

## **RHETORICAL QUESTIONS AS KEY SYNTACTIC MARKERS OF POSTIRONY (CASE STUDY OF DAVID MITCHELL'S NOVEL *CLOUD ATLAS*)**

Identifying David Mitchell's writing style in the novel "Cloud Atlas" as postironic, we distinguish three levels of postironic markedness: extralinguistic, compositional, and linguistic-stylistic. Given the expansive temporal and spatial structure of "Cloud Atlas" and its constellation of characters as representatives of distinct historical and cultural epochs, their speech patterns and degrees of expressive intensity vary significantly, ranging from relatively neutral to highly emotively marked discourse.

This stylistic heterogeneity is manifested through a wide range of phonographic, lexical, semantic, and syntactic devices, which collectively contribute to the construction of the novel's postironic mode of narration. Syntax therefore functions as one of the principal instruments for constructing postironic narration, shaping ambiguity, emotional modulation, and the interaction between sincerity and irony. Particular attention should consequently be paid to syntactic devices that contribute to the formation of the novel's postironic stylistic framework.

As D. Peplow and R. Carter observe stylistics constitutes an applied, that is, empirical method of literary analysis directly connected with the reader's immersion in narrative discourse: "One aspect of this empiricism is stylistics' commitment to studying the effect of texts on readers" [2, p. 472]. Proceeding from this, syntactic stylistic devices and techniques may be regarded as a significant means of foregrounding both the author's postironic writing style and the corresponding readerly perception. Among the 68 instances of syntactic devices and techniques employed in 150 postironic character utterances, particular prominence is given to *rhetorical questions* (18), *repetition* (16), *asyndeton* (15), *parallel constructions* (4), *polysyndeton* (2), and *gradation* (2) as illustrated in *figure 1*. The following research examines selected examples of syntactic expressive means used in postironic character speech and analyses their intensifying effect in the construction of postironic discourse.

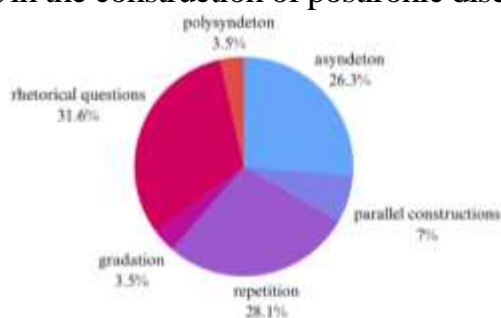


FIGURE 1. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS  
OF THE SYNTACTIC STYLISTIC DEVICES DAVID MITCHELL'S "CLOUD ATLAS"

According to the obtained results, *rhetorical questions* constitute the most frequently employed syntactic stylistic device in the analysed material. M. Biezma and K. Rawlins define rhetorical questions as utterances that signal the speaker's attitude toward the answer. In their view, the answer is either inferred from the context of the utterance, with all discourse participants accepting its "common ground" status and non-controversial nature, or otherwise presupposed by the communicative context itself. Despite the apparent addressivity of

rhetorical questions toward the interlocutor or reader, such a “direct signal of rhetoricity” foregrounds the postironic self-evidence of the implied answer and simultaneously illustrates the profound dramatic intensity of the characters’ existential quests [1].

Tormented by doubts concerning their own perceptions of world order, justice, or the validity of their personal choices, David Mitchell’s characters employ rhetorical questions as a form of self-reflection: although they already know the answer, they nevertheless seek affirmation and emotional validation. In this respect, rhetorical questions function not merely as expressive syntactic devices, but also as markers of the characters’ internal psychological tension and existential uncertainty. The following examples illustrate the ways in which rhetorical questions contribute both to the broader postironic framework of the novel “Cloud Atlas” and to the characterization of its narrators in particular.

Robert Frobisher emphasizes the devaluation of his own talents, achievements, and social status within the environment of the impoverished working class: “*What value are education, breeding, and talent if one doesn’t have a pot to piss in?*” [3, p. 96]. The postironic dimension of the situation lies in the fact that, while cynically contrasting himself with those who were fundamentally deprived of social privilege from birth, Frobisher simultaneously directs this criticism at himself, having ultimately failed to make meaningful use of either his talent or his familial status.

The postironic idea of lost opportunities and unrealized potential is likewise emphasized through a rhetorical question in Timothy Cavendish’s reflections on the deteriorating condition of Britain’s railway infrastructure, which German engineers are expected to take into account when designing rolling stock: “*...when the German engineers test British-bound trains, they use imported lengths of our buggered, privatized tracks because the decently maintained European rails won’t provide accurate testing conditions. Who really won the ruddy war?*” [3, p. 324]. As a representative of a victorious nation, Cavendish is troubled by the fact that the German economy has regained strength after recovering from military defeat. Within the context of the railway system’s deterioration, Timothy postironically foregrounds this contrast as a reflection of Britain’s own decline.

Among the novel’s characters, the clone Sonmi may be regarded as the figure most profoundly confronted with the persistent dissonance between a propagandistic worldview and the experience of her own intellectual and personal awakening. Gradually recognizing the manipulative influence of autocratic ideology upon the individual, the fabricant expresses astonishment at the unquestioning faith of the ordinary “consumer”, who, in turn, appears devoid of ethical inquiry or moral hesitation: “*Questions: How could Papa Song stand on His Plinth in Chongmyo Plaza Servery and stroll Xultation’s beaches with our Souled sisters simultaneously? Why were fabricants born into debt but purebloods not? Who decided Papa Song’s Investment took twelve years to repay? Why not eleven? Six? One?*” [3, p. 362]. Moreover, through observing the natural flow of life, Sonmi gradually approaches distinctly human manifestations of curiosity and existential inquiry: “*Thus I first encountered birds. An aero overflew, and many hundreds of swallows poured upstream. For whom did they sing? Their Logoman? The Beloved Chairman?*” [3, p. 385]. The postironic idea of Sonmi’s rhetorical questions as an artificially created being lies in the fact that it is precisely she who becomes capable of interrogating the very essence of freedom among living beings (both humans and birds alike) as well as the ethical implications of the powerful exerting control over the weak, the price of recognizing truth, and the burden imposed by knowledge and self-

awareness: *“What was knowledge for, I would ask myself, if I could not use it to better my existence? How would I fit in on Xultation nine years and nine stars later with my superior knowledge? Could amnesiads erase the knowledge I had acquired? Did I want that to happen? Would I be happier?”* [3, p. 419].

Another character in “Cloud Atlas” who confronts the disintegration of an established worldview and is forced to adapt his beliefs to the harsh realities of life is Zachry. A member of a tribal community, he is not an obvious candidate for the pursuit of truth. However, on his path toward its gradual recognition, Zachry demonstrates an increasing readiness to pose complex questions, each of which functions as a further step in the evolution of human consciousness.

The rhetorical nature of Zachry’s questions serves as a confirmation of the wisdom he has acquired through his lived experience and the journey he has undergone. *“The fires o’ Valleysmen an’ Prescients both are snuffed tonight, I speaked, so don’t that proof savages are stronger’n Civ’lized people?”* [3, p. 566]. The postironic idea of Zachry’s rhetorical question lies in the acknowledgement of the bitter truth of domination by the strong over the weak, as both Zachry’s tribe and the Prescients ultimately prove powerless against the brutality and sheer force of the savage raiders.

A rhetorical question concerning power is also posed by the character Luisa Rey; however, the courageous journalist refers not to physical strength, but to the power of intellect and justice: *“What happens in a minute’s time is made by what you do”, “So what’s the answer? Can you change the future or not?”, “Maybe the answer is not a function of metaphysics but one, simply, of power”* [3, p. 735]. The idealism of the young Rey instills belief in free will and in the power to resist the evil she confronts. Here, the postirony of Rey’s rhetorical question suggests that she too harbors doubts about whether she has chosen the right path of struggle. In turn, when instructing his young apprentice Robert Frobisher, the experienced composer Vyvyan Ayrs articulates his own cynical stance on the “power of the strong” through a rhetorical question: *«Any society’s upper crust is riddled with immorality, how else d’you think they keep their power?»* [3, p. 831]. Acknowledging immorality as the primary instrument of power, the mentor does not envisage any alternative means of maintaining authority, a stance for which he is postironically “rewarded” by his “grateful” student.

Rhetorical questions, though diverse in their axiological content, consistently articulate the characters’ positions on fundamental dilemmas of world order, humanity, power, justice, and morality. What unites them is the presence of “doubt”: whether to submit to the will of the stronger or to persistently resist a perceived or real form of “evil”, thereby drawing a clear boundary between “humanity” and “cruelty.” Embedded within the semantic structure of each rhetorical question is a postironic component of answerhood, since, despite all hesitation, the characters have already made their choices and determined their respective paths.

Syntactic devices used to construct postirony in the novel “Cloud Atlas”, in their various combinations, intensify the effect of doubt and hesitation, particularly through the use of rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions function as a means of creating situational emotional states and psychological conditions associated with shifts in worldview and broader existential crises experienced by the characters. Thus, the author deliberately employs specific phonographic, lexical, semantic, and syntactic devices in the construction of postirony. The typical syntactic devices of postirony identified in the analysed postironic utterances of the

characters in the novel *Cloud Atlas* enable the definition of David Mitchell's writing style, from a linguistic and stylistic perspective, as postironic.

#### REFERENCES

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