

A postmodernist exploration of the human experience



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the suffocating times of the Victorian era, authors adhered to strict and stifling methods of writing due to the restrictive and stigmatic conformity engulfed by Victorian society. Postmodernism conjured a form of radicalism in literature, altering the world of writing indefinitely. The utterly brilliant construction of a postmodern text, engenders it's audience to explore an alternate perception of the human experience. Gail Jones, an Australian novelist and academic, employs the notion of post-modernism throughout a critical construction of her novel, ' Sixty Lights', published in 2002. The narrative follows a non chronological storyline of the lives of Lucy and Thomas Strange - two orphaned and estranged children. Jones creates a pastiche effect by exercising the technique of metafiction in the novel through continuous intertextual references of ' Jane Eyre' by Charlotte Bronte and ' Great Expectations' by Charles Dickens. Jones implements fragmentation repeatedly throughout the novel as well as infusing generic conventions specific to the postmodern genre, which takes effect to undermine traditional methods of writing. Through the exploration of the postmodern genre, ' Sixty Lights' presents the audience with insight into the conflict of the human experience, suggesting that literature can accurately reflect the plight of humanity.

Postmodernist texts are typically experimental and exploratory in nature, this notion is seen particularly in ' Sixty Lights' as Jones experiments with the technique of intertextuality. The effect of pastiche occurs through Jones' plot imitation of ' Jane Eyre' written by Charlotte Bronte and ' Great expectations' by Charles Dickens. Jones has adopted the structural stylings of Bronte and Dickens' novels as it is evident that the key characters in both texts are

without parents and appear unguarded in the world in which they live in. Jones' application of a 'story within a story' allows the audience to bind together a relation between the text and its influences. This enforces a deeper understanding of how in reality, humanity is propelled by the influence of others – with a fear that if one is too original, they may become alienated and estranged in society. This influential conformity takes shape on page 12 when Honoria quotes Jane Eyre by saying, " I am Jane Eyre, I am honourable but unnoticed, I am passionate and strong. I need a lover who will carry my future in the palm of his hand". In this sense, it is as if Honoria idolises and wants to be Jane Eyre as she perhaps sympathises with Jane's character. The notion of influential conformity and its impact on Honoria's identity provides the audience with insight into her perspective in the world.

The pastiche style intertextual references continue to occur as Jones creates a stark link between the character Jane Eyre herself and the orphaned child, Thomas, one of the prominent protagonists in ' Sixty Lights'. In Bronte's novel, Jane believed that she truly saw her uncle's ghost. Jane's notion of the supernatural is similar to that of Thomas' experience where, on page 19, Jones describes, " Thomas swore he saw his father's face – unshaven, eyes bloodshot – hovering on the surface of the hallway mirror". This relationship between the characters in ' Jane Eyre' and ' Sixty Lights' identifies the technique of metafiction, which reveals how it is human nature to be guided by the means of others. Jones has alleviated the audience of trying to toil new concepts as she thoroughly connects her novel to the experiences of other writers. It is evident that both Thomas and Lucy relate well with the character Pip, from Dickens' ' Great Expectations' providing critical insight to

the minds of the audience as they are exposed to this reiterated and apparent link between two texts. In this case, on page 84 it is described, “ Thomas called himself Pip for a while, but Lucy too wanted to be Pip and resented his claim”. It is conspicuous that in Lucy’s experience she rejects the typical values of the Victorian era – challenging societal expectations of the urges of a ‘ conforming’ woman. Lucy’s yearn to be like Pip re-enforces the postmodernist style of ‘ Sixty Lights’ . This quote conveys that women too can be influenced by men as well as their own gender – once again, an accurate reflection of how it is in the yearn of the human approach to be influenced by those that surround.

Postmodernism shapes ‘ Sixty Lights’ as it acts as a critique of the different human experiences and how through different triumphs and conflicts, a text can resemble the frustrations and confusion that real life possesses.

Fragmentation in the novel has been used to create a somewhat playful text that explores the true chaos of the human experience in the real world. At the beginning of every chapter a new storyline or set up appears. With some chapters being a mere two pages long and others being longer than ten pages. The fragmentation and un-alignment of the chapters are symbolic of photos – hence each chapter is the equivalent to a photograph – the longer the chapter perhaps the deeper the meaning in the photo. For example, chapter twelve begins with, “ In the novel, Jane Eyre a tree is cleft by lightning the goddess nature”, and chapter thirteen follows, starting off with, “ He had wanted for years to tell her, but now it was too late”. Two chapters that have no relation in chronological or narrative structure – like two photos put next to each other from two completely different occasions.

This fragmentation of the narrative enlightens the audience into human reality and how human life is sometimes chaotic, frustrating and utterly confusing. Therefore, Jones accurately portrays the chaos of human life through the conspicuously fragmented chapters. Jones continuously distorts time throughout the text, a prominent postmodern technique that takes effect to confuse and frustrate the audience. This is evident at the beginning of the novel as the novel begins in the future, where Lucy is a near adult in India, when in chapter two, where Lucy's childhood is introduced as the present. Jones' inherent distortion of time, perhaps signifies the notion of memories as a part of the human experience. This technique comments on the un-alignment and fragmented manner of memories and how humans simply cannot hold memories in perfect, timely chronological order re-enforces the postmodernist notion. As an insightful principle, the 'frustrating' and bewildering approach of postmodernism depicts the plight of the confused and imperfect human advance to life and how, through the perspective and revelation of memories, one can simply not align in perfection the means of the past.

Generic conventions of postmodernism call attention to the human affliction to focus on physical exterior by means of vanity of which highlights the apparent flaws in human nature. The metaphorical notion of motifs cohere 'Sixty Lights' as they add a sense of depth and complexity to the narrative. Each chapter contains at least one image connected to light - often towards the close of the chapter. This motif advances on page 170, where Jones describes Lucy's actions, " She held the image to the light, gently testing its texture. The word was bioluminescence. There was in every living thing this

elusive capacity. In lovers. In the newborn. In the man who was killed by a mirror and lay on his back looking at death". 'Bioluminescence' is defined as the production and emission of light by a living organism. A prepossessing description of light which highlights the flawed nature of humans to view things particularly from an aesthetic lens and not appreciate what is beyond the surface. The contrast between life and death, between the 'newborn' and the 'killed man' conveys a prominent part of the human experience - mortality, connecting the two opposing concepts through the motif of light (arrival in the world begins with light whilst leaving the world is also associated with seeing 'light'). It is ironic how light is not absorbed into the surface of a mirror. A mirror's existence is based solely on the physical exterior of a person, of which reflects and permeates light in small particles of colour in order to reveal the reflecting image. The irony in the man dying from the source of his own reflection exposes the cynical and vain plight of humanity and how our reflections are perhaps the cause of the stifling notion of conformity and 'outside appeal'.

Sardonic dark humour, a prevalent convention specific to the postmodern genre appears constantly throughout the novel. Sardonicism reflects the narcissistic behaviours of humans through the works of literature - reflecting the evil present in humanity. On page 23, Lucy and Thomas talk about their wishes for Mrs Minchin, "Perhaps she's died Lucy said hopefully." and "Murdered, I should think. With her throat cut. And purple blood in bucketsful Thomas added". The humanistic approach to death is evidently startling in this scenario, with two young children humouring a gruesome imagination of murder - reflecting the evil nature that lies in every person, even children.

The motif of Mrs Minchin's 'purple' birthmark which is continuously referenced by Lucy in particular exhibits the great impact that physical and outer appearance has on the actions of humans. Lucy is disturbed by Mrs Minchin's appearance and due to her childish naivety links it to Mrs Minchin's 'human' characteristics, referring to Mrs Minchin on page 7 as, "she looked always to be moving in her own private shadow". Lucy's distinguished focus on Mrs Minchin's exterior reiterates how it is in the nature of humanity to be consumed by one's physical appearance and to reject what is beneath the surface as the notion of 'face value' undermines true and honourable character.

Through methods of intertextual references (the pastiche effect of the metafiction technique), fragmentation, distortion of time and generic conventions all specific to the postmodern genre in which preoccupies the novel, 'Sixty Lights' written by Gail Jones, the human experience is shaped. Jones has created an inevitably critical and commentary piece that infuses a postmodernist ideal – resulting in an aesthetic and artistic work of modern literature. Jones urges her audience to question the actions of themselves and others around them through her application of sardonicism and dark humour, providing the audience with an enlightening education of their own kind. Jones' novel arises tragic doubt in mankind and how, in a world (advancing every second), can we still be flawed by the concepts of social conformity and self absorption? Is it possible to palliate our human destruction?