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**RECLAIMING AUTHENTICITY AND SINCERITY
IN THE DIGITAL AGE:
PATRICIA LOCKWOOD'S *NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS* (2021)
AND JENNIFER EGAN'S *THE CANDY HOUSE* (2022)**

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ÖZET

Cemre Aydoğan. Dijital Çağda Özgünlük ve Samimiyetin Yeniden Kazanılması: Patricia Lockwood'un *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) ve Jennifer Egan'ın *The Candy House* (2022) Romanları Üzerine Bir İnceleme, Başkent Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Yüksek Lisans Programı, 2025.

Dijital çağda özgünlük ve içtenlik, teknolojinin bireylerin bağ kurma, iletişim ve kendilerini algılama biçimlerini yeniden şekillendirmesiyle giderek ulaşılması zor kavramlar haline gelmiştir. Sosyal medya, hiper-bağlantılılık ve anı paylaşımı teknolojileri, insan ilişkilerine yeni karmaşıklıklar ekleyerek, gerçek ile yapay arasındaki sınırları bulanıklaştırmaktadır. Bu tez, bu sorunların çağdaş edebiyatta nasıl yansıtıldığını, Patricia Lockwood'un *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) ve Jennifer Egan'ın *The Candy House* (2022) eserleri üzerinden incelemektedir. Her iki roman da teknolojinin insan kimliği ve ilişkileri üzerindeki etkisini sorgularken, özgün bağların zayıflamasını eleştirir ve postmodernizm ile post-postmodernizm çerçevelerinde bir yolculuk sunar. Romanlar, çağdaş hayatın parçalanmış doğasını yansıtmak için postmodern teknikler kullanırken, aynı zamanda yeniden inşa ve bağlanma temalarını merkeze alarak post-postmodernizme doğru bir geçiş yapmaktadır. *No One Is Talking About This*, teknolojiden uzaklaşma yoluyla özgünlüğün yeniden kazanılabileceğini vurgulayan daha iyimser bir duruş sergilerken, *The Candy House*, teknolojiyle daha karmaşık bir ilişkiyi ele alarak, teknolojinin tehlikelerini ve kendini keşfetme ile bağ kurma potansiyelini bir arada kabul etmektedir. Araştırma, bu romanların teknolojinin özgünlük ve içtenlik üzerindeki ciddi etkilerini gözler önüne sererken, aynı zamanda bu değerlerin yeniden kazanılmasına yönelik yollar sunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Hiper-bağlantılılığın genellikle tecrit, yapmacıklık ve yüzeysel ilişkilere yol açtığı bir dünyada, edebiyat, insan olmanın ne anlama geldiğini incelemek için hayati bir araç olarak kalmaya devam etmektedir. Teknoloji gelişmeye devam ederken, bu anlatılar özgünlük ve içtenliğin anlamlı insan deneyimlerini korumadaki kalıcı önemini hatırlatmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Özgünlük, İçtenlik, Hiper-bağlantılılık, Patricia Lockwood, Jennifer Egan

ABSTRACT

Cemre Aydoğan. Reclaiming Authenticity and Sincerity in the Digital Age: Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) and Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022), Başkent University, Institute of Social Sciences. Master's of American Culture and Literature with Thesis, 2025.

In the digital age, starting with the millennium, authenticity and sincerity have become increasingly elusive concepts as technology reshapes the way individuals connect, communicate, and perceive themselves. The social media, hyperconnectivity, and memory-sharing technologies have introduced new complexities into human relationships, often blurring the boundaries between the real and the artificial. This thesis examines how these issues are reflected in contemporary literature, specifically through Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) and Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022). Both novels explore the impact of technology on human identity and relationships, criticizing the erosion of genuine connection while navigating the frameworks of postmodernism and post-postmodernism. While both novels employ postmodern techniques to reflect the fractured nature of contemporary life, they also transition toward post-postmodern themes of reconstruction and reconnection. *No One Is Talking About This* adopts a more optimistic stance, emphasizing the possibility of reclaiming authenticity and sincerity through disengagement from technology. On the other hand, *The Candy House* portrays a more complex relationship with technology, acknowledging both its dangers and its potential for fostering self-discovery and connection. The research concludes that these novels illustrate the severe impact of technology on authenticity and sincerity, while also offering pathways for their recovery. In a world where hyperconnectivity often leads to isolation, pretense, and superficial relationships, literature remains a critical tool for examining what it means to be human. As technology continues to evolve, these narratives emphasize the enduring importance of authenticity and sincerity in preserving meaningful human experiences.

Keywords: Authenticity, Sincerity, Hyperconnectivity, Patricia Lockwood, Jennifer Egan

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Aim of the study

This thesis aims to analyze Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) and Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022) with a focus on the impact of recent technological developments in the digital field on the nature of interpersonal relationships. Both novels have been very recently published, and thus, have a greater tendency to engage with contemporary societal issues. Technology is used as a tool to show changing human interactions in a world that is becoming more and more digital especially starting with the new millennium, resulting in a complex interplay between the virtual and the real (Hagood, 2000, p.311). This study will explore how human relationships are influenced by technology, with a particular focus on how themes such as authenticity, sincerity, and intimacy are shaped in this context. It will also analyze the role of communication, the structure of the digital networked novel, and the concept of hyperconnectivity in understanding these dynamics. All these issues will be scrutinized under the framework of post-postmodernism. The aimed result is that, contrary to the idea that technology connects people through its speed and hyperconnected state, it actually tears people apart from each other, and the line between the real and the digital becomes increasingly blurred, leading people to a sense of disconnection from one's self and others in their relationships. In order to pursue such a study, this thesis aims to employ the post-postmodernist theories of Wolfgang Iser, Paul de Man, and Jacques Derrida, and the conceptual framework of Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*.

Patricia Lockwood is one of the important writers of contemporary literature. Lockwood was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on April 27, 1982. In 2012, she received public attention with her poem "Rape Joke" which went viral and stirred discussions about traumas and the adoption of humor for dealing with them (Whiteman, 2018, p.497). She has published poem collections entitled *Balloon Pop Outlaw Black* (2012) and *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals* (2014). Her poems explore the themes of family, sexuality, religion, and contemporary culture. Besides her poems, Lockwood also published a memoir entitled *Priestdaddy* (2017) in which she describes her experiences as the Catholic priest's daughter growing up in an extremely religious family. Lockwood's recent novel *No One Is Talking About This* was published in 2021. The novel was a finalist for the Booker Prize in

2021 and the Women's Prize for Fiction, in addition to winning the 2022 Dylan Thomas Prize. It was listed on books of the year lists of 2021, including those for the *Washington Post*, *TIME*, *NPR*, *The Telegraph*, *The Times*, and *The Guardian*. Lastly, *The New York Times* called it one of the 10 Best Books of 2021 (The New York Times, 2021).

Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* can also be classified as a memoir because some of the events in the novel are derived from the author's own experiences. It begins with an unnamed female protagonist and focuses on her transformative journey from being a portal's influential figure, exclusively involved in online social media, news, and blogs, to becoming a public speaker and guide addressing contemporary global issues. The platform referred to as the portal is a social media product, similar to the contemporary social media platform Twitter. It serves as a space where individuals from diverse backgrounds share their thoughts on various subjects, with some gaining popularity while others face criticism. The novel's protagonist has significant popularity on this platform. First half of the novel depicts her struggle with a developing sense of physical and mental alienation as a result of her overwhelming presence on the portal, finding solace in the temporary moments of reputation caused by popular postings. Her digital existence, however, takes a back seat in the second half when she receives a text message from her mother urgently inviting her to Ohio to help her sister who is going through a difficult pregnancy. Despite her initial withdrawal from the portal, the protagonist's focus shifts totally to her family, particularly to her newborn niece, who is diagnosed with a dangerous disease. The novel focuses on the difficulties of Ohio's conservative abortion laws, as well as the baby's eventual survival against all odds. The baby's life is ended at six months, leading the protagonist to reconsider her choices. Dissatisfied with her former portal-centric existence, she struggles with the newly-discovered worth of a meaningful offline living. She is invited to give a seminar about the portal at the British Museum, but she struggles to give an accurate speech because she has lost interest in the subject. This disillusionment continues until a bar encounter in which her phone is stolen, and she chooses not to intervene despite witnessing the theft, believing that the photographs of the baby on her phone will inspire love and optimism in whoever comes across them.

The story masterfully connects the protagonist's digital and physical experiences, while exploring issues such as identity, family, and the significant impact of real-life challenges in the virtual domain. With this novel, which is based on her own life experiences, Lockwood aims to draw attention to the fact that people get lost in the online reality they

have created for themselves and forget what is real as she mentions by saying, “Certain people were born with the Internet inside them and suffered greatly from it” (Lockwood, 2021, p.45). *No One Is Talking About This* aligns with Lockwood’s claim in this regard. The novel presents its narrative not only through its content but also in conjunction with its structure. In this era dominated by hyperconnectivity and the themes and tropes that post-postmodernism emphasizes, Lockwood seems to recognize that people now live at a rapid pace and have the patience for only brief texts. This understanding is reflected in her decision to compose the entire novel in the form of tweets. Another reason for this choice may be to hold a mirror to the society and the audience reading the novel because it is almost impossible not to feel a sense of surfing through a portal while reading the novel. Lockwood aims to draw attention to how people might appear to socialize and make friends through online games or activities, but she emphasizes the uncertainty surrounding the authenticity of these connections. In an interview she participated in, Lockwood also states that her novel generally touches on these topics, emphasizing that many individuals engage in these artificial interactions not with the primary goal of establishing genuine relationships, but rather to showcase them as stories on the social media or other online platforms (Sisley, 2021, para.9-10). The fundamental inference is that relationships labeled as “real” might, in reality, be more about displaying a sense of prestige or garnering likes and attention in the digital realm than about fostering authentic connections.

Jennifer Egan, like Patricia Lockwood, is a contemporary author who works on the themes and tropes of the 21st century and addresses similar topics to those explored by Lockwood. Jennifer Egan, born in 1962 in Chicago, is an American novelist and short-story writer. She earned an English degree from Brown University in 1984. After graduating from college, she worked as a copy editor and fact-checker for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, respectively. In the early 1990s, she started publishing her short stories in literary journals. *Look at Me*, her first collection of short stories, was published in 1997. *The Invisible Circus*, which was her first novel, was released in 1999. Her previous novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the 2011 National Book Critics Circle Award. Egan frequently uses contemporary storytelling techniques in her writing, which also addresses tropes like memory, identity, authenticity and how technology affects interpersonal relationships. Her writing has won high recognition for its depth, creativity, and compelling storytelling, and she is regarded as one of the leading voices in

contemporary American fiction and received countless honors and awards for her contributions to literature (Moran, 2021, p.2).

Jennifer Egan's last novel *The Candy House* (2022) has been widely praised and called "one of the best books in 2022" by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Guardian*. The novel delves into the profound effects of technology on society both focusing on the self and the community and captivates the reverse and unexpected consequences of technological advancements and ethical dilemmas it raises. The novel's central technological innovation is "Own Your Unconscious," a website that allows people to access and share their memories, reshaping their understanding of themselves, other people, and the world.

In the thirteen years since Own Your Unconscious had been released, one of its ancillary features—the Collective Consciousness—had gradually become central. By uploading all or part of your externalized memory to an online "collective," you gained proportionate access to the anonymous thoughts and memories of everyone in the world, living or dead, who had done the same. (Egan, 2022, p.56)

Egan depicts the experiences of the users of "Own Your Unconscious" across the lives of various characters whose paths cross on a webpage over several decades. This groundbreaking discovery causes a shift in the way people view, control, and edit their personal narratives, radically changing the context of interpersonal interactions, identity, and self-perception. While it may be an eye-opening experience for some characters, for most of them, it brings devastating effect, to the extent of losing the sense of self, communication with their loved ones, and their lifestyle.

At a time when hyperconnectivity is experienced on a daily basis, Egan reveals how this hyperconnectivity actually undermines the connection between people, even though its initial intention is to foster it, and intensifies human beings' need for authenticity and intimacy. By emphasizing the human desire for true connection, authenticity, and for sharing privacy and intimacy, *The Candy House* presents an innovative narrative technique as well as representations of various emotions. With the use of different narrative techniques such as the use of multiple points of view, tweets from Twitter, and the epistolary style, Egan portrays the characters and the complex relationships among them. Egan adopts contemporary narrative techniques in *The Candy House* by presenting each chapter from the perspective of a different character. These characters are connected through relationships of kinship or acquaintance. Some chapters are written in the first person, others in the second

person, and some employ a fragmented writing style, reflecting the absence of a linear timeline. Therefore, it can be said that Egan can be regarded as postmodernist because of her narrative structure, and regarding the above-mentioned writing techniques she uses, such as tweets and different narrative techniques, she appeals to the contemporary reader's real daily life.

Hence, Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* and Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* adopt the literary issues of the 21st century as their main themes. In the contemporary age, technology has significantly altered human relations. As Sherry Turkle (2011) states: "Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities... We are lonely but fearful of intimacy" (p.1). On the one side, technology has made connections easier by permitting instant communication over great distances. Hyperconnectivity is a concept that comes into play here; people are constantly in communication. Hyperconnectivity, or hyper connection, refers to the state in which technology has become an integral part of human life, enabling constant communication and perpetual accessibility. It is a condition that humanity has become deeply familiar with, characterized by the ability to be reachable at any moment. In the viewpoint of Turkle (2011),

[t]hese days, being connected depends not on our distance from each other but from available communications technology. Most of the time, we carry that technology with us. In fact, being alone can start to seem like a precondition for being together because it is easier to communicate if you can focus, without interruption, on your screen. (p.174)

Obviously, technology cannot always be labeled as a bad tool. Most of the time, it simplifies people's work, accelerates communication, and, in fact, that is its primary purpose from the outset. Therefore, it can be said that this state of hyperconnectivity and the digital media have brought about extensive changes in how individuals engage with others and perceive themselves. In her article *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, Nancy K. Baym (2010) argues that the digital media neither save nor destroy society, nor do they create entirely new forms of communication, identity, relationships, groups, or networks. Instead, they modify the dynamics of the connections with others and reshape our self-perception in profound and pervasive ways. For example, the constant accessibility enabled by mobile phones can strengthen interdependence among local peers and family but can also feel overwhelming and restrictive. The effects of the digital age, both positive and negative, have become deeply embedded in daily life and social contexts,

making it difficult to view them as drivers of radical transformation, whether utopian or dystopian (p. 81). Her discussion explores the impact of technology and hyperconnectivity, uncovering a paradox in which individuals remain consistently linked but experience feelings of isolation and solitude at the same time. Although technology can create a sense of closeness, it is important to approach it with caution. By making individuals constantly available, technology blurs the boundaries between one's own identity and relationship of others. This artificial closeness might turn relationships into mere connections, causing worries about being disconnected and a sense of panic when individuals are cut off from their usual digital connections. Additionally, emphasis is placed on the observation that despite the increased number of connections facilitated by technology, people report having fewer friends and an increasing sense of isolation (Turkle, 2011, p. 299). Therefore, it can be concluded that although technology has unquestionably transformed the way people communicate and connect, it simultaneously poses a risk of diminishing authentic human intimacy.

Both *No One Is Talking About This* and *The Candy House* are among the best examples that reveal the damage to authenticity and sincerity caused by technology. Both novels portray this in different ways. In *No One Is Talking About This*, Lockwood addresses the issue of technology through a medium already widely used by most people; the social media, particularly the fictional social media platform called "Portal" which can be likened to something almost identical to Twitter. In an interview Lockwood gives to Deborah Treisman, she says:

What I did feel, after a while being on Twitter, was that a joke would, more often than it did before, present itself to me in, like, a pre-prepared form, a preconceived form that was not always my own. *That* I didn't like. When you were in that place and it automatically occurred to you to formulate your joke in a way that people had been formulating jokes—like, "New Garfield just dropped." Or people would have a kid, and they would be, like, "New baby just dropped." And that started to concern me—it was, like, O.K., but you just had a child, and you're talking about it in Internetspeak. That is what I wanted to write about in *No One Is Talking About This*, that feeling. Again, early on, with something like Twitter, there's this sort of ecstatic component to this. It feels incredible, it feels like you're on fire, like you're part of this communal creative fire. But then, after a while, it becomes rigid or concretized. And you think, well, if I weren't formulating it this way, how would I be saying it? And then you start to really freak out. (Treisman, 2022 para. 67)

In this interview, Lockwood seems to acknowledge that her novel is partly a memoir. “That feeling” refers to the growing discomfort or tension that the author feels while using Twitter. There is an initial sense of excitement and joy related to being part of the platform, described as feeling “incredible” and being part of a “communal creative fire.” This initial sensation is defined by a sense of being on fire, implying enthusiasm, creativity, and a shared feeling of being a part of a community. However, as the author spends more time on Twitter, the initial enthusiasm gives way to an unpleasant realization. As she witnesses a shift in the nature of communication on the platform, she feels uncomfortable and dissatisfied. Jokes and expressions begin to appear in a “pre-prepared form” or “preconceived form” which is not always authentic or individually personalized. When discussing how the slang she uses such as “New Garfield just dropped” or “New baby just dropped” reflects the infiltration of Twitter’s conversational style into people’s lives, the phrases she employs are recognizable to anyone who uses Twitter. Thus, the ultimate point she wants to convey is that everyone seems to have become uniform, as if they are all coming out of a machine, and their authentic selves are lost. Unfortunately, the influence of the Internet is powerful enough to make everyone seem the same, even if people do not realize it. Therefore, to illustrate the distortions within individuals and their relationships, especially due to technology, the Internet, and social media networks, *No One Is Talking About This* serves as a clear example.

Different from *No One Is Talking About This*, in *The Candy House* there is criticism of a technology that has not yet been invented. The inventor of the platform named Bix creates a technology called “Own Your Consciousness” which allows access to people’s memories. It becomes a platform where even scientists upload their memories, leading to discussions and research on the psyches of individuals who upload their memories to it.

Consciousness for the small price of making our own anonymously searchable? We all went for it on our twenty-first birthday, Mandala’s age of consent, just as prior tech generations went for music sharing and DNA analysis, never fully reckoning, in our excitement over our revelatory new freedom, with what we surrendered by sharing the entirety of our perceptions to the Internet—and thereby to counters, like me. Strict rules govern the use of gray grabs by data gatherers, but there are occasions when I’m obliged, in my professional capacity, to search the psyches of strangers. (Egan, 2022, p.81)

What Egan seems to aim to demonstrate here is how humanity may be becoming increasingly dependent on technology, the Internet, and everything associated with them. However, in the context of modern technological advancements, there is a growing perception that the

Internet is beginning to take on a dominant role in the society. From this perspective, it can be said that while Egan's scenario may not be real, it is also not distant from humanity, as it portrays the Internet assuming a godlike status without arousing a sense of alienation in the reader. Moreover, the novel's representation of technology is multilayered. It includes the use of advanced algorithms to attract trust and impact on social media platforms, the concept of uploading animal perceptions via brain sensors, and the concept of individuals sharing their perceptions on the Internet, as well as the possible consequences of this sharing. There are also references to the lack of contemporary technology, such as smartphones, in particular places, which creates a sense of surprise and contrast. Overall, technology is portrayed as an important and influential component of the characters' life, impacting their interactions and experiences.

In order to conduct a study observing the disruption of both individuals' self-identity and their relationship with themselves, as well as the deterioration of interpersonal relationships due to the increasing use of technology and the Internet, it would be more appropriate to analyze Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* and Egan's *The Candy House* within the framework of post-postmodernism while also taking postmodernism into account, as both novels incorporate structural elements associated with postmodernist theory. Traditional literary theories may fall short in explaining the issues explored in these works. Instead, contemporary literary contexts and theories are more relevant, particularly as both novels emphasize the breakdown of authenticity and sincerity in modern life. The notions discussed above will be explored within the context of authenticity and sincerity, drawing upon the theoretical frameworks proposed by Wolfgang Funk in *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium* (2015), and Robin Van den Akker, Allison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen's *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism* (2017).

1.2. Theoretical framework

Postmodernism was a literary movement that particularly stirred the 1980s. Emerging almost as a demolition of the ideologies of modernism and even those preceding it, postmodernism was characterized by a rupture from reality, a questioning of it, and an ironic tone suggesting that the meaning of life actually did not exist at all, and that the pursuit of meaning was unnecessary. These ideologies sparked much debate in literature. However, "postmodernism is now dead and buried" (Kirby, 2009, p.34). In the contemporary era, the

notion of meaninglessness and emptiness seem increasingly inadequate for addressing the complexities of human experience. This period witnesses a shift away from the irony and skepticism, which are the characteristics of postmodern thinking, towards a focus on emotions and a new engagement with reality. Yet, “it is impossible to avoid postmodernism because it was one of, if not the most significant of the intellectual currents which swept the academic world in the last third of the twentieth century” (Lopez and Potter, 2005, p.4). While postmodernism’s influence is obvious, it has changed throughout time, allowing for new approaches that build on its foundations while responding to current societal and technological advances, and many critiques on this subject have ideas that complement each other. As Andrew Hoberek (2007) explains: “Postmodern techniques-even if they no longer play quite the dominant role they once did-have hardly disappeared from contemporary fiction” (p.236). Postmodernism was such a powerful movement and had become so entrenched in literature that completely breaking away from it is almost impossible. However, it does not mean that a new approach is not needed as contemporary fiction is no longer adequately described as postmodern (Hoberek, 2007, p.233), and the postmodern discourses have lost their critical value when it comes to understanding contemporary arts, culture, aesthetics and politics (Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, 2017, p.3). A new approach or a direction is needed to interpret the new relationships, new narratives and realities in 21st century literature (McLaughlin, 2004, p.55). Some important critics and authors such as Wolfe, Vermeulen, Van den Akker and Gibbons regard it appropriate to address the concept that has been slowly emerging in contemporary literature as “metamodernism,” while Alan Kirby calls it “digimodernism” and Enrique Dussel calls it “transmodernism.” However, in this study, the concept of contemporary literature will be examined under “post-postmodernism” as McLaughlin calls it because the works under scrutiny, *No One Is Talking About This* and *The Candy House* bear traces of postmodernism. Hence it would be more accurate to label this new concept as post-postmodernism for the purposes of this study.

To look more closely into post-postmodernism and what it brings to literature, it can be said that post-postmodernism, also commonly referred to as metamodernism, is a major departure from the aesthetic and intellectual concepts of postmodernism. While postmodernism focuses on irony, playful self-awareness, breaking traditional storytelling rules, and presenting fragmented views of reality, post-postmodernism takes a more sincere approach, aiming to portray a sense of shared and connected reality. However, “in

recognizing (as postmodernism has helped us to do) the discourse-based process of representation through which we know our world, we are not denying or abandoning content” (McLaughlin, 2004, p.61). Postmodernism has shifted away from its introspective focus, where authors primarily explored their internal worlds through fragmented narratives and irony. Instead, it has evolved toward a mode of expression that resonates more with readers, addressing societal issues and engaging with broader social challenges. Themes such as relationships, the passage of time, and the questioning of individuals’ roles in both life and society have become central. As mentioned before, there has not been a complete break from postmodernism. In their book *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, Van den Akker, Gibson and Vermeulen (2017) state that “the term ‘metamodern’ indicates what is today generally considered (a variant of) postmodernism” (p.4) and they add:

the cultural texts and practices we would describe as metamodern do not offer a solution to the problematic of postmodernism (however the postmodern is perceived). Despite suggestions to the contrary, our conceptualization of metamodernism is a manifesto, a social movement, stylistic register, or philosophy – even though it takes into account a number of developments that may well be regarded as social movements, stylistic registers and philosophies. Metamodernism is a structure of feeling that emerges from, and reacts to, the postmodern as much as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today’s stage of global capitalism. (2017, p.5)

Therefore, it can be said that post-postmodernism is not so much a movement opposing postmodernism but rather an evolution that arises from within it. It builds on postmodernism while addressing its issues and ambiguities, shifting focus to the themes of the 21st century. These themes often center on recognizing and engaging with both societal and individual challenges. It can be better understood as a response to the limitations of postmodernism, reflecting the dynamics of contemporary society. By referring to post-postmodernism as a “structure of feeling,” the authors imply that it is profoundly based on the collective experiences and emotions of individuals within society, acting as a lens through which they perceive and navigate their world. In essence, post-postmodernism is a cultural logic that combines postmodernist features with current 21st-century themes and concerns. It is characterized by an overall shift towards honesty, involvement with societal issues, and an understanding of the interconnectivity of human experience. Post-postmodernism, with its emphasis on collective feeling and societal dynamics, provides a compelling framework for analyzing and interpreting contemporary literature and culture.

It is possible to observe post-postmodernism not as a direct opposition to postmodernism but as a reaction in both *No One Is Talking About This* and *The Candy House*. Structurally, both novels carry postmodern influences. However, in terms of the issues they deal with, both novels investigate more closely the societal problems of the 21st century, which are often intertwined with technology. These novels, which focus on relationships, sincerity and emotions of individuals within themselves and towards each other, also have a post-postmodernist approach. In *No One Is Talking About This* by Patricia Lockwood, it can be observed that the structure and the style of the novel have postmodern traces. The biggest clue is that the first half of the novel is written in sections of tweets. As it was mentioned before, the protagonist spends all her time on the portal which is a very similar social media platform to Twitter. Therefore, in the first half of the novel, the reader is presented only with tweets from the portal, emphasizing how ideas are shaped and influenced on the social media. By doing so, Lockwood demonstrates a postmodernist approach in terms of her style as she has both fragmented and non-linear style especially in the first half of the novel.

Capitalism! It was important to hate it, even though it was how you got money. Slowly, slowly, she found herself moving toward a position so philosophical even Jesus couldn't have held it: that she must hate capitalism while at the same time loving film montages set in department stores.

...

Politics! The trouble was that they had a dictator now, which, according to some people (white), they had never had before, and according to other people (everyone else), they had only ever been having, constantly, since the beginning of the world. Her stupidity panicked her, as well as the way her voice now sounded when she talked to people who hadn't stopped being stupid yet.

(Lockwood, 2021, p.1,2)

Here, it is possible to see very clear traces of postmodernism. Stylistically, the text incorporates both irony, such as humor-infused criticism following the entry into capitalism, and fragmented transitions between topics. The protagonist recognizes the need to hate capitalism while still admitting its significance for earning money, illustrating the ambivalence and contradiction that is characteristic of postmodern ideology. This ironic attitude toward capitalism is a common subject in postmodern literature, where authors frequently criticize capitalist structures while acknowledging their inherent relationship with them. Another reason for the fragmented narrative may be the fact that each segment written in the form of a "tweet" appears disjointed and jumps from one topic to another. However,

it should be noted that Lockwood's progression in the first half serves not only to support the main themes through postmodern elements but also to emphasize the main idea. The reader does not feel the need to understand the disjointed, tweet-like structure of the novel because it mirrors the way they already experience their daily lives fragmented and saturated with similar patterns of communication. Instead of reading long passages with coherence, it is more comfortable for most people to read short but succinct segments discussing different topics. Lockwood demonstrates exactly this in the first half of her novel. Nevertheless, especially when it comes to the topics explored in the second half of the book, the fragmented and ironic voice of postmodernism begins to fade away, and traces of a turn towards reality start to emerge, with the themes addressed by post-postmodernism, as discussed above, coming into play. Based on the summary, it can be said that there is a turn towards reality in the second half of the novel, in which the protagonist emerges from the portal and the virtual world of the portal to focus on her niece's health. As a result, a noticeable change in language is detected. This shift in focus and language suggests that elements of post-postmodernism can be discussed.

As Robert McLaughlin (2004) also emphasizes, the transition from postmodernism to post-postmodernism first begins in language:

Franzen and Wallace agree that literature has been and continues to be valuable as a way of critiquing our social world, of finding ways to be human in it, and of truly connecting with others. This is a good way to think about the agenda of post-postmodernism, but only if we understand that all of these things are mediated through language. This may seem obvious to readers of this journal, but the vast majority of Americans are not aware of the role language plays in constructing the roles they perform in this culture of despair. Post-postmodernism seeks not to reify the cynicism, the disconnect, the atomized privacy of our society nor to escape or mask it (as much art, serious and pop, does), but, by engaging the language-based nature of its operations, to make us newly aware of the reality that has been made for us and to remind us - because we live in a culture where we're encouraged to forget- that other realities are possible. (p.67)

Hence, with *No One Is Talking About This*, Lockwood actually brings forth a change, a transition. After the second half of the novel, the changed language structure is still presented, although somewhat fragmented, in a longer and more coherent manner. Disconnected topics between "tweets" are mostly left behind, and as mentioned above, the issues addressed by post-postmodernism, such as social connection and individuals' relationships with themselves and one another, especially authenticity and sincerity, are

tackled because there is no longer the perceptual understanding of reality provided by postmodernism. Instead, post-postmodernism marks a shift toward reality, emphasizing a change in belief and perspective. It encourages individuals to discover their own truths and realities, both within themselves and in their relationships.

Just like Lockwood, Egan uses a fragmented narrative form in *The Candy House* to illustrate the individuals' intertwined lives. For example, the novel is told through a sequence of episodes and perspectives. Moreover, non-linear storytelling challenges typical narrative norms and encourages readers to piece together the fractured narrative puzzle. Another consequence of fragmented narration is its lack of objective truthfulness. Sometimes, when the same events are recounted from the perspectives of different characters who experience them together, objectivity is compromised, leaving no objective truth. This could be another example of a postmodernist writing technique. While all these writing styles point to postmodernism, in terms of the topics addressed, *The Candy House* can be associated with a post-postmodernist approach. Technology, exemplified by the concept of "Own Your Unconscious," is not far removed from the reality of the 21st century. This idea does not feel overly fantastical to readers, as new technological devices and applications are introduced into people's lives almost daily. However, what it is new is to see how this technology affects people and damages authentic and sincere connections because at a state of hyper connectedness, one does not expect to be emotionally disconnected from themselves and also each other. This is where post-postmodernist approach comes in, as McLaughlin (2004) says,

[T]his new fiction nevertheless has to show that it's a world that we know through language and layers of representation; language, narrative, and the processes of representation are the only means we have to experience and know the world, ourselves, and our possibilities for being human. The better we understand them and how they operate, the better we can disengage them from the institutions that encourage the cynical despair that perpetuates the status quo and claim them for our own purposes. (p.66-67)

The new technology that is called "Own Your Unconscious" underscores the significance of storytelling, perception, and the human experience. Throughout the novel, the characters deal with their own perceptions, experiences, and the impact of their narratives on their lives. McLaughlin's interpretation of post-postmodernism reflects the novel's exploration of the complexities of relationships, the struggle for self-understanding, and the role of storytelling in shaping human experiences and interactions. As the new technology gives

people access to one another's memories in the novel, characters are deprived of storytelling and, thus, of shaping authentic and sincere connections. This newly-created technology impedes people from forming relationships in natural ways. In fact, perhaps the new natural way is now to form relationships over the Internet, and it is progressing in that direction. However, what is rejected here is not the idea of technology being a means to connection, but rather its often-disruptive use or the production of technology that leads to disruption. Focusing on the themes brought about by post-postmodernism, language is used as a navigation tool. While Egan also employs elements of postmodernism in her use of language, she embraces post-postmodernism in terms of content by focusing on societal and individual realities. Understanding the function of language and representation in shaping individuals' experiences is important for navigating the complex issues of modern relationships, especially in a technologically-mediated world as represented in *The Candy House*. Not acknowledging the importance of these factors and acting as if they are more connected simply because of what technology provides can prevent the characters from addressing their problems and regaining control over their relationships, ultimately resulting in inauthentic and insincere connections within the digital world.

It could be argued that authenticity and sincerity are two important themes explored by post-postmodernism, while also addressing how they are influenced by technology. The discussion on authenticity and sincerity emerges initially as a topic proposed by Jean Jacques Rousseau, but one that has gained further traction in literature with Lionel Trilling's book *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972). Authenticity, while difficult to define precisely, can be understood as the concept of being true to one's self. "Despite the multiplicity of terms and interpretations applied to authenticity, ultimately what is consistent across the literature is that authenticity encapsulates what is genuine, real, and/or true" (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010, p.839). It originated from the simpler concept of sincerity, which emerged during the sixteenth century due to the dissolution of face-to-face feudal relationships in European society (Lindholm, 2008, p.3). Like traditional cultures, medieval Europe operated within a highly personalized framework, sustained by a social order that provided individuals secure positions within a divinely-ordained hierarchy. Local authorities served the church and state, while being served by their servants (Lindholm, 2008, p.3). This hierarchical structure was mirrored within families, in which fathers held the authority, and this was the daily existence of the society. Most individuals within this system had limited or no opportunities for travel beyond their locality, and social mobility was minimal, and the primary concern revolved

around individuals meeting their obligations to the neighbors and peers that they had known, and who had known them, throughout their lives (Lindholm, 2008, p.3). Therefore, it can be claimed that throughout history, with the changing dynamics of the world and societies, authenticity has always been an issue. In the 21st century, the pursuit of authenticity has gained significant attention and become a central theme in literature, reflecting a contemporary challenge. In the digital age, which can be said to have started with the millennium, particularly with the pervasive influence of the social media, maintaining an authentic sense of self has become increasingly challenging compared to earlier periods. This difficulty arises largely from the personas that are constructed and projected on social media platforms. The social media perpetuate a constant race for attention, a constant stream of sharing, and, for instance, on platforms like Twitter, a constant expression of opinions. Instead of sharing one's true thoughts or life experiences, the social media often encourage individuals to share or highlight what gets the most "likes" or attention. While it might seem minor among the flurry of such applications, the struggle to remain honest with oneself in this digital age is, in fact, one of the greatest challenges of the contemporary time. In the context of authenticity, it is useful to set aside the social media temporarily and focus solely on mobile phones and messaging applications. Nearly every individual is accessible around the clock, leading to a constant state of engagement through messaging, whether with chosen or unchosen contacts. These apps have evolved to the point of informing others of one's online status, when they enter and exit the app, and even when they have read a message but not responded. Consequently, many individuals find it difficult to remain true to themselves and unfortunately resort to pretense. Whether it involves lying to avoid unwanted gatherings, attending events reluctantly, or reacting to a humorous video with a laughing emoji despite feeling unhappy, individuals are often pressured to present a false version of themselves. It is at this circumstance that authenticity is undermined, or rather, never truly achieved because "from Rousseau we learned that what destroys our authenticity is society-our sentiment of being depends upon the opinion of other people" (Trilling, 1972, p.93). Therefore, Trilling's exploration of authenticity in literature serves as a reminder of the value and rarity of genuine expression in a world increasingly characterized by artifice and pretense. As navigating the complexities of modern life, preserving authenticity is more than just a personal goal. It is essential for maintaining integrity and building genuine connections in an increasingly digital society.

One of the other consequences of authenticity appealing to themes of contemporary literature in the 21st century is its impact on identity. Authenticity, at its core, is based on the idea of being honest and true to oneself. Lionel Trilling (1972), in his exploration of authenticity, draws on Shakespeare's famous line from Hamlet: "To thine own self be true," to emphasize the importance of self-honesty and staying true to one's inner values (p.3). Trilling bases much of his research on this concept, highlighting its relevance in understanding the idea of authenticity. It is promoted that people stick to their own opinions, values, and identities rather than conform to the demands or influences of others. However, in the context of the 21st century, the critical questions surrounding authenticity shift to focus on defining *which self* and *under what circumstances* this authenticity is maintained (Williams, 2009, p.86). "One might argue that authenticity is a subjective appraisal that concerns the (dis)continuity between an individual's perception and the imagined perceptions of others—between 'personal identity' and 'social identity'" (Williams, 2009, p.86). It can be implied that authenticity is a concept that individuals might interpret differently, and it involves evaluating how closely one's idea of oneself matches with how they feel others perceive them. It emphasizes the relationship between an individual's sense of self, known as "personal identity," and the identity they project onto others, known as "social identity." This aligns with Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and the theory of Ego, Superego, and Id, where the ego represents how individuals see themselves, and the superego reflects how they project themselves in social life and how others perceive them externally. According to Jean-Claude Deschamps and Thierry Devos (1998), while "personal identity refers to the fact that the individual perceives himself as identical to himself; in other words he is the same in time and in space, but that is also what specifies him and marks him out from others" (p.2), "social identity refers to the fact that the individual perceives him- or herself as similar to others of the same background; the we" (p.3). Therefore, "personal identity" mentioned can be likened to Freud's Ego, while "social identity" can be thought of as similar to the superego. In this sense, authenticity can be considered as a subjective appraisal of the perceived consistency or discontinuity between these two identities. For example, if someone believes that their external behaviors or presentation is consistent with their internal sense of self, they might think of themselves authentic as ego and superego overlap. In contrast, if individuals notice an incoherence between how they view themselves and how they believe others see them, they may have a sense of inauthenticity. This demonstrates how authenticity is fundamentally

related to a combination of internal self-perception and external presentation, with any difference that might end in feelings of alienation and inauthenticity in one's personal and social identity.

Sincerity, a concept similar to but different from authenticity, plays an essential role in both human behavior and literary discourse. As Trilling (1972) defines it in his book *Sincerity and Authenticity*, "the word as we now use it refers primarily to a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (p.2). While authenticity is concerned with preserving alignment with one's inner self and beliefs, sincerity is mostly expressed through one's actions and interactions with others. While authenticity can be classified as "being," sincerity can be considered a state of "doing." Thus, authenticity prioritizes self-awareness and commitment to personal ideals, whereas sincerity is more outwardly focused, requiring a genuine presentation of one's feelings and intentions in relationships and communication. Individuals in the context of authenticity are responsible for self-awareness and self-assessment. Authenticity includes having an in-depth knowledge of their own values, beliefs, and identity. Individuals must engage in contemplation and internal reflection to see whether their actions are consistent with their inner truth. Because authenticity is fundamentally subjective, only the individual can genuinely know whether they are being authentic. The subjective aspect of authenticity emphasizes its personal and introspective dimensions. Sincerity, on the other hand, is influenced by ethical principles and societal norms: "Sincerity is discovered within social roles, authenticity behind and beneath them" (Berger, 2001, p.82). Sincerity, as opposed to authenticity, which focuses on an individual's internal coherence, is the external representation of one's beliefs and intentions. While authenticity emphasizes being honest to oneself, sincerity encompasses how one interacts with others and the larger social context. Trilling focuses on the distinction between authenticity and sincerity by emphasizing the importance of sincerity in developing true human connections and ethical communication. Trilling's observations highlight the interconnected nature of sincerity and authenticity, both of which are required for personal integrity and meaningful social connections. Another critic who has extensively worked on sincerity, Martin Paul Eve (2018), puts forward the following points about sincerity: "Sincerity is, in the interpretation that I will advance here, a type of honesty that is not merely concerned with an accuracy in one's statements to others but is rather based on checking future actions against previous speech and behavior" (p.37). Sincerity is portrayed as a type of honesty that goes beyond the accuracy of a person's words and includes the consistency of words and acts. Unlike

traditional definitions of honesty, which frequently center on the immediate accuracy of statements, sincerity emphasizes the connection between what an individual says and how that person behaves in the future. This shows that sincerity is a continuous process of self-monitoring and reflection in which people compare their future actions to their previous words and act according to them. In essence, sincerity implies an obligation to maintain coherence and integrity in one's words and actions, a consistency in a period of time, rather than simply searching for truth in a single instance in a relationship. As a result, sincerity is subject to external evaluation and judgment because it involves other people's opinions and meeting social standards. Hence, the key distinction between authenticity and sincerity is consistency:

Sincerity is an ongoing negotiation between trust, public performance and proof, between the rhetoric of the present and the action of the future. The take-away point, however, is that the terms "authenticity" and "sincerity" are linked as they both focus on a truth to oneself, but they are also fundamentally distinct in the interpretation I am advancing here: only an individual can tell whether they are being authentic (if they even can) but sincerity is a societal, public virtue that can be verified and judged by others. (Eve, 2018, p.37-38)

Eve's perspective on sincerity can be interpreted as requiring a consistent commitment to honesty and integrity in one's conduct over time. It is vital for building trust and credibility in interpersonal relationships and social interactions and simply an agreement between belief and representation and future self-consistency; whether or not the concealed inner state of an "authentic" self is truly represented in that consistency. He suggests that a person cannot be labeled as sincere if their actions change unexpectedly or contradict their professed values. As a result, sincerity needs a level of dependability and consistency in behavior, displaying an honest commitment to ethical values and moral principles.

Authenticity serves as the foundation for sincerity as it follows the logic that one must first be true to oneself in order to be genuine and sincere in relationships. Therefore, lack of authenticity and the emergence of fake identities in the digital age are also consequences of the loss of authenticity and sincerity. "Technologies of simulation constantly problematize our grasp of "reality" as media spectacles, celebrity images, and corporate brand names have advanced from the status of merely "reflecting" society to become the back-bone of global political economy and constitutive of social relationships" (Baudrillard, 1994, as cited in Moore, 2004, p.306). The online profiles are one of the best examples of this. In essence, what Baudrillard discusses here about simulation technologies can be exemplified by social

media platforms, virtual reality, and digital imagery. These technologies produce representations or simulations of reality that blur or even eliminate the distinction between what is real and what is created. For instance, if an individual raises environmental awareness on the social media but does not adopt sustainable actions in their daily lives, their sincerity may be put into question. Similarly, if their online persona differs significantly from their behavior in person, questions about their authenticity may arise. Media frames, such as popular threads on Twitter or entertainment posts on Instagram, may provide a changed or hyped version of reality in order to capture public interest and influence opinion on anything and create a common public opinion on what is right and what is not. Similarly, celebrity pictures and corporate branding can represent carefully controlled identities or narratives that may not entirely reflect the reality but still have an important effect on public opinion. Therefore, the relationship between authenticity and sincerity is becoming increasingly complicated in the digital era, as simulation technologies and mediated identities blur the barriers between reality and representation, radically changing both individual self-perception and public opinion.

As these simulations gain credibility and influence in society, they bring into question reality, authenticity and sincerity. People may struggle to distinguish their authentic identities, sincere experiences and produced simulations, resulting in a blurring of the two. This phenomenon has significant consequences for social relationships, politics, and the global economy, as digital representations increasingly influence perceptions and behaviors rather than direct experiences or actual realities. “There is the relation between the perception of inner truth and the demands of the social order. Wasn’t being true to one’s own intuition of right and wrong more important than conforming to social rules? The shift is from being as one appears, to discovering what one truly is” (Lindholm, 2008, p.4). As mentioned above, every discourse, every action, every idea is now shaped by society’s judgments, and there is a phenomenon called lynch culture on the Internet. Lynch culture generally refers to the situation created by people - often the majority - who believe they have the right to ridicule, criticize, and insult others for anything they perceive as different, whether it is their thoughts, reactions to specific events, fashion sense, makeup style, or even their tone of voice and diction. Unfortunately, this is a problem of the 21st century that will most likely not be resolved for a long time, and its connection to authenticity cannot be denied. If an individual is afraid of facing online backlash for every action, thought, style, and all other characteristics, they may feel compelled to “correct” themselves, even conforming to false

standards that are labeled as correct by the opinions of the majority. In doing so, they inevitably stray from their authentic selves and sincere behaviors, and what they create for themselves becomes an illusion and both a false identity and relationship. If a person sustains this for long enough, they may forget that they are pretending and start living as if the false identity is their true self. Unfortunately, the situation becomes nothing more than being trapped in a glass cage because it generates a sense of capture, much like being in a glass cage-visible and exposed, but isolated and limited at the same time, unable to break free from the produced false identity. Only when one realizes that authenticity, particularly the one created by the social media, and sincerity, that is important to build relationships under the rules of social order and ethics, are lost, can they take measures to prevent or be free from it.

In the light of all this, it can be said that the challenges of the 21st century have also affected literature and begun to change the existing order. As a result of authenticity and sincerity gradually losing themselves to innovations arising from technological developments, the nihilism brought about by postmodernism in literature has begun to come to an end, and a need to search for and return to reality has emerged. This phenomenon, which is not entirely separate from postmodernism and not yet ready to emerge as a completely new movement - preferred to be called metamodernism by some critics such as Gibbons, Vermeulen and Van den Akker- has been termed as post-postmodernism, which will be referred to as such in the framework of this study. Along with post-postmodernism, the need to return to reality has been acknowledged and embraced in literature by significant critics such as Gibbons, Vermeulen, Van den Akker, Wolfe, and McLaughlin, as well as by famous contemporary writers such as Wallace, DeLillo and Franzen. However, one of the topics addressed by post-postmodernism is authenticity and sincerity because the understanding of reality begins primarily with one's own self and their environment. Technology, and especially the social media, lead people to create a false identity for themselves, resulting in relationships ending up as false relationships. Therefore, as the digital age progresses, the way humanity adapts to these changes has led to results that are very different from the initial purpose of technology. For example, hyperconnectivity, the purpose and the consequences of which were mentioned above, can be seen as an example. While hyperconnectivity may suggest that people can reach each other at any time and in any way, it can actually be argued that it is a phenomenon that damages individuals' identities and relationships. Therefore, authenticity and sincerity are at the heart of the

themes and tropes brought about by technology in the 21st century, and all discussions revolve around these two concepts.

The novels *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) by Patricia Lockwood and *The Candy House* (2022) by Jennifer Egan, not only highlight the transition from postmodernism to post-postmodernism structurally but also shed light on the themes of authenticity and sincerity in the 21st century, making them key works for studying this subject. To this end, Chapter 1 examines Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021), namely the novel's shift from postmodernism to post-postmodernism. By exploring the protagonist's journey, the chapter argues that authenticity and sincerity, while concealed by the overwhelming influence of technology, can be rediscovered when people disconnect from the digital world and start observing reality around them. Chapter 2 shifts the discussion to Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022), in which postmodern structures, such as fragmented storytelling and multiple perspectives, coexist with post-postmodern themes. Here, the longing for authenticity and sincerity is not only central to the characters' desires but also reflective of a contemporary world in which individuals seek connection through sharing and accessing others' memories as a way to rediscover their true selves. As such, the Conclusion arrives at the argument that while digital hyperconnectedness has undermined the quality of human relationships, resulting in a loss of authenticity and sincerity, there is still a chance to reclaim these values by moving away from the superficiality of technology and engaging more meaningfully with the real world.

2. PATRICIA LOCKWOOD'S

NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS

Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) is a novel which is concerned with contemporary issues of life in an experimental way. Due to bearing many traces from Lockwood's life, it can actually be considered a semi-autobiography. In an interview with Treisman in *The New Yorker*, Lockwood confirmed that the tragedy depicted in the novel was indeed real and that the story was actually about her niece who was born with Proteus syndrome and died at the age of six months in an interview with Treisman. She states:

It's true that the section with the protagonist's niece—that is my niece. That is her personality put into the book largely intact, and I wanted it that way. But there were things surrounding her that I still felt the need to fictionalize. I wouldn't, for instance, want my father as he truly was in that book. I had a cop in there, instead. But, yes, this novel breaks directly in the middle. Up to that point, the protagonist is largely thinking about the Internet, how she feels herself to be trapped there, inside what she calls "the portal." And then there is this sudden jolt of awareness when she's yanked into the real world. I like this framework—there was a fictional reality going on, and in the midst of it was something real. So maybe it is a hybrid (Treisman, 2022, para.46)

Not only that, but Lockwood also shared a post on her own Twitter account a year after the publication of the novel, sharing a photo of her nephew with the comment "she would be 5 years old today... thank you for reading her book" (Lockwood, 13 July 2023). Lockwood spent a lot of time on the social media before and, as far as she could see from the people around her, decided to write the novel *No One Is Talking About This* after realizing how much Twitter and similar social media platforms had become a part of life, almost becoming life itself. The unnamed protagonist in the novel was popular on a social media platform called the Portal, resembling today's Twitter, and spent all their time on the portal. In fact, the reader scrolls down what is written on this platform along with the protagonist until the second chapter of the book. Afterwards, the protagonist learns that her sister has a problematic pregnancy and unfortunately gives birth to a baby with Proteus syndrome, also known as Elephant Man syndrome, as abortion is not allowed due to Ohio laws. The whole family spends a beautiful six months with the baby, dedicating themselves to the baby during this time because the protagonist actually has an epiphany, realizing that she had previously devoted all her time to keeping up with the jokes and hot topics on that platform, sacrificing

her authentic self and turning sincere connections into relationships attempted to be understood through emojis, throughout the six months. Lockwood wrote the novel in an experimental manner to emphasize that the real essence of life does not lie in social media platforms; instead, it underscores the possibility and even necessity of returning to real life and showing people that it is possible. Throughout the novel, with its writing technique giving the sensation of scrolling down Twitter, the novel gives the reader a postmodern impression, creating a fragmented and disjointed reading experience. This style decision is consistent with postmodern characteristics, giving the reader the sensation of grappling with questions of reality and meaning, which are distinctive features of postmodern writing. On the other hand, the change in the plot and the protagonist's story of returning to real life after the tragic event in the first half of the novel actually moves away from the ideology of postmodernism such as "nothing is real" or "what is real?," and begins to focus on the themes of authenticity and building sincere connections, which have become intense in contemporary literature under post-postmodernism. Under this perspective, the novel highlights the importance of reconnecting with reality, as well as engaging with emotions and human connections, in contrast to the skepticism and detachment commonly associated with postmodernist thought. Therefore, *No One Is Talking About This* provides this research's argument that the hyperconnected state emerging alongside today's technology and people's constant online presence on social media platforms actually contribute to creating an emotional disconnection.

Postmodernism can be seen in the structure of the novel because, although the themes addressed may be post-postmodernist, post-postmodernism still carries traces of postmodernism. The most striking aspect of the novel is actually its format, written in tweet-like style. Lockwood, who discusses various topics in disconnected sections that could each be labeled as a tweet, presents a style that is not unfamiliar to the reader. Just as an average person browses through Twitter and reads about thousands of topics, the same feeling emerges in the reader while reading the book. Even from the very beginning, Lockwood exposes images and discussions that can be seen every day on social media platforms, and then individual posts shared on the portal start to be seen in each section. One example is as follows:

Close-ups of nail art, a pebble from outer space, a tarantula's compound eyes, a storm like canned peaches on the surface of Jupiter, Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*, a chihuahua perched on a man's erection, a garage door spray-painted with the words STOP! DON'T EMAIL MY WIFE!

Why did the portal feel so private, when you only entered it when you needed to be everywhere?
(Lockwood, 2021, p.10)

In this passage, Lockwood presents a brief critique right in the first section of the novel, effectively showcasing the state of technology and its impact. After listing familiar visuals that everyone is accustomed to and creating a depiction in the reader's mind, she actually begins to critique the social media in general. The irony of why people use a social media platform, often perceived as private, to extend their reach everywhere is also a point worth examining critically. According to Hoberek (2007), "Postmodern writers had enjoyed a notorious and wild ride of radical challenge to institutionalized art and its generic categories in the 1970s and 1980s, but their ironic, skeptical, and knowing (yet celebratory) juxtapositions of high and low, and their rejection of objective (or political) reality as a significant object or limit for representation, no longer worked by the 1990s" (p.233). Irony is one of the most important elements of postmodernism, and Lockwood employs irony in many places throughout the novel. For example, in places where Lockwood makes political critiques in the messages shared on the portal, there is often irony and sarcasm. Lockwood, while satirically criticizing certain political views, actually highlights how the social media shape political debates and their absurdities. This is a characteristic that reflects the ironic and satirical tone of postmodernism. Lockwood (2021) says,

The problem was that the dictator was very funny, which had maybe always been true of all dictators. Absurdism, she thought. Suddenly all those Russian novels where a man turns into a teaspoonful of blackberry jam at a country house began to make sense. (p.11)

Lockwood emphasizes the absurd posts the protagonist reads on the portal, referring to the person she calls a dictator, who she implies to be Donald Trump himself, considering both the time the novel was written and the political landscape of that period. This inference can be made considering that, although the novel was published in 2021-the year Biden was elected as the new president-its writing likely dates back further. While absurdity alone can be considered postmodern, Linda Hutcheon (1989) remarks that "While the postmodern has no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political action, it does work to turn its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique" (p.3). Hutcheon suggests that while postmodernism lacks a clear theory that facilitates direct political action, it effectively uses its ideological foundation to provide a platform for critical examination and deconstruction of ruling political ideologies. This ties in with the previous discussion

about Lockwood's use of irony and sarcasm in her portrayal of political criticisms within the novel. Therefore, it can be said that postmodern literature, including Lockwood's work, engages in a process of de-naturalizing politics, the people who make politics and challenges the dominant ideologies, including those present in political discourse. Therefore, while postmodernism may not directly lead to political action, it contributes to a critical understanding of the ideological structures underlying social and political phenomena.

As is widely recognized, fragmented narrative style is one of the key stones in postmodernism. "Either plot is pounded into small slabs of event and circumstance, characters disintegrate into a bundle of twitching desires, settings are little more than transitory backdrops, or themes become so attenuated that it is often comically inaccurate to say that certain novels are 'about' such-and-such" (Lewis and Bridger, 2001, p.126). One of the main reasons for *No One Is Talking About This* to be fragmented is that it is written piece by piece; there is no plot especially in its first chapter, only presenting random posts written on the portal to the reader. In addition to this, emojis are used intermittently. There are phrases which are only used as Internet slang, for instance "Lol, her little sister texted. Think if your body changes 1-2 degrees . . . it's called a fever and you can die if you have one for a week. Think if the ocean has a fever for years . . . lol" (Lockwood, 2021, p.29). The phrase "lol" is commonly used only in Internet slang and signifies 'laughing out loud.' However, the author's use of this in the book is, again, because the reader feels like they are scrolling down on the portal with the protagonist, but stylistically, it is postmodern. Looking at the plot, there is no other information or storyline preceding or following this text message from the sister. In fact, another reason why the novel can be termed as postmodern stylistically is the absence of a plot, especially in the first chapter and in the second chapter in which the plot following the tragic event is also presented to the reader in a fragmented manner, not as if reading tweets, but again divided into sections. Another striking postmodernist writing technique is the incorporation of metafiction, where the author directly addresses the reader or makes it obvious that what the reader has in their hands is a fiction. In the perspective of Patricia Waugh (1984),

[m]etafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion. In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. (p.6).

Lockwood also uses this technique. In *No One Is Talking About This*, Lockwood leaves five pages blank and writes something related to “blank” on each of them. On page 53, the reader sees the phrase “I have eaten the *blank*,” on page 54, “that were in the *blank*,” on page 55, “and which,” on page 56, “you were probably,” and on page 57, “saving for *blank*” (Lockwood, 2021). When these phrases are combined to form a complete sentence, it becomes: “I have eaten the blank that were in the blank and which you were probably saving for blank.” It is as if the author is speaking directly to the reader or perhaps sending a message like, “I’ve eaten the blank pages you left in the book,” thereby involving herself in the narrative and creating a metafictional writing technique. Furthermore, on page 58, the author writes lines that seem almost like an apology for doing so: “Forgive me / they were *blank* / so *blank* / and so *blank*” (Lockwood, 2021). Each “blank” is italicized, and the final lines are written in a poetic format only for this part of the novel. While all these elements point to postmodernism, another postmodernist element is evident in these lines which is the use of irony. The author, while using blank pages, also emphasizes the fact that they are blank, thus adding an ironic sense to the novel. The appearance of the word “blank” on the blank pages itself adds an ironic twist to the narrative as the word itself contradicts its context. A page labeled “blank” is, by definition, not truly blank since it contains the word “blank.” Therefore, it may also function as a metafictional commentary, in which the text reflects on its own form and challenges the reader’s expectations.

In postmodernism, there is also a questioning of reality. As Brian McHale (1987) states “postmodernist fiction does hold the mirror up to reality; but that reality, now more than ever before, is plural” (p.39). Critics have mostly focused on the question “what is real?” and have addressed the presence of multiple realities.

First, that the ‘grand narratives’ of social and intellectual progress initiated by the Enlightenment are discredited; and second, that any political grounding of these ideas in ‘history’ or ‘reality’ is no longer possible, since both have become ‘textualized’ in the world of images and simulations which characterize the contemporary age of mass consumption and advanced Technologies. (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 2005, p.197)

The deconstruction of grand narratives is at play, and the line between the real and fantasy is blurred. However, in *No One Is Talking About This*, Lockwood brings up the inquiry into reality not by questioning reality itself but rather through an irony suggesting that the lived reality is somewhat of a simulation. Jean Baudrillard (1994) defines simulation as a

“generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” and “The desert of the real itself” (p.1). This indicates that simulation develops a form of reality that is unrelated to the true reality. Instead, the reality is fully produced or constructed, resulting in a hyperreality in which the distinction between the real world and simulations of reality is blurred. Although the reference of simulation fits into the ideology of postmodernism’s “nothing is real,” in fact, Lockwood presents this as a critique of technology’s negative effects on masking the reality, as Hutcheon (1989) suggests that it is possible in postmodernism; “today the mass media have neutralized reality by stages: first they reflected it; then they masked and perverted it; next they had to mask its absence; and finally they produced instead the simulacrum of the real, the destruction of meaning and of all relation to reality” (p.33). Lockwood initially depicts these stages through her portrayal of the portal. In the first few chapters of *No One Is Talking About This*, she uses the portal’s words which can be taken to represent Hutcheon’s first stage: reflection. Lockwood’s understanding of the media is highlighted through the protagonist’s navigation and participation in the portal, with a focus on its first reflecting stage before transitioning into distortion and, eventually, into simulation. As for the second stage, masking and perverting, Lockwood (2021) writes,

There was an iconic photograph, crisp in its nurse’s uniform, of a woman being bent backward and kissed by a soldier on V-Day. We had seen it all our lives, and thought we understood the particular firework it captured—and now the woman had risen from history to tell everyone that she didn’t know the man at all, that in fact she had been frightened throughout the whole encounter. And only then did the hummingbird of her left hand, the uncanny twist of her spine, the grip of the soldier’s elbow on her neck become apparent. “I had never seen him before in my life,” the woman said, and there he was in the picture, there he was in our minds, clutching her like victory, never letting her go. (p.14)

This text tells the revelation behind a famous photograph of a nurse being kissed by a soldier on V-Day (Victory in Europe Day) at the end of World War II. The protagonist reflects on how this image has become widely recognized, symbolizing the joy and celebration at the end of the war. However, the story takes a turn when the woman in the photograph, who had previously been viewed as a symbol of happiness and romance, comes forward to say that she did not know the man who kissed her and was terrified during the encounter. It contributes to the argument of what is seen, and encountered online not always accurately mirroring real-life events. The social media, in particular, have become a stage in which people edit and display finely crafted images of themselves and their lives, highlighting only

the joys, while hiding their struggles and imperfections. Photographs are precisely edited, experiences are filtered to appear more glamorous, and narratives are adapted to the intended perceptions. This tendency has resulted in a culture of comparison and insecurity, with people measuring their own lives against the supposedly-perfect portrayals they see online. Furthermore, the availability of misinformation and false news contributes to the problem, since manipulated visuals just like in the novel's example can quickly spread virally, distorting people's perception of reality. As a result, reality emerges in the form of what Hutcheon portrays as a postmodern narrative style, a masked and perverted reality.

Another example from the novel to simulation regards how technology and especially the social media distort perceptions of reality. Similar to Baudrillard, Hutcheon (1989) has also addressed the issue of hyperreality and argues that, "The postmodern, as I have been defining it, is not a degeneration into 'hyperreality' but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it" (p.34). Lockwood (2021) also allows the reader to experience the same thing that Hutcheon mentions by writing;

She and her husband would often text each other throughout the day to say Glitch. Glitch. The simulation is glitching again. This was different from last year, when they would text each other headlines to say Proof. Proof? Isn't this proof? Proof that we're living in a simulation? (p.58)

The protagonist and her husband are discussing the possibility of living in a simulation. They send text messages throughout the day with the term "Glitch" implying that they believe there are errors or faults in their perceived reality, that they may be living in a simulation. This is a change from their previous conduct, in which they would give each other headlines labeled "Proof" to ask whether certain events were evidence of living in a virtual environment. The conversation is ironic but interesting exploration of the possibility that the world around them is not totally real, but rather part of a wider simulated existence. In relation to Hutcheon's claim, it can be said that the phrase "the simulation" implies a belief or concern that their world could be replicated or artificial, mirroring the postmodern notion of questioning the nature of reality itself. The discussion of "Proof" reflects a desire to gain evidence or confirmation to support their belief in living in a simulation. However, the shift from seeking proof to seeing errors suggests a shift in their tones to a sarcastic one. Rather than seeking confirmation of their beliefs, they have begun to accept disruptions in their reality, indicating a deeper engagement with the questioning of reality and its limits, which is consistent with the postmodern questioning of the concept of reality and the

comprehension of it. As a result, it can be said that the style used by Lockwood in *No One Is Talking About This* is postmodern, but the plot, especially the second chapter, should be examined and analyzed through the post-postmodern concept. As Neil Brooks and Josh Toth (2007) suggest, instead of dismissing discourse or the cynical, self-aware irony often viewed as harmful, the approach involves leveraging it by creating narrators and characters who are acutely aware of language. This serves as a means to move beyond irony and reach a sense of authenticity and sincerity (p.60). This is because postmodernism, when discussing reality, emphasizes the concept of multiple realities, exploring how reality is understood differently across various contexts. In a world and society shaped by technology, particularly through the lens of simulation, postmodernism examines how these multiple realities coexist and interact. However, as literature is seen to be moving towards post-postmodernism, it can be emphasized that reality should not be subject to questioning. This is because, in the subjects examined by post-postmodernism, the focus is not on questioning whether reality exists or not; it is accepted that there is a reality, but the discussion is on how people can return to it.

In addition to the influence of postmodernism on *No One Is Talking About This*, it is also possible to call it a post-postmodernist novel because of its plot and the message it conveys. The major difference of post-postmodernism from postmodernism is that rather than an approach that rejects everything, that does not believe in the existence of a single reality, that believes in the existence of multiple worlds and that changes the concept of reality; it adopts an approach that accepts the existence of a reality and that the main goal is to find that reality in one's own self and also within the relations to others. For instance, Nicoline Timmer (2020) explains how irony, one of the most prominent elements of postmodernism, has evolved in post-postmodernism as follows: "the post-postmodern novel is not 'beyond irony,' or itself completely 'irony free,' but it no longer uses irony as the default 'language,' irony is no longer the social convention or cultural norm in the novel itself (although it may be a social convention in certain cultural milieus depicted in the novel)" (p.360). Post-postmodernism cannot completely break away from postmodernism, but it does not use its elements in the same manner. Irony is one of these examples. In *No One Is Talking About This*, irony is also used prominently- as it was shown in the example of Donald Trump when describing postmodernism- but this irony is never used in such a way as to make the main element of the novel or the plot so complex that it gets in the way of the intended message, irony; as Timmer summarizes, does not constitute the main norm of novels in post-postmodernism, but it cannot be said that it is not being used because it

carries traces of postmodernism. Lockwood incorporates this shift in the use of irony into her novel by subtly employing technology as a narrative device.

‘Can ghosts learn new technology?’ her sister asked, thinking of what must come next, the endless conveyor of progress to which a whole human history’s worth of spirits must adapt. The two of them were silent for a minute, and then images came crowding in: an elevator ghost pressing every button, feeling its stomach drop out through the bottom of the world; a ghost unzipping its message across long black telegraph wires; ghosts in the portal, reading forever, tenderly holding down hearts. In the group text where they sent her videos back and forth late at night, that’s what they said —thank God, can you believe, that we had the technology (Lockwood, 2021, p.146)

Irony is used here not to reinforce a sense of meaninglessness or emptiness in the text as in postmodernism, but to point to a subtext. Lockwood is actually criticizing technology by suggesting the irony of what it would be like if ghosts had technology, and in the last sentence, when she ironically ends with “thank God we don’t have it,” it can be said that post-postmodernism uses irony, but it does so in order to convey a message or to criticize. This message that Lockwood delivers continuously supports the part of the argument that technology changes and restricts relationships, and the way people live life. Humanity has become so accustomed to living with technology, whether through phones, the social media, or its application in virtually every aspect of life, that it is now nearly impossible to imagine a world without it. Considering this, the idea of technology extending its influence even to the concept of the afterlife does not seem far-fetched. Contrary to popular belief, technology and especially the social media do not bring people closer to each other; however, considering Lockwood’s portrayal and the concept of ghosts, one could argue that if ghosts were offered technology, they would likely reject it, as it is probably one of the burdens they were relieved of upon leaving the physical world.

This change that comes with technology has paved the way for post-postmodernism in literature because the main element of post-postmodernism is that real life has always existed and that a return to it is necessary and possible. The ways to do this start with people turning first to themselves and then to their relationships with others and creating “real” bonds. Timmer (2010) also points this out:

The criticism that can be distilled from the post-postmodern novel, is the view that the postmodern condition or a postmodern way of thinking and experiencing is ‘what makes it tough

to be a human being' ... the post-postmodern novel signals 'a turn to the human,' with its focus on 'what it means to be human today,' on empathy and human interaction, on existentialistic human concerns, and because of its 'heterophenomenological' approach to constructing experience worlds. (p.360).

The importance of being human has come to the fore in post-postmodernism and this is where authenticity comes into play, which starts with being true to oneself. By first knowing what it means to be human, one explores one's own nature, so to speak, and what one discovers becomes one's authentic self. Lockwood also touches upon the themes of authenticity and being human frequently in *No One Is Talking About This*.

What is a human being? What is a human being? What is a human being? she asked herself, on the day the gorilla who understood she was a person died. But that was the thing. Let one gorilla be a person, and then a whole flood comes crashing through the word, until the childhood home is swept away right down to the bars on the windows (Lockwood, 2021, p.99).

Here again, the protagonist is inspired by a post about a gorilla she sees on the portal when she is still negatively affected by technology. She goes into an introspection and tries to figure out within herself what it means to be a human being. The answer to this is not clear to the protagonist at that moment because she has not yet had the epiphany, and she has not yet been able to be authentic or to have sincere connections. While making these inquiries, she is still stuck in the big but actually lonely world of the social media, but since she is able to make these introspections, it would not be wrong to say that she has an awareness at the same time. The protagonist's awareness begins to solidify even more in the second half of the novel when she learns that her sister is pregnant. The biggest reason for the acceleration of this transformation process, during which she starts to discover both herself and other people, is her distancing from technology and the social media. When the protagonist learns about her sister's pregnancy, Lockwood (2021) describes the moment with detail, capturing its emotional impact:

A fizzing black void opened behind her eyes, where the long backward root of her sight was, and she gathered her sister's rough blonde hair in her hands. There was still a real life to be lived; there were still real things to be done—above all, there was still good news, to be heard over a forkful of three-legged deer. (p.63)

The news of her sister's pregnancy hits her like a shockwave, opening up "a fizzing black void" behind her eyes, as if her perspective had become disconnected from

reality or it has always been separated. In this state of disorientation, she reaches out to her sister's rough blonde hair in her hands, grounding herself in the physicality of the moment. Despite the overwhelming emotions, she realizes that there is still real life to be lived, real things to be done. Life is not only about the portal and everyone's posts. Most importantly, there is still good news to hold onto, something as odd and imperfect as a "forkful of three-legged deer," yet full of life's unique beauty and unexpected joy. These are emotions that the protagonist had never experienced before. Here, Lockwood is trying to show how technology has a way of taking control of people, and how emotions, personal thoughts, and feelings of closeness to someone cannot simply be accessed through screens. These are emotions that must be experienced both within oneself and shared with the person one connects with. The small epiphany the protagonist experiences upon learning about her sister's pregnancy can be considered the first step of a much larger journey. This significant moment, which can also be seen as the point where the novel starts to be categorized as post-postmodernist, could be described as the point of origin of this research's argument.

Like every change, perhaps the journey back to reality from the numbness and sense of loss in oneself that technology has brought upon humanity must also begin within the individual. This is evident from the dialogue the protagonist has with someone they meet at a conference after learning about her sister's pregnancy, which seems to be Lockwood's way of illustrating this path.

"My bud's wife is pregnant too," her brother said, sipping a gold inch of scotch with an air of meditation, his face covered with the requisite rusty pubes of his time. "A bad guy, has terrible Internet poisoning. And the other day he says to me, *Saw my daughter's tits on the ultrasound. Looked pretty good!* And I was like, *Damn, dude, really?* And he just gazed far off into the distance and said, *I don't know how to act. I've been this way so long, I don't know how to be anymore.* (Lockwood, 2021, p.64)

The term "Internet poisoning" is quite significant because it emphasizes the extent of the harm that technology and Internet jargon inflicts on individuals. People have become so distant from normal dialogue and conversation between two human beings that it is almost impossible not to see the argument of people losing their sense of self, especially when a father-to-be describes seeing his daughter on an ultrasound as "I saw my daughter's tits" (p.64). This is the language of the portal. This corruption, this forgetting of how to connect

in real life, has led people to not only lose touch with themselves but also to struggle to form relationships. The protagonist's reaction of "damn, dude, really?" (p.64) reflects how far removed it is from her own response when she received similar news. What is even more important is the moment of clarity that comes with the man's final words: "I don't know how to act. I've been this way so long, I don't know how to be anymore" (p.64). This sheds light on how the generation born into technology, raised on the Internet, and living through the social media has adapted so deeply to the language and ways of interacting in that realm that it has become difficult to live, form relationships, or understand oneself outside of it. The social media jargon has infiltrated the man's vocabulary so deeply that he has forgotten how to respond naturally. Instead, like someone who has integrated random online expressions into his life, he appears before the reader as someone who has lost his authenticity. This phrase, which recurs in later parts of the novel, forms a crucial element of the argument. When the protagonist experiences the moment of the baby's birth, she recalls this sentence again: "*Saw my daughter's tits on the ultrasound. I've been this way so long, I don't know how to be anymore*" (Lockwood, 2021, p.94). The protagonist's recollection of the man's words is directly linked to her own inner journey and search for authenticity. This sentence symbolizes the impact that technology and the social media jargon have on individuals. The sense of being lost in the man's words reveals the tragedy of a person who has become disconnected from their true self and trapped within societal patterns. According to Peter Berger (1973), "The idea of authenticity emerges from the disintegration of sincerity [...] "true self" is no longer placed on the stage of public roles, but on the contrary is made manifest only in resistance to these roles" (p.82). This aligns with the protagonist's evolving understanding of the self, which develops as they confront the breakdown of sincerity and begin to resist the societal roles imposed on them, as Berger describes. When the protagonist recalls this sentence during the birth of the baby, she is trying to fully grasp the reality of that moment. The birth of her sister's child represents a profoundly personal and genuine event. In this moment, she seeks to fully experience her emotions and reactions without being influenced by the language or artificial expressions shaped by the social media and the digital world. Therefore, just as Berger mentions, the protagonist experiences an authentic moment. Perhaps for the first time, she breaks away from the hyper-connected state brought about by the social media jargon and technology, and becomes aware of the reality of the events taking place at that specific moment. She is not reading posts on the portal or writing

what has happened that day. Thus, it can be said that in this particular part, a return to authenticity has begun for the protagonist with the news that her sister is pregnant.

Lockwood (2021) describes how technology and the social media influence what Berger calls the public roles in her novel by writing:

Why were we all writing like this now? Because a new kind of connection had to be made, and blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote (p.50)

The style that the protagonist calls “writing like this” can be thought of as the style of the Twitter application that most people use in daily life. She refers to short, concise sentences and a direct style of communication as writing that can be quickly composed and easily consumed. This style reflects the influence of technology on modern habits, where people increasingly prefer simplicity and speed over long, detailed narratives. As mentioned before, the novel is written in this way, and therefore, Lockwood also criticizes this laziness through the protagonist’s questioning of why people were writing in this specific, possibly fragmented or condensed style. A possible reason a “new kind of connection” was required is that the medium such as the Internet, the social media, or a digital platform, referred to as the portal, demanded a distinct writing style- short, rapid, and direct, like “blink, synapse, little space-between” (p.50). From the perspective of authenticity, this could indicate a shift in how people express their “true selves.” In traditional conceptions of authenticity, “true self” is frequently represented through deep, introspective, and complete expressions. However, Funk (2015) claims that “[w]ith identity displayed and performed more and more in virtual and digital cyberspace, a revaluation of what it means to possess and to exhibit an individual self becomes inevitable” (p.7), just like how the fragmentary writing style on the portal may reflect a more contemporary struggle with preserving authenticity in a fast-paced, hyperconnected digital world. If the portal determines this new method of communication, there is danger that people will no longer write or express themselves authentically. Instead, individuals might be created within the limits of the portal, resulting in a loss of the deeper, more stable identity associated with authenticity. Therefore, Lockwood emphasizes the contradiction between authentic self-expression and the way technology forms communication, implying that the authenticity of communication is at risk when shaped by external, digital influences. Again, this may ultimately explain why the man in the previous example spoke in portal jargon about his daughter’s ultrasound. It can be considered as one

of the biggest examples of the fact that the long time spent on the portal, or in general, on the social media and technological tools, can be unnoticeably embedded in one's own self, and that communication in that style is now common. Thus, the person who loses themselves in scrolling down may be able to return to their true self, or perhaps rediscover it, only if they have an epiphany like the protagonist did when she learned about her sister's pregnancy.

The impact of these changing public roles in the digital age on people's sense of self appears to be something that did not happen all of a sudden, as mentioned above. Initially, technology seemed to aim at facilitating communication, with the hope of improving connections and enabling people to express themselves more effectively through digital tools. While it cannot be denied that the social media provide opportunities for self-expression and connection, it could be argued that the nature of this expression is evolving. Over time, there may be a tendency for online identities to become more similar, potentially influenced by the norms and trends commonly found on digital platforms. Lockwood (2021) describes this in the novel as follows: "It [the portal] had also once been the place where you sounded like yourself. Gradually it had become the place where we sounded like each other, through some erosion of wind or water on a self not nearly as firm as stone" (p.60). Here the protagonist implies that the social media or technology was originally a place where individuals expressed themselves authentically. This is in line with the ideal of authenticity, because authenticity refers to a situation in which one projects one's "true self" to the outside world. However, over time, the social media and technology have turned into a platform where people have started to speak with a collective voice that resembles each other. Lockwood's metaphor here is about the impact of digital platforms or the social media on individuals' sense of self. Just as something that seems as solid as stone is eroded by the elements of nature, people start to look alike and lose their authenticity through the social media. In terms of authenticity, this can be seen as a kind of "erosion of the self." The norms imposed by digital platforms, constant interaction, the culture of 'likes' and the pressure of followers push individuals to look alike, to use the same patterns, and thus, not to reflect their inner selves. The individual no longer feels obliged to be themselves, but to behave in accordance with societal expectations. As Michael Davies (2011) also states, the authentic self is something that is lying within each individual.

If 'the basic assumption built into the ideal of authenticity,' at least as it might be understood from an early twenty-first-century perspective, is that 'lying within each individual, there is a

deep, “true self” – the “Real Me” – in distinction from all that is not really me,’ an ‘inner self [...] that makes the person a unique individual’ and which constitutes a stable and self-possessed identity (p.11).

This aligns with Lockwood’s concept of authenticity. Lockwood states that individuals are losing their authenticity in the world of the social media and technology, by “making the same noises as each other” (p.11). Davies defines the ideal of authenticity. It is possible to observe how the ideal of authenticity is eroded under the influence of the social media and the digital world. Hence, it could be claimed that the subtext Lockwood wants to convey is that the social media challenge individuals’ ideal of authenticity. On the one hand, authenticity brings to the forefront a unique, individual expression derived from the inner self, while, on the other hand, platforms like the social media, under the pressure of external norms and trends, standardize individuals. According to the understanding of authenticity, every individual is unique and has a stable identity, but the social media weaken this stable identity, causing the eroding effect. People begin to shape themselves according to external pressures, leading to the loss of authenticity. As a result, the concept of authenticity implies the ability to maintain one’s inner identity and originality, while the social media and the digital world are seen as forces of erosion.

After the second half of *No One Is Talking About This*, this barrier between the self and the portal is broken, and the protagonist starts to find her authentic self with the baby: “She only knows what it is to be herself,” they kept repeating to each other. The rest was about them and what they thought a brain and body ought to be able to do” (Lockwood, 2021, p.116). It can also be said that this shift begins with the baby herself, as the protagonist first recognizes the pure authenticity embodied by the baby. After seeing how true the baby is to herself, the protagonist seems to have wanted this truthfulness for herself as well, as, especially towards the end of the novel, she starts to question her former lifestyle, the time she spent on the portal and what she read and wrote there:

Why had she entered the portal in the first place? Because she wanted to be a creature of pure call and response: she wanted to delight and to be delighted. She read, her rib cage shaking, with the voice she had used to delight the baby. (Lockwood, 2021, p.148)

The protagonist questions why she entered the portal in the first place, eventually realizing that it stems from her desire to become “a creature of pure call and response” (p.148). This metaphor reflects her pursuit of genuine connection in a world where communication has

largely become digitized, with many believing that meaningful interaction can now be achieved through social media tools. The protagonist initially embraces this belief, thinking that the portal would allow her to experience what humanity ultimately craves, that is to delight and be delighted. Her desire for “delight,” on the other hand, highlights a deeper need for true, instinctual communication that goes beyond the superficiality of online interactions. By referring to the shaking of her rib cage and the voice she used to delight the baby, the protagonist expresses her need for emotional sincerity, founded in care and vulnerability-forms of connection that feel more genuine than those mediated by the digital world. As such, it can be said that Lockwood depicts the contradiction between modern communication’s artificiality and the human need for genuine emotional exchanges, underlining the importance of authentic connection in fulfilling the desire for delight.

Just like authenticity, sincerity has become one of the increasingly rare phenomena to be seen and found in the contemporary world, especially with the acceleration of technology and the social media, which have begun to invade people’s lives and to replace all traditional means of communication. In *No One Is Talking About This*, Lockwood demonstrates the importance, loss, and rediscovery of authenticity, and the same can be observed for sincerity. In the first half of the novel, sincerity, like authenticity, is almost nonexistent. The protagonist spends most of her time on the portal, where a lynch culture is dominant, preventing people from expressing their thoughts sincerely. Generally, everyone is focused on posting things that will gain popularity on the portal- usually offensive jokes- and no one is using the portal to highlight the actual role technology and the social media should play in communication: providing easy accessibility. Over time, this situation becomes so ingrained in people’s lives that it affects not only their online personas but also their real lives and personalities. They begin to forget what genuine relationships are like, assuming that this is the only form of communication, and start living accordingly. The example used to explain authenticity- “I saw my baby’s tits on the ultrasound”- is also relevant here, as the character then suddenly realizes and almost revolts, “I don’t know any other way” (p.64). This statement serves as evidence of how difficult it has become to find genuine interactions. It could be said that the protagonist suffers from the same situation. To give an example from the early parts of the novel, even during sexual intercourse with her husband, the protagonist remains under the influence of the social media and the Internet. Believing the content she sees there to be “true,” she feels dissatisfied with the experience and begins comparing what is happening in real life to what is portrayed online.

Hadn't she opened as wide as possible earlier, hadn't she moaned, even said *yes, yes, more* as he used it on her? She had, she had. Despite all that, wasn't it still her prerogative to throb between the legs? It was. He should have to take it. (Lockwood, 2021, p.32)

In the protagonist's contemporary society, societal norms and standards are defined by the portal, and they dictate how expressions like desire, consent, and physical intimacy are shaped, resulting in a tension between what is stated outwardly and what is felt internally. The protagonist's argument that it is still "her prerogative" to have her body respond in specific ways indicates a deeper desire to maintain authenticity over her internal feelings, even in settings where there may be pressure to comply or perform. Here, despite the protagonist's earlier openness, there remains a sense of disconnection between what she has expressed outwardly and what she feels inwardly, which is an illustration of the lack of sincerity often felt in contemporary experiences. Her insistence that "he should have to take it" suggests a refusal to surrender her autonomy, signaling a desire to protect her internal authenticity in a context that might otherwise impose superficial or insincere behavior. The reason for her insincerity is that even the most intimate experience, like sexual intimacy, is approached as if it should play out automatically, just like in the media or on Internet sites. Instead of sharing the situation with her husband and being sincere, the protagonist tries to control her husband's behavior and thoughts, thinking, "he should have to take it." Another example to disconnection between the protagonist and her husband can be given not from the physical but the emotional level:

"You have a totally dead look on your face," her husband observed, as he watched her engage in mortal online combat with a person who had chosen, out of all combinations of words in the universe, the username *henry higgins was an abuser*. "Like a ventriloquist's dummy. Like a doll that haunts kids. Just totally, totally dead." Her feelings, such as they were, were hurt. He was always saying things like this just when she was at her most alive. (Lockwood, 2021, p.81-82)

The protagonist seems to be getting into an argument with someone on the portal, but her husband criticizes her by saying, "you have a dead look on your face." This highlights how digital engagement can disconnect a person from real life. By the end of the quote, the protagonist feels most "alive" at the exact moment her husband criticizes her, highlighting a inconsistency between his perception and her internal state. This moment can be seen as authentic in a way, as the protagonist openly expresses feeling hurt by his words, even though she minimizes her emotions by describing them as "such as they were." This suggests she is aware of her own sense of disconnection. As a result, she is true to herself, but it would

be a stretch to call this moment sincere. Despite feeling “alive,” if, as her husband observes, she wears a “dead look” on her face, then, she is not conveying her emotions with sincerity to those around her. As Spencer Jordan (2024) states, “we get ironic asides, memes and flashes of external detail; but the overall effect is of a narrator physically and emotionally detached” (p.182). What Jordan mentions can be traced down with this so-called intimate scene between the protagonist and her husband. It creates an insincere dynamic between them, where genuine feelings are not fully shared or perceived, even between close partners because the protagonist is still detached from herself and the ones around her. Lockwood, therefore, reflects the impact of online interactions on personal connections, where external expressions become hollow or disconnected from true emotion.

Sincerity and authenticity cannot be separated because sincerity is the outward expression of one’s inner self. About this particular topic Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal and Carel Smith (2009) claim that

[w]ith this conception, sincerity is tightly bound up with an equally traditional view of subjectivity. In order for sincerity to come to the surface and, indeed, enter the social realm, a specific notion of subjectivity is necessary. This notion assumes that we, as individuals, have an “inner self” responsible for our conduct, performances, and speeches-in effect, all the ways in which we manifest ourselves for others. (p.3)

Sincerity can also be observed in the way the characters express themselves through their actions, gestures, or unspoken moments, rather than being explicitly stated in the written text. The absence or presence of sincerity can only be understood through actions, values and beliefs of the characters. Funk (2015) supports the perspective of Alphen, Bal and Smith by stating, “[s]ince sincerity in their view is always concerned with how the individual relates to others, it necessarily implies an aspect of performance” (p.25). Lockwood (2021) appears to share these views, as she writes about what the protagonist and her family are going through now that her niece is almost at the end of her days:

Her hair had not been cut in months, and she knew the funeral might be any day, so she took an afternoon off and went to the salon. “I saw a meme the other day,” her hairstylist said, concentrating hard on the back of her head. “It was about how cowlicks are formed, and it showed a cow coming into a kid’s room at night and actually licking his hair, and that’s how it happens.” A tear slipped from her eye in the mirror. She recalled the text thread she had going with her brother, where he just sent her minor variations of the “guess I’ll die” meme, which to be honest she had never fully understood. “Oh God, did I snip you?” her stylist asked, bending

down under a curtain of benevolent hair. “No, no,” she said, laying her hand on the stylist’s arm, feeling that new and unstoppable stream of care pour out of her palm. “I was just thinking that you and I . . . have seen very different memes in our lives.” (p.132-133)

The protagonist, who is now on the verge of a loss, feels forced to maintain her appearance for the upcoming funeral. Her hairstylist’s amusing statement about cowlicks, based on a meme, creates a contradictory moment by bringing the insignificant, absurd tone of Internet humor into the serious realm of her quiet sadness. A sincere moment develops when a tear falls from her eye, her sadness coming through despite the contradiction. This cry demonstrates the intensity of her emotional state, in opposition to the casual, disconnected connections frequently produced by memes and digital humor. This moment is sincere because it is the outward expression of the protagonist’s truth at that instant. It is an authentic and sincere moment, free from any interfering factor or detachment, and Lockwood presents it to the audience as if it were a performance. Another point of true sincerity is established when the protagonist places her hand on the stylist’s arm, allowing a new flood of care to flow from her. This simple, genuine touch cuts through the digital isolation and superficiality represented by memes. Her comment, “I was just thinking that you and I... have seen very different memes in our lives,” admits the gap between their worlds. This gap can be described as the difference between someone beginning to return to reality and someone still trapped in technology and social media jargon, which is why the protagonist expresses and feels it. Therefore, this short interaction is very real, capturing both the protagonist’s desire for a genuine connection and her awareness of the societal alienation surrounding her sadness.

It would be reasonable to discuss the two seminars the protagonist attends in order to observe the transition in terms of the depictions of sincerity and authenticity between the first and second halves of the novel. Throughout the novel, the protagonist participates in two conferences to give seminars related to the portal. In the first one, she is filled with the following emotions and thoughts:

All around the world, she was invited to speak from what felt like a cloudbank, about the new communication, the new slipstream of information. She sat onstage next to men who were better known by their usernames and women who drew their eyebrows on so hard that they looked insane, and tried to explain why it was objectively funnier to spell it *sneazing*. This did not feel like real life, exactly, but nowadays what did? (Lockwood, 2021, p.16)

Lockwood creates a sense of disorientation and detachment, emphasizing the protagonist's ambivalence about the digital world and the artificiality it brings to her experiences. Invited to talk "from what felt like a cloudbank," she exists in a disconnected realm- a space that implies a lack of authenticity or sincerity. The people around her represent extreme online personas- men identified by usernames rather than real names, and women with exaggerated, almost performative features, highlighting that the protagonist's world is influenced by temporary, constantly-changing digital connections that lack the sincerity or authenticity of real-life interactions. Moreover, when she says, "this did not feel like real life, exactly, but nowadays what did?," it is implied that her sense of reality has deteriorated, and she is increasingly unable to distinguish between the digital and the real. Her life, which is filled with digital engagement, is disconnected from her personal sense of authentic experience, pointing to a larger problem of sincerity worldwide. However, given her tone and the fact that she lived in exactly this way in the first half of the novel, she, herself, is one of the very people she describes, and she proceeds to give her talk willingly and with joy. In the second part of the novel, there is another conference, which takes place nearly at the end of the novel, after the baby is born and then passes away. Lockwood (2021) writes: "The audience was silent, and the faces in the front row were shining. This did not feel like real life exactly, but nowadays what did. What she was imagining was carrying the baby through the museum, the head in her arms unheavy" (p.149), thereby echoing what she said in her previous conference. Here, the protagonist not only recognizes her audience's "shining" faces, but also slips into a delicate, intimate vision of carrying a baby through a museum, imagining the baby's head "unheavy" in her arms. The visual description provides a physical, maternal sense that contrasts sharply with the superficial, digitized environment she explores early in the narrative. The fact that she imagines the baby in her arms suggests a need for grounding, closeness, and simplicity that she cannot obtain through digital connections. The baby captures the warmth and simple, unfiltered connection she appears to be seeking. The image of holding a baby and moving gently through a museum suggests a more peaceful, intentional rhythm, sharply contrasting the chaotic, fast-paced "slipstream" of her digital life earlier in the novel. Her thoughts are in harmony with what happens around her, creating a quietly-vulnerable moment that feels like an intimate daydream during her public existence. The repeating line, "This did not feel like real life exactly, but nowadays what did?" indicates a shift from the detached, digital perception of reality during the former conference

to something more internal, introspective, and connected. In the perspective of Jordan (2024),

[t]he fact that it is a novel which spends much of its time refuting the basic premise of plot, both within its own fragmented form, but also in the metareferential asides of the narrator, is a big part of this: the novel ultimately establishes the reader's trust that beneath the performative banality of the protagonist is something much more genuine. (p.186)

Therefore, it can be said that while the first scene is distorted by digital emptiness and superficial exchanges, the second scene balances her inner and exterior experiences, emphasizing her sincerity. As such, her focus on the baby demonstrates her progress towards a more profound understanding of what feels "real." This shift represents the protagonist's transition from a life of fragmented, insincere digital interactions to one in which she values the deeper, unburdened nature of genuine real-life connections. The second moment expresses her need for something authentic, demonstrating her emotional shift towards a life less connected in digital distractions and more based on genuine, human experiences.

In the first half of the novel, the protagonist looks like she cannot stay away from the portal for just a second but, after the baby is born, she discovers the real life, comes back to it, and finds herself in the moments she shared with the baby. After that, everything she has done on the portal starts to make no sense and she moves away from it day by day. It would, therefore, not be wrong to say the protagonist experiences an epiphany. However, this epiphany does not occur suddenly with the baby's birth; rather, it unfolds gradually as she spends time with the baby and begins to discover what is truly "real." She reaches this point first by recognizing the excessive time she has spent on the portal. When she is speaking to the baby, she explains everything to her: "how it felt to go to a grocery store on vacation; to wake at three a.m. and run your whole life through your fingertips; first library card; new lipstick; a toe going numb for two months because you wore borrowed shoes to a friend's wedding" (Lockwood, 2021, p.121). She mentions "the portal, but just for a minute" (Lockwood, 2021, p.121). She wants to tell the baby about all of life, yet finds it appropriate to mention the portal, the thing that once consumed most of her life, for only a single minute. After realizing the amount of time she spends on the portal, the protagonist recognizes just how meaningless that time truly was by saying "'A minute means something to her, more than it means to us. We don't know how long she has—I can give them to her, I can give her my minute.'" then, almost angrily, "What was I doing with them before?" (Lockwood, 2021,

p.124). As the things she once spent time on start to seem meaningless, the only thing that holds true value now is spending time with the baby. This point she arrives at can be interpreted as both the protagonist discovering her own self- becoming authentic- and starting to create more genuine relationships, thus becoming sincere. There are two peak moments of this epiphany throughout the novel, the first of which is at the baby's funeral. Lockwood (2021) once again conveys sincerity to the reader through a performance:

At the funeral home, as the family sat down for a meeting with the funeral director, her brother fucked up and somehow introduced himself as the baby's *husband*. Their laughter approached hysteria, tears streaked down their faces, they gripped each other's arms and could not stop. She closed her eyes against her brother's shoulder and saw him carrying the baby into the woods, where his green skills waited to keep them all safe. (p.137)

The family's experience with the protagonist's brother's mistake causes shared laughter, demonstrating how humor and sorrow overlap, especially during moments of intense emotion. The image of the protagonist closing her eyes against her brother's shoulder is the performance of the sincerity, signifying comfort and connection in a moment of profound anguish. Her image of him "carrying the baby into the woods" to a place where his "green skills waited to keep them all safe" contributes a touch of imaginative hope, where sincerity goes beyond sorrow to a desire for protection and connection that overcomes the loss. As Alphen, Bal and Smith (2009) mention, "sincerity is not something that can necessarily be "read off" a text, as if there exists a direct relationship between a word (or image) and the emotional condition of its author" (p.244). By blending humor and sorrow, Lockwood creates a moment both authentic and sincere as the family embraces emotion in its full, plain form, reflecting a sincerity that is not about expressing grief in a "proper" way but about letting real feelings come forward, however contradictory they might be. This makes this scene one of the clearest moments of *No One Is Talking About This* that the sincerity is foregrounded.

The other, and perhaps the greatest, moment of epiphany is the ending of the novel. It would be insufficient to describe the ending solely as an epiphany, as it also incorporates the broader conclusions drawn from this research. To provide a brief framework, one needs to return to the moment when the protagonist gives her second seminar. At the end of the novel, the protagonist realizes her phone has been stolen after the seminar. Lockwood (2021) describes this moment as follows:

Afterward, and after many drinks, people from the audience led her down winding side streets to a club with no name. The club was a crush, one body. A mirror at the back that she first thought was another room, until she saw her own face at the center of it. A sign on the wall that said OASIS. At first she could not dance at all, and then she could not stop. The songs they played were preposterous; were her personal American embarrassments; the ones that had marked her as backward, provincial, unsubtle as a major chord. They played “Rock and Roll All Nite.” They played “Seven Nation Army.” They thumped up and down like Ohioans to “Sweet Caroline.” Oh, she said to herself, I did not know. The songs all along had been beloved. The whole club pressed against her and she thought of Little Touch; her eyes traveled to all the places she was kissed, places all over the world. She wondered was it worth it to show up, hear a little music, and then leave? Someone at some point slid her phone out of her pocket and she lifted off her feet, lighter. Her whole self was on it, if anyone wanted. Someone would try to unlock it later, and see the picture of the baby opening her mouth, about to speak, about to say anything. (p.149-150)

In this scene, the protagonist’s night out at the club transforms into a rare, passionate moment of self-discovery. Initially, she feels embarrassed and out of place, unable to dance, and shocked by the “preposterous” American songs dominating the room. These songs, such as “Rock and Roll All Nite” and “Sweet Caroline,” have always seemed trashy to her. However, when she watches the audience embrace them without irony, something in her changes. She understands that these songs are not simply embarrassing artifacts; they are liked by others. It is a kind of revelation. Something she once dismissed as shallow might actually hold true value for others, and she finds herself unexpectedly caught up in that love, feeling her own connection to this shared experience. It is precisely here that what Timmer (2010) says about post-postmodernism can be brought into the discussion:

This new self is predicated on communication and connection, precisely because it is fragmented. Since it is without foundation, the self can only precariously manifest itself in negotiation, as a communal or at least reciprocal act which ‘forces (if only by an awkward leap of faith) into being a “you and me,” a “we” – a structure activated only by a form of responsiveness.’ (p.46)

With post-postmodernism’s focus on authenticity and its shifting perspective on irony, the return to one’s “true self” also brings with it a need for a sense of “we.” This can be seen as the point where authenticity and sincerity intersect. In this scene, Lockwood might be illustrating this for the reader through both performance and a “read-off” approach. The true self reveals itself, perhaps even finds itself, within a community. In an environment free of any technological elements and where the social media are absent and unused, the

protagonist accesses her fully authentic self simply by surrendering to the crowd, a single body, dancing in a way she previously felt she could not or did not know she was capable of. The image of the mirror here also contributes to this argument as the protagonist initially thought it was another room but then saw her face in the center. In that moment, she indeed is at the center, and it leads her to a genuine connection with people around her. She does not feel detached from the world around her; she is part of it, uniting with everyone else in the rhythms of the night. This embrace of vulnerability and presence brings a kind of sincerity she rarely encounters in her life. Afterwards, the protagonist realizes her phone has been stolen from her pocket, and the first thing she feels is relief. For someone who was once so attached to her technological devices, living almost her entire life on the portal, conducting all her communication there, and believing she found her identity within it, this reaction is far from what might have been expected upon losing the phone that held her “whole self.” However, the protagonist has now come to understand what is “real.” True relationships and one’s true self are too deep to be contained by technological interfaces, and, since the arrival of the baby, she has gradually started integrating this understanding into her life. It is as if letting go of her whole self, all the images, texts, and memories stored on that device, allows her to be present in the moment without the weight of her digital life holding her back. The photograph she values the most on that phone is one of the baby “about to speak,” a memory so intensely personal and important that it captures everything real and true to her. Despite her fear of losing this piece of herself, she also feels a sense of liberation from letting it go. Her relationship to the baby no longer relies on the phone or any digital record. It is something she carries within herself, unmediated by screens or filters. At that moment, all she can think about is how the brief life and lived experiences of the baby, captured in those photos on her phone, might inspire the person who stole it when they unlock the screen and see them.

In the light of all these, it can be concluded that in *No One Is Talking About This*, Patricia Lockwood tells the story of returning to reality. Moving away from the postmodern sense of nihilism, where reality is viewed as multiple and any true or singular reality seems impossible, the novel begins to embrace the idea that truth and authenticity exist, and can be found within oneself and in genuine connections. The novel’s experimental nature arises from its engagement with both postmodernism and 21st-century themes and tropes. Lockwood critiques the digital era by writing the novel in a style reminiscent of social media posts, mirroring the kind of readily-accessible information people seek in a digitalized world.

This stylistic choice is what gives the novel its postmodernist edge. Yet, in terms of content, the novel leans towards a post-postmodernist outlook, as the protagonist's transformation becomes more evident in the second half of the novel. As Jordan (2024) mentions,

[i]f one ending of the novel is of a woman released from her addiction to social media, then another is of the creation of a new form of writing, one that, at least as far as the author is concerned, is able to capture something of what it feels like to be alive today. (p.186)

The protagonist's departure from the portal signifies an important personal development in which she finds meaning outside of the continuous loop of digital acceptance, regaining richer and more authentic and sincere life experiences. Therefore, *No One Is Talking About This* can be considered experimental both in its writing style and in the themes it explores as "extreme conceptualism and extreme materiality, multimediality and media-specificity, being 'born digital' and being hand-made- all of these, and many others, are ways of being experimental in literature" (Bray, Gibbons, McHale, 2012, p.1). The novel's ending indicates a transition in both the protagonist and literature itself. One conclusion represents the protagonist's liberation from her digital addiction, while the other represents a new type of writing that captures the fractured, overstimulated sensation of contemporary existence as Jordan (2024) mentions by saying "a means by which to imitate the artificiality and fraudulence of contemporary existence, while concurrently establishing a reconstructive relationship with the reader in which intimations of hope and truthfulness are made possible" (p.187). This combination of postmodern structure and post-postmodern themes of authenticity and sincerity positions the novel as both a critique of the digital age and a demand for deeper, more human connections in an increasingly detached society. Ultimately, *No One Is Talking About This* is a stylistic and thematic experiment that not only criticizes the disconnectedness of the digital era, but also encourages a return to real and genuine connections, redefining what it means to be truly "alive" in the contemporary age.

3. JENNIFER EGAN'S

THE CANDY HOUSE

Jennifer Egan explores the changing nature of the self and relationships influenced by technology in the modern world in her latest novel *The Candy House* (2022), much like Patricia Lockwood. While it can be said that the two authors share many similarities in content and structure, they also have their differences. As a sequel and companion work to Egan's previous work, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), *The Candy House* (2022) expands and enhances the narrative universe she developed more than ten years ago. In one of her interviews with Jane Ciabaattari, regarding the interconnectedness of *The Candy House* with *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan states:

There are still characters I'd like to examine more closely but haven't been able to approach with enough success to create compelling fiction. My methodology, such as it is, has amounted to following my curiosity and hoping for the best. As to whom I was most curious about, I think two things dictated that: one was a sense of knowing things about certain people that I wanted readers to know—for example, that Bix Bouton, who makes a very brief appearance in *Goon Squad*, would go on to invent social media. I was eager to revisit Bix after he's become a tech icon. Another thing that piqued my curiosity was a sense that certain characters were quite opaque, which made me want to burst inside their inner lives and experience the world from their perspective. (Ciabaattari, 2022, para.6)

This connection places *The Candy House* within a broader literary investigation of interconnected lives, memory, and the continuously changing structure of society, in addition to reinforcing the thematic and structural originality that characterizes Egan's storytelling. Egan further elaborates on the internal and collective consequences of this digitally-dominated age by integrating these two novels together and bringing readers into an expanded universe where technology's significant impact on human relationships is highlighted. Through the perspectives of numerous characters, these novels depict separate yet connected stories that illustrate the consequences of both unique and common experiences. *The Candy House* expands on *A Visit from the Goon Squad*'s innovative structure and exploration of time, authenticity and sincerity. Egan reintroduces both new and familiar characters from *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, immersing the reader in a world where technological advancements challenge and redefine the nature of connection and memory. She offers a deeper narrative framework by presenting *The Candy House* as a thematic

extension or sequel, which allows a more thorough examination of how technology changes the perceptions of identity, sincerity and authenticity.

In *The Candy House*, technology serves as both a narrative device and a thematic focal point, representing the novel's investigation into authenticity, connection, and memory in a digitally-dominated society, as Egan (2016) herself explains: "Yet the great irony of our technological age is that the phoniness of mediated experience leaves us craving authenticity that only more media can seem to satisfy" (p. 461). At the heart of this technological framework is the creation of "Own Your Unconscious," a fictional network that enables users to externalize, store, and even share their memories with others. This technology acts as a metaphor for Egan's broader concerns about privacy, identity, and the social consequences of connection. Bix Bouton, who could be called one of the central characters of the novel, invents the "Own Your Unconscious" technology in 2016. Bix's invention of this technology actually stems from a traumatic event. During his youth, while he was at university, Bix, Drew, and Rob form a close trio of friends. One night, during an outing, they walk to a river and decide to swim, but Rob drowns and dies. After this, his friendship with Drew is no longer the same, and they begin to drift apart. Later, during an existential crisis, Bix returns to the river where Rob drowned but struggles to recall the event that changed all three young lives forever.

He'd run into Rob and Drew in the wee hours in the East Village and done E with them, and the three of them had crossed the overpass to the river together, at sunrise. The impulsive swim happened after Bix had gone home, farther down the river. Although he'd repeated every detail about that morning for the police inquest, it was vague to him now. Seventeen years had passed. He could hardly picture the two boys. (Egan, 2022, p.10)

When Bix initially invented this technology, his main goal was to enable people to revisit life-altering events and reintegrate those experiences into their lives. For himself, he wanted to remember this significant event that he had started to forget, to see who he truly was back then and to reconnect with that version of himself, rather than the tech demigod he had become. Just before creating this technology, he was lost as he says at the very beginning of the novel: "I have this craving" (Egan, 2022, p.3). What this means is that he lost his authenticity and sincerity, and he craves to have them back. He acted with his wife and children as he was "supposed to," but whenever he found a moment, he would wander aimlessly through the streets, searching for his true self. This scene unfolds during one of

those moments, leading him, through his existing tech company, Mandala, to create Own Your Unconscious. However, as previously mentioned, when it comes to technology, it often fails to serve its original purpose, deteriorating in ways that lead people not to rediscover themselves or the importance of their relationships but, on the contrary, to lose them. The Own Your Unconscious concept is both a tool for individual memory retrieval and a societal platform, allowing users to download the memories of others, resulting in a massive and shared consciousness that redefines the boundaries of human interaction. It promises better connection and understanding but it also leads to new forms of alienation. People are no longer isolated from their memories, and the constant availability of others' perspectives and memories blurs the distinction between personal identity and collective memory. Throughout *The Candy House*, characters use Own Your Unconscious with varying degrees of skepticism and enthusiasm, reflecting the different ways in which people adapt to, reject, or are affected by this technology. The technology raises problems about authenticity and sincerity: if memories can be shared, changed, or commodified, what happens to the integrity of personal experience? Egan's representation of technology serves as a mirror, reflecting the real-world concerns about the digital age's impact on human connections and the perception of the self.

In doing so, it could be argued that, like Patricia Lockwood, Egan adopts a postmodern structure while leaning toward post-postmodern themes. This is consistent with the observation that "much contemporary fiction indeed continues to pursue postmodern styles" (Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen, 2017, p.90). The reasons *The Candy House* possesses a postmodern structure include its fragmented writing style, incorporation of hyperreal elements, and blending of different genres. However, before discussing these, it is important to highlight another notable postmodern element: the recurring pattern of "word casings" in the novel. As is integral to postmodernism, themes of meaninglessness and emptiness are frequently used. Nothing has a definitive meaning, and a sense of void prevails. This also applies to words, and the "word casings" that suddenly appear in parts of the story that often lack meaning. Yet, they serve a purpose: that is to show how even dialogues have become meaningless in a hyperconnected world. To give a specific example from the novel:

"How is our Athena?" Gregory projected, with effort, toward his open bedroom door. In the weeks since a mysterious fatigue had confined him to his bed, Gregory and Dennis had perfected

the art of conversing between rooms. “Unchanged,” Dennis said. “*Topical. Fearsome.*” He popped briefly into Gregory’s doorframe. “*Poison,*” Gregory said.

“Aaaaaant.” Dennis made a buzzer noise. “Word-casing.” “True,” Gregory reflected. “‘Poison’ is no longer toxic.” “‘Toxic’ isn’t toxic,” Dennis said.

“‘Toxic’ is anodyne,” Gregory agreed. “‘Robust’ is limp. ‘Catalyze’ fails to react.”

“The ‘silos’ and ‘buckets’ are empty,” Dennis said. “What about ‘empty’?” Gregory said. “Is ‘empty’ empty?”

“‘Empty’ is supposed to be empty,” Dennis said. “‘Empty’ fails by being full.” “But does ‘empty’ convey *enough* emptiness?” They could do this all day. (Egan, 2022, p.306)

This is a part of the novel’s last chapter entitled “Eureka Gold.” In this part of the novel, Dennis and Gregory, who is Bix’s son, talk about their friend Athena. Egan depicts a very postmodern perspective on language, using the concept of “word-casing” to demonstrate how words have become empty shells, deprived of their original meaning. Gregory and Dennis’ humorous, almost absurd conversation about language demonstrates a sense of inconsistency in trying to find actual meaning in words that have become “empty.” The two friends examine keywords such as “poison,” “toxic,” “robust,” and “empty,” understanding that these words no longer carry the same amount of importance as they once did; they have become buzzwords, missing the ability to convey their genuine meaning. This is a defining feature of postmodern thought, in which language is perceived as increasingly insufficient or separated from reality. As Jean-François Lyotard (1997) argues: “[t]he grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation” (p.37). The phrase “word-casing” implies that words are now simply containers or “casings” that once contained meaning but are now meaningless, reflecting the postmodern perspective that language frequently fails to express the true human experience. Gregory and Dennis’ dialogue highlights the irony and humor of postmodern communication, as they challenge the means they are using to communicate. Their dialogue is both playful and unsettling as it illustrates how, in a hyperconnected world, language can become diminished, leaving individuals with words that sound empty or performative instead of meaningful. On this particular topic, Jordan (2024) states:

Egan uses the term “word casings” to describe the contemporary situation when words have become nothing but empty shells, existing only as ironic signifiers, trapped within quotation marks. And it is this emptying out of meaning, the sort of thing that David Foster Wallace railed against in “E Unibus Pluram” (1993), that Egan’s experimental technique is equally a response to. (p.209)

Egan’s use of “word casings” corresponds with David Foster Wallace’s argument in *E Unibus Pluram*, which discusses how irony and media culture have drained words of their sincerity, leaving them as hollow signifiers. In *The Candy House*, the term “word casings” symbolizes this postmodern nothingness, depicting words as empty shells with no true substance. By using these empty signifiers repeatedly in the novel itself, Egan emphasizes their performative aspect, implying that language has become a tool for irony rather than authentic speech. This strategy might be viewed as a response to Wallace’s critique of the postmodern condition, in which the excessive use of irony and hyper-awareness in media culture results in a widespread sense of detachment from meaning as he states in *E Unibus Pluram* (1993): “irony tyrannizes us. The reason why our pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is impossible to pin down. All irony is a variation on a sort of existential poker-face” (p.183). Egan’s experimental approach emphasizes this point, demonstrating how, in a hyperconnected and media-saturated world, even the most basic communication tools, such as, language itself can lose their authenticity and become little more than gestures or simulations of genuine sentiment.

Another significant postmodern element in *The Candy House* is the chapter entitled “Lulu the Spy, 2032.” This chapter is an expanded version of a short story originally titled “Black Box,” which was first published as a series of tweets on *The New Yorker*’s Twitter page and later printed in *The New Yorker* (2012). The story “became a key locus for subsequent critical attention, with much of this emerging scholarship focusing on its use of digital technology” (O’Riordan and Rouverol, 2021, p.141). These tweets were shared one by one in the evenings at 9 p.m. in 2012. Egan firstly compiled these tweets to be published as a chapter called “Black Box” in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and then compiled them to create the “Lulu the Spy, 2032” chapter in *The Candy House*. In this section of the argument, it should be clarified that critics such as Butchard, O’Riordan, and Reuverol, who reference the “Lulu the Spy, 2032” chapter by its previous title “Black Box,” will be noted accordingly, since all these studies were published before *The Candy House* in 2022. Therefore, in this research, the short story referred to by these critics as “Black Box” will be discussed under

the title “Lulu the Spy, 2032.” To give a brief explanation of what happens in the chapter, Jennifer Egan’s chapter “Lulu the Spy, 2032” takes the character Lulu through a futuristic world of spying and surveillance. Lulu, a spy, is equipped with modern technology that allows her to collect and transfer information secretly. She can record and share data without raising suspicion due to body implants and cognitive upgrades, thus transforming herself into a human recording device for a larger organization. Lulu’s experiences through the mission depict the ethical and psychological challenges of a hyperconnected future. Her work blurs the distinction between her personal identity and her role as a spy, addressing concerns about privacy, identity, and control in a world where everyone is constantly monitored. However, what makes this chapter postmodern is not so much what it narrates but rather the narrative structure Egan employs. According to Dorothy Butchard (2019),

this attention to changing trends within language and new media extends to Egan’s literary experimentation with new technological forms, most notably in Goon Squad’s much-praised ‘PowerPoint chapter’ and the serialization on Twitter of the short story ‘Black Box.’ Egan’s use of PowerPoint and Twitter explores the creative possibilities of new technological media, in her most formally experimental pieces of writing to date. Her engagement with the software platform itself is limited; in both cases, she wrote the content out by hand first, before painstakingly transferring it to the technological medium. (p.368)

In the story referred to as “Black Box,” Egan chose to present it in PowerPoint format. However, Lulu’s story in *The Candy House* appears to readers in the same format as it was originally published on Twitter. It consists of condensed sentences that do not exceed Twitter’s 140-character limit, delivering the main point in short, definitive statements. This chapter’s publication on Twitter and its tweet-like writing style make it quite similar to Patricia Lockwood’s *No One Is Talking About This*. In this relatively long chapter, while reading Lulu’s story, the pages are vertically divided into two sections, with section numbers separating them. The story, written as tweets on both sides of the dividing line, is also written in the second person and includes imperative sentences. As such, it would not be wrong to say that this chapter in particular is fragmented, and accordingly, postmodern. According to Mark Currie (1998) “The text is fragmented into numbered paragraphs which makes it rather unlinear, but this is clearly part of the point” (p.157). This fragmented structure, with each tweet-like line providing brief, to-the-point statements, reflects the postmodern concept of fragmentation and decentralization. It expects readers to piece together the story from fragmented thoughts, mirroring how information is absorbed in the digital age.

Another notable instance of postmodern structure in *The Candy House* can be observed in the “See Below” chapter is written solely through e-mails, without first-person, second-person, or omniscient narration. This chapter centers on Lulu, introduced in the “Lulu the Spy, 2032” chapter, and her quest to find her father. Noticing that Lulu has been unable to recover from her espionage work and recent mission, her husband begins looking into ways to help her, both to shed light on a hidden, unknown part of her life so she might rediscover her sense of self, and to relieve her of the almost paranoid state she is in. While on spy missions, Lulu is equipped with advanced technology, essentially a chip or device in her brain, that records the mission, capturing her every thought and memory. After returning from the mission, her husband notices Lulu speaking as if someone were always listening, carefully choosing her words. This spurs him into action. While the search begins with Lulu reconnecting with old friends, it soon evolves into an adventure to find her father, who is now a film star. What makes this story postmodern, however, is not its plot but its narrative style. Egan delivers this whole story through a series of e-mails. The e-mail chain, involving twenty-one people, gives the reader the sensation of piecing together a puzzle while uncovering both individual and collective stories that interweave throughout the narrative.

Kitty Jackson→Lulu Kisarian; bcc: Ashleigh Avila Dear Lulu,

Wowowowowowowowow... is it really you?!? So sorry you got caught in the snares of my

manager/publicist/assistant/mama bear, who tries to make things (and people) disappear without my knowing they ever existed!

I’ve spent the past fifteen minutes catching up on your achievements. Scotty Hausmann’s Footprint Concert... What????? SOOOOO IMPRESSED!!! I’ve pretended that I was AT that concert, but I’ll know better than to try that with you! I trust your mom is alive and well? Send news! And tell me, of course, how I can help.

Xxxxoooo Love, Kitty. (Egan, 2022, p. 255)

Both the use of expressions like “wowowow” to indicate a state of shock, “xoxo” to mean hugs and kisses, as well as the capitalization, and the numerous exclamation marks are elements that make Egan’s writing style in this chapter postmodern. Egan’s use of an e-mail format for advancing the plot emphasizes fragmented, mediated communication as a storytelling tool. The e-mail style differs from typical narrative formats, replacing a continuous, omniscient voice with a sequence of intimate, fragmentary communications.

According to Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (1992), “[i]n postmodern narratives temporality has little to do with historical conventions; instead it is multivalent and nonlinear” (p.21). Therefore, Egan’s e-mail structure illustrates postmodernism’s embrace of non-linear storytelling, where the narrative unfolds through isolated fragments or interactions, requiring readers to piece together the story from various perspectives. Each e-mail has its own tone and context, building the story in a decentralized manner as “our world is marked by a degree of interconnectedness, virtual reality, decentralization, heterogeneity, genre (and genetic) blurring, surveillance and meta-awareness” (Bray, Gibbons and McHale, 2012, p.442). In the perspective of Funk,

the dissociation of reality and (its) representation which characterizes much of postmodern theory is mirrored in the development of the communicative patterns which have accompanied it. Just as the rise of printing had inaugurated a period of logocentrism and the virtually automatic authority of the written or printed word, the spread of computation-based forms of knowledge acquisition and interaction around the turn of the twenty-first century, from e-mail to social networks and from Google to copy-and-paste, is having fundamental reverberations on many aspects of human self-perception. (Funk, 2015, p.44)

Funk illustrates the “dissociation of reality and its representation,” a fundamental postmodern idea that corresponds to how Egan perceives mediated communication and the emptying out of language in digital contexts. Funk states a movement from the authority of the printed word to digital forms such as e-mail and the social media, which resonates with Egan’s approach to create chapters as e-mail exchanges or tweets. This structural choice highlights how digital communication can change or diminish meaning by making words less about true expression. The digital communication tools from the example of the chapter “See Below” indicate a focus on emotional shortcut rather than direct or unmediated reality. Thus, Funk’s perspective regarding digital-based interaction altering “human self-perception” is consistent with Egan’s use of postmodern narrative techniques that depict the superficial, frequently-fragmented communication patterns characteristic of contemporary digital age. In its essence, *The Candy House* demonstrates postmodernism through its distinctive structure, which uses fragmented formats such as e-mails and tweets to reflect the broken, mediated nature of contemporary communication and identity in the digital age.

Yet, at the same time, much like Patricia Lockwood, Jennifer Egan also uses this postmodern structure. While, in terms of content and themes, the novel is closer to post-

postmodernism. As McLaughlin (2004) states, postmodernism “collaborates with the culture of consumer technology to create a society of style without substance, of language without meaning, of cynicism without belief, of virtual communities without human connection, of rebellion without change” (p.66). He emphasizes that postmodernism advocates for a society shaped by consumer technology, in which truth and authenticity are abandoned in favor of superficial representations and detachment. According to McLaughlin, postmodernism promotes a “society of style without substance,” emphasizing how things seem rather than what they truly are, resulting in superficiality. Language, as well, becomes “language without meaning,” as words are seen as changeable and frequently empty, close to the state of genuineness. Nonetheless, McLaughlin (2004) goes on by explaining what happens after postmodernism in the contemporary literature era when post-postmodernism is being embraced by contemporary authors:

Post-postmodernism seeks not to reify the cynicism, the disconnect, the atomized privacy of our society nor to escape or mask it (as much art, serious and pop, does), but, by engaging the language-based nature of its operations, to make us newly aware of the reality that has been made for us and to remind us - because we live in a culture where we're encouraged to forget- that other realities are possible. (p.67)

Post-postmodernism defines itself by rejecting the reinforcement of cynicism, disconnection, and isolated privacy that frequently characterizes contemporary culture (Hoberek, 2007, p.241). Rather than continuing or seeking to escape these characteristics, post-postmodernism responds to them directly in order to raise awareness. Post-postmodernism aims to shed light on the created aspect of reality by emphasizing the language and institutions that shape perception. Huber highlights the transition from postmodernist to post-postmodernist attitudes, emphasizing how contemporary fiction shifts its focus. He defines contemporary fiction as “a fiction that is no longer centrally concerned with unmasking, dissolving, subverting and unsettling, but sets out to gradually displace postmodernism’s fantastic paranoia by attempts to reconstruct, (re-)connect, communicate and engage” (Huber, 2014, 24). Therefore, it could be argued that instead of simply accepting this created reality by postmodernism as an unchanging fact, post-postmodernism acts as a reminder that other realities and ways of being are possible. In a digital culture that usually favors complacency or detachment, post-postmodernism serves as an inspiration, creating a new determination to explore possibilities, reconnect with purpose, and create a more authentic community (McLaughlin, 2004, p.67). Authenticity is a significant part of the

novel and, obviously, of post-postmodernism, but before delving into that area, it would be more appropriate to shed light on how Egan transitions from postmodern thinking to post-postmodernism in *The Candy House*.

Within the context of exploring postmodernism, examples were provided using the character of Lulu and the narrative of her story. This section focuses on analyzing the story of Roxy Kline from the chapter “Bright Day” from *The Candy House* in order to examine the characteristics of post-postmodernism. To give a brief summary of what happens in the chapter, Roxy Kline, a complex woman with a traumatic background, decides to use the Mandala Consciousness Cube, which allows her to externalize and preserve her memories. “She has no interest in other people’s memories. She wants only to relive her best days” (Egan, 2022, p.145). At the start of the chapter, Roxy reflects on her background, her drug use, and her desire for affirmation from her father. She has a glimmer of hope that this technology would allow her to regain her memories without facing the physical and mental pain associated with them. She wishes to reconnect with a moment when she felt more alive and satisfied as Roxy’s life has been defined by a sense of loss and wasted opportunities, depicted through her perspectives on family relationships, difficulties with addiction, and memories of her distant and self-centered father. However, Chris Salazar, the son of Bennie Salazar who is a character present in both *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and *The Candy House* (2022), a younger friend, mentor, and the Dungeons and Dragons game leader, warns her couple of times by saying, “If it stopped there, maybe,” she’s heard him say, “but it never stops there. The collective is like gravity: Almost no one can withstand it. In the end, they give it everything. And then the collective is that much more omniscient” (Egan, 2022, p.145). What Chris calls “stopping there” refers to only uploading his own memories to the Cube without sharing them with the collective. Jeffrey K. Olick (2008) provides an insightful perspective on the subject: “Memory, our common sense tells us, is a fundamentally individual phenomenon. What could be more individual than remembering, which we seem to do in the solitary world of our own heads as much as in conversation with others?” (p.152). Nevertheless, in the world Egan has created, memories have ceased to be individual and have become societal, as all the memories can be uploaded to “the Collective.” People can access each other’s memories, observe them, and even perceive the emotions and thoughts within them. Roxy, however, is at a point in her life that could be considered its final phase, and she wants to take one last journey by re-living the memories that make her feel more alive. Chris, on the other hand, is concerned for her because, as a younger character, he understands the workings of the Consciousness Cube better

than Roxy does. Perhaps sensing the potential harm it could bring, he repeatedly warns her. In fact, Chris's attitude toward Roxy is one of the elements that makes this chapter post-postmodern, because, as Timmer (2010) notes, "the post-postmodern novel hinges on creating empathy (between characters, between narrators and characters, between narrators or characters and narratee, between fictional figures and the flesh and blood 'real' reader)" (p.360). Chris's worry creates an emotional bond between him and Roxy, revealing a human connection that goes beyond storytelling. His empathy through the whole chapter towards Roxy exemplifies the post-postmodern quality Timmer defines, as it demonstrates a character who is deeply concerned with the emotional well-being of another.

Indeed, Chris' words come true; the Mandala Cube does more than just access plain memories; it also stimulates a "swarm of memories" (Egan, 2022, p. 153), including a clear remembrance of a trip to London with her father, which reveals her deepest emotions and regrets. This immersion in memories creates both joy and sorrow for her. The events during the London trip unfold as Egan (2022) describes:

After lunch, they all took a walk. Her father held her hand. (...) As the musicians tried to push one another in, their manager turned suddenly to Roxy and asked, "What do you plan to do with your life?" (...) Roxy said, "I want to make my mark," with such crisp finality that both men laughed in surprise. She felt her father's pride, exhilarating and new. Long after the musicians had drifted away, Roxy stayed with her father and the band's manager, walking and talking long into the night. At ten o'clock, the sun was still up. It was the happiest day of her life.

"I want to live with you," she told her father on the plane ride back to Los Angeles. She was still drinking champagne, although he had stopped.

"Won't work, Rox," he said. "I travel too much. And Kiki would miss you." "She'd be glad to get rid of me."

"Everyone needs a sibling they can be close to."

"I could come with you when you travel. Like now." "Be fun, wouldn't it?"

He wore his reading glasses. Papers were stacked on his airplane tray, and a pile of cassette tapes he needed to "give a listen" on his Walkman. She understood then that their trip had ended. The perfect harmony she felt with her father, a symbiosis that made her old life obsolete, had been temporary. She started to cry. (p.154-155)

Roxy's day with her father includes an intensely emotional moment of connection and hope. Her ambition to "make her mark" is received with joy, giving her a rare sense of pride and confirmation from her father. Post-postmodernism encourages genuine reactions, and this moment gets readers into Roxy's emotional world, creating empathy with her need for acceptance and connection, again demonstrating Timmer's ideas on empathy, but this time it is not between characters, but between the character and the reader. What Roxy experiences can actually be described as the breakdown of the nothingness and meaninglessness inherent in postmodernist thinking, through the lens of post-postmodernism. After re-living a memory from her past with the same emotions and thoughts, Roxy is overwhelmed with feelings. Initially, she believes she is sharing a deeply-sincere moment with her father, feels proud of her younger self, and realizes how alive she felt. However, all these thoughts and emotions are shattered toward the end, when the subject of living together with her father comes up and he rejects her. At that moment, she confronts her true self and the reality of time. Roxy's experiences in this particular scene can be described precisely through Irmtraud Huber's (2014) perspective of "transformation of postmodernist attitudes" (p.24). She unmask herself, her younger self, reconnects with herself, and ultimately engages with herself. This brings the argument to the theme of authenticity, one of the core elements of post-postmodernism. It would not be wrong to suggest that Roxy might have chosen to re-live and experience this specific story from the "swarm of memories," as it is the memory of when she felt most alive, yet also experienced the deepest wounds to her sense of self. She is forced to make peace with it. Her tears at the end, as she realizes that this part of her life was obsolete yet temporary, can also be described as an authentic moment since this act of memory reconstruction gives Roxy closure and sets the path for a new sense of self, as Alicia J. Rouverol (2021) suggests: "the desire to assess the personal past, to resolve prior difficulties in search of new beginnings, serves as a driving force for many of Egan's characters" (p. 281). Roxy, too wants to make a new beginning as she says in the last sentence in this chapter, "to Chris and Molly, 'I'm ready to make my character. Will you help?'" (Egan, 2022, p. 158). This is a reference to the game of Dungeons and Dragons; however, after everything Roxy experiences with re-living that memory with her father in London, she has an epiphany of who she really is and she is willing to explore more of herself, create a self that is unfiltered from all the societal and individual chains and even her own deceptions about the way she remembers her past and find her authentic self. Therefore, Roxy's journey in "Bright Day" provides post-postmodernism's emphasis on

authenticity and the life-changing impact of memory, as she goes into her history to discover herself as unfiltered, and “real” even if she does not like what she sees or even if she is broken by it.

As previously discussed, authenticity is a crucial component of post-postmodernism because, in a world increasingly shaped by the media and new technology, the notion of authenticity has transformed into something that often feels artificial and performative. Egan (2016) takes the issue of authenticity in the digital age quite seriously: “More mediation leads naturally to fetishization of the “real” as we sense that we’re getting less of it” (p.460). As interactions and experiences are increasingly mediated and filtered through technology, the media, or other layers, the concept of the “real” becomes intriguing, even idealized. The more people feel disconnected from true, unfiltered encounters, the more they “fetishize” or obsess over the concept of authenticity and reality. This contradiction arises because, as the perception of close connection decreases, the significance of “realness” increases. In *The Candy House*, Egan delves deeply into the concept of authenticity. She acknowledges inauthenticity as a problem of the contemporary world and provides insights into how individuals might reclaim their “true self” amidst the personas created by technology and the social media. The Own Your Unconscious technology, much like Lockwood’s portal in *No One Is Talking About This*, is a technological tool that undermines individual authenticity because, as noted earlier, people grant access to both their own memories and those of others. As Alexander Moran (2021) notes, “Egan’s fiction is much more concerned with *experiences of authenticity*, particularly in relation to tourism, technology, genre, and memory” (p.6). The way Own Your Unconscious technology destabilizes authenticity can be explained by claiming that people’s pasts, regardless of how they were experienced, are already completed and have become part of their personalities. One’s character is largely shaped by past experiences, and no matter how they are remembered- whether accurately or influenced by perspective- those experiences are embedded in a person’s sense of self. However, revisiting the past and realizing that supposedly accurate memories may have been deteriorated by one’s own perception can create an identity crisis, as seen in Roxy’s example. This is the primary way in which Own Your Unconscious disrupts authenticity. About this very issue, Jordan (2024) comments that “In *The Candy House*, in particular, there is clearly an emphasis on the creation of a form that is able to deconstruct its own truth-telling as a way of establishing its authentic intent” (p.209). The memories, exchanges, and even straightforward stories in *The Candy House* are all narrated from the perspective of one or

multiple characters. Therefore, rather than attempting to present a narrative that might be perceived as representing reality or truth, in *The Candy House*, Egan adopts strategies that emphasize the fragile nature and subjectivity of truth itself. By doing so, Egan seeks to express genuine intent, demonstrating that true authenticity may arise from understanding that “truth” is often complex, subjective, and difficult to fully grasp. Therefore, each character’s story, their way of reaching authenticity, and their understanding of sincerity is different. There is not a single reality, but this is not a nihilist postmodern approach; rather, there is reality, but each character’s perception of it is unique to themselves. As Huber (2014) suggests, “while the work of the younger generation draws on postmodernist playfulness and artificiality, it does so in ‘an appeal to the individual, an ethical imperative even, to preserve their unique and genuine, authentic, understanding of the greater frame of reference, in which their existence is played out’” (p.30). While contemporary authors, including Egan, incorporate postmodern elements such as irony and artificiality, they do so with a larger aim, that is, emphasizing the individual’s responsibility to maintain a true and genuine perception of the broader reality, which remains uniquely personal to each individual.

To see how Egan individualizes authenticity on a character basis, the stories of two characters, Alfred and Miles Hollander, can also be considered. Starting with Alfred Hollander, it can be said that he is someone who openly seeks authenticity. He believes himself to be authentic and lives accordingly, but because he thinks others are not authentic, he undertakes various projects to help them find their own authenticity. Alfred appears in *The Candy House* in the chapter “Case Study: No One Got Hurt.” To give a brief summary of the chapter, Alfred has had a strong dislike for superficiality since he was a child, especially the forced, interpersonal aspects of people’s interactions, which he regards to be “phony” (Egan, 2022, p.25). His disgust with artificiality grows beyond criticizing TV characters to calling out people around him for what he considers as insincere behavior. This disgust leads him to perform disruptive behavior, such as wearing a paper bag over his head during family gatherings in order to generate genuine responses or, later in life, intentionally screaming in public to evoke authentic, spontaneous reactions from people. His obsession with authenticity, starting from a young age, begins with the falseness he perceives in the media.

Nobody, including Alfred Hollander himself, is certain of when he first began reacting violently- “allergically” is the word he uses—to the artifice of TV. It started with the news: those fake

smiles. That hair! Were they robots? Were they bobbleheads? Were they animate dolls he'd seen in horror-movie posters? (Egan, 2022, p.25)

Even at that young age, he can see the falseness on TV, all the fake smiles, the perfect faces, hair, and makeup; and he believes it is all false. He even voices this within the family. To protest, he often sits with a paper bag over his head at family dinners or on any other occasion. Then he continues his protests with his “screaming project” in his adolescence and adult years. His acts challenge social conventions, sometimes resulting in discomfort, disapproval, and even physical conflicts. Alfred finds brief affirmation in his relationship with Kristen, but when she becomes bored with his actions, he understands that his approach may further alienate him from the society itself rather than achieving the connection he needs. Alfred's actions can be seen as a demonstration of Funk's ideas on how authenticity can be found or, more accurately, observed. Funk (2015) claims that “[a]uthenticity, in this regard, could be considered a performative concept, a simulation even in so far as it postulates essence while eluding definition” (p. 17). The issue of performance was also discussed in the analysis of *No One Is Talking About This*, and the same can be observed in *The Candy House*. As Funk suggests, authenticity is a concept that is difficult to grasp in the text or dialogue and is, therefore, more often understood through performances. In Roxy's example, this performance emerges in the final dialogue, where she takes steps toward finding her true self and almost seeks help from Chris and Molly, evaluating herself as ready for this journey. However, in Alfred's case, it is seen more in actions rather than in dialogue. The efforts and actions he undertakes to reveal others' lack of authenticity can be considered a performance within this concept.

Later in the chapter, after reconnecting with an old acquaintance, Jack Stevens, Alfred reflects on his previous works, specifically an unsuccessful documentary about geese that purposefully lacked “performance.” It can be inferred that he does not find the document authentic enough: “In this new world, rascally tricks were no longer enough to produce authentic responses; authenticity required violent unmasking, like worms writhing at the hasty removal of their rock. He needed to push people past their breaking points” (Egan, 2022, p.30). However, these performances, like the screaming project, start to disappear after meeting Jack. Jack had always found Alfred's typically-unsettling behavior amusing, which made him a very important person for Alfred. In fact, while talking to him, Alfred experiences an epiphany. While Alfred has a genuine reunion with Jack, he, who has

dedicated much of his life to constantly looking for authenticity and criticizing people for being “phony,” returns to one of his own previous projects, that is, a documentary about geese. The project had aimed to capture a thing which is real and authentic. However, when Alfred talks about this documentary with Jack, he starts to make fun of it, even criticizing his own obsession with authenticity.

Alfred had been trying, impulsively, to cheer Jack up. But when Jack returned with a whole cooler full of Old Styles and Alfred resumed his parody, it felt different. He proceeded with a sense of perilous intention, as if he were dismantling *The Migratory Patterns of North American Geese* and setting it afire for Jack to warm himself. (Egan, 2022, p.46)

Here, Alfred realizes that authenticity might not just be about acting purely on one’s impulses. Intentionally criticizing and making fun of his own documentary just to entertain Jack, bringing joy to someone he values and connecting with him on a deeper level could also be an authentic experience. What Alfred understands here is that, in his previous search for authenticity, he had alienated himself; not only from authenticity but also, unintentionally, from himself because he always tried to live within rigid boundaries of authenticity, becoming, as he put it, obsessed. Yet now, what he recognizes with Jack aligns with the theme of this research, that is, that it is possible for people to find their true selves through genuine interactions. Afterwards, Alfred reaches out to Rebecca Amari, a doctoral student who had previously contacted him but whom he had rejected. Rebecca is writing a dissertation on searching for authenticity in the digital age, a topic very similar to this research, and had wanted to speak with Alfred for her work, but Alfred had harshly rejected Rebecca by saying, “why would I let you co-opt my ideas into some phony academic bullshit, just so you can get tenure?” (Egan, 2022, p.22). However, after experiencing an epiphany with Jack, Alfred wants to share his story with Rebecca, realizing that achieving authenticity might actually mean not doing what he initially did. He even wants to hear her perspective. Toward the end of the chapter, the reader realizes that the entire chapter has actually been narrated from Rebecca’s point of view and is, in fact, part of her dissertation.

Now that he was junking and repurposing failed endeavors, why not offer up his screaming project for “some phony academic bullshit,” after all? For that, he needed me.

But I needed him, too. Why study authenticity if not to seek it- try to wring some last truth from that word before it’s so leached of meaning that it becomes a word casing: a shell without a bullet; a term that can be used only inside quotation marks? I needed Alfred to help me avoid

writing some phony academic bullshit. This collaborative chapter, hybrid and unorthodox as it may seem in an academic context, represents that attempt.

In retrospect, then, there were three of us sitting with Jack Stevens behind his house on that midwestern fall night. (...) Alfred wanted to sit there forever. He drew out the hilarity as long as he could sustain it, staving off the moment when Jack would say he needed to get to bed, and the party would stop. (Egan, 2022, p.47)

Alfred's decision to contact Rebecca after mocking his life's work is a milestone, indicating a change in his perception of authenticity. By criticizing his own obsession with authenticity, Alfred starts to rethink the rigidity of his methods. This self-observation enables him to perceive his previous "screaming project" in an entirely different manner. Instead of clinging to a solitary, obsessive pursuit of the truth, he is now willing to direct his efforts through collaboration, which eventually leads him to a more subjective and genuine view of authenticity. It can be understood that Alfred's attitudes and entire perspective have changed, as he now wants to contribute to Rebecca's dissertation in order to learn more and share his own experiences. By emphasizing that they both need each other, Rebecca supports this collective understanding as well. It would not be wrong to say that this is precisely a post-postmodern approach as Timmer (2010) notes: "a desire for some form of community or sociality is highlighted in the post-postmodern novel, in other words: 'a structural need for a we'" (p.359). Therefore, in this collaborating chapter, as Rebecca herself calls it, they are trying to bring real-life experiences into academic discussions and transforming their pursuit of authenticity into a collaborative project. Because it opposes the idea of detached self-discovery and emphasizes interpersonal connection as a means of searching for authenticity, this collaborative project exemplifies a post-postmodern sensitivity. Lastly, Alfred's desire to "sit there forever" due to the sincerity of his collaboration with Jack and Rebecca also highlights the post-postmodern concept of sincerity. As discussed before with reference to *No One Is Talking About This*, the protagonist first found her true self and then worked to make her relationships with others more genuine. However, in *The Candy House*, there is not such a sequence. The characters experience all these concepts simultaneously or in varying orders, which reflects Egan's approach of blending these ideas and allowing each character to have their own unique reality without an absolute, singular truth.

Another character in *The Candy House* who discovers their authenticity in a unique way is Alfred Hollander's older brother, Miles Hollander. Although Miles appears as a

supporting character in many chapters, Egan dedicates an entire chapter to him, “A Journey A Stranger Comes into Town,” which fully reveals his story. This chapter touches extensively on both authenticity and sincerity in the digital age, which are central to this research. Throughout the chapter, Miles Hollander, Sasha’s cousin, a character from *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), is dealing with regret, disappointment, and a search for meaning in his life. Miles’ life drifted rapidly, resulting in drug addiction and an affair that eventually ended his marriage. Miles lost everything in a tragic car accident caused by his affair, which left him disabled in his head and divorced. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Sasha was a kleptomaniac struggling with her condition. However, in *The Candy House*, she became a character who discovered her authenticity. What helped Sasha in this journey was art. By turning to art, she overcame her kleptomania and built a life for herself with her husband and children in an American desert in Arizona, where she practiced her work of art. Her art became a way for Sasha to channel her kleptomania. She continued collecting things but shifted to gathering recyclable materials, transforming them into new forms and creating massive artworks scattered across the desert, visible from above via hot air balloons. Nevertheless, Miles was highly critical of this. He found Sasha’s work and art ridiculous, rejected the idea that she had truly healed, and dismissed the notion that she had found herself through this process.

My father, who treated Sasha as a daughter and whom I saw as her enabler; my mother, whose romantic adventures since my parents’ divorce I found sickening; my younger brothers, Ames and Alfred, both of whom I’d deemed “lost” before they turned twenty-five—no one escaped the roving, lacerating beam of my judgment. (Egan, 2022, p.50)

Since Miles has not yet transformed into a more authentic person himself, he believes he has the right to criticize everyone around him and openly acknowledges his judgmental nature. This ties in with another concept explored in post-postmodernism: sincerity. Miles projects an insincere image by being overly critical. The reason for this is that, despite his harsh judgment of Sasha’s art, something within him pushes him to visit Sasha and her husband, not only to see the art he deems ridiculous but also to spend time in the American desert. His desire to see the art he claims to find absurd, driven purely by curiosity, can also be considered an example of his insincerity. Even though Miles’ actions are insincere, his reason for going can actually be seen as a desire to find himself. After losing his job, wife, and former life, Miles falls into a deep void. He neither wants to return to his old life nor finds himself capable of building a new one. During this time, he begins thinking about

Damon, someone from his past during his days of drug addiction, and obviously, learning about Damon would be possible through Own Your Unconscious.

Finally, I caved and bought Mandala's Hey, What Ever Happened To...?™. The process was frictionless, as promised: thirty minutes with electrodes attached to my head as I closed my eyes and pictured my interactions with Damon (thereby releasing those specific memories to the collective); then a twenty-minute wait while my "content" churned in the collective gyre, searching for facial matches. (Egan, 2022, p.56)

Another aspect of Mandala's Own Your Unconscious technology that Egan mentions here is the "Hey, What Happened To...?" feature. Through this feature, it becomes possible to view memories uploaded to the collective about the person being searched for and gather information about them. Miles uses this feature to learn about Damon and says, "I wanted Damon to have achieved something great!" (Egan, 2022, p.57). The reason Miles wants Damon to have achieved great things, in his own words, is as follows;

I realized that the person Damon had reminded me of was myself: another white male who'd managed to blow through countless advantages and opportunities and fail catastrophically. The knowledge that he'd fared worse than I had was depressing, literally. I became depressed. I hadn't realized how badly I'd wished for Damon to thrive. (Egan, 2022, p.57)

Here, Damon serves as a side mission for Miles, and Miles positions Damon as a form of redemption for himself. If Miles were to see that Damon had achieved something, it would give him a sense of hope for his own life. However, Own Your Unconscious reveals to Miles that Damon is in an even worse state than he is, leading Miles into depression and making him question whether redemption is even an option for himself. For this part, Butchard (2019) suggests: "Egan's fiction seldom lingers on characters at moments when they find themselves entirely detached from functional society. Instead, the novels and short stories tend to focus on those who endeavor to maintain outwardly conformist existences despite feeling a sense of profound disconnection" (p.365). Miles' narrative captures this inward and outward dynamic perfectly. Despite his deep sense of failure and disconnection from his previous life, Miles does not entirely withdraw from society. Instead, he continues to engage in external activities like paying visits to Sasha and her family. These actions demonstrate his attempt to stay connected to the world, even as his inner estrangement grows. At that moment, Miles is neither authentic nor sincere; he no longer believes in his own redemption

after Damon, and he struggles to accept that those around him who have achieved it as it can be inferred from his criticism of Sasha's art. Yet, he is willing to try new paths.

It is precisely in this emotional state that he decides to visit his cousin Sasha to see her work. At this point, the narrative perspective of *The Candy House* shifts to Sasha's husband, Drew. Drew is a character with his own past traumas. He was one of Bix Bouton's college friends (the creator of *Mandala* and *Own Your Unconscious*) and was present during the tragic drowning of their friend Rob, which neither Drew nor Bix could prevent. This tragedy was a major factor in Bix's creation of *Own Your Unconscious*, emphasizing the importance of remembering, and perhaps not forgetting as Drew explains: "Bix wrote that it was his memory of Rob, and that morning, and those years-his difficulty remembering them-that first spurred him to try to mass-produce a memory externalization device" (Egan, 2022, p.60). Drew, on the other hand, chose a more domestic path, finding consolation in his wife and children. Initially, Drew and Miles have no connection, and Drew even finds Miles odd. However, due to Sasha's busy schedule, Drew ends up having to spend a lot of time with Miles, which he is not particularly happy about. When Miles goes to Drew and Sasha's house, he catches a glimpse of the artworks from a distance and makes no comments about them. What he thinks to himself, however, is, "*Recycling: how original! The only thing more beautiful than these "sculptures" would be the desert without them*" (Egan, 2022, p.64). There is a pivotal moment when he and Drew go to see the sculptures from above in hot air balloons.

As I gazed down, reading Sasha's buoyant testimony, my mind broke free like our hot-air balloon lifting away from the earth. From my new height, I saw my life with brute simplicity; my overweening pride and contempt, and then my failure, so much failure—failure everywhere I looked. I had tried, Lord, I had tried. But it wasn't enough; it was nothing. My children were grown and whole and didn't need me; were perplexed by me, I often felt. I was alone, had been ebbing away for years in a purgatory that seemed, from this height, more dire than death. There was nothing to go back to.

Tears muddled my vision, blurring Sasha's sculpture. Each time I blinked, its colors winked back at me in code: Here. Now. Enough. GO! (Egan, 2022, p.69)

Miles is in a hot air balloon, looking down at Sasha's sculptures spread across the desert. The sculptures, attractive and alive, capture him in unexpected ways. Their authenticity fascinates him; they seem to be communicating directly to him. From this high viewpoint,

Miles sees a sharp and ruthless clarity about his own existence. He meets his authentic self, free of illusions; the ego, pride, and huge failures that have left him feeling empty and lost. This real and authentic experience urges him to face how disconnected and meaningless his life has become. Yet, Miles' confrontation with authenticity does not bring him any hope or healing instantly. Rather, it overwhelms him. Sasha's sculptures, which convey a feeling of reality and meaning, simply emphasize how empty he feels within. The contrast between the sculptures' vibrant presence and his own sorrow is too much for him to cope with. In this moment of emotional breakdown, he lets go of the hot-air balloon, unable to see any way into the future. Drew rescues him at the last moment. This scene suggests a paradox of authenticity. Miles' reaction illustrates the negative aspects of confronting one's actual self, but Sasha's sculptures reveal the transforming and grounding power of something truly authentic. The burden of authenticity becomes unbearable for someone like Miles, who has lived so much of his life in denial or criticism. Miles makes his terrible choice in this time of harsh reality, where the beauty of Sasha's artwork brutally clashes with his own inner conflicts and sorrow. As Moran (2021) notes: "Egan's fiction is full of characters trying to experience something real, something authentic, and then never being quite sure when or if they have reached what they were looking for" (p.7). As for Miles at that point, Sasha's art is what he was looking for as it was something real and something authentic. That reality struck Miles at first. However, it was also the very first step for him to find his authentic self. It can be said that Sasha, a supporting character in this chapter, also finds her authentic self through the element of art because, as mentioned earlier, Sasha was a kleptomaniac, but she healed through her art and found her true self in her creations, and this art also creates an epiphany moment for Miles. Moran (2021) suggests that "across her fiction, [Egan] looks at how images of authenticity are produced, and she questions the ways in which authenticity effects are staged and managed" (p.5). Egan challenges the staging of these authenticity effects, as suggested by Moran. Although the intention and message of Sasha's sculptures are authentic, they are carefully crafted and displayed in order to provoke a particular reaction, not how Miles reacted. Miles' struggle to deal with this authenticity with his own unfiltered misery highlights the delicate and complex connection that exists between authenticity as a lived experience. Therefore, it demonstrates how authenticity may be created, interpreted, and ultimately questioned by human emotion and experience. This reflects Egan's diverse and nuanced approach to the subject, as she adapts the concept of authenticity uniquely for each character in *The Candy House*.

Most of the characters analyzed so far have first discovered their true selves, their authenticity, and then the sincerity that naturally follows. However, Egan charts a different path for Miles. After experiencing his epiphany and surviving owing to Drew's intervention, Miles' journey to finding authenticity involves building sincere connections. Following this pivotal moment, Miles spends a long time in a mental recovery facility in the same town where Sasha and Drew live. During this time, he often has Sasha and Drew by his side, and he begins spending a lot of time with them. The once-critical Miles shows no trace of his previous judgmental demeanor. Nonetheless, in the beginning, Miles and Drew argue frequently.

I shouted at Drew through the desert silence, and he shouted back at me. Sasha begged us to stop, demanded we stop, and stormed out of the house when we ignored her. We couldn't stop. One night, as we raged at each other across their deck, Sasha began spraying us with a garden hose. (Egan, 2022, p.71)

The underlying reason for this can be linked to Drew's past. After witnessing his friend Rob lose his life and being unable to save him, Drew experiences a similar situation with Miles but succeeds in saving him. This incident seems to have caused Drew's past traumas to resurface, making him deeply angry at Miles. Similarly, Miles harbors resentment toward Drew. It is as if both characters are channeling the pain of their past traumas and disappointments into their conflict with each other. This process ultimately brings them both a sense of relief. By the end of it all, they grow into very close friends. In fact, what they are doing is sharing emotions at that point and, according to Timmer (2020), "sharing" is a part of the contemporary novel and post-postmodernism.

In the post-postmodern novel 'sharing' is important; for example sharing stories as a way to 'identify with others' (and to allow others to identify themselves with you); others identifying with 'your' story is in this type of novel a very important way of restoring some faith in the coherence and legitimacy of one's 'own' feelings and thoughts (therefore: of constructing an identity, a meaningful self-narrative). (p.359)

Later, Miles returns home, and the sharing between Miles and Drew comes to a temporary halt. However, when Miles goes back to his home in Chicago, he experiences the following changes as a much different person:

I returned to Chicago nine weeks after leaving. On the ride from O'Hare to my apartment, I gazed at the sparkling buildings downtown and felt my failure and exile slide back around me.

Nothing had changed. The act of entering my studio was forensic, like visiting a crime scene. The stale air had a faint toxic sweetness. I was afraid that if I went to sleep there, I would never wake up. So I stayed awake, organizing my possessions overnight and arranging for them to be boxed and shipped to Drew and Sasha's house. I left keys and instructions and money in an envelope for the super, and hoped for the best. Dawn had barely broken when I got back on the Blue Line to the airport. As I watched the illumination of the Chicago sky, I was dreaming of the desert. I wanted to fill its emptiness with a different story than the one I'd lived so far. Like Sasha had. (Egan, 2022, p.72)

Upon his return to Chicago, Miles is struck by the weight of his past existence, which he describes as a "failure" and a "exile." His home, which has been compared to a "crime scene," represents the empty and meaningless life he left behind. The forensic tone highlights his disassociation, as though he is looking at the ruins of a past self that he no longer identifies with. He would be physically and emotionally suffocated by staying in this room, as suggested by the musty air and the prospect of never waking up. Rather than giving in to despair, Miles acts decisively. He essentially cuts off connection to his former life by spending the night packing his things and making arrangements to send them to Sasha and Drew's place. In addition to marking a physical departure, packing and leaving also symbolize a rejection of his past self. By the morning, he is more interested in the immense emptiness of the desert, a location that represents opportunity and rebirth, than in the "sparkling buildings" of Chicago. Sasha's journey is paralleled by the reference to the desert as a place to "fill its emptiness with a different story." In the same way that Sasha turned her kleptomania into art, Miles hopes to change his story, putting his mistakes behind him and pursuing authenticity in a new chapter.

This decision of Miles is consistent with post-postmodern ideas, especially the focus on identity reconstruction and searching for meaning through connection. Inspired by Sasha's ability to take control and rebuild her own life, Miles' choice to leave Chicago and embrace the desert is a step towards becoming a more authentic version of himself. As contemporary literature is "a world that we know through language and layers of representation; language, narrative, and the processes of representation are the only means we have to experience and know the world, ourselves, and our possibilities for being human" (McLaughlin, 2004, p.67), Miles has now known the world, experienced it and found out that other possibilities are ahead of him. Therefore, it can be argued that the sense of success and redemption Miles initially sought in his drug dealer Damon and the collective ultimately

materializes through his deeper connections with Sasha and Drew. Later, he becomes the success he had hoped to see in Damon. The only thing that brings him to this point can be described as sincerity and true emotional connection as he now experiences “to reconnect with something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real” (McLaughlin, 2019, p.213). Now, what is real in Miles’ life are the connections he has with others. These connections are simple and meaningful, free from judgment or technological interference, unlike Miles’ search for Damon through the collective. McLaughlin (2004) also identifies this as a characteristic of the contemporary novel and states: “literature has been and continues to be valuable as a way of critiquing our social world, of finding ways to be human in it, and of truly connecting with others” (p.67). This is what Miles finds in his interactions in his new life:

Drew and I never talk about our odd history, but I think my “success,” and any good I’ve managed to do, have brought him gladness. Sasha tells me, during her long hugs that I’ve come to depend on, that I’ve helped him to relax. After our twice-weekly tennis games, Drew usually stops and has a beer with me rather than bolting straight back to his clinic. When the balloons are out, as they often are, we raise our glasses at the sky before we drink. (Egan, 2022, p.72)

The notion of sincerity is reflected among these three characters, especially in the real bonds that form between Miles and Drew. Their acts and conversations show a quiet sincerity, despite the fact that they never directly address their turbulent past that is Miles’ near-death experience in the hot air balloon and Drew’s part in saving him. Their relationship grows stronger through shared activities like tennis matches, casual drinks, and symbolic acts like lifting their glasses to the balloons in the sky. Miles interprets Drew’s pleasure in his own development and the positive influence that he has been able to make. A tiny, symbolic ritual that symbolizes the sincerity of their relationship is created as glasses are raised to the balloons. Without having to express it out loud, it is a recognition of their past and present. The post-postmodern emphasis on sincerity, finding genuine human connection and shared meaning in easy to understand, uncomplicated actions, is embodied in this moment, which has no trace of irony or pretense. Through these exchanges, Miles and Drew demonstrate the notion that sincerity emerges from small, regular acts of care and connection rather than from large, flashy actions. Thus, lastly, it can be said that Miles’ journey in this chapter serves as an example of how Egan’s creation reflects her interaction with a world where existence has lost its distinct limits and certainty. She investigates how sincerity can still

bloom in interpersonal interactions and narrative. As Adam Kelly (2021) characterizes Egan's style, he states:

Egan's fiction accepts as its premise a world where the category of reality no longer holds out the promise of orientating the self and moves to consider the ethical implications of this scenario, asking how sincerity can continue to operate between people in such a world and how one can write "sincere" fiction after postmodernism. (p.158)

Egan is a remarkable example of how sincerity can function in broken, reversed contexts through Miles' metamorphosis, his actual connections with Sasha and Drew, and his search for purpose beyond failure. By overcoming postmodern skepticism and creating genuine, moving moments that reconstruct human connection, Egan's narrative thoroughly deals with the theme of authenticity.

In conclusion, Jennifer Egan explores authenticity, sincerity, and how technology affects how people perceive connection and identity in *The Candy House*. Her narrative style exceeds postmodernism's disconnected mindset, adopting a more empathetic style that captures the complexity of contemporary reality. Since every character has a unique path towards authenticity and sincerity, it is evident that there is no one way to discover meaning or what is real. Rather, Egan creates a web of encounters that puts forth how deeply personalized the search for authenticity can be. Egan challenges the concepts of identity while also using technology, such as the Own Your Unconscious, as a mirror. It encourages readers to re-think how preserving and sharing their lives can blur the lines between memory, identity, and behavior. Her criticism of technology is significant, but so is her emphasis on how people still want genuine connection and authenticity despite living in increasingly-mediated and fragmented worlds. Instead of providing easy solutions, her novels explore the complexities of being human in a time when everything is hyperconnected. Her comprehension of how unique the challenges are is what gives Egan's writing its strength. Although the journeys of each character seem unique, taken as a whole, they paint a larger picture of what it means to be human in the modern world. By redefining authenticity in her narrative, Egan demonstrates that connection and sincerity are still achievable, and worthwhile, in a society dominated by artifice.

4. CONCLUSION

With the development of technology and its tool, the social media, humanity has evolved into a position highly different from what it once was. This position can be described as one of isolation because relationships have weakened, the perception of the true self has eroded, and genuine interactions have been compromised. It was once believed that the social media and technology would make humanity more connected. It cannot be said that this belief is entirely incorrect because, in theory, the entire world is just one click away. However, the connection created by this hyperconnectivity has become superficial, as it is far removed from genuine and intimate interactions. One of the primary reasons for this is the rise of lynch culture. Over time, as an Internet jargon developed, people began expressing their thoughts in ways that conformed to this jargon. For example, they might act as though they liked things they do not or laugh at things they do not find funny-acts of pretense motivated by fear of being canceled or disliked. Beyond this pretense, the tendency of people to avoid presenting themselves as they truly are has become one of the main factors damaging their sense of self and authenticity. Lynch culture manifests on the social media not only as an attack on differing opinions but also as a form of assault on physical appearances. The evolving beauty standards influenced by technology have also left their mark on the social media. People alter their appearances through filters or Photoshop, striving to conform to whatever beauty trend happens to dominate at the moment, since these trends can shift constantly. Consequently, these issues have become some of the defining problems of the 21st century, finding their place even in contemporary literature. Both Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) and Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022) deal with the challenges posed by technology in shaping human identity, memory, connection, authenticity and sincerity. While they share thematic concerns, their approaches differ in tone, structure, and the pathways they offer toward reclaiming authenticity and sincerity in the digital age.

No One Is Talking About This and *The Candy House* employ postmodern approaches in their narratives because the digital age, with its fragmented, hyperconnected, and media-saturated nature, reflects many of postmodernism's basic characteristics. Postmodern literature frequently deconstructs traditional narratives, embraces fragmentation, and blurs the line between fiction and reality, all of which are consistent with the digital age experience. This is primarily because what is referred to as digital age experiences-tweets,

posts, and rapid updates on the social media, as well as created social media personas, deepfakes, and virtual realities-reflect the characteristics of postmodernism. Thus, both novels use stylistic strategies to represent how technology reshapes human communication, relationships, and the self. Just like postmodernism, the digital age challenges traditional conceptions of truth, identity, authenticity, and sincerity which postmodernism has long explored. In *No One Is Talking About This*, Lockwood uses a fragmented narrative structure that mirrors the scrolling experience on social networking platforms. The brief, disconnected lines and references to online culture depict the overwhelming flow of information in the digital age, exhibiting postmodernism's rejection of linear storytelling. Similarly, in *The Candy House*, Egan employs multiple viewpoints and interconnected character narratives to capture the diversity of voices and experiences made possible by digital connectivity. Both works emphasize how the Internet age generates an endless variety of stories, opinions, and realities, reflecting the postmodern emphasis on decentralization. Moreover, in *No One Is Talking About This*, the protagonist's engagement in the portal expresses the postmodern idea of skepticism and simulation about the real and virtual worlds. The themes of simulation and questioning reality, central to postmodernism, are now commonly observed in everyday life, particularly in discussions around the social media. Lockwood captures this effectively by structuring her novel in the form of tweets, reflecting the fragmented and hyperconnected nature of contemporary communication. Similarly, *The Candy House* investigates how memories and identities are commodified through Bix Bouton's technological creation, the Own Your Unconscious technology, which allows people to share and access one another's memories. Egan examines the concept of memory exchange, using its implications to explore reality through her characters' experiences and inner lives. Both novels employ postmodern techniques to critique and investigate the consequences of a future in which technology blurs the lines between reality and representation. At the same time, they use postmodernism as a base to criticize it, eventually moving beyond its skepticism to a search for authenticity and sincerity; a path that corresponds to post-postmodernism. The use of postmodernism in these novels could be a way to highlight that contemporary life has already adopted many postmodernist characteristics. However, postmodernism's approach is no longer sufficient to address pressing contemporary issues, such as the erosion of authenticity and sincerity. Its tendency to reject singular truths and embrace relativism limits its ability to confront these challenges effectively. In contrast, post-postmodernism offers a more constructive perspective by acknowledging reality and seeking to reconnect with it. This

shift allows post-postmodernism to address the crises of authenticity and sincerity more directly, making it a more fitting framework for exploring the complexities of contemporary life.

Post-postmodernism, while presenting a new direction, is not entirely independent from postmodernism; rather, it builds on and progresses from its predecessor. It keeps postmodernism's critical skepticism, self-awareness, and fragmented narrative frameworks while focusing on reconstruction and reconnection. Post-postmodernism embraces postmodernism's questioning of truth and reality while aiming to move beyond it, in search of meaning, authenticity, and sincerity in a postmodernist-influenced world. This continuity demonstrates how post-postmodernism operates within the context of postmodernism, using its tools to meet the deeper emotional and existential challenges of the contemporary age. Lockwood and Egan both move beyond postmodernism and embrace post-postmodernism, exploring themes of authenticity, sincerity, and intimate connection in an age dominated by technology and artifice. While they maintain postmodernist elements in their structure and narratives, they alter their focus to investigate how people might navigate the difficulties of the digital world while rediscovering meaning and genuine relationships. This transition is illustrated in Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*, which follows the protagonist on her journey. The first half of the novel engages readers in the Internet's fragmented, ironic, and hyper-mediated reality, while the second half shifts to a highly intimate, honest narrative about family, grieving, and the tangible facts of existence. This shift emphasizes the insufficiency of digital platforms to deal with meaningful human experiences, implying that authenticity and sincerity exist beyond the portal of the Internet. The pivotal moment comes when the protagonist is pulled away from the portal by the news of her niece's life-threatening condition. This transition represents a departure from the portal's hyper-mediated and superficial world towards the unfiltered, concrete reality of the true self, family, love, and grief. In these moments, Lockwood presents authenticity as a state of being that takes place when one is fully present in the moment and engaged with those around them. Sincerity in the novel is most evident in the protagonist's interactions with her niece and family, where pretense and irony give way to genuine emotion and vulnerability. Lockwood utilizes this contrast to criticize the superficiality of digital life, arguing that authenticity and sincerity may still be achieved if people are ready to detach themselves from the artificiality of the portal and reconnect with their actual environment. Ultimately, *No One*

Is Talking About This presents authenticity and sincerity as both vital and achievable in a world where technology often threatens to overshadow genuine human experiences.

Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* explores the tension between postmodernism and post-postmodernism, blending ideas of authenticity and sincerity within the story's fragmented framework. Just like Lockwood, Egan reflects the complex nature of a hyperconnected world through postmodern techniques such as nonlinear narrative, shifting perspectives, and fragmented chapters. However, it goes beyond postmodernism's skepticism and irony to address deeper emotional issues, exemplifying the post-postmodernist influence to recreate meaning and foster connection. Central to the novel is the Own Your Unconscious technology, a device that allows individuals to externalize and share their memories. This invention blurs the line between private and public space, raising concerns about the privacy of memory and its impact on identity and relationships. While the technology reflects postmodern concerns about reality and representation, it also highlights a post-postmodern desire for authenticity and sincerity in an age when human experiences are mediated by technology. Authenticity is depicted as both fragile and desirable, with characters like Alfred Hollander debating whether sharing memories brings him closer to his authentic self or lowers him to a phony version of it. Moreover, Miles' harsh confrontation with his authentic self with Sasha's sculptures, made from waste materials and as a way of self-expression, represents a struggle to maintain authenticity in a society where even memory is controlled and managed. The novel also emphasizes the need for sincerity in restoring genuine human relationships. While hyperconnectivity can lead to shallow relationships, Egan depicts moments of honesty, such as Roxy Kline's reconciliation with her family and her struggle to overcome loss and addiction. Ultimately, *The Candy House* criticizes the erosion of authenticity and sincerity in a hyperconnected world, highlighting how technology's prevalent effect distorts human interactions and complicates the pursuit of genuine connections. While the novel acknowledges the desire for authenticity and sincerity as a response to these distortions, it depicts them as becoming increasingly elusive in a world controlled by technological orientation.

As it can be inferred, both novels argue that technology has significantly destroyed authenticity and sincerity in human interactions, but their responses differ and overlap at the same time. *No One Is Talking About This* focuses on disconnecting from the digital in order to reconnect with reality, whereas *The Candy House* explores the possibility of navigating

and critically engaging with technology to find fragments of genuine connection and meaning. In terms of authenticity and sincerity, Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* depicts these elements as achievable through detachment from the digital age. The protagonist's journey emphasizes stepping away from the chaotic portal of social media to prioritize familial love and real-world connections, suggesting that authenticity can be reclaimed by rejecting the artificiality of technology. On the other hand, Egan's *The Candy House* depicts a more complex and unstable relationship with authenticity and sincerity, as the hyperconnected world of memory-sharing devices affect the characters' sense of self and capacity to build genuine relationships. While technology alienates, it also serves as a source of desire and self-exploration, demonstrating that authenticity is difficult but not impossible to achieve.

Structurally, both novels employ postmodernist fragmentation to reflect the disconnected nature of contemporary life. Lockwood's fragmentary approach reflects the temporary, chaotic nature of the social media, but the second half transitions into a more linear narrative as the protagonist moves toward real-world connections. In comparison, Egan's novel employs a variety of perspectives and nonlinear storytelling to investigate the various effects of technology on identity and memory, emphasizing the fragmented nature of digital life. In tone, *No One Is Talking About This* is more optimistic, presenting a clear path to sincerity through disengagement from technology, whereas *The Candy House* is more uncertain, implying that while genuine connection is possible, it requires confronting the difficulties of the use of technological devices. Therefore, it can be said that Lockwood adopts a more optimistic and forward-looking approach. In *No One Is Talking About This*, the individuals' past, their previous pretenses, or who they once were do not prevent them from becoming authentic or forming sincere relationships in the future. If a person desires to reach their true self or establish deeper connections, they can achieve this by leaving behind technology and/or the social media and focusing on what is "real." Egan, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of looking towards the future-as seen in the character of Miles-while many chapters show characters using the Own Your Unconscious technology to embark on a search for their true selves, either through their own or others' memories. Thus, it would be more accurate to describe Egan's approach as mirroring the past for achieving authenticity and sincerity. Rather than fostering an internal transformation, Egan portrays an external shift as the characters depend more on each other to find their true selves and genuinely connect with one another. However, at the end, both Lockwood and Egan

investigate how technology undermines authenticity and sincerity, but they propose several responses to this disruption: either by walking away from the digital world or critically engaging with it.

All in all, the investigation of authenticity and sincerity is expected to remain a fundamental subject in literature as technology continues to advance. As developments such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality become more and more popular, the lines between the real and the artificial will blur even more, posing new issues for people attempting to define their selves and connections. Literature in the future may concentrate on how these technologies alter humanity's perceptions of truth, intimacy, and sense of self. Moreover, digital monitoring, and the ethical implications of memory and identity modification could all appear as be central themes of contemporary literature. Therefore, as technology advances, literature will play an important role in conceptualizing the emotional and ethical implications of these changes, serving as both a mirror and a guide through an increasingly changing world. In the long term, literature may reflect a growing opposition against technological dominance, depicting individuals or societies looking for achieving authenticity and sincerity just like Lockwood and Egan. The focus on human-centered narrative in post-postmodernism implies that future narratives will continue to focus on emotional depth, interpersonal connections, and the struggle for authentic identity in a world that frequently encourages speed, efficiency, and performance over quality. As a result, literature will continue to be an important medium for exploring and maintaining what it means to be human in an age of rapidly-changing technological environments.

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