

Task for *Heat and Light*

Key quotations and discussion points guide

Heat

Female sexuality

- The author positions Amy and Pearl as outcasts in the community from the first page: 'she...pointed at me accusingly. "You're a Kresinger," she spat.' (p. 3); 'But it was the wind, cyclonic, that kept anyone with common sense inside. Not Pearl. She went out on the beach.' (p.3)
- Amy is characterised as a lost soul with loose morals and an unquenchable sexual appetite. As an Aboriginal and lesbian she plays around the fringes of society and seems to accept it as fate and a predetermined life that she cannot control: 'I thought I was going to become a nice woman one day...I thought I'd mellow and tame with time. Now I'm not so sure.' (p. 6); 'I am like my grandmother Pearl...love comes too easy for me. There is always someone to drown.' (p. 8); 'In my teens, I was one of the ones every Friday night in the last carriage on the 1 a.m. train having sex with anyone who would have me. I am cursed to be this.' (p. 10)
- The stereotype of the irresistible exotic Aboriginal woman is perpetuated in the descriptions of Pearl and Amy. The old woman in the pie shop who remembers Pearl tells Amy: 'They looked at Pearl as if she was possessed. They were dazzled by her stories, and of course the flash of pale on her brown body, her well-positioned cleavage...No one looked at me twice, I was big-eared, pale and freckled.' (p. 8). Amy then reflects on this and connects her sexuality with Pearl's, stating: 'I have those Bundjalung eyes, too.' (p. 8)

Past government practices/interactions between white settlers and Aboriginal people

Mission era and appointment of Aboriginal leaders by the Government: 'I have one photo of my great-grandfather. He has long hair in his face. In a photo taken at the mission, he sits on the right. They had put a king plate across his neck.' (p. 12). See link about history of breastplates provided earlier in this section.

Three very different experiences of Aboriginal identity

In the chapter 'Soil', the story changes to a third-person narrative and the relationship between Amy and her cousin, Colin, is introduced. The next chapter, 'Hot Stones', is told from Colin's point of view in the first person and he remembers his teenage love, Mia. We gain an understanding from this chapter of how his experiences of racism have shaped his identity.

Amy was brought up with Colin on the family homestead learning their family stories and connection to culture. Amy continued to identify as Aboriginal and work in the community, working at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Development Centre at Chermside, Brisbane. Colin became estranged from the family and Amy believes he no longer identifies as Aboriginal.

- Colin: 'My father had come from Ireland so I wasn't very dark. When I passionately shared a few of the stories my grandmother told me, the other kids called me a half-caste. It didn't really stop me, though; I even spoke up in English class, because the teacher was talking like we weren't even here before, and I got kicked out and had the whole oval to myself until lunchtime. I made a nest out of twigs. I was the sort of kid who couldn't stop touching the earth, sculpting it with my hands.' (p. 28)
- About Amy: 'As president she had made strict rules about who she accepted, it wasn't just anyone. They must know who they are and they must be living as who they are. With those whose applications were rejected, she didn't use the terms that some of the others did, 'coconut', and so forth. She understood it was easy for some of their mob to be white and project a whiteness. She imagined it was easy for them to live out their lives this way. And one day it might click, when they needed a job, a house, a surgery. Too easy. I'll be black now.' (pp. 22–23)
- About Amy and Colin: 'She met up with Colin in Sydney, one time, a lot of years ago...Colin told Amy he'd take her out to dinner, with his girlfriend and his girlfriend's brother...He'd told a story, perhaps it was to impress the brother. A racist joke, like one from the comments you see on Yahoo news...She was too shocked to speak...They had planned to walk around Darling Harbour after dinner but she said she wanted to have an early one as she had to present the next day. That was it. The last time she talked to him. They were well into their forties now.' (pp. 24–25)
- Mia had been adopted from her Aboriginal family further North and separated from land and culture. Perhaps trying to maintain cultural connections, and trying to make friends with the racist and hostile classmates, she recommended a type of wild berry to a white classmate who had toothache. She had got the berries confused with the correct ones and poisoned the girl, and was suspended for a week. The classmates' response was to pelt faeces at her house, send hundreds of letters of hate mail, and to brutally beat and rape her. It is suggested that the perpetrators were their classmates and older brother, who had driven past and terrorised Mia the day before: 'It was Mick Hammer and his crew, his brother, Ant, driving. They screamed at Mia as they went past, and screeched the car to a halt in the middle of the road...he yelled he was going to kill her.' (pp. 32–33) At

the hospital, Mia was not given immediate treatment, which makes Colin angry: 'The white woman whispering, "Rape doesn't take priority to heart attack. You're going to have to sit down." I snatched the television remote from the woman, pulling it apart like Lego blocks and smashing it under my feet...And the woman kept whispering, "They're all crazy, twisted, that's right. Out of control."' (p. 35)

- Having witnessed Mia's experience of racism, and to be himself teased for being 'half-caste' and then vilified for being angry and out of control: '...what do they say in Sydney: Aboriginal men are always angry.' (p. 36), Colin simply found it easier to stop identifying as Aboriginal: 'I wasn't a bush boy anymore, not a bush man. I had been in Sydney for almost a decade. I had stopped ticking the box. I thought, what's the point?' (p. 36)

Water

Set in the future, the government is trying to build Australia 2, a new island for Indigenous peoples in a misguided attempt to return land and sovereignty. Of course, the usual problems abound – a lack of consultation and a government making decisions on the Indigenous peoples' behalf, and no one wanting to leave their homeland to move to the new island: 'The cultural displacement continues!' (p. 104)

Despite a general advancement of Indigenous rights (Aboriginal spirituality is the most popular religion on the census and Jessica Mauboy's song is the new Australian anthem), Indigenous culture is so heavily consumed by capitalism that it has negative impacts: 'Aboriginal art has almost wiped out all other Australian art...most Aboriginal artists crack under the enormous pressure and celebrity, from the commodification of their work.' (p. 73) Kaden's father committed suicide from the pressure of being an artist, and her mother protected Kaden and her friend Julie from being made an artist: 'It was your mum who stopped them making me an artist. Enlisting me. She protected me from them. The agents and the suppliers. And I think she did the same for you.' (p. 111)

Most interesting is the new marginalised group in society, Sand plants, a new species born out of an experiment but with roots to Aboriginal ancestry. The government deals with them in the same way protectionist policies in the early years of Australia's settlement dealt with Aboriginal people. They are a segregated population and live off government rations. Their special 'formula' (created to suit their digestive system and keep disease away) is deliberately altered with chlorine to make them more docile. (p. 93) The hallmarks of social Darwinism, seeing the plant people as an inferior race, are present: 'They're not entirely human, though, are they? Not close. We've been having these debates for years. About scientific testing on animals for medical research. At the end of the day, we have to put humans first.' (p. 94)

Light (collection of short stories)

Students could be invited to select a short story (or be placed in groups to analyse the same story) and annotate it.

Text annotations to include the following:

- questions and comments while reading the text
- personal connections with students' own experiences or identification with characters, places, events and issues
- language and structural features, including imagery
- contextual influences (biographical, historical, literary)
- exploration of themes, ideas.

Some areas to explore within the themes and ideas could include:

1. How do the characters in the story experience and respond to abandonment?
2. How is a sense of place, as well as connection to place, established?
3. How does the story end? Is this a deliberate choice? What is the effect of this kind of ending on the reader?
4. Which characters 'make it' and which do not? To what extent is this success or failure defined by either the character's own actions or the actions of others around them?

After being given the opportunity to do this individually, students who have annotated the same short story can compare observations, ideas and responses. Finally, students can be instructed to write about their annotations in a short analysis.

[\(ACELR038\)](#), [\(ACELR040\)](#), [\(ACELR042\)](#), [\(ACELR045\)](#), [\(ACELR046\)](#), [\(ACELR047\)](#)