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## Navigating nostalgia and hope: Metamodern oscillation in Tracy K. Smith's *Life on Mars*

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines Tracy K. Smith's *Life on Mars* through the theoretical lens of metamodernism, focusing on oscillation between irony and sincerity, despair and hope. Employing qualitative close reading, the article analyzes selected poems—including "Life on Mars," "My God, It's Full of Stars," and "The Universe as a Primal Scream"—to investigate how nostalgia and hope function as interrelated metamodern strategies for negotiating contemporary existential and social anxieties. Drawing on metamodern theory (Genovese, 2017; Keenan, 2022) and recent scholarship on Smith's poetry, the study argues that nostalgia in *Life on Mars* operates as a reflective and critical mode rather than as mere sentimentality, while hope emerges as a provisional yet persistent affective response to uncertainty. The article's original contribution lies in demonstrating how Smith's poetry sustains emotional complexity through oscillation rather than resolution, positioning *Life on Mars* as a significant example of metamodern poetics in twenty-first-century literature.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Metamodernism has emerged as a significant critical framework for interpreting contemporary literature that neither entirely abandons postmodern skepticism nor returns uncritically to modernist idealism. Rather than positioning itself as a replacement for earlier paradigms, metamodernism is defined by oscillation, a sustained movement between irony and sincerity, doubt and hope, critique and belief (Keenan, 2022; Allport et al., 2011). This oscillatory logic enables literary texts to confront fragmentation and uncertainty while resisting the nihilism often associated with postmodern discourse. Consequently, metamodernism has become an

increasingly productive lens for reading contemporary poetry that engages affect, ethical responsibility, and existential crisis.

Theoretical discussions of metamodernism consistently emphasize this principle of oscillation as its defining feature. [Genovese \(2017\)](#) conceptualizes metamodernism as a cultural response to postmodern fragmentation, foregrounding its capacity to move dynamically between competing epistemological and emotional positions rather than settling into stable ideological commitments. [Keenan \(2022\)](#) further highlights metamodernism's ethical investment in hope, not as a naïve return to optimism, but as a provisional, self-reflexive stance that remains critically aware of uncertainty. Together, these perspectives establish metamodernism as a mode of engagement that sustains tension rather than resolving contradiction, making it particularly relevant for analyzing contemporary literary texts shaped by crisis and ambiguity ([Barzinji, 2012](#); [Bradbury, 2012](#)).

Within literary studies, this framework has been increasingly applied to contemporary poetry that foregrounds emotional complexity and renewed sincerity. Scholars have identified a broader shift away from ironic detachment toward poetic forms that openly engage vulnerability, memory, and affect ([Chocano, 2017](#); [Chocano, 2020](#)). Rather than functioning as sentimental excess, emotion in these works operates as a critical tool for negotiating meaning within unstable cultural, political, and ecological conditions. This shift suggests a recalibration of poetic voice in which sincerity and skepticism coexist, reflecting metamodernism's dual orientation.

Tracy K. Smith's *Life on Mars* occupies a central position within this evolving literary landscape. Critical engagement with the collection has primarily focused on its investment in the cosmic sublime, its political resonances, and its elegiac treatment of loss. [Ambroży \(2020\)](#), for example, examines how Smith's use of astronomical imagery creates a productive tension between vast cosmic scale and intimate human vulnerability, arguing that the cosmic functions as a lens through which mortality and affect are refracted. [Ross et al., \(2021\)](#) situate Smith within broader trends in contemporary poetry that foreground emotional intensity and renewed seriousness, signaling a movement beyond postmodern irony ([Gillard-Estrada & Besnault-Levita, 2018](#)).

While these studies provide valuable insights, they have not sufficiently examined how *Life on Mars* systematically enacts metamodern oscillation through the intertwined dynamics of nostalgia, hope, and emotional complexity. Nostalgia in Smith's poetry is often read as elegiac or retrospective, while hope is frequently treated as an implicit or secondary effect. What remains underexplored is how these affective dimensions function relationally, sustaining emotional tension rather than offering resolution. This gap is particularly significant because *Life on Mars* responds

directly to contemporary existential, ecological, and political anxieties, yet it resists both postmodern detachment and uncritical optimism.

Comparative scholarship further illuminates this gap by situating Smith alongside poets such as Ocean Vuong and Ada Limón, whose work similarly mobilizes nostalgia and affects to negotiate trauma, identity, and meaning. In collections such as *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* and *The Carrying*, nostalgia operates ambivalently, offering moments of comfort while simultaneously exposing loss and fragmentation. This dual function aligns closely with metamodernism's oscillatory logic, in which longing for the past coexists with a critical awareness of its limitations. Read within this broader poetic movement, *Life on Mars* emerges as a distinctly metamodern text that balances intimacy and vastness, memory and futurity, despair and aspiration (Hellström et al., 2020).

This article argues that *Life on Mars* exemplifies metamodern poetics by transforming nostalgia into a reflective and critical mode of engagement and hope into a resilient, forward-looking orientation rather than a consolatory gesture. Through close textual analysis of selected poems, the study demonstrates that Smith preserves emotional ambiguity rather than resolving it, allowing contradictory affective registers to coexist. By foregrounding the interaction of nostalgia, hope, and emotional complexity as oscillatory forces, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of Smith's poetic practice and clarifies the collection's position within contemporary metamodern literature.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative literary methodology grounded in close reading to examine how Tracy K. Smith's *Life on Mars* articulates metamodern oscillation through nostalgia, hope, and emotional complexity. Close reading is adopted as the primary method because it enables detailed attention to poetic language, imagery, structure, and tonal shifts, the essential elements for tracing the sustained tension between irony and sincerity that characterizes metamodern poetics.

The analysis focuses on a selection of poems from *Life on Mars*, namely *Life on Mars*, *My God, It's Full of Stars*, *The Universe as a Primal Scream*, *Sci-Fi*, and *They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Refused*. These poems were selected based on their explicit engagement with cosmic imagery, memory, and affect, as well as their critical prominence in existing scholarship on Smith's work. Collectively, they exemplify the collection's thematic and emotional range and provide a representative corpus for examining metamodern sensibilities. Together, these poems foreground the collection's oscillatory logic by consistently juxtaposing cosmic vastness with intimate loss, speculative imagination with historical memory, and moments of vulnerability with gestures toward resilience, making them particularly representative of *Life on Mars* as a metamodern poetic whole.

The analytical procedure proceeds in three interrelated stages. First, the readings identify moments of oscillation between irony and sincerity, attending to shifts in tone, voice, and figurative language. Second, the analysis examines how nostalgia functions simultaneously as remembrance and critique, revealing how memory is mobilized not as a sentimental retreat but as a reflective mode of engagement with loss and historical rupture. Third, the study analyzes hope as an effective response to existential uncertainty, focusing on how aspiration and resilience coexist with despair rather than on their resolution.

Throughout the analysis, poems are read iteratively to identify key images, symbols, and stylistic devices, including metaphor, enjambment, and sonic patterning, and to interpret how these formal elements contribute to emotional complexity. The readings are informed by metamodern theory, particularly its emphasis on oscillation and affective tension, and are supported by selective comparative references to contemporary poets where relevant. This theoretical grounding ensures that the textual analysis remains situated within broader critical debates on contemporary poetry while maintaining close engagement with Smith's language and form. By integrating close reading with a metamodern analytical framework, this methodological approach allows for a systematic exploration of how *Life on Mars* sustains emotional ambiguity and articulates a nuanced poetic response to the conditions of twenty-first-century life.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines how *Life on Mars* articulates metamodern poetics through the interrelated dynamics of nostalgia, hope, and emotional complexity. Rather than treating these elements as isolated themes, the analysis demonstrates how they function as oscillatory forces sustaining affective tension throughout the collection. Drawing on close textual readings of selected poems, the discussion traces how Smith negotiates irony and sincerity, loss and aspiration, intimacy and vastness, thereby producing a poetic response attuned to the uncertainties of contemporary life (Knoblauch, 2025). To clarify this interaction, the discussion is organized into three subsections: nostalgia as a reflective mode of engagement with the past, hope as an affective response to existential uncertainty, and emotional complexity as a product of sustained formal and thematic tension.

### Nostalgia as metamodern reflection

In *Life on Mars*, nostalgia functions not as sentimental retrospection but as a reflective mode that sustains emotional tension between longing and critical awareness. Rather than attempting to recover a stable past, Tracy K. Smith mobilizes memory to interrogate loss, continuity, and human vulnerability in an unstable

present. This approach aligns with metamodernism's defining oscillation, in which attachment to what has been lost coexists with an acknowledgment of its irretrievability.

Across the collection, nostalgic moments are frequently situated within cosmic and speculative frameworks, destabilizing linear conceptions of time and memory. In poems such as "Life on Mars" and "Sci-Fi," personal recollection is juxtaposed with images of outer space and science-fiction imaginaries, creating a layered temporal perspective in which the past persists as an affective presence rather than a recoverable reality. Smith's references to cultural artifacts and collective memories, particularly those drawn from late-twentieth-century popular culture—do not function as comforting return points; instead, they expose the fragility of shared narratives that once promised coherence and progress (Louvel et al., 2019).

This tension is especially evident in "My God, It's Full of Stars," where even the poem's titular invocation "My God, it's full of stars" frames wonder and remembrance within a vast, impersonal universe. Here, the speaker's engagement with cosmic imagery reframes personal grief as both intimate and infinitesimal, allowing memory to operate simultaneously as attachment and critique. The past is not invoked to resolve loss but to render it intelligible within a scale that resists consolation. As Ambroży (2020) observes, Smith's cosmic sublime oscillates between intimacy and vastness, producing an affective space in which nostalgia becomes inseparable from existential uncertainty.

From a metamodern perspective, this use of nostalgia exemplifies a refusal of both postmodern detachment and restorative longing. Genovese's (2017) conceptualization of metamodernism as a movement beyond postmodern fragmentation is particularly relevant here: Smith's poetry neither abandons emotional investment nor seeks closure. Instead, nostalgia operates as a critical lens through which the speaker confronts the limits of remembrance while maintaining an affective connection to the past (Putri et al., 2023). The result is a poetics of suspended meaning, in which memory remains active, unsettled, and ethically charged.

Through this oscillatory deployment of nostalgia, *Life on Mars* articulates an emotional engagement that resists resolution. The poems invite readers to inhabit the space between mourning and meaning-making, recognizing nostalgia not as escape but as a mode of reflection that sustains emotional complexity (Stratton, 2023). In this way, Smith transforms nostalgia into a distinctly metamodern strategy, one that acknowledges loss while refusing to relinquish the impulse to seek understanding within it.

### **Hope as oscillatory response to uncertainty**

In *Life on Mars*, hope does not emerge as optimism or consolation but as an

affective stance sustained in tension with loss, uncertainty, and cosmic indifference. Rather than offering resolution, Smith situates hope within an oscillatory framework in which aspiration coexists with vulnerability. This positioning reflects a distinctly metamodern sensibility, where hope functions not as a guarantee of meaning but as an ongoing, imaginative engagement with what remains unresolved (Strickland, 2024).

Smith frequently articulates hope through speculative and cosmic imagery that foregrounds the limits of human knowledge. In poems such as “Life on Mars” and “The Universe as a Primal Scream,” the speaker confronts vast, indifferent spaces that resist anthropocentric interpretation. Yet within these expanses, moments of imaginative projection persist. In “*Life on Mars*,” Smith (2011) admits, “*I want to believe*”—a brief but significant utterance that captures hope as desire rather than certainty. The phrase does not assert conviction; instead, it reveals hope as a tentative, forward-reaching impulse sustained despite doubt. In this context, imagining alternate futures, extraterrestrial life, or scientific possibility becomes a means of sustaining connection in the face of existential isolation (Strickland, 2024).

This oscillatory construction of hope is especially evident in “The Universe as a Primal Scream,” where expressions of grief and cosmic insignificance are juxtaposed with a persistent desire for connection. The poem does not resolve the speaker’s suffering; instead, it frames hope as an act of endurance, rooted in the willingness to continue addressing an unresponsive universe. Such moments exemplify how Smith’s poetry resists the nihilistic tendencies of postmodern thought without reverting to redemptive narratives. Hope remains provisional, fragile, and ethically charged (Hasan, 2019b).

From a metamodern perspective, this treatment aligns with Keenan’s (2022) argument that hope functions as a critically aware response to contemporary conditions rather than as an ideological affirmation. Smith’s poetry acknowledges the failures of historical progress and the weight of collective trauma, yet it refuses to retreat into emotional withdrawal. The forward-looking gestures embedded in her poems however tentative affirm the value of imaginative persistence as a mode of engagement with uncertainty (Hasan, 2025).

Importantly, hope in *Life on Mars* is inseparable from nostalgia, as memories of what has been lost shape the contours of what can still be imagined. Rather than negating loss, hope is articulated through the recognition of its permanence. This relational dynamic underscores the metamodern logic at work in the collection: hope and despair, past and future, belief and doubt remain in continuous dialogue (Hasan, 2022). Through this sustained oscillation, Smith’s poetry constructs hope as an active, ongoing process that enables meaning-making without closure, reflecting the affective

complexity of contemporary life.

### **Emotional complexity and affective tension**

The interaction of nostalgia and hope culminates in a broader affective structure that resists emotional closure (Hasan, 2019a). Emotional complexity in *Life on Mars* thus emerges not as thematic accumulation, but as a dynamic process shaped by formal tension and oscillatory movement. Rather than isolating grief, wonder, hope, or despair as discrete emotional states, Tracy K. Smith's poetry holds these effects in productive suspension.

This complexity is especially visible in the poem "My God, It's Full of Stars," where the speaker confronts both awe and fragility, acknowledging that "we learn at last the lesson of our smallness." (Smith, 2011). The line articulates emotional vulnerability without surrendering to despair, capturing the coexistence of humility, grief, and reflective awareness. The vastness of the universe does not negate human feeling; instead, it intensifies it, rendering emotional experience both profoundly personal and broadly existential. This oscillation between scale and intimacy exemplifies how emotional complexity in *Life on Mars* is structurally embedded rather than merely thematic (Hasan, 2023).

Smith's poetry repeatedly situates intimate experiences of mourning within expansive cosmic frameworks, allowing personal emotion to resonate beyond individual subjectivity. Grief is articulated alongside images of astronomical immensity, producing affective contrast that amplifies rather than diminishes emotional impact (Hasan, 2024a). The universe functions not as an abstract backdrop but as an active participant in the speaker's emotional negotiation, magnifying vulnerability while resisting the temptation to simplify emotion (Hasan, 2024b).

Formal features further contribute to this affective tension. Shifts in tone, abrupt transitions between imagery, and variations in rhythm mirror the speaker's emotional fluctuations, creating a reading experience marked by instability and openness. Enjambment and fragmentation frequently interrupt moments of lyrical cohesion, preventing emotional closure and reinforcing uncertainty. Through these stylistic strategies, Smith ensures that emotional meaning remains provisional, shaped by movement rather than resolution (Hasan, 2025; Hasan et al., 2024).

This refusal of emotional finality aligns with metamodernism's emphasis on ambiguity and oscillation. Rather than offering catharsis, Smith's poems invite readers to inhabit unresolved emotional states. Joy is shadowed by loss, wonder by fear, and hope by doubt, producing an affective landscape that resists reductive interpretation. Emotional complexity thus becomes an ethical stance, acknowledging the insufficiency of singular emotional narratives in the face of contemporary crises.

Importantly, emotional complexity in *Life on Mars* is inseparable from the

collection's engagement with nostalgia and hope. Memory intensifies grief while sustaining connection, just as hope emerges alongside despair without negating it. These affective forces operate relationally, reinforcing the collection's metamodern logic in which meaning arises through sustained tension rather than emotional clarity. Through this interplay, Smith's poetry articulates a deeply human response to uncertainty, one that embraces vulnerability, acknowledges loss, and persists in the search for connection without certainty.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that *Life on Mars* operates through a coherent metamodern logic in which nostalgia, hope, and emotional complexity function relationally rather than independently. Nostalgia emerges as a reflective engagement with memory that sustains attachment while acknowledging loss; hope appears as a tentative yet persistent imaginative impulse that coexists with uncertainty; and emotional complexity is realized through formal and affective tension rather than emotional resolution. Together, these elements produce a sustained oscillation between vulnerability and resilience, intimacy and vastness, doubt and belief.

Rather than offering closure or consolation, Smith's poetry maintains emotional openness, inviting readers to inhabit contradiction as an ethical and aesthetic stance. The collection's use of cosmic imagery, speculative imagination, and tonal fluctuation reinforces this oscillatory structure, demonstrating how form and affect work in tandem to articulate contemporary experiences of grief, uncertainty, and meaning-making. Through this interplay, *Life on Mars* exemplifies metamodern poetics as a mode that neither retreats into postmodern detachment nor embraces uncritical optimism. Instead, it sustains emotional tension as a productive response to the complexities of twenty-first-century life.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Tracy K. Smith's *Life on Mars* articulates a distinctly metamodern poetics through the sustained interaction of nostalgia, hope, and emotional complexity. Rather than operating as discrete thematic concerns, these affective dimensions function relationally as oscillatory forces that structure the collection's engagement with loss, uncertainty, and meaning. Nostalgia emerges as a reflective mode that holds memory and critique in tension; hope operates as a provisional, forward-facing response to existential uncertainty; and emotional complexity is realized through the poems' refusal of affective closure. Together, these dynamics produce a coherent metamodern logic in which vulnerability and resilience, intimacy and vastness, doubt and belief remain in continuous dialogue.

The analysis further shows that Smith's formal and stylistic strategies, particularly her use of cosmic imagery, tonal shifts, and structural variation are

integral to this oscillatory affective structure. Form and content operate relationally, allowing contradictory emotional registers to coexist without resolution. By embedding intimate experiences of grief within expansive, speculative frameworks, Smith sustains emotional openness rather than consolation. Emotional meaning, therefore, arises not from thematic declaration but from the poems' formal negotiation of scale, voice, and uncertainty.

The findings indicate that *Life on Mars* resists both postmodern detachment and uncritical optimism by sustaining an ethical and aesthetic stance of emotional tension. Nostalgia, hope, and emotional complexity operate as interdependent forces that invite readers to inhabit contradiction rather than resolve it. Through cosmic imagery, speculative imagination, and tonal fluctuation, Smith's poetry articulates contemporary experiences of grief and uncertainty while preserving the impulse toward meaning-making. In this sense, *Life on Mars* exemplifies metamodern poetics as a mode of engagement that affirms emotional depth without closure, offering a resonant poetic response to the complexities of twenty-first-century life.

This study contributes to contemporary literary scholarship by providing a focused, textually grounded reading of *Life on Mars* that situates the collection firmly within metamodern literary discourse. By foregrounding the relational interplay of nostalgia, hope, and emotional complexity, the article extends existing criticism that has often treated these elements in isolation. It clarifies how Smith's poetry negotiates loss and aspiration through oscillation rather than resolution, thereby advancing understanding of how contemporary poetry responds to cultural and existential uncertainty.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis is confined to selected poems from a single collection and prioritizes close textual reading over reader reception or broader comparative study. While the metamodern framework offers a productive lens, alternative approaches, such as ecocriticism, science and technology studies, or affect theory—could further illuminate the collection's engagement with cosmology, scientific imagination, and human vulnerability.

Future research may expand this inquiry by examining *Life on Mars* in dialogue with other contemporary poets whose work similarly navigates grief, speculation, and cultural memory, or by exploring intermedial connections with music, film, and visual culture. Such directions would further enrich understanding of Smith's contribution to contemporary poetry and the evolving contours of metamodern literary expression.

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