is a significant proposal to answer Hutcheon’s call for a new label. The two researchers describe Metamodernism as a “structure of feeling” that oscillates between “a modern outlook of fanaticism and/or naivety and the Postmodern outlook of apathy and/or skepticism.” This, in its turn, creates a new outlook of “informed naivety and pragmatic idealism.”² This shifted sensibility creates the potential for something novel. As Vermeulen and van den Akker state, “the cultural industry has responded in kind, increasingly abandoning tactics such as pastiche and parataxis for strategies like myth and metaxis, melancholy for hope, and exhibitionism for engagement.”³

There is a growing body of literature that affirms the applicability of the concept. In their article, “Introduction: Metamodernism,” Dennis Kersten and Usha Wilbers remark on the different approaches to Metamodernism. There is a distinction to be made between Metamodernism as coined by David James and Urmila Seshagiri and the one as presented by Vermeulen and van den Akker. The latter interpretation will be more in line with the arguments of this thesis. The impact of Vermeulen and van den Akkers work also extends beyond their own field of research. Religious studies scholar Linda Ceriello, for example,

¹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 165-166.

² Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, *Notes on Metamodernism*, 4.

³ Vermeulen and van den Akker, 5.

recognized the potential of Metamodernism as a lens through which to explore the interplay between spirituality and the contemporary cultural landscape. She observed a growing interest and representation of the supernatural in TV-shows for example that she links to shifting sensibilities and the growing acceptance of the Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR) movement.⁴ This recognition and exploration of spirituality in a, specifically western, contemporary milieu will be highly influential in this thesis, as it will explore potential spiritual themes.

The discourse of Metamodernism has also garnered attention and development outside of academic circles, with voices such as Hanzi Freinacht. Freinacht emphasizes the need for a changing sensibility in the political sphere and in his argument addresses the role of ecology, spirituality, and religion in regard to Metamodernism. Lastly, Jason Ananda Josephson Storm argues in the opening of his book *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* that the Postmodernism outlook, by rejecting meaningful generalizations, resulted in the creation of fragmented hyper-specializations and the alienation of different disciplines from another. He also marks Metamodernism as a bridge that could connect them again.⁵ Considering that I will combine elements from both literary studies and religious studies, this thesis about Metamodernism is, apparently, in and of itself an example of a Metamodern sensibility.

This thesis aims to address the research gap regarding the contemporary representation of metamodern spirituality as highlighted by Linda Ceriello. There is a need to understand the diverse perceptions of spirituality and Metamodernism that exist within the realm of contemporary fiction. By delving into this topic, the study of Metamodernism and spirituality has the potential to offer an extra level of understanding to the novels. The primary focus of this thesis is to explore the intertwining of spirituality and Metamodernism in contemporary British fiction. This will be done by conducting a qualitative analysis on the novels *Klara and the Sun* (2021) by Kazuo Ishiguro and *How to be Both* (2014) by Ali Smith. These two novels stood out because of their different approach to spirituality, meaning-making and character representation. The qualitative analysis will involve an examination of the themes and motifs as well as focusing on the portrayal and actions of the characters in both novels. It is important to note that this thesis does not seek to provide an all-inclusive examination of all aspects of Metamodernism or Spirituality. The focus is specifically on their intersection and the representation in the two selected novels. The research question this thesis will therefore

⁴ Linda Ceriello, "Toward a metamodern reading of Spiritual but Not Religious mysticisms," in *Being Spiritual But Not Religious*, 18.

⁵ Jason Ananda Josephson Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*.

address is: How do the themes and motifs in the novels *Klara and the Sun* and *How to be Both* represent the intertwining of spirituality and Metamodernism? This thesis will draw upon the theoretical framework of Metamodernism, which highlights concepts such as neoromanticism, oscillation and Metaxis. It will also identify practices such as performatism and the use of liminal spaces, of which the latter is used as means to highlight the spiritual themes in the novels. Through the textual analysis, the thesis argues that these works challenge the binary thinking of spiritual and material and instead offer a complex and nuanced understanding of the interconnected relationship between the self, society and spirituality.

This thesis aims to contribute to the growing academic discourse on Metamodernism. It builds upon the concept of Metamodernism as articulated by Van den Akker and Vermeulen, while drawing heavily on the scholarly work of Linda Ceriello. The latter positions spirituality as a significant element of Metamodernism. While there are varied interpretations of the relationship between Metamodernism and spirituality, my thesis aligns with the view that Metamodernism represent a reinvention of spirituality, rather than Hanzi Freinachts's argument of "a reconnection with a religious core."⁶ As a relatively new field there is still much to be explored and understood and I aim to contribute to this ongoing endeavour. Because Metamodernism is a "structure of feeling," it reaches beyond academia. Hence, that this thesis will include sources such as blogposts or website materials to offer a more complete understanding and nuanced portrayal of the concepts.

The overall structure of this thesis takes the form of three body chapters. The initial chapter will delve deeper into the theory of Metamodernism and aims to illustrate the position of spirituality within this movement. The second and third chapter will offer a detailed analysis of the novels *Klara and the Sun* and *How to be Both* respectively. The final section will effectively tie together the various threads of the research and provide a cohesive perspective on the topic.

⁶ Hanzi Freinacht, "Metamodern Spirituality, Existence and Aesthetic", <https://metamoderna.org/metamodern-spirituality-existence-and-aesthetics/>.

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework

This chapter will provide a comprehensive understanding of the key concepts and theories that underpin the research. It will draw on a range of scholarly works and theories from cultural studies, literary studies, and religious studies. Because the discourse surrounding Metamodernism transcends academia, non-academic sources such as blogposts and website content will also be included. This chapter will explain the concept of Metamodernism as coined by Vermeulen and van den Akker in contrast to David James and Urmila Seshagiri understanding. Furthermore, it will stipulate the interpretation of Metamodern spirituality through the research on the Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR) movement by Linda Ceriello. It will also take a critical stance on the perception of contemporary spirituality at the hand of a blogpost by political philosopher Hanzi Freinacht. Eventually, it will provide the foundation for the analysis and interpretation of the two contemporary British novels that will be discussed in consequent chapters.

First of all, Metamodernism comes in different shapes, and it is important to clarify which one will be used in this thesis. This will be done with the help of the article “Introduction: Metamodernism” by Dennis Kersten and Usha Wilbers. The article charts and identifies how Modernism manifests itself in contemporary fiction in English. This is done through a literary analysis of scholarly works on the topic. They identify two diverging interpretations of the term Metamodernism. David James and Urmila Seshagiri, in their article “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution”, apply the label “specifically to literary fiction and identify Metamodernism as a body of artistic products which can be pinpointed to a historical period.”⁷ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, on the other hand, “[p]lace this structure of feeling against a cultural landscape of architecture, film and art.”⁸ While the first one is more focused on the legacy of the Modernist period, Vermeulen and van den Akker broaden the concept to encompass a more general change in cultural sensibility.

It is also important to note that the latter argues that Metamodernism is a reaction to the

⁷ Dennis Kersten and Usha Wilbers, “Introduction: Metamodernism,” 719.

⁸ Kersten and Wilbers, 719.

demise of Postmodernism rather than a resurfacing of Modernist elements. This discussion attests to the fact that the field of Metamodernism is still new and that it is still unfolding itself. However, upon comparing these viewpoints, it becomes clear that Vermeulen and Van den Akker's concept of Metamodernism aligns more closely with the argument of my thesis.

Vermeulen and Van den Akker introduced the concept of the "structure of feeling" in their article "Notes on Metamodernism" in 2010. They observed a changing sensibility due to the demise of Postmodernism, and reacted to the call from Linda Hutcheon, with their theory of Metamodernism. It is important to note that they take the charting of Metamodernism rather lightly; it is not used as an idealism. Hence, the label of a "structure of feeling". It is structural in the sense that it is everywhere and a feeling because it has this fleetingness about it.⁹ Instead of advocating the complete destruction of Postmodernism, especially because there is no such thing as "the Postmodernism", Vermeulen and van den Akker argue for "a new *sens*, a new meaning of direction."¹⁰ This direction is fuelled by both Modernism and Postmodernism.

Subsequently, the question arises as to how Metamodernism navigates this new *sens*. Metamodernism's epistemology is derived from Kant's "negative" idealism that can be summarised as "as-if" thinking.¹¹ This translates into the knowing naivety that fuels Metamodernism. Vermeulen and van den Akker state that "Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find."¹² If one would simplify this even further one could state that there is a sense of hope at the core. The ontology of Metamodern is characterised by an oscillation between the Modern and the Postmodern. In their essay, Vermeulen and van den Akker explain it as follows:

It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.¹³

There is always the sensibility at the other end of the spectrum that withholds Metamodernism from fully swinging one way or the other. In that sense, both the epistemology and ontology

⁹ What is Metamodernism, "Talking Metamodernism with Tim Vermeulen," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lus0CjpdWwg>

¹⁰ Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," 4.

¹¹ Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," 5.

¹² Ibid, 5.

¹³ Ibid, 5-6.

of Metamodernism can be conceived of as a “both-neither” dynamic. “They are each at once modern *and* postmodern and neither of them.”¹⁴ This is, in turn, explained with the metaphor of metaxis. Metaxis stems from Greek and literally translates to “between.” It is worth noting that the concept of metaxis has different meanings according to the context it is used in. This thesis will use the explanation of “both-neither” regarding Metamodernism to prevent confusion when analysing the novels. This thesis will use metaxis as the term for the literary device utilizing contrasting elements to challenge readers to consider multiple viewpoints and engage with the nuances of (human) experience. This often involves juxtaposing different ideas, themes, or characters’ viewpoints.

One of the strategies of Metamodernism is performatism. This term was coined by Raoul Eshelman and is explained as, “the willful self-deceit to believe in -or identify with, or solve – something in spite of itself.”¹⁵ It underlines the knowing-naivety that is the zenith of Metamodernism. Although, Eshelman uses the concept to argue in favour of the revival of theism. This is echoed by the political philosopher Hanzi Freinacht in his blogpost “Metamodern Spirituality, Existence and Aesthetics.” He states that “The metamodern path is ... [the] struggle to reconnect to the fundamental religious core of reality.”¹⁶ Although the practice of performatism seems plausible, this thesis will refrain from using the concept. Both Eshelman and Freinacht’s assumptions fail to acknowledge the significance of spirituality in works that are not labelled as religious or essentially related to theism. Instead, this thesis will use the argumentation of a Metamodern spirituality as demonstrated by Linda Ceriello in her article “Toward a Metamodern Reading of Spiritual but Not Religious Mysticism”.

Linda Ceriello puts the spirit into Metamodernism. She contributes to the discourse on Metamodernism by examining the connection between contemporary alternative spiritualities, specifically the Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR) movement, and its expression in contemporary culture while using the theoretical framework of Metamodernism. To maintain focus and conciseness, this thesis will refrain from delving into the extensive historical background, and myriad definitions of spirituality. Instead, this thesis will primarily draw upon the article as a key source to examine the characteristics of Metamodern spirituality and its expression in contemporary culture. Ceriello observes that “millennials have felt something amiss with the always-ironic postmodern disaffection.” She suggests that the

¹⁴ Vermeulen and van den Akker, 6.

¹⁵ Vermeulen and van den Akker, 6.

¹⁶ Hanzi Freinacht, *Metamodern Spirituality, Existence and Aesthetics*, <https://metamoderna.org/metamodern-spirituality-existence-and-aesthetics/>

attitude changed to, “OK, there may be no “there there,” but yet . . . I’m here! That has to count for something . . .!”¹⁷ It echoes the same oscillation and sense of hope that Vermeulen and van den Akker already asserted. She affirms that “mystery and the mystical have re-established themselves as central in the cultural conversation and are, in fact, reframed by the concerns of SBNRs.”¹⁸ This allows for a more prominently featured spirituality in contemporary culture. This thesis argues that this includes contemporary literature. This is highlighted by the spiritual themes and motifs in the two contemporary British novels.

What does this Metamodern spirituality look like then? First of all, there seems to be a “general gravitation toward – even a kind of *sacralizing* of individual felt experience.” Metamodern spirituality celebrates the individual, with all its “weirder and quirkier human qualities, emotions, and experiences,”¹⁹ without condemning the subjectivity of it. This allows for an acceptance and representation of human experience that has the typical *both/and* sentimentality of Metamodernism. A key aspect of Metamodern spirituality is its reliance on the concept of liminality. Ceriello explains the liminal as a, “move across the borders of ordinary and nonordinary realities.”²⁰ The liminal is thus, “active[ly] riding the tensions between the secular and spiritual.”²¹ The term originates from the Foucauldian concept of *heterotopic liminality*. Ceriello quotes Carmel Bendan Davis to explain Heterotopias as “places which are ‘ . . . a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of space in which we live . . . representing something that is *beyond* that society.”²² The liminal refers thus to places that are both secular and spiritual employing the *both/neither* tendency as explained earlier. It also underlines the significance of individual experiences within these spaces.

It is important to acknowledge that the SBNR movement traces its roots back to the New Age movement and has adopted certain qualities from it. These qualities includes a holistic worldview that recognizes the interconnectedness of humans within a larger ecological realm. This implicit connection between Metamodern spirituality and environmental consciousness is particularly evident through the neoromantic movement, which Vermeulen and Van den Akker consider to be a pivotal component of Metamodernism. They describe it as the “re-signification of the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar, and the finite with the

¹⁷ Linda Ceriello, “Toward a metamodern reading of Spiritual but Not Religious mysticisms,” in *Being Spiritual But Not Religious*, 205.

¹⁸ Ceriello, 202.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 204.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 210.

²¹ *Ibid*, 211.

²² *Ibid*, 210.

semblance of infinite.”²³

In conclusion, the theoretical framework presented in this chapter lays the groundwork for the analysis of the two contemporary British novels *How to be Both* (2014) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021). The key concepts and theories discussed include Metamodernism as defined by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker as a “structure of feeling” that encompasses a broader cultural shift of sensibility, the notion of metaxis as a literary device and the use of Romantic tendencies. The chapter also explores Metamodern spirituality, drawing from Linda Ceriello’s research on the Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR) movement. The characteristics of Metamodern spirituality, such as the celebration of individual experience, the return of the mystical, and the engagement with liminality, are highlighted. Additionally, Metamodern spirituality engages with the environment through a holistic worldview, and neoromanticism. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for the subsequent analysis of the selected novels, providing a lens through which to examine their themes, motives and narrative techniques in relation to Metamodernism and spirituality.

²³ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, Notes on Metamodernism, 12.

Chapter 2: Divine Brushstrokes: *How to be Both*

The novel *How to be both* (2014) by Scottish writer Ali Smith intricately weaves together two storylines, presenting a narrative that invites readers to engage with the Metamodern element of *both/neither* through the concept of “bothness.” It furthermore re-mystifies the power of art and human experience. The novel engages with themes of grief and loss yet concludes with a hopeful tone. George, a witty 16-year-old girl, is the focal point of one of the storylines. Her story unfolds against the backdrop of her grieving process for her mother in the twenty-first century. The other narrative perspective introduces the enigmatic spirit of Francesco del Cossa, a 15th-century painter who lives her life cross-dressed as male. The order in which these two storylines unfold varies depending on the edition of the book. This thesis centres on the edition where George’s storyline precedes Francesco’s. Through a careful examination of *How to be both* this thesis analysis endeavours to unravel the interplay of spirituality and narrative elements in the novel.

In the novel, Smith skilfully juxtaposes different themes and characters to explore existential questions through the concept of “bothness”. As implied by the title, *How to be Both*, the notion of “bothness” lies at the heart of the novel. It encompasses the exploration of being simultaneously male and female, secular and spiritual, and existing in both the present and the past. By deliberate juxtaposition of these contrasting elements, Smith creates a sphere of possibility that suggests that one can embody multiple identities concurrently. One pivotal scene that exemplifies this exploration is presented in the early pages of George’s story. George’s Mother, Carol, presents George with a moral conundrum regarding the wages of a painter. George, who is an inquisitive but also sardonically witty character, proceeds to ask for more details, “Past or present? George says. Male or female? It can’t be both. It must be one or the other.” Her mother counters her questions with, “Who says? Why must it?”²⁴ These questions must be what Smith asked herself when writing this novel. Throughout the story she continues to challenge the notion that such binary distinctions are necessary. This scene is particularly noteworthy for her practice of blurring the boundaries between past and present. While the conversation is written in the present tense, it is a flashback or memory. The conversation happened during their trip to Italy to see Francesco del Cossa’s Fresco’s. In the present of the storyline, George’s mother has passed away and George is in the middle of

²⁴ Ali Smith, *How to be both* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 53.

coping with the immense loss.

The second part of the question pertains to gender. While George is referred to by this name throughout the novel, it is later revealed that her full name is Georgia, signifying her female identity. The book is deliberately vague about George's own opinion or how it affects her. The other storyline by Francesco further expands on the exploration of gender norms. Francesco is initially perceived as a male painter due to the name. Her own narrative, however, unveils her true identity as a woman who cross-dresses to pursue her passion for painting. Francesco also grapples with the loss of her mother. Her father then presents her with a choice, wear boy clothes and become the apprentice of her father and eventually become a painter, or spend her days "filling the pages of holy saint books"²⁵ in a nunnery. Unlike with George, the reader knows of the active decision by Francesco to slip into the male role to fulfil her dream of being a painter. Through both characters, Smith prompts readers to ask the counter questions of the mother themselves. By employing the technique of metaxis, or the juxtaposition of characters and themes, the author creates a literary space where "bothness" is not only present but vital to the story. This concept aligns with the Metamodern understanding of the *both/neither* dynamic, as described in the first chapter of this thesis.

Furthermore, the novel intertwines art with spirituality, enabling the characters to forge meaningful connections and navigate their journey of meaning-making. Smith weaves art seamlessly throughout her novel, demonstrating its profound impact on the lives of the characters. In fact, she goes beyond incorporating art thematically and, arguably, even structures her novel as a visual masterpiece. As the artist Sheila Gallagher asserts, "Experiencing visual art follows no storyline: there is no beginning, middle and end, but rather a cross-section of simultaneity."²⁶ This description aptly fits *How to be Both*, with its shifting timeline and emphasis on "bothness."

Also, the vivid imagery of art serves as a source of solace and connection for the characters. Both Francesco and George have lost their mother at a young age. However, their response to loss and grief differs significantly. George is a dynamic character in the novel whose attitude towards art evolves throughout the story. Initially, she is not very fond of art. Her scepticism is evident in the encounter with the frescos in Italy on the trip with her mother. She asks her mother, "Whats the *point*, What's the *point* of it?"²⁷ She asks the questions as part of a self-invented game called 'what's-the-point-of-art game'. She knows it is a game,

²⁵ Smith, *How to be both*, 217.

²⁶ Sheila Gallagher, "An artist's notes on the art and the articulation of the mystical moment," 151.

²⁷ Smith, *How to be both*, 46.

however, there is some truth-seeking in her questions. She employs a form of ironesty here, an ironic sincerity. Greg Dember coined this neologism in his description of Metamodern methods stating that, “Ironesty is irony/sarcasm/sardonicness/snark employed in the service of making an earnest point, or expressing a heart-felt emotion.”²⁸ George wonders why they went all the way to Italy to see the Fresco’s, although she knows that they are important to her mother. The questions themselves echo a Postmodern perspective towards art. Helen Appleton and Louise Nelstrop, in the book *Art and Mysticism* (2018), state the following,

The idea that mysticism and art are complementary, let alone bedfellows, might have been treated with scepticism or even hostility less than fifty years ago. In art circles the emphasis was on ‘art for arts sake’; the idea of art as a stepping stone to something else was frequently flatly rejected.²⁹

Appleton and Nelstrop argue for the re-mystification of art in their book. The belief that art has only a material manifestation is, in their eyes, not adequate to explain the possible spiritual experience of art. The novel follows their line of thinking with the unfolding of the narrative, particularly through the changing attitude of George toward art as she copes with the loss of her mother.

George discovers that one of Francesco del Cossa’s paintings is exhibited in the London Gallery, which serves both as a turning point in her perspective towards art as well as establishes the connection with the story of Francesco. The artwork in question is Francesco’s painting of Saint Vincent de Ferrer. While delving into its details would be extensive, it is worth noting that the painting portrays Saint Vincent dressed in the attire of a monk as main figure. Positioned above him, in the upper section of the artwork, is the depiction of Jesus surrounded by a celestial entourage of angels. George goes to see the painting several times. It is not the material or symbolic aspect of the painting that compels her to seek it out. It is certainly not the religious connotations she finds solace in as she initially dismisses it, “another religious picture (first reason not to look).”³⁰ What captivates her is not the meaning derived from the physical attributes or the objects within the painting. Instead, it is her own experience and connection with what the painting represents to her. It is the profound connection she feels to her mother when she gazes upon the painting. Art becomes a vessel of connection through which she can establish a tangible link to her mother.

²⁸ Greg Dember, *After postmodernism: Eleven Metamodern Methods in the Arts*.

²⁹ Helen Appleton and Louise Nelstrop, *Art and Mysticism*, 1.

³⁰ Smith, *How to be both*, 154.

As time passes, she also begins to develop a genuine appreciation for the artwork and gains insight into her mother's affinity for paintings and art as a whole. Through this exploration of Francesco's artwork, George discovers herself that art carries layers of significance beyond its physical existence. In this way, art serves as a transformative force for George, allowing her to engage in a profound exploration of her own identity, emotions and the power of art itself. Smith therefore debunked the notion that art is there just for art's sake.

The character of Francesco, being an artist herself, has a different view on art and the immaterial yet powerful force of it. Her understanding of paintings goes beyond their physicality. At one point in her narrative perspective, she observes George sitting in her room with all the pictures of her mother in front of her. Francesco starts to realise that those are meaningful pictures and that they are likely of someone that died. She understands this feeling of loss as she states, "cause pictures can be both life and death at once and cross the borders between the two."³¹ This statement exemplifies the essence of art in the novel, whether in the form of a picture or a painting, as profound connection that transcends the boundaries of materiality and time. Furthermore, it serves as a powerful testament to the connection between Francesco and George. Despite living more than 500 years apart, they both carry the weight of losing their mother, a profound and timeless loss that unites them on a deeper level and that they carry each in their own way.

As a final argument, it is important to highlight Francesco's hopeful albeit critical perspective on "purgatorium" or twenty-first century London, which contributes to the novel's exploration of spirituality. Although the theme of loss and grief is prominent in the storyline of both characters, the overall tone of the novel is not grave or bleak but rather carries a sense of hopefulness. This hopeful tone is evident in George's storyline through her way of finding meaning in art and the connection to her friend Helen. However, it is the character of Francesco which exemplifies this sense of hope even more profoundly. Francesco's point of view is that of a ghost or spirit. She has come back from the afterlife and finds herself abruptly transported into twenty-first century London. Confused and disoriented, she initially assumes that she has landed in purgatorium, the first ring of hell. She follows George around led by some invisible thread between them and, as time passes, begins to question her assumption and reevaluates her purpose in this unfamiliar realm.

³¹ Smith, *How to be both*, 344.

Cause I know this is not hell cause I am intrigued not hopeless and cause I am surely put here for some good use albeit mysterious : in hell there is no mystery cause in mystery there is always hope.³²

Even in her afterlife, Francesco finds meaning and a sense of hope. Rather than succumbing to hopelessness, she embraces the unknown and recognizes the potential for discovery and growth. This realisation fuels her determination to navigate her afterlife and unravel the mysteries that surround her.

Although hopeful, Francesco's storyline also serves as a platform for critiquing the relationship between humans and their neglect of the surrounding world. As an artist from the fifteenth century, Francesco possesses a keen eye for observation and seeing the essence of things:

It is a feeling thing, to be a painter of things : cause every thing, even an imagined or gone thing or creature or person has essence : paint a rose or a coin or a duck or a brick and you'll feel it as sure as if a coin had a mouth and told you what it was like to be a coin[. . .]

In her observances of the contemporary world, she is perplexed by how little attention people seem to pay to their surroundings. She remarks people's devotion to, what she calls, "holy votive tablet,"³³ referring to the iPad George is taking pictures with. This reliance on mobile devices appears completely illogical to her, as she remarks, "this place is full of people who have eyes and choose to see nothing."³⁴ Francesco's voice invites readers to reconsider their own interactions with the environment. She proceeds to redirect attention to nature "look, boy : cheerful thing : spring flowers in a sort of bucket hanging off the top of a metal pole stuck at the side of this roadway."³⁵ She shows that one can find nature even in the middle of a city like London, if one would just pay attention to the surroundings. In essence, Francesco's ethereal presence allows for a nuanced exploration of human behavior, both in the sense of hopefulness as a possibility for offering critique.

In conclusion, it can be said that spirituality is a prominent feature in *How to be Both*. The novel explores the concept of "bothness", which is a distinguished characteristic of the Metamodern sentimentality. The novel's exploration of art as a transformative force

³² *ibid*, 227.

³³ Smith, *How to be both*, 229.

³⁴ *ibid*, 229.

³⁵ *ibid*, 230.

underscores the impact it can have on individuals to navigate their own journeys and find solace in the face of loss. Smith uses this opportunity to re-mystify the experience of art and actively debunks Postmodernist notions of art as solely material objects. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of George's contemporary narrative and Francesco's ethereal perspective allows for an extensive engagement with several aspects of human experience. This can be seen through the employment of themes such as grief and loss and nonetheless keeping hopeful. Francesco's ghostly viewpoint confirms not only the re-integration of mystical elements into various contemporary discourses but also embodies a neo-Romanticist notion of reconnecting with nature. Therefore, the Metamodern and spiritual elements in the novel shape the narrative and engage readers with thought-provoking themes.

Chapter 3: Solar Epiphanies: *Klara and the Sun*

The final chapter will discuss the novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021) by Nobel Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro. The novel explores the existential question of what it means to be human through the depiction of a spiritual robot. Set in a world resembling the present but with advanced technology. The protagonist Klara is an anthropomorphic AI known as Artificial friend (AF) whose purpose is to alleviate the loneliness of a child. Klara's spiritual beliefs in the sun provide a thought-provoking lens through which to examine the broader theme of spirituality within the novel. This chronological narrative encompasses Klara's experience and observations in the store, her life as an AF, and until her impending end. It ultimately raises the question, if a robot can be so intensely bothered about nature, why can't we?

The dual role of Klara, both as the Other and the first-person narrator in the novel, embodies a Romantic approach to making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Divided into distinct chapters, the narrative is vocalised solely by Klara. She showcases surprising emotional depth and profound understanding of human behaviour and emotions for a machine. In the first part of the story, Klara remains in the store alongside the other AF waiting to be bought. She is watching the happenings beyond the store when she witnesses a reunion, she observes that, "they seem so happy," I said. "But it's strange because they also seem upset."³⁶ This exemplifies her extraordinary skills of observing and processing human emotions.

Through her childlike narration, she also creates a perceptible distance that allows readers to observe human behaviour with a sense of innocence and novelty. Her childlike observations and lovable actions to Josie, whose AF she becomes in the second part, also evoke strong sympathy for her. In that sense, she is making the strange more familiar. On the other hand, she maintains her robotic Otherness which is highlighted through the way she communicates. Her manner of speaking is characterized by a formal tone and a slight stiffness. For instance, rather than saying, "It is nice to meet you" she opts for phrases like, "It's very nice to meet Rick."³⁷ The deliberate use of such proper nouns accentuates the sense of distance and otherness to the humans around her.

One minor character in the novel makes her otherness very clear, "one never knows

³⁶ Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, 20.

³⁷ Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, 83.

how to greet a guest like you...after all, are you a guest at all? Or do I treat you like a vacuum cleaner?"³⁸ The significance of this quote lies in the objectification of Klara, likening her to a vacuum cleaner while the reader possesses knowledge of Klara's near-human capacity to sense and experience emotions. This contrast between the objectified perception of Klara and her actual emotional capabilities blurs the boundary between the familiar and the strange. These observations are in line with the argumentation by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker that a Conceptual Romanticism tries, "to present the ordinary with mystery and the familiar with the seamliness of the unfamiliar."³⁹ The duality of Klara's perspective, invites readers to view her as both familiar and unfamiliar simultaneously.

Another, unexpected, distinction between Klara and humans is her unwavering spirituality. Spirituality, in the novel, is probably most thoroughly observed in Klara's religious-like devotion to the sun. It is worth noting that Klara's bottomless devotion to the sun is not arbitrary; rather, it is rooted in her being a solar-powered entity. She, along with the other AF's in the store, gets her nourishment, as she calls it, from the sun. Its absence also shows to have a profound impact on, not only on her physical, but also mental capacity:

Even so, an AF would feel himself growing lethargic after a few hours away from the Sun, and start to worry there was something wrong with him – that he had some fault unique to him and that if it became known, he'd never find a home.⁴⁰

Klara, as an AF, relies on the power of nature to keep her technological systems running. In that sense, Klara is a bit of both, both technology and dependant on the environment nonetheless. However, the quote could also signify a deeper allusion. In the light of the quote, nourishment could be understood as being more than the sustenance that keeps Klara up and running, it could also denote a nourishment of the soul, so to say. However, the aforementioned quote could also hold a deeper allusion. It signifies that beyond the literal sustenance that keeps Klara operational, the nourishment could also be understood in the metaphorical sense of nourishment of the soul. The sun's presence not only provides energy but also represents a source of spiritual nourishment that is necessary to function properly. Even more so, Klara starts to perceive the sun as more than a mere power source and rather vocalises it as a deity figure. The novel makes some thematic and stylistic choices that underlines this idea. She witnesses what she perceives as a miraculous resurrection brought

³⁸ Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, 191.

³⁹ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism", 7.

⁴⁰ Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, 5.

about by the sun's powers: "I looked over to the spot where Beggar Man and the dog had died. I saw they weren't dead at all – that a special kind of nourishment from the Sun had saved them."⁴¹ This exemplifies Klara's personification of the Sun as an active agent. Furthermore, this poignant moment triggers Klara's profound belief in the healing powers of the sun. Motivated by her dedication to fulfilling her purpose as a reliable AF, Klara embarks on a quest to beseech the sun for the bestowal of its special nourishment to Josie, who is afflicted by an unknown illness. Her journey leads her to a barn which is her interpretation of the resting place of the sun.

The barn symbolises a liminal space in the novel where both secular and spiritual elements come together. Through the perspective of Klara and her strong engagement with spirituality, ordinary things become warped. This is definitely the case in respect to the setting of the barn. The human characters denote no special interest in the barn or belief in its extraordinary qualities. Klara, however, perceives the barn as the resting place of the sun because of its distinct contours during sunsets. In her perspective the barn has mystical qualities. The narrative suggests that this is the truth for Klara as she also gets visions of Rosa, an AF friend of hers from the store: "[t]he barn filled even more intensely with orange light, and I saw again Rosa, on the hard ground wearing an expression of pain, reaching forward to touch her outstretched leg."⁴² While the barn as setting itself is purely secular, Klara's spirituality and her experience transform it into a sacred place which in effect categorises it as an example of a liminal space. As outlined in chapter one, Linda Ceriello advocated the use of liminal spaces as an integral part of Metamodern spiritual depictions.

The image of the Sun as deity also symbolises faith and the importance of nature in the novel. As explained earlier, Klara's relation to the sun is an almost religiously devoted one. The faith she has in the power of the sun to heal Josie is one of the main things that drive her. The sun, therefore, also symbolises the possibility in believing in something grander than oneself. When observing the other characters, there seems to be not one who is even close to the spiritual tendencies that Klara portrays in the novel. Most of the characters rely heavily on science and technology and seem to have adopted the belief that therein lies the answer. The scientist Mr Capaldi, for example, states that "There's nothing there. Nothing inside Josie that's beyond the Klara's of this world to continue."⁴³ He believes that he can capture the

⁴¹ Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, 38.

⁴² Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, 165.

⁴³ Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, 210.

essence of Josie and use Klara as a vessel to proliferate Josie in that way, in the case that her illness becomes fatal. Josie's father, a bit more nuanced, shares this view as he states:

Science has now proved beyond doubt there's nothing so unique about my daughter, nothing there our modern tools can't excavate, copy, transfer. That people have been living with one another all this time, centuries, loving and hating each other, and all on a mistaken premise.⁴⁴

This "mistaken premise" alludes to faith in something that is not tangible or scientifically provable and might even allude to faith, as in religious faith. It also critiques the consequences of such faith as a possible ground for people to hate each other. This creates a juxtaposition of faith as Klara's faith in the sun as healing power and the critique on faith as something that could cause hate among people. This dualing position towards faith echoes the oscillation nature of Metamodern spirituality as the descendent from the New Age perspective as Linda Ceriello states: "Epistemically, this presents a kind of clash among traditional (or premodern), modern, and Postmodern epistemes. The simultaneous borrowing from and critiquing of religious ideas reflect both a suspicious stance toward them and a disinclination to discard them."⁴⁵ The use of the dual position of spirituality in the novel, then, is best understood with the pretence of *Both/neither*.

Besides the symbolism for faith, the symbolism of the sun also addresses the environmentalism consciousness in the novel. Humans have become out of touch with the natural world in the novel. Klara seems to be the only character who worries about the consequences of pollution. This is closely related to her spirituality revolving around the sun. The sun can thus be understood as symbolising the natural world. It's the obstruction of the sun, through pollution that frightens Klara. Humans in the novel seem less concerned with the environmental consequences of pollution, "Once, a customer began talking about Pollution, and pointing to the overhaul men outside, said how dangerous Pollution was for everyone."⁴⁶ The emphasis here lies on once, denoting a sense that the rest of the humans hazard the consequences pollution causes to advance progress. The Cootings machine is the antagonist of the image of the Sun. If the Sun is the image for the natural world the Cootings machine denotes environmental pollution. The novel does not specify exactly what the Cootings machine is, however we do know that it causes pollution through its emissions. This is

⁴⁴ Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, 224.

⁴⁵ Linda Ceriello, "A metamodern reading of SBNR mysticisms", 203.

⁴⁶ Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, 27.

evident when it makes its first appearance in the novel outside of the store. Klara observes that, “The Sun, I knew, was trying his utmost and towards the end of the second bad afternoon, even though the smoke was worse than ever, his patterns appeared again, though only faint.” The obstruction of the nourishment of the sun, whether in its literal or metaphorical sense, frightens Klara and she eventually chooses to take action. Klara goes on the quest to destroy the Cootings machine which in her eyes will please the sun in a manner that he will pour his “special nourishment” to heal Josie. This act of environmental activism underscores the novel’s engagement with environmental concerns, highlighting the importance of individual actions and the potential for positive change. The sun’s significance as both a spiritual and ecological force invites readers to reflect on the delicate balance between human progress and environmental preservation. It also prompts a deeper consideration of the relationship between humans and the natural world. By employing the imagery of the sun, Ishiguro effectively weaves together the themes of spirituality and environmentalism.

At the heart of the novel lies the profound existential question of what it truly means to be human, and spirituality plays a significant role in this exploration. The novel examines this question through various lenses, including the juxtaposition of Klara and humans and of science and faith. While the novel does not provide a direct answer, it highlights two essential human qualities: love and hope. Hope is directly addressed in the Fathers’ assistance of Klara dismantling the Cootings machine. Despite his lack of understanding regarding the purpose of the destruction, he selflessly lends his support, driven by the hope that it will affect his daughter’s health positively. “‘Hope,’ he said. ‘Damn thing never leaves you alone.’”⁴⁷ This quote not only exemplifies the intrinsic nature of hope in human beings but also aligns with the Metamodern “as-if” mentality discussed in chapter one.

Furthermore, while the novel remains unclear about whether Klara is capable of love, she does exhibit an understanding of the concept. She suggests that what truly defines human beings is the capacity for love, but most importantly the connections forged with loved ones. This is exemplified in the following quote as Klara reflects on her impending fate on the dump:

There would have remained something beyond my reach. The Mother, Rick, Melania Housekeeper, the Father. I’d never have reached what they felt for Josie in their hearts

⁴⁷ Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, 222.

[...] there *was* something very special, but it wasn't inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her.⁴⁸

This highlights the profound meaning that lies within the connection of others. Through its examination of love and hope, the novel delves into the fundamental aspects of spirituality in the exploration of what it truly means to be human.

In conclusion, the novel explores the duality of Klara's role as both the first-person narrator and the Other, evoking a Romantic sensibility of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange through which the character can be seen as depiction of Metamodern simultaneity. Klara's childlike observations and lovable actions evoke sympathy, while her robotic manner of speaking and objectification emphasize her otherness. The central depiction of spirituality in the novel lies in Klara's unwavering devotion to the sun. The nourishment of which can be both perceived as physical and spiritual. Through her personal experience she transforms an ordinary barn into a liminal space of worship. The sun's presence highlights the importance of faith and nature in the story. It also evokes a possibility of believing in something grander than oneself. The novel also touches on environmental consciousness, with Klara's concern for pollution and her activism against the Cootings machine. Moreover, the novel explores the profound existential question of what it means to be human, highlighting the essential qualities of love and hope in the human experience. Therefore, the novel employs Metamodern strategies to effectively convey the underlying meaning and creates a space for a nuanced exploration of spirituality.

⁴⁸ Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, 306.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this thesis was to answer the question on how spirituality and Metamodernism intertwine in the context of *Klara and the Sun* (2021) and *How to be Both* (2014), by looking at the themes and motifs that denote spirituality and employ Metamodernism in the novels. It therefore tried to explore a research gap regarding the contemporary representation of Metamodern spirituality as highlighted by Linda Ceriello. In order to answer the research question, the two contemporary British novels were analysed and connected to Metamodernism and Metamodern spirituality.

The analysis of *How to be Both* has shown that particularly the Metamodern notion of *both/and* is grandly explored in the novel through its emphasis on “bothness” portrayed through the motifs of gender and time. The novel also challenges Postmodernist notions of art and rather imbues it with a spiritual notion. It focuses on themes of grief, loss but most importantly hope. The juxtaposition of the narratives highlights the exploration of the human experience, reintegrating mystical elements throughout. *Klara and the Sun* also features the exploration of the *both/and* concept but rather through a more Romantic lens of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Ishiguro actively implies spirituality to the portrayal of faith and hope but most importantly the protagonist Klara’s devotion to the sun as deity. The novels are employing each end of a spectrum in regards to their style and narration. The protagonists are a robot, a 16-year old and a ghost. And while one narration follows a chronological order the other makes extensive use of prolepsis and interweaving storylines. However, this adds to the evidence that spirituality and Metamodernism are both not dependent on strict characteristics. Furthermore, both novels depict a sense of environmentalism in their highlighting of the importance of engaging with the natural world and eventually lead readers to contemplate a more holistic worldview beyond the Anthropocene.

It can be said that the observed spiritual themes found in both novels are not merely incidence. It is more likely that they indeed denote a shift of sensibility that can be attributed to Metamodernism. Without the shifting sensibility of Metamodernism that emphasises a knowing naivety and employs the *both/neither* concept, the characters would have not been able to portray their personal spirituality thoroughly. In effect, this would have depleted the novels of the possibility to ask fundamental questions like what it means to be human with the

playfull seriousness that is deployed in the novels. They both engage readers to think about fundamental questions themselves without regarding it as a meaningless exercise highlighting once more the emphasis on individual experience in meaning making. Therefore, spirituality depends on the Metamodern “structure of feelings” that underlies the novels, as well as the strategies employed within the framework to reach its full potential. All in all, it can be concluded that the novels *How to be Both* by Ali Smith and *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro provide evidence for the presence of Metamodernism as well as the intertwining of it with spirituality. The novels therefore categorise as possible subjects in the search for more evidence of Metamodern spirituality in contemporary discourse.

Though this research has shown that Metamodernism is a relevant theory applicable to literature, the question remains on whether it will remain this way or evolve eventually into something different. This inevitably also relates to the depiction of spirituality through a Metamodern lens. The emphasis on the individual in meaning-making further complicates the matter of academic research. Metamodernism is still a relatively new field of research it is thus too early to state concluding facts about the future. In future research, It would be of best interest to collect more examples of Metamodern spirituality in novels to get a more comprehensive understanding of its expression in fiction.

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