

Task for *Five Bells* by Gail Jones

Style in Jones' *Five Bells*

(Extracts from: Gail Jones, *Five Bells*, Picador, 2012)

The following activities are designed to make you think not only about Jones' writing but about your own writing. Use these ideas to make your own writing more interesting.

1. Writing is about choice of words

Word choice isn't just about the adjectives, as we can see below. Every word carries a weight of meaning that changes the text and affects the rhythm.

In extract (a) choose the word you think sounds best from the alternatives given.

- How does each word choice change the effect?
- In the second example what is the effect of the participles? What could you use instead?

a) James' view of the Opera House (1)

Then he saw it looming / hovering in the middle distance, too pre-empted to be singular. It appeared on T-shirts, on towels, even captured / trapped in plastic domes of snow; it could never exist / live other than as a souvenir / replication, claiming the prestige of an icon. Its maws / sails opened to the sky in perpetual devouring.

White teeth, James thought. Almost like teeth. And although he had seen the picture / image of this building many / countless times before, it was only in its presence, here-now, that the analogy / comparison occurred to him. The monumental is never exactly / precisely what we expect now / ever. (p. 5)

b) Descriptions use participles

James:

His nerves settled, he felt himself return, he began again to look. There was the wake, lush white and sucking under the black water; there was the Opera House sliding out its great and singular form, and the reflection of the Opera House, which looked thin and un-abiding and made of snow. And there was the city, retreating, all those towers of lights, all those engineering wonders, high-rising and firm. (p. 200)

2. Writing is about adding a level of comparisons from referencing

James' view of the Opera House (2)

In the passage below, Jones uses art references to explain the effect of the Opera House on the character. But this referencing also makes a statement about the character and what he values.

- What do we learn about the character from the referencing?
- What do we learn about the scene from the referencing?

James looked out of the window at the view of Circular Quay. From his table he could see across the water the Opera House entire. He began vaguely to wonder how the Surrealists would paint it. Magritte would place it in a forest or let it float in the sky; Dali would melt it like ice-cream, like one of his dissolving clocks; Max Ernst would use it as ruffles on the cloak around a pompous figure. No: Magritte would set it adrift in the ocean, like a rare efflorescent species of underwater life; Dali would refigure it as the chambers of a woman's body; Ernst would have children fleeing it on a sparse, bleak plain, as if it had arrived from nowhere, from outer space, as a menacing apparition. And then there was the Australian, James Gleeson. For him, the smooth arcs of the Opera House would be covered with excrescences; grim faces would appear, limbs sprout out, indefinable and disgusting matter would festoon the surface.

James was surprised to have relinquished his initial aversion; it was an art-object after all, it contained multitudes, suggested metaphors. (pp. 98–99)

3. Writing is about varying sentence length and order:

The following sentences and sentence fragments have been rearranged – try to place them in the best order. Compare the order with other students.

- Is there more than one way to organise these sentences?
- How does the meaning change with different sentence organisations?
- Jones uses many sentence fragments. What is the effect of these fragments?
- Jones varies the types of sentences (fragments, simple, compound and complex).
- What is the effect of this variation?

Pei Xing's view of the Opera House

What was it called, she wondered.

Cranes.

The paper House sailed by.

Frogs.

She had not thought of it before: from here the Sydney Opera House looked like folded paper, like one of those shapes children produce under instruction from a teacher.

It was achieving a golden sheen in the late afternoon light, its shells polished in the setting sun, responsive to the sky.

Airplanes.

And there was the game she had seen Australian children play: they fold the paper into little peaks, inserted their thumbs and forefingers, and counted out numbers and fortunes, opening and closing the paper object like the mouth of a bird.

Lotus blossoms. (p. 180)

4. Writing is about building and adding detail

Ellie's view of the Opera House:

An unfolding thing, shutters, a sequence of sorts.

Ellie could imagine music in there, but not people, somehow.

In the viewfinder it was flattened to an assemblage of planes and curves: perfect Futurism. The fan of its chambers leant together, inclining to the water.

Ellie marvelled that it had ever been created at all, so singular a building, so potentially faddish, or odd.

Ellie raised her camera and clicked. Marinetti might have dreamt it.

It looked poised in a kind of alertness to acoustical meanings, concentrating on sound waves, open to circuit and flow.

Leaning into the pure morning sky.

And that shape of supplication, like a body bending into the abstraction of a low bow or a theological gesture.

It was moon-white and seemed to hold within it a great, serious stillness...

Yes, there it was...

"Most photographed building in Sydney." (p. 3)

Summing up

Gail Jones shows us that one place can evoke many different responses.

- What type of character emerges in each of the extracts?
- What ideas emerge from the extracts?
- How does the choice of language help us to understand character?