

Decoding New Sincerity in Zadie Smith: A Study of *On Beauty* and *Swing Time*

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Abstract

Zadie Smith's fiction marks a crucial shift in twenty-first-century British literature from postmodern irony toward an ethically charged mode of representation often described as New Sincerity. This paper examines the manifestations of this aesthetic in *On Beauty* and *Swing Time*, exploring how Smith redefines the relationship between irony, empathy, and moral responsibility. Drawing on the theoretical framework of New Sincerity as articulated by scholars such as Adam Kelly and David Foster Wallace, the study situates Smith within a broader cultural movement that seeks authenticity without abandoning complexity or self-awareness. In *On Beauty*, Smith's portrayal of the Belsey family exposes the tensions between intellectual skepticism and human vulnerability, suggesting that emotional truth and ethical engagement can coexist with postmodern consciousness. *Swing Time* extends this exploration through its first-person narrative of friendship, race, and artistic aspiration, foregrounding sincerity as both a moral and aesthetic choice. Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates how Smith's fiction balances irony with empathy, transforming realism into a space for ethical dialogue and emotional resonance. Ultimately, Smith's engagement with New Sincerity signals her evolution from a chronicler of multicultural chaos to a writer of moral vision, affirming the enduring value of sincerity in contemporary narrative practice.

Keywords: Zadie Smith; New Sincerity; Moral Realism; *On Beauty*; *Swing Time*; Authenticity

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed a remarkable reorientation in literary sensibility — a turn away from the detached irony and playful fragmentation that characterized much of late twentieth-century postmodernism. In its place has emerged a renewed faith in emotional authenticity, ethical seriousness, and the possibility of sincere expression within the complexities of contemporary life. This literary and cultural phenomenon, often referred to as “New Sincerity,” challenges the dominance of cynicism and irony, calling instead for writing that combines awareness of postmodern artifice with a genuine search for moral and emotional truth. Within this evolving aesthetic framework, Zadie Smith occupies a significant position. Her fiction, spanning from *White Teeth* to *The Fraud* reflects a sustained negotiation between postmodern irony and the humane impulse to connect, empathize, and mean what one says. The term New Sincerity first gained traction in American cultural criticism, particularly in response to the self-referential irony that defined the postmodern condition. Writers such as David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Dave Eggers advocated for a revival of earnestness in fiction — not as naïve sentimentality, but as a complex sincerity aware of its own limitations. Theorist Adam Kelly further conceptualized New Sincerity as an “ethical posture” that acknowledges the impossibility of total authenticity yet strives toward it as a moral and aesthetic goal. In British fiction, few writers embody this ethos as fully as Zadie Smith, whose works interrogate the performativity of modern identity while yearning for genuine human engagement. Her fiction operates in the liminal space between irony and empathy, intellect and emotion, skepticism and faith in moral values. *On Beauty* represents a pivotal moment in Smith's oeuvre — a novel that reinterprets the campus satire and domestic realism of E. M. Forster and Henry James through the lens of contemporary multicultural Britain. The novel's protagonist, Howard Belsey, is a liberal art historian whose intellectual skepticism and emotional detachment mirror the very postmodern irony Smith seeks to transcend. His inability to live sincerely — to reconcile thought with feeling, principle with practice — becomes the novel's central ethical conflict. Through the intergenerational and interracial tensions within the Belsey family, Smith stages a drama of sincerity versus hypocrisy, intellect versus compassion. The novel's moral universe revolves around the question of how individuals can live truthfully in an age of performative intellect and ideological fatigue. In contrast, *Swing Time* is a more introspective and psychologically complex novel. Here, the narrative focus shifts from academic and cultural satire to questions of identity, race, and authenticity in art and friendship. The unnamed narrator's relationship with her childhood friend Tracey serves as a mirror for her own fractured sense of self. The novel's sincerity emerges through its intimate engagement with vulnerability and moral reckoning — particularly in its treatment of privilege, betrayal, and the ethics of artistic representation. Smith's choice of first-person narration marks a departure from the panoramic irony of her earlier works, allowing for a deeper exploration of emotion, conscience, and voice. Through this personal lens, Smith constructs a form of realism that acknowledges fragmentation yet aspires toward coherence — a hallmark of New Sincerity. By placing *On Beauty* and *Swing Time* in dialogue, this paper argues that Zadie Smith's literary evolution exemplifies the broader cultural movement from irony toward sincerity. Her fiction does not reject irony outright; rather, it reclaims it as a tool for examining the difficulties of authentic living in a self-conscious age. Smith's characters are rarely idealized; they are flawed, contradictory, and aware of their own performative tendencies. Yet it is precisely through their struggles — between belief and disbelief, irony and faith — that Smith articulates the moral vision of New Sincerity. In doing so, she revitalizes the ethical potential of the novel form, showing how fiction can still serve as a space for empathy, dialogue, and moral reflection. The following sections will trace the contours of this sincerity through close readings of *On Beauty* and *Swing Time*. The analysis will show how Smith reconfigures the modern novel into a medium of ethical inquiry — one that bridges the ironic detachment of postmodernism with a renewed commitment to truthfulness, compassion, and connection. In both novels, sincerity is not a return to naïve realism but a dynamic practice — a way of being in the world that remains self-aware yet emotionally and morally grounded. Zadie Smith's pursuit of New Sincerity thus embodies a vital response to the crises of representation and belief in contemporary culture, reaffirming the novel's enduring power to make meaning in an age of fragmentation.

New Sincerity and Moral Realism in *On Beauty*

Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* stands at the crossroads of her artistic evolution — a point where she begins to shed the postmodern exuberance of *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man* in favor of a deeper engagement with ethics, emotion, and authenticity. It is in *On Beauty* that Smith first articulates the moral and emotional dimensions that would later define her association with New Sincerity — the literary mode that privileges authenticity of feeling and ethical awareness within the self-consciousness of postmodern art. While the novel's surface is rich with irony, wit, and social satire, its underlying spirit reveals a profound yearning for truthfulness, compassion, and moral coherence in an increasingly fragmented intellectual landscape.

The Intellectual Ironist and the Crisis of Authenticity

The figure of Howard Belsey, an art historian at the fictional Wellington College, embodies the crisis at the heart of postmodern irony. His intellectual stance is one of rigorous skepticism; he is an atheist, a critic of traditional aesthetics, and an opponent of beauty as a stable category. Yet his ideological detachment masks a deep personal emptiness. His affair with one of his students not only disrupts his family life but exposes his inability to live in accordance with the principles he professes. In one of the novel's key moments, Smith writes: “Howard's problem was that he had spent a lifetime deconstructing everything—art, love, belief—until there was nothing left to stand on.” (*On Beauty*, p. 145)

The above line crystallizes the moral vacuum created by relentless irony and intellectual relativism. Howard's deconstructive worldview denies the possibility of sincerity; every gesture becomes performance, every belief suspect. Through his character, Smith critiques the postmodern condition that privileges cleverness over conviction, fragmentation over faith.

By contrast, Howard's wife Kiki Belsey embodies a moral and emotional authenticity that stands as a counterpoint to her husband's irony. Kiki's warmth, empathy, and sense of rootedness connect her to the world in ways that Howard's cerebral detachment cannot. Her friendship with Carlene Kipps, the wife of Howard's conservative rival Monty Kipps, transcends ideological boundaries and illustrates Smith's belief in the redemptive potential of sincerity. In their unlikely relationship, Smith constructs a moment of grace that dissolves intellectual posturing in favor of genuine human connection. As Carlene says to Kiki during their last meeting: "People don't talk to each other enough, Kiki. We're all busy proving something." (*On Beauty*, p. 204)

Carlene's remark encapsulates the essence of Smith's New Sincerity — the recognition that true moral engagement lies not in ideological purity but in vulnerability, openness, and conversation.

Family, Empathy, and the Ethics of Connection

The Belsey family, fractured yet tenderly rendered, becomes Smith's laboratory for examining sincerity as an ethical practice. Each member represents a different form of engagement with truth and authenticity. Jerome, Howard and Kiki's son, undergoes a spiritual awakening that brings him into conflict with his father's skepticism. His decision to intern with the conservative Kipps family and his infatuation with their daughter Victoria reveal his yearning for faith, structure, and meaning. Howard dismisses Jerome's conversion as naïve, telling him that "belief is a form of laziness," but Smith's narrative sympathies lie elsewhere. Jerome's search for faith is not presented as dogmatic but as sincere — an attempt to find coherence in a world that his father's irony has rendered hollow.

Similarly, Zora, the Belseys' daughter, struggles with authenticity in her intellectual pursuits. Her desire to impress her father and to prove her own brilliance often blinds her to the ethical implications of her actions. When she exploits the talent of a working-class student, Carl, for her own academic gain, she mirrors Howard's moral blindness. Yet Smith refuses to judge her harshly. Through Zora's gradual self-awareness, Smith demonstrates the process of becoming sincere — the painful recognition of one's own hypocrisy and the effort to live differently.

The family dynamic in *On Beauty* thus becomes a microcosm of the broader moral crisis of postmodernity. Smith's realism here is not the detached sociological realism of the nineteenth century but a moral realism — one that seeks to represent the complexity of human motives and the ethical demands of empathy. As Adam Kelly notes, New Sincerity in fiction is less about formal innovation than about an ethical orientation toward the reader and the world. Smith's narrative voice, alternating between irony and tenderness, performs precisely this balance.

Art, Aesthetics, and the Search for Beauty

One of the most striking elements of *On Beauty* is its sustained meditation on art and beauty. The novel's title itself — echoing E. M. Forster's *Howards End* and alluding to Elaine Scarry's philosophical essay *On Beauty and Being Just* invites the reader to reconsider beauty not as an aesthetic luxury but as an ethical principle. For Howard, beauty is a social construct, an illusion perpetuated by elitist traditions. His lectures, filled with witty deconstructions, parody the postmodern impulse to dismantle meaning. Yet his intellectual arrogance alienates both his students and his family. In contrast, the moments of beauty in the novel emerge from acts of sincerity and love — from Kiki's acceptance of imperfection, from Carlene's gift of her painting to Kiki, and from Jerome's fragile faith. When Kiki receives Carlene's painting after her death, she experiences a moment of revelation: "It was not a masterpiece, but it was made with love. And that, she thought, was what made it beautiful." (*On Beauty*, p. 364) This scene encapsulates Smith's redefinition of beauty as sincerity in creation — a moral rather than purely aesthetic quality. The painting's value lies not in its technical brilliance but in the truthfulness of feeling it conveys. Smith thus aligns herself with a tradition of moral humanism that resists the cynicism of postmodern art. Importantly, Smith does not abandon irony altogether. Instead, she transforms it into a mode of ethical self-awareness. Her narrative voice, often humorous and self-reflexive, invites the reader to recognize the absurdities of human behavior while maintaining compassion for her characters. In this respect, *On Beauty* demonstrates what scholar David Foster Wallace called "the irony of the sincere," where irony serves not to distance but to deepen understanding. For example, the dinner-party scenes at Wellington College, filled with academic jargon and performative liberalism, are rendered with biting wit. Yet beneath the satire lies an unmistakable tenderness for the human need to belong, to be seen, and to matter. Smith's irony, then, becomes a tool for sincerity — a means of confronting hypocrisy without surrendering empathy.

New Sincerity as Moral Transformation

By the end of *On Beauty*, Smith orchestrates a subtle moral transformation. The novel concludes not with resolution but with recognition — an acknowledgment of imperfection and the need for forgiveness. Howard's public humiliation at the end, when his affair becomes known, is not a moment of mere exposure but of potential renewal. The final scene, in which he stands before a painting at a campus exhibition, captures this fragile hope: "He stood before the picture for a long time, unable to say what it meant, only that it moved him." (*On Beauty*, p. 441)

This moment of speechless emotion signifies Howard's first encounter with beauty unmediated by theory — a return to sincerity after a lifetime of irony. In this sense, Smith's novel enacts the moral journey of New Sincerity: the passage from skepticism to humility, from intellectual posturing to emotional truth. *On Beauty* thus stands as a landmark in Zadie Smith's career — a novel that transforms the postmodern campus satire into a vehicle for moral inquiry. Through her characters' failures and awakenings, Smith articulates the ethical dimension of sincerity as both a personal and aesthetic ideal. Her prose oscillates between the ironic and the sincere, embodying the very tension she seeks to explore. In doing so, Smith demonstrates that sincerity in the twenty-first century need not mean simplicity or sentimentality; it can coexist with irony, self-awareness, and complexity. In Howard's disillusionment, Kiki's compassion, Jerome's faith, and Zora's awakening, we witness the emergence of a new kind of realism — one that restores moral gravity to the contemporary novel. Smith's *On Beauty* invites readers to believe again in the possibility of connection, meaning, and ethical beauty. It is this restoration of belief, fragile yet luminous, that marks her as one of the most vital voices of New Sincerity in modern fiction.

Emotional Authenticity and Narrative Reflection in *Swing Time*

If *On Beauty* represents Zadie Smith's ethical turn toward sincerity through the lens of family and academia, *Swing Time* marks her deepening commitment to exploring the interior dimensions of sincerity — emotional truth, moral ambiguity, and the ethics of self-representation. In this novel, Smith moves away from the ensemble realism and comic sprawl of her earlier works toward a more introspective mode of storytelling, using first-person narration to chart the moral and emotional complexities of a narrator whose anonymity becomes both a psychological and philosophical statement. *Swing Time* thus enacts a more intimate version of New Sincerity, where the search for authenticity is filtered through voice, memory, and self-examination.

Narrative Form and the Quest for Authenticity

The decision to tell the story through an unnamed first-person narrator immediately signals a shift in Smith's aesthetic concerns. Whereas *On Beauty* employed a third-person omniscient narrator to reveal a moral panorama, *Swing Time* confines itself to the consciousness of a single, unreliable but self-aware voice. The narrator's anonymity is crucial — she is both participant and observer, caught between her working-class upbringing in North-West London and her later life as an assistant to a global pop star named Aimee. Her inability or refusal to name herself underscores her fragmented identity: a woman of mixed race, class mobility, and moral uncertainty. From the outset, the novel situates sincerity as a problem of self-narration. The narrator confesses, "There was a time when I could say, without irony, I wanted to dance" (*Swing Time*, p. 3). This admission, tinged with nostalgia and loss, frames the entire novel as a meditation on authenticity — on what it means to live truthfully in a world mediated by performance, fame, and cultural appropriation. The dance metaphor becomes a motif for moral and emotional rhythm, for finding one's place between imitation and originality, between irony and sincerity.

Smith's narrative structure mirrors the discontinuity of memory, alternating between the narrator's childhood friendship with Tracey and her adult experiences in Aimee's employ. This nonlinear form, rather than undermining sincerity, enhances it by reflecting the authentic process of recollection — fragmented, selective, and emotionally charged. Through this structure, Smith demonstrates that sincerity in the postmodern world cannot be naïve or linear; it must grapple with the fractured nature of identity itself. The relationship between the narrator and Tracey lies at the emotional core of *Swing Time*. Both girls grow up in the same North-West London housing estate, both are mixed-race, and both dream of becoming dancers. Yet their paths diverge: Tracey possesses natural talent and charisma but remains trapped in her social circumstances, while the narrator, more introspective and cautious, gains education and mobility but loses her emotional center. Their friendship oscillates between affection, envy, and betrayal — a complex emotional dynamic that exposes the tensions between authenticity and self-performance. In one striking passage, the narrator recalls watching Tracey dance: "There was an energy about her movements, an ease that came from somewhere deep inside her. She didn't just move to the music; she was the music." (*Swing Time*, p. 27)

This moment captures the essence of sincerity in artistic expression — Tracey's dance is authentic because it is unmediated, instinctive, true to her being. The narrator, in contrast, becomes increasingly aware of her own inauthenticity: her education, her self-consciousness, and later, her role as an assistant to a celebrity who commodifies sincerity for global consumption. The friendship thus becomes an allegory for the struggle between genuine self-expression and the performativity of modern identity. The deterioration of their friendship parallels the narrator's moral disintegration. When she later exposes Tracey's personal scandal to others, her act of betrayal signifies not empowerment but alienation from her own moral compass. The emotional aftermath of this event reveals Smith's nuanced understanding of sincerity — it is not merely telling the truth but acting with empathy and integrity. The narrator's failure to do so renders her complicit in the very cynicism she intellectually despises.

Race, Class, and the Global Performance of Morality

One of Smith's most significant achievements in *Swing Time* is her expansion of sincerity beyond personal relationships into the domains of race, class, and globalization. The narrator's employment by Aimee, an Australian pop star obsessed with humanitarian image-building, provides a sharp satire of performative morality. Aimee's decision to build a school for girls in a West African village is portrayed as both well-intentioned and self-serving — a gesture of compassion mediated through celebrity spectacle. The narrator's complicity in facilitating this project forces her to confront the gap between moral intention and ethical action. In one emblematic scene, Aimee proclaims: "It's about giving them what we have — opportunity, education, freedom." (*Swing Time*, p. 221)

Yet the narrator's silent observation of local realities exposes the hollowness of such rhetoric. The villagers' skepticism, the cultural misunderstandings, and the economic inequalities all reveal the contradictions of Aimee's performative sincerity. The narrator, increasingly aware of these ironies, finds herself unable to fully critique them — her dependence on Aimee for identity and livelihood renders her morally paralyzed. Here, Smith explores the ethics of sincerity in a globalized world where empathy is commodified, and authenticity becomes a brand.

The Africa episodes contrast sharply with the narrator's earlier life in London, exposing the continuum of moral blindness that unites privilege and marginalization. Just as Howard Belsey's intellectual irony prevents sincerity in *On Beauty*, Aimee's self-conscious benevolence corrupts it in *Swing Time*. Both represent different forms of postmodern detachment — one intellectual, the other performative. Against these models, the narrator's halting introspection and ultimate isolation signify the painful but necessary process of ethical awakening.

Voice, Memory, and the Ethics of Self-Narration

The narrator's storytelling in *Swing Time* is marked by hesitation, omission, and self-contradiction — narrative traits that might initially seem at odds with sincerity. Yet Smith redefines sincerity here not as transparency but as self-awareness — the courage to acknowledge uncertainty, guilt, and fragmentation. The narrator's anonymity, her refusal to name herself, reflects an ethical modesty that resists the totalizing claims of identity politics or confessional culture. Her voice embodies what the critic Adam Kelly calls the "post-ironic sincerity" of contemporary fiction — an earnest engagement with moral ambiguity that avoids both cynicism and sentimentality. At one point, she reflects: "I was the kind of person who learned not by doing, but by watching others do." (*Swing Time*, p. 179) This confession encapsulates her central dilemma — her tendency to mediate experience rather than inhabit it. Yet her awareness of this flaw constitutes a form of sincerity in itself. Through the narrator's reflective voice, Smith constructs an aesthetic of moral introspection, where the act of narration becomes a mode of ethical reckoning.

Art, Performance, and the Politics of Imitation

Dance, the novel's recurring metaphor, encapsulates Smith's exploration of authenticity and imitation. Tracey's dancing is natural, expressive, and embodied; the narrator's is learned, imitative, self-conscious. This contrast extends to their lives as well: Tracey remains authentic to her circumstances, however limited, while the narrator ascends socially at the cost of losing touch with her roots. The novel's title — *Swing Time* — alludes both to the 1936 film featuring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and to the oscillation between authenticity and performance that defines the narrator's moral world. In one of the novel's pivotal scenes, the narrator reflects on a performance of black dancers in Aimee's video project: "They were performing their own lives, yet it was not theirs anymore. It belonged to the camera, to Aimee, to the world." (*Swing Time*, p. 287) This observation distills Smith's critique of cultural commodification — how even sincerity can be appropriated and repackaged as spectacle. Yet rather than offering a moralistic conclusion, Smith leaves the narrator in a state of unresolved reflection. The sincerity of *Swing Time* lies precisely in this refusal of closure — in acknowledging that authenticity, like identity, is a perpetual negotiation rather than a fixed state.

The Fall and the Possibility of Renewal

The narrator's downfall — her exposure of Aimee's affair and subsequent dismissal — represents both moral failure and potential renewal. Stripped of professional identity and social privilege, she is left alone to confront her past and her conscience. The final pages of the novel, set in the London neighborhood where her story began, evoke a quiet circularity. She sees Tracey again, now a single mother living in poverty, performing a dance with her children in their small flat. The scene is intimate and moving: "She danced for them, not for anyone else. Her feet tapped out a rhythm that belonged only to her." (*Swing Time*, p. 453)

This closing image reaffirms the novel's faith in small, personal acts of sincerity — moments of truth unmediated by irony or performance. Tracey, despite her failures, embodies a kind of authenticity that the narrator has long sought but never attained. Her dance becomes an emblem of redemption, of art rooted in lived experience rather than representation. The narrator, watching silently from the street, does not intrude. She recognizes, perhaps for the first time, that sincerity cannot be possessed or performed; it must be lived. The act of watching — once a symptom of detachment — here becomes a gesture of humility and moral awareness. The novel thus ends on a note of quiet sincerity, where acknowledgment replaces explanation, and seeing replaces knowing.

Sincerity as Moral Consciousness

In *Swing Time*, Zadie Smith transforms the concept of sincerity from a moral ideal into a lived process of self-interrogation. Through the narrator's fragmented voice, the novel dramatizes the ethical challenges of living truthfully in a world of mediated identities and performative virtue. Smith's use of first-person narration, nonlinear temporality, and the metaphor of dance all contribute to a deeply felt exploration of authenticity — one that transcends the boundaries of race, class, and art. Whereas *On Beauty* exposes the intellectual ironies of liberal humanism, *Swing Time* internalizes these conflicts within the self. The movement from external critique to internal reflection marks Smith's full embrace of New Sincerity — a mode of writing that seeks to reconcile complexity with compassion, awareness with feeling. By the end of *Swing Time*, sincerity

is no longer an aesthetic stance but an ethical awakening — a recognition that truth, however partial, emerges from the courage to see oneself clearly. Smith's narrator, standing outside Tracey's flat and watching her dance, embodies the paradox of New Sincerity: she knows too much to be innocent, yet she feels enough to be redeemed. This balance — between irony and emotion, intellect and empathy — defines Zadie Smith's mature art. Through *Swing Time*, she affirms that the possibility of sincerity persists even in a fractured world, that authenticity can still be found in the ordinary gestures of love, friendship, and art.

Conclusion

Zadie Smith's fiction stands as a compelling testament to the resurgence of sincerity in twenty-first-century literature. Through *On Beauty* and *Swing Time*, she reconstructs the moral and emotional architecture of contemporary novels, bridging the gap between postmodern irony and ethical realism. In *On Beauty*, sincerity emerges through the moral disintegration and eventual reckoning of the Belsey family, exposing the emptiness of intellectual posturing without emotional truth. In *Swing Time*, sincerity takes a more introspective form, revealed through the narrator's confrontation with her own complicity and yearning for authentic connection in a world structured by inequality and performance. Across both works, Smith demonstrates that sincerity is not a rejection of complexity but a reaffirmation of meaning within it — an effort to live truthfully despite the contradictions of modern identity. Her nuanced exploration of empathy, moral choice, and artistic integrity redefines realism for the post-ironic age. Ultimately, Zadie Smith's engagement with New Sincerity reflects her enduring belief in the novel's capacity to act as a moral and emotional compass — a space where intellect and feeling, irony and faith, can coexist in the ongoing search for human understanding.

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