

Between Hope and Despair: A Metamodernist Reading of Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain*

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Abstract

The turn of the twenty-first century saw a significant cultural and aesthetic transformation in literary fiction, moving from the irony and self-doubt that characterized postmodernist to a renewed engagement with honesty, emotion, and meaning. This transformation, which Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker examined under the metamodernist label, does not represent a naive return to the optimism of modernity, but an oscillation between hope and despair, honesty and irony, that determines the sensibility of contemporary cultural production. Based on foundational theorization of Vermeulen and Van den Akker, as well as extended to narrative fiction by Seshagiri and James, this article argues that the Booker Prize-winning Douglas Stuart novel, *Shuggie Bain* (2020), embodies a distinct metamodernist sensibility, specifically what this article calls the non-teleological ethical endurance: a pattern of commitment that continues without ensuring transformation, where care continues through

disappointment cycles not because it ensures change, but because attachment, in itself, shapes a form of meaning. The analysis deals with three interrelated dimensions: the characterization of Agnes as a fluctuating character between ambition and collapse; Stuart's narrative voice as a site of post-cynical sincerity; and the novel's reconstruction of meaning within the post-ideological and post-industrial landscape of Glasgow under the Thatcherite era. Thus, the article contributes to the growing body of metamodernist literary criticism while opening new critical prospects for Stuart's work, which has received considerable academic attention as social realism but has not yet been examined through a metamodernist lens.

Keywords: metamodernism, Douglas Stuart, Shuggie Bain, ethical oscillation, non-teleological ethical endurance

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, literary critics have increasingly questioned the adequacy of a postmodern framework to understand literature of the twenty-first century. While postmodern narratives were ironic, fragmented, and marked by cognitive suspicion, contemporary narratives often show renewed interest in emotion, relationships, and moral seriousness. Instead of abandoning postmodern awareness of eventuality and social structure, many recent works seem to operate within this framework while maintaining signals of meaning and connection. This cultural transformation was considered metamodernism, particularly by Vermeulen and Van den Akker (2010), who described it as an oscillation between modern hope and postmodern suspicion, a movement in which the individual acted as if meaning were possible, fully aware of its vulnerability.

Shuggie Bain (2020) is the debut novel by the Scottish writer Douglas Stuart, which won the Booker Prize. The novel is one of the most important contemporary British novels of recent decades. The story of the novel takes place in Glasgow during the 1980s and tells the story of the painful, though thin, relationship between the boy Shuggie and his alcoholic mother, Agnes, a relationship of firm love despite his full awareness of her fragility and her morbidity. From the opening scene of the novel, where Shuggie shows up alone in a small room, arranging his mother's little stuff, to its painful final pages, Stuart insists on the simultaneity of love and loss, refusing the consolation of pathos or irony. The novel was written with remarkable intimacy, drawing heavily on Stuart's childhood, and it occupies an extraordinary position in the contemporary literary scene: it is both a work of social realism, a portrait of maternal love, and an exploration of social class, vulnerability, and survival.

Unlike the postmodern novels that preceded it, Shuggie Bain does not use irony or formal experimentation as a shield against emotional fragility. It insists earnestly and consistently that the devaluation of human communication is the only indicator of deep social and personal collapse. Despite its critical reception, which has often been situated within the tradition of British working-class realism and personal memoir, Shuggie Bain has not yet been studied from a metamodernist perspective. This absence is significant because the most prominent achievements of the formal and objective novel are precisely those not fully covered by existing frameworks.

This article argues that the novel *Shuggie Bain* embodies a metamodernist moral sensitivity through its earnest, unemotional narrative voice, its structural fluctuations between hope and despair, and its insistence on rebuilding meaning in the wake of both personal trauma and collective ideological collapse. More specifically, the article introduces the concept of non-teleological ethical endurance to describe the novel's central emotional structure: a pattern of commitment that continues without ensuring transformation, in which attention persists through cycles of disappointment not because it is effective, but because attachment itself is a form of meaning. This concept expands the metamodernist framework beyond aesthetic experimentation, positioning it within the fields of ethical stability and relational resilience, as most current studies do. While the metamodernism remains controversial (Samuels 2008), this paper shows the analytical accuracy of Stuart's novel.

The article deals with three analytical stages. The first examines the central oscillation between hope and despair through the characterization of Agnes, who simultaneously embodies aspiration and self-destruction; the novel's refusal to resolve into either pure tragedy or consolation, and its periodic cycles of relapse and recovery, together constitute what this article terms non-teleological ethical endurance. Second, Stuart's narrative voice as a post-cynical sincerity site is warm and passionately committed, but fully aware of suffering and disappointment, rejecting postmodern irony without abandoning critical consciousness. The third situates the novel in its social and political context, arguing that the Thatcherite landscape functions as a failed grand narrative, against which the novel rebuilds meaning through intimate human connection and what it calls metamodernism as a pragmatic ideal. These three analyses together show that *Shuggie Bain*'s novel is not just a socialist realist act or personal memorandums, but a significant metamodernist literary accomplishment that mirrors and responds to cultural circumstances in the early 21st century.

2. Theoretical Framework: Metamodernism, Ethical Oscillation, and Endurance

2.1 Metamodernism: Definition and Key Characteristics

The theory of metamodernism has been articulated as a cultural and theoretical framework by Vermeulen and Van den Akker in their 2010 article "Notes on Metamodernism," published in the journal *Aesthetics and Culture*. In response to what they considered postmodern exhaustion, Vermeulen and Van den Akker suggested that contemporary culture had entered a new phase not characterized by complete postmodern separation, but by an oscillation between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony. They define this oscillation as moving "between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony" (2010, p. 5). An individual continuously negotiates between commitment and consciousness, devotion and doubt, without stabilizing at either pole. An individual acts in the metamodernist age as if meaning were possible, with a realization of his fragility, a contradictory pattern of interaction in which faith is practiced uncertainly, and loyalty coexists with self-meditation.

This perception of metamodernism as an uncompromising oscillation is essential for its analytical usefulness. It does not suggest that metamodernist texts are more optimistic than postmodern texts, or that they have abandoned irony for naive honesty. It points out that it holds both possibilities simultaneously, capable of engaging earnest feelings and momentary

self-awareness and that this synchronization is characteristic of its cultural moment. As Vermeulen and Van den Akker note, the metamodernist sensibility oscillates "between hope and melancholy, between naivety and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation" (2010, p. 6). And most importantly, this oscillation is not a stable argument; it is a dynamic, unresolved movement. The post-modern text doesn't reach a reconciliatory situation, but it remains in a permanent movement between its poles.

2.2 Metamodernism as Ethical Rather Than Merely Aesthetic

The theoretical framework was later developed for literary analysis by James and Seshagiri in their book, *Narratives of continuity and revolution* (2014), which provides the most comprehensive application of metamodernist theory to contemporary literature. However, most of the studies that exist, including those by Seshagiri and James, tend to prioritize experimental or self-meditating texts, considering style hybrid or playing beyond novelists as the main sites of oscillation. This paper argues in favour of a broader concept. If oscillation is understood as an emotional structure, a term from Raymond Williams (1977) to describe emerging social sensitivities that are recovered and tested before they are considered, it should not only appear through the aesthetic surface. It might also work at the level of narrative ethics, relational dynamics, and emotional repetition.

This new framework allows for metamodernist oscillation as a moral, not just an aesthetic, concept. Ethical Oscillation refers to the frequent negotiation between despair and commitment, inspiration and perseverance, a pattern of interaction in which individuals realize the instability of results, yet they continue to invest in relationships and responsibilities. This resilience is fundamentally different from optimism: optimism presupposes a bright future, whereas this resilience holds up without that assumption. So, metamodern ethics can be defined as a non-teleological ethical endurance, that is, continuing work without ensuring narrative reward. The novel *Shuggie Bain* does not highlight self-awareness beyond the novelist; it builds oscillation through narrative repetition and ethical resilience, showing that metamodernist sensitivity doesn't need a fancy style but can be embodied in the quiet perseverance of domestic labour, emotional loyalty, and repeated tolerance.

2.3 Theoretical Complements: Williams, Berlant, and Felski

It complements three frameworks of metamodernist analysis theory. The Concept of the Feeling Structure of Raymond Williams (1977) provides the methodological basis: for Williams, cultural forms record emerging social sensitivities that are not yet fully formulated in institutional speech. When this is applied to literature, it means that metamodern oscillation may manifest not only in stylistic gestures but also in the way characters live with uncertainty as they continue to act. The concept of "cruel optimism" by Lauren Berlant (2011) sheds more light on this dynamic, describing links that continue even when prosperity is hampered, forms of hope that connect individuals to a vulnerable future. While the *Shuggie Bain* novel doesn't quite match the Berlant formulation, it shows links that last, although not possible to happen structurally, and most importantly, the Stuart narrative doesn't romantically confer these connections and doesn't refuse them as fake. Hope is recognized as

fragile but not abandoned, a contradiction that resonates with postmodern oscillation in its most morally honest form.

Rita Felski's (2008) defence of the concept of literary studies offers a third complementary dimension by questioning the dominance of suspicious reading practices that prefer momentary distance to interaction. Felski argues that the ways readers and characters are constructed both link them to texts and to each other. In a metamodern context, this attachment does not deny critical consciousness; it coexists with it. Moral seriousness does not necessarily require naïve theory; rather, it may indicate a deliberate refusal of ironic separation. Williams, Berlant, and Felski together reinforce the argument that metamodernism is best understood not only as a style phase but also as a reorientation toward commitment in the face of instability. In novel literature, these reorientations are shown through periodic narrative structures, repeated disappointments, and unresolved attention, which is the formal and objective pattern that distinguishes the character of Shuggie Bain.

2.4 Metamodernism and the Postmodern Legacy

To appreciate and understand the importance of the metamodernist framework, one must grasp its relationship to postmodernism. Postmodern novels, as Hutcheon (2003) and Jameson (2016) have dealt with deeply suspicious emotional frankness. Sincerity was linked to the naive acceptance of the grand narratives, with the artificial and intermediate nature of each experience not being understood. The prevailing aesthetic pattern was ironic, a spacing mechanism that allowed the authors to engage with emotion while simultaneously signaling their awareness of its artificiality. The consequence, as Wallace excellently argued in his 1993 article "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," was "a culture that's too hip for its own good" (1993, p. 171). A literary world is so ironic that true emotional engagement has become almost structurally impossible.

The Metamodernist novel responds not to this impasse by abandoning ironic consciousness completely, but by moving through it towards what Wallace called a "new sincerity", frankly and emotionally recognizing her vulnerability and choosing to commit. This is not a return to post-modern patent; it is a more complicated thing: sincerity comes true with all the reasons for not being honest. This characteristic, which Vermeulen and Van Den Akker call "informed naivety" (2010, p. 5), is what distinguishes metamodernist texts from their ancestors in modernism and postmodernism, making Shuggie Bain an interesting subject of metamodernist literary analysis.

3. Oscillation Between Hope and Despair: Agnes as a Metamodernist Figure

3.1 Agnes as a Figure of Aspiration

In the heart of Shuggie Bain lies a relationship that rejects the solution. The relationship between Shuggie and his mother, Agnes, is at once a deep love story and a devastating failure, an unabated hope and an irreversible collapse. This refusal to settle, specifically, into either a direct tragedy or a compensatory narrative is what characterizes the narrative as metamodernist in its deepest structure. Vermeulen and van den Akker describe metamodernism as oscillating "between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony" (2010,

p. 5). In contemporary literature, nothing embodies this oscillation more clearly than Agnes Bain. She is not a pitiable victim or a hero who deserves to be celebrated, but something more complex and human, a character who holds both possibilities simultaneously, swinging between them without settling on either.

Since her first prominent appearance in the novel, Agnes has been depicted as a woman with exceptional vitality and self-determination. Stuart embodied it with unequivocal warmth and admiration. Her careful attention to her hairdressing, and her insistence on wearing clean, well-fitting clothes even in the simplest circumstances, are among the most important details of the novel. As Stuart writes, "Agnes Bain had always thought of herself as a woman of some quality" (Stuart, 2020, p. 33). The novel presents this self-imagination not as an illusion but as a genuine resistance to the forces they seek to undermine. Her ambition is not naive. She knows her situation, but she refuses to let this perception erode her sense of self-worth. This is exactly what Vermeulen and Van Den Akker mean by "informed naivety" (2010, p. 5), hope that does not ignore reality, but rather chooses confrontation over surrender, and acts as if dignity is still conserved even as the evidence against it accumulates.

Her relationship with Shuggie promotes this explanation. Agnes's love for her son is manifested in the novel by her interest in him, her attention to his sensitivity, her encouragement of his differences from other boys, and her taking his internal world seriously in a world that ignores him. When she tells Shuggie, in one of the most influential conversations in the novel, that he is "the only good thing she has done with her life" (Stuart, 2020, p. 289), This statement carries the weight of the metamodernist paradox: it is simultaneously an expression of honest love and acknowledgement of a dramatic failure, and the reader remains incapable of deciding between these two feelings. Their mutual devotion is the strongest confirmation in the novel of metamodernist truth: love fully aware of the difficulties it faces, yet refuses to give up to despair.

3.2 Agnes as a Figure of Collapse and Non-Teleological Endurance

However, Agnes is simultaneously a symbol of disturbing self-destruction. Stuart doesn't romanticize her alcoholism, and it doesn't reduce it to just a simple social criticism. It is given the same bold frankness as it offers its ambitions as a real thing, devastating, and eventually beyond Shuggie's ability to solve or prevent it. The novel shows its deterioration through accumulated details of the home that refuse to make it up. When you drink Agnes, the house is rigorously disintegrated; the sound of the narrator does not soften it: "The living room was a catastrophe. The ashtray had spilt, and grey snow lay across the good carpet. Somewhere a glass had broken and glittered sharply in the weak morning light" (Stuart, 2020, p. 90). Home space becomes a record of Agnes, a system and chaos closely linked to its recovery and relapse cycles. Stuart forces us to watch her lapses with precise details: Agnes is drunk and helpless as Shuggie tries to run home affairs, loops in which she gives her dignity to men who do not appreciate it, and moments where her love melts for her son completely in her urgent need for alcohol. The scene where Agnes is described, after she completely lost control of herself, and she is sitting "in the puddle of her own making, her good coat soaked through, her careful hair matted to one side of her face" (Stuart, 2020, p. 241) This scene turns the

dynamic relationship between parents and the child on its head. The coat itself, the carefully dyed hair that was previously symbolizing its dignity, now points to its destruction, so that it is recorded as a form of violence against childhood itself. These scenes are particularly disturbing because they exist side by side, not instead of the scenes of Agnes' dignity and love: the narrative sound itself, which shows lightly how she shaped herself, now depicts how she destroyed it with the same accuracy and care.

Here, the Stuart style becomes clearly metamodernist, and here the concept of non-teleological ethical endurance becomes more analytically accurate. A postmodern novel may use Agnes' contradictions to ironically highlight the impossibility of a coherent identity. But Stuart does something different. He does not present her contradictions as a sarcastic comment, but as a tragic fact of human life, honest, very painful, and ultimately beyond any single explanation. Agnes is the woman who, in a moment of pure tenderness, wipes Shuggie's hair and tells him, "You're the only thing I ever did right" (Stuart, 2020, p. 317), and the woman who, after hours, doesn't remember that she said that. Stuart insists that both of them are equally real and that no theoretical or ironic framework can waste the pain of combining them. Agnes's alcoholism follows a periodic pattern of temporary recovery and inevitable relapse, a pattern that resists the lyrical path of both the recovery narrative and the tragic decline. Short abstinence is depicted with real lightness. "The house had a different feeling to it. Clean. Still. The smell of cooking reached him on the landing, and Shuggie stood for a moment just to let the feeling settle on him like sunlight" (Stuart, 2020, p. 176), but the warmth of these clips makes them more vulnerable; the reader learned to read hope in this novel as a form of exposure. Each cycle follows renewed attempts to restructure self: Agnes re-applies her makeup, rearranges her clothes, and performs recovery movements as if the performance itself can stabilize what it represents. Every attempt has to carry in it a ghost of failure, even when she asserts, "Shuggie, I'm gonna get better. I mean it this time. I can feel it" (Stuart, 2020, p. 245). The reader simultaneously senses the true advertising and anticipation of its failure. Repetition itself, his refusal to decompose to a permanent recovery or end destruction, is the structure of non-teleological ethical endurance: a renewed commitment not because it has been proven, but because the alternative is to withdraw, and withdraw, in the moral world of Stuart, is the only thing Agnes and Shuggie cannot allow for themselves completely.

3.3 The Oscillation as Structural Principle

What makes this character a metamodernist, rather than merely complicated or realistic, is that the oscillation between Agnes' ambition and her collapse is not merely a psychological trait but a structural principle of the novel itself. Stuart organizes a narrative about repeated cycles of hope and despair. Agnes recovers from addiction and then declines. She finds a new man who seems stable, but he proves to be another source of humiliation. She gathers her dignity in a moment of crisis, and then abandons it the next minute. These courses are not presented as evidence that messing with the novel doesn't mean that hope itself is the problem, but they also don't resolve to final salvation. This reflects what Berlant(2011) described in the context of harsh optimism: relationships that last, though unlikely, generate real moments of intimacy and dignity even as they connect characters to suffering. Stuart's narrative does not

romanticize these relationships, nor does it refuse them as fake. It records their painful repetition of the same quality of patient and steady attention that characterizes the entire novel.

This structural oscillation reflects what Vermeulen and Van Den Akker described as the metamodernist "quest for multiple Eureka's" (2010, p. 8), a quest for meaning that doesn't reach an end, but finds its value in the same march. Indeed, Agnes's love for Shuggie does not save her, but the novel suggests its importance and that the truth of love is justified by itself, regardless of its outcome. This is a distinctive metamodernist moral attitude: the meaning doesn't depend on success, and hope doesn't break down. As Felski argues (2008), reading attachment involves perception rather than mere suspicion; Stuart's narrative voice facilitates this kind of cognitive perception, calling readers to live with a sense of discomfort resulting from repeated disappointment without being asked to break up with it.

3.4 Agnes in the Context of Post-Industrial Collapse

Agnes' personal fluctuation cannot be separated from the social and political context in which Stuart situates her. Thatcherite Glasgow in the 1980s is itself a scene of the collapse of the great narrative; the working-class community around Agnes has been systematically stripped of its economic foundation, political representation, and collective identity. In this sense, Agnes is not only a metamodernist character but also a social person. Her alcohol addiction, though intimate and personal, is also a reaction to the conditions of mass despair. Her desire for dignity and self-determination contradicts a political system that made such aspirations structurally impossible for people of her class and circumstances.

However, the novel refuses to reduce Agnes to just a victim of social forces. Stuart insists on her ability to act, her individuality, and her inherent character, even as he recognizes the structural constraints that shape her life. This double insistence on social criticism and on individual dignity is itself a metamodernist gesture, rejecting both the postmodern dismantling of self-determination and the modernist ideal of individual will. Agnes is formed by her history and circumstances, but it never becomes a product of them; she retains, to the end, the ability to surprise, resist, and be more and less than it has made. As Williams (1977) records, her experience reveals an emerging structure of emotions, a living negotiation between regular constraints and personal aspirations that institutional speech cannot fully express.

4. Narrative Voice as Metamodernist Sincerity: Between Awareness and Commitment

4.1 The Problem of Sincerity After Postmodernism

If the previous section examined what the novel says through the characterization of Agnes, this section examines how it says so through the texture, tone, and point of view of Stuart's narrative voice. In metamodernist literature, the form is never neutral. The way the novel talks to itself is an argument about how we deal with the world, with passion, and with meaning. James and Seshagiri believe that the metamodernist novel is characterized not only by its objective concerns but also by its formal strategies, especially its negotiation between "emotional openness and critical self-awareness at the level of narrative voice" (2014, p. 11).

In the novel *Shuggie Bain*, Stuart builds a deeply honest narrative voice, almost challenging, warm, intimate, and emotional, but not naive or emotional in the negative sense. It's a sound that clearly looked at suffering and chose ratchet, though that's precisely the formal footprint of logic as if metamodern.

To appreciate what Stuart achieved with his narrative voice, the problem that postmodernism posed for literary honesty must be understood. As Wallace argued in his article "E Unibus Pluram," irony is no longer a critical tool but an end in itself, a position that protects the writer and reader from the fragility of the real meaning (1993, p. 171). The Metamodernist novel responds to this impasse by moving through irony towards a new truth, explicitly recognizing its vulnerability and choosing to commit. Stuart's narrative voice in *Shuggie Bain*'s novel is one of the most prominent examples of this post-cynical sincerity in contemporary British novels, showing that emotional frankness doesn't necessarily require a retreat from theoretical complexity.

4.2 The Warmth of Stuart's Prose

The most interesting thing in Stuart's narrative style is its warmth. Since the first pages of the novel, the prose has established an intimate and thin relationship with its characters, refusing the ironic spacing that characterizes postmodern novels. Stuart doesn't watch his characters from above or outside, but it looks like he's living their experiences from inside, transmitting their perceptions, desires, and suffering, coming close to making the reader feel part of their lives rather than just far from them. This voice is not separate from its characters to evaluate it, but rather lives, risks engaging with it, and accepts the weakness involved.

This warmth is clearly evident in the way Stuart is depicted within Shuggie's inner world. A child's perspective is transmitted accurately and compassion that doesn't exist for any abuse. She hopes to describe the novel to Shuggie as he watches his mother prepare every morning: "He had seen her fix herself back together before. He loved to watch her put on her face" (Stuart, 2020, p. 18). The simplicity of this observation, which loved to watch, carries a huge weight. They renounce both excessive and ironic emotion; simply record, innocent, a child who has not yet been ashamed of love, the truth of Shuggie's feelings. This is the distinctive feature of post-cynical sincerity: emotional frankness that draws its strength from accuracy, not from rhetorical pressure, and makes real feeling a form of moral knowledge, not just a shortcoming in momentary maturity.

4.3 Resisting Sentimentality: Sincerity and Its Full Cost

A clear distinction must be made between sincerity and emotion, as they are often confused, even though they are structurally contradictory. Emotion, as Baldwin explained in "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), is the desire to have an emotional experience without paying for it fully, that is, the warmth of love or grief without confronting their real cost. And the irony of postmodernism was that it, in part, reacted against the emotionality of some realistic traditions. But metamodernist honesty is not a return to emotion; if it is to speak, more demanding than irony, insisting on paying the full price. Non-teleological ethical endurance requires a specific character: a willingness to stay in sticking pain without solace.

This distinction is clearly reflected in one of the most precise scenes in the novel. When Shuggie finds out that Agnes is unconscious on the kitchen floor, he systematically cleans the house around her, makes himself a toast, and then sits to watch TV, performing normalcy as a form of self-preservation (Stuart, 2020, p. 158). An emotional picture of this scene would highlight the tragedy of Shuggie's isolation and evoke the reader's pity. Sarcastic imagery may use household details, toast, and TV as a distancing mechanism, transforming suffering into black comedy. But Stuart didn't do any of that. He was filmed in the same warm, accurate, and unemotional manner that characterized the entire novel, allowing horror and compassion to coexist without merging into one. The reader feels a very heavy moment because the prose refuses to control it. This is the metamodernist honesty in its completed form: the desire to stay in the scene without any aesthetic or ironic exit.

4.4 The Working-Class Voice and the Politics of Authenticity

Another dimension of Stuart's narrative style deserves attention in the context of metamodernist honesty: its relationship to social class and authenticity. The Shuggie Bain narrator is inspired by the Stuarts' personal experience of his genesis in Glasgow, which lends the novel's voice the quality of autobiographical testimony, imbuing its sincerity with a social and political dimension. The working-class experience that Stuart portrayed was always underrepresented in literary novels, especially with such intimacy and respect. The warm and dignified portrayal of the working-class life without its weird character, without reducing it to just a social problem or a political symbol, and without that ironic distance that sometimes printed the moral therapies of poverty, is an insistence on the full humanity of people who are constantly deprived of it through both political discourse and cultural representation.

This is linked to what James and Seshagiri described as metamodernist reconstructionism, its desire to rebuild the meaning, value and dignity of humanity in environments where these values have been systematically eroded (2014, p. 84). The language duplication that Stuart used, the Standard English narrative, which gives him access to the deepest self, and the Glasgow dialogue that entrenches characters in their collective and geographical privacy, embody this innovative motive formally. When Agnes, with her distinctive rhythms, declares that "no finished yet" (Stuart, 2020, p. 121) the accent puts this challenge both a collective and individual character, bearing the weight of the community's refusal to retreat. And then the narrative in Standard English shows what is behind this ad, what it costs, and what you know about it. So, Shuggie's voice, suspended between the two narratives, simultaneously becomes an aesthetic and a political gesture.

4.5 Free Indirect Discourse and Emotional Proximity

At the technical level, Stuart's use of free indirect speech in the novel is a fundamental formal mechanism by which the narrative achieves its metamodernist effects. Free Indirect speech, the way the narrator moves into a character perspective without using official signs of speech or movable thought, allows Stuart to maintain the narrative objectivity as the reader is actually immersed in the personal experience. This method formally embodies the central moral position of the novel: that to understand someone else, one must be approached enough to lose the safety of distance.

A typical example is when Shuggie monitors his mother as she dresses up at night: "She was so beautiful. He could see that, even if no one else could. He didn't know why they couldn't" (Stuart, 2020, p. 54). In grammar terms, the passage is seen in the conscience of the absent, but the emotional tone, a combination of pride, confusion and extreme protection, stems from Shuggie alone. The narrator doesn't frame or restrict this perception; it is simply presented as a clear fact, even as the reader realizes the surrounding context that Agnes's beauty is both a source of weakness and of pride. This interference, the love of a child coexisting with the knowledge of the more complex reader, is exactly what the free indirect speech, employed in metamodernist structure, can achieve. This shape embodies the central moral attitude of the novel, while also explaining why post-ironic honesty is more formally sophisticated, not less, than the ironic breakup that replaces it: it requires narrative voice to carry multiple levels at once, without letting any of them control or cancel others.

5. Reconstructing Meaning in a Post-Ideological Landscape: Pragmatic Idealism and the Thatcherite Context

5.1 Thatcherism as Collapsed Grand Narrative

This section of the article places Shuggie Bain in its specific social and political context. It argues that the Thatcher-era Glasgow of the 1980s is not just a backdrop but a force shaping the characters' metamodernist shifts. Fredric Jameson (2016) notes that postmodernism is marked by the decline of grand narratives, which are the big stories that once helped people make sense of history and progress. In a post-industrial setting, this loss leads to what Jameson calls the "waning of affect" (2016, p. 10) a sense of emotional numbness and a struggle to find meaning in history.

Stuart's portrayal of deindustrialized Glasgow brings this crisis of meaning to life. The novel shows that economic decline is not just a background detail; the crumbling environment shapes how the characters think and feel. Closed shipyards, empty shops on Agnes Street, and isolated housing schemes create a sense of despair that unsettles the characters' sense of time and purpose. Stuart describes the housing scheme as a place built quickly and without plans for the future: "the scheme had been built in a hurry, and it showed. The scheme had never been meant to be permanent" (Stuart, 2020, p. 67). The temporary and degraded nature of the physical environment is an architectural reflection of the collapse of social and political promises that accompanied the building of the post-war welfare state. The Industrial Retreat of Thatcher undermined the economic and ideological infrastructure of these communities, leaving behind what Jameson (2016, p. 15) described as a post-modern situation: history without narrative, present without future, and a community without solidarity.

This feeling of physical impermanence reflects and adds to the decline of the post-war welfare state's promises. The Thatcher government's focus on privatization and the fall of industry took away both economic security and a shared sense of identity from these communities, leaving them facing a present with little hope for the future. Rather than simply overwhelming the characters, this tough environment leads them to develop a metamodern outlook. Stuart shows that by dealing with daily structural decay, the characters use metamodern oscillation as a practical way to get by. Without broad ideological beliefs to lean

on, the post-industrial setting makes them find meaning in everyday tasks, emotional loyalty, and steady endurance.

5.2 The Novel's Reconstructive Response and Pragmatic Idealism

While traditional postmodern fiction often responds to systemic collapse through formal irony, fragmentation, or a cynical abandonment of meaning, Shuggie Bain uses the very bleakness of its environment to stage a reconstructive metamodernist response. Because the post-industrial landscape offers no institutional or macro-political avenues for hope, the characters are forced to generate meaning at the most intimate, domestic level. The collapse of the collective grand narrative does not lead to total nihilism; rather, it shifts the labor of meaning-making onto fragile, interpersonal spaces that actively resist the surrounding decay. This environmental pressure produces what Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) call "pragmatic idealism" (p. 9), defined as the deliberate pursuit of ideals or dignity despite recognizing that structural realities render such fulfillment unattainable. This concept is evident in the localized rituals through which Shuggie and Agnes resist the oppressive conditions of their environment. Moments of play, careful maintenance of household routines during periods of collapse, and adherence to outward appearances function as intentional strategies to resist the dominance of their surroundings.

When Agnes takes Shuggie to visit relatives on Christmas and dresses them both in expensive, beautiful clothing despite their poverty, this act is motivated by a desire to transcend the monotony of the housing scheme. Stuart presents the moment with genuine warmth: "She looked so beautiful to him. He felt proud to be her son" (Stuart, 2020, p. 202). The beauty and pride experienced are authentic, serving as a deliberate and defiant counter-aesthetic to the physical and social deterioration of their environment. This dynamic constitutes the core of their moral oscillation, as the characters employ emotional commitments to construct meaning from the remnants of a post-industrial context.

5.3 Community, Solidarity, and the Limits of Love

The surrounding community in Shuggie Bain further illustrates how the post-industrial landscape actively fragments social relations, complicating the characters' search for meaning. The neighbours, relatives, and acquaintances who populate the novel are not merely unsympathetic bystanders; they are individuals whose capacity for both fleeting kindness and structural cruelty has been warped by the scarcity and precarity of post-Thatcherite reality. The landscape breeds a survivalist isolation that actively erodes traditional working-class solidarity, leaving individuals to sink or swim on their own.

This tension is embodied in the trajectory of Agnes's elder son, Leek. As a young man navigating a world devoid of industrial employment or social mobility, Leek exemplifies the limits of individual resilience within an economically abandoned environment. His artistic ambitions stand in sharp contrast to the bleak realism of the coal-dusted schemes. When he leaves Glasgow for art school, his departure is not depicted as a triumphant escape or a selfish betrayal. Rather, the narrative presents his exit as a structural necessity, reflecting the unresolved oscillation between the hope for individual self-actualization and the despair of

community abandonment.

The brief and fragile connections within this fractured neighborhood provide a stark alternative to the absence of political grand narratives. Although these intimate interactions cannot reverse structural injustice or economic neglect, the novel affirms their localized significance. By treating these small, imperfect gestures of human attachment as meaningful within a hostile economic climate, Stuart enacts a metamodern approach: he recognizes the legitimacy of postmodern skepticism about structural recovery, yet deliberately chooses interpersonal engagement.

5.4 Shuggie as Metamodernist Subject and the Final Image

Shuggie functions as the novel's central consciousness, internalizing the structural conflicts of his environment and emerging as a fully realized metamodern subject. His cognitive development is accelerated by the harsh demands of the post-industrial landscape, resulting in an acute awareness of his mother's addiction, his own marginalized identity, and the economic constraints shaping their lives. Despite possessing every structural reason to retreat into self-protective irony or psychological withdrawal, Shuggie persistently chooses to hope, care, and engage.

Shuggie's devotion to Agnes exemplifies informed naivety, reflecting a deliberate choice to offer love and care while remaining fully cognizant of the structural forces opposing them. As he matures, his understanding deepens; he anticipates Agnes's relapses even during her periods of sobriety, yet his commitment remains unwavering. His internal state parallels the broader metamodern movement: his hope is repeatedly diminished by the material conditions of Glasgow, but it never disappears entirely. He exists in a continual state of oscillation, positioned between the stark reality of environmental decline and an unwavering commitment to care.

The novel's final pages resolve the environmental and emotional dialectic with precision. After Agnes's death, Shuggie lives alone in Glasgow and intentionally continues the domestic rituals he inherited from her: "He took out his pay packet and counted the notes carefully on the kitchen table, the way she used to do. He folded it neatly and put it back" (Stuart, 2020, p. 430). This gesture constitutes an active, spatialized performance of memory within the ongoing post-industrial context. By replicating his mother's actions, Shuggie sustains her pursuit of dignity into an uncertain future.

This serves as the novel's definitive statement on non-teleological ethical endurance: the material landscape has claimed Agnes and continues to constrain Shuggie, yet the practice of care endures. This persistence does not guarantee economic liberation or structural change; instead, it constitutes the sole domain through which the post-industrial subject may assert and preserve human dignity.

6. Conclusion

This article has shown that Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* represents a unique metamodernist approach, seen in three connected ways: Agnes Bain's ongoing ethical endurance, a narrative

voice marked by sincere post-irony, and a practical idealism that finds meaning in a post-industrial setting. Together, these aspects show that the novel's significance goes well beyond personal catharsis or classic social realism. Instead, it stands as a key metamodernist work that reshapes how today's fiction responds to the worn-out ideas of the late twentieth century.

This interpretation has broader significance because it challenges the usual limits of metamodernist studies. By focusing on realistic, working-class life rather than experimental or formalist styles, this analysis challenges the notion that metamodernism is merely a privileged stylistic exercise. By bringing together Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling," Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism," and Rita Felski's idea of "attachment," this paper shows that the key metamodernist tension between hope and doubt is most powerful in ethical choices, not just in language or style. Stuart shows that a story can incorporate postmodern doubt without becoming detached or ironic, thereby restoring a strong sense of moral seriousness to modern realist fiction and broadening what we think realism can do.

This new way of thinking creates clear paths for future research based on the ideas in this paper. First, future studies could draw on the concept of non-teleological ethical endurance to examine Stuart's *Young Mungo* (2022) and explore how queer relationships reshape the boundaries of care in a post-industrial world. Second, this approach could be used to study other recent British working-class novels, like those by Kit de Waal, Niall Griffiths, and Darren McGarvey, to see how local ethical strength offers something different from either political victory or total despair. Finally, looking at post-industrial social realism in other countries, such as the American Rust Belt or post-Soviet fiction, could reveal whether this kind of moral awareness is a specific response to British neoliberalism or a broader metamodern trend.

In the end, *Shuggie Bain* stands out as a key metamodernist novel because it sees survival as a kind of moral awareness. Stuart shows both the full cost of Shuggie's loyalty and Agnes's dignity even as she suffers, turning the story from one of despair into a powerful ethical statement. By finding meaning not in success, but in the ongoing strength of human connection, the novel changes what we expect from modern literature. It shows that literature can bear witness to human life with honesty, knowing its own limits but refusing to give up.

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Authors contributions

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