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Critiquing Metanarratives through Historiographic Metafiction in Graham Swift's *Last Orders*

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Abstract

Graham Swift's *Last Orders*, a novel set in late twentieth-century England, explores postmodern tensions surrounding history and mortality by primarily focusing on the personal narratives of four working-class men—Ray, Vic, Lenny, and Vince—in the aftermath of Jack Dodds's death. This article examines how the intertwined memories of those characters exteriorize fragmented and subjective histories that challenge traditional metanarratives, particularly those rooted in colonial and nationalist ideologies. Drawing on theories of historiographic metafiction, this qualitative and text-based analysis highlights the novel's self-reflexive and intertextual form to show how the narrative resists the notion of death as narrative closure and history as a singular and objective truth. Based on the features employed in the novel, I argue that the novel critiques the dominant metanarratives embedded in humanism, Christianity, and colonial legacies. Thus, this article contributes to broader discussions in literary and cultural studies about how the narrative reimagines the past and questions official histories through individual and localized perspectives.

Keywords: Historiographic metafiction, metanarrative, intertextuality, self-reflexivity, postmodernity, postcoloniality

Introduction

Last Orders unravels the story of four working-class men—Ray, Vic, Lenny, and Vince—whose lives are deeply intertwined with Jack Dodds—a butcher, friend, and dad of Vince—whose death sets everything in motion. Though Jack is gone, his influence lingers, shaping how each of them sees the world and themselves. The story is set in Bermondsey, a historic district in southeast London, settled along the River Thames and known for its industrial past and vibrant character. From there, the men set off on a road trip to Margate pier, located in Margate, Kent, a seaside town on England's southeastern coast. On the surface, it is a simple journey, but as they travel, memories surface, and the past begins to unfold. What begins as a personal story gradually expands into something larger: a reflection

on England's post-World War II history and its influence on ordinary lives. Told through the shifting voices of its characters, the novel reveals the story with deeply personal moments from each person's perspective. Jack's death becomes a turning point, pushing the men to confront old pain, long-buried secrets, and the bonds that still hold them together—not just as friends, but as part of a country that is evolving around them. Through layered flashbacks, Graham Swift shows how the past quietly shapes people's lives, often hiding in everyday moments and memories.

The journey to scatter Jack's ashes becomes more than just a trip; it becomes an opportunity for each of the men to look back on their lives and their relations to Jack. As they travel, old memories unravel. Ray thinks about his feelings for Amy and how Jack once called him "Lucky" during the war. Vic, the undertaker, remembers Jack's financial troubles. At the Chatham Naval Memorial, they all pause to think of Jack. Vince stops at a Wick's farm where his adoptive parents first met. He recalls saying, "[t]his is where," he says, wiping his face. "This is where" (151). Even though Lenny objects, Vince scatters some of the ashes, and they move on toward Canterbury Cathedral. At last, on Margate pier, they scatter Jack's ashes and say their final goodbye. Even though scattering the ashes feels like saying goodbye to Jack, it is also a way to start fresh, forgetting sadness, pain, and memories that were hard to carry.

In the novel, each of the four central characters—Ray, Vic, Lenny, and Vince—is symbolic. For instance, Ray "Lucky" Johnson represents a working-class man who has lost the stability he once had, his employment, male friendship, and post-war optimism. Ray now opposes personal loss and social change, struggling to find meaning in a world that no longer offers the same certainties. Jack gave me the nickname 'Lucky' because of his interest in professional gambling. He remembers, "It aint everyone who sees signs, but they call me Lucky Johnson. And sometimes I'm wrong" (58). His life reflects his memories of war, friendship, and missed opportunities that challenge the heroic national myth of British colonialism and the order of the past.

Similarly, Vic Tucker is an undertaker, representing a practical yet profound aspect of human life that reveals its emotional and chaotic truth, i.e., life and death. Lenny Tate symbolizes Britain's colonial legacy when he expresses bitterness and hatred against Vince, Jack's adopted German-born son, and stresses post-imperial worries about identity and racial notions. Lenny accuses Vince of insincerity and physically confronts him at Wick's farm, causing the ashes jar to nearly fall. Ray recalls, "Lenny goes forward and puts in a punch straight away, no messing, a good, quick jab to the middle of the chest.... 'That's for Sally,' Lenny says, gasping, then he puts in another punch.' And that's for Jack.'" (148). These characters reflect the emotional tensions of post-war Britain, showing how personal grief and unresolved histories continue to shape their lives and relationships.

Vince Dodds, Jack's adopted son, on the other hand, represents the mixture of cultures and the generational differences that developed after the war. Though his father wanted him to be a butcher, he rejects it, saying, "I aint going to be a butcher never, it aint what I'm going to be" (63) and instead chooses his lifestyle. Lenny, who is parochial towards the issue of nationalism, feels threatened by Vince's German background and rebellious nature. All these references indicate the dying nature of colonial ethos, the anti-essentialist notion of humanism, and the emergence of local narratives. Thus, by foregrounding the personal narratives of characters such as Jack, Ray, Vic, Vince, and Lenny in the context of World War II, this article hypothesizes that the novel not only engages with the postmodern concept of historiographic metafiction but also critiques traditional metanarratives, including humanism, Christianity, and colonialism.

Critics have analyzed *Last Orders* since its publication in 1996. As the novel dramatizes the characters' connections with World War II, it depicts a troubled history in

contemporary times. In this context, Daniel Budggood critiques *Last Orders* as a reconstructed past. Budggood states that the novel reveals "Swift's postmodern duality of perspective towards history and mortality particularly strongly" (209). The first-person narratives impart the character's personal history in the aftermath of Jack Dodds. Furthermore, in *Reading the Novel in English 1950–2000*, Brian W Shaffer critiques this novel from a postmodernist perspective of knowledge and truth. He examines Swift's novel as a woven narrative of postmodern characters' personal experiences of life and death. Relating it to William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, he argues that "*Last Orders* muses on death and dying, on complex familial relationships and meaning, and on the potent and uncanny impact of the dead on the living" (196). In a similar vein, Elisabeta Simona Catana explores how the past opens the multiplicity in interpretation when these symbols make the reader ponder them and understand their "immortal values, dreams, and truth" (43). Thus, the novel examines the past illustrated through symbols in a postmodernist manner.

Moreover, Elizabeth Weston views *Last Orders* as a novel that explores what it means to die. In Jack's final days in the hospital, both the characters and the readers are encouraged to think about what happens to a person at the end of life (282). Ray's reflection—"Two weeks, three. Nothing to do but sit still and be who you are. I don't know what you say to someone when they say that they know" (152)—shows that even in dying, there's space for meaning. Swift uses Jack's death to guide readers through the emotional journey of grief, helping them face loss and understand its stages.

In the postmodern fashion, despair becomes a catalyst for reflection, encouraging characters and readers alike to confront mortality, memory, and the transformative potential of death as a site of both closure and renewal. Regarding despair in the postmodern novel, Gary Davenport explores the new hope even in chaos. He states that "disillusion and despair are no strangers to literature, but even well into the present century disillusion has tended to lead to resolution, and for despair press characters, readers, authors towards a new hope" (445). Furthermore, Richard Pedot observes the deadlines in Swift's *Last Orders*. His primary concern is to explore whether the dead can set deadlines in the lives of the survivors. In the novel, Vic, Jack's friend and one of the central characters, mentions that "you shouldn't be late for the dead, just because they're dead, one of my rules. Do not dilly-dilly with the diseased" (217). For him, deadlines and last orders refer equally to events in ordinary life. It should not be taken for granted. Just like silence is not void but a force, death is not the end of life but rather a new beginning. Similarly, Donald P. Kaczvinsky describes *Last Orders* as "generational and elegiac," "...[it] is entirely symbolic, a memorial to those who served before they pass away, [and]...a 'realm of memory'" (145). Swift credits fading World War II heroes through an elegiac narrative that reflects on memory, death, and loss.

According to Stef Craps, the novel explores how people often fail to achieve their personal goals. He explains that Jack, Ray, and Lenny had dreams beyond what society or family expected, but they could not realize them. Steps notes that "all had dreams beyond the binaries of class or parental expectation but failed to realize their ambitions [. . .]; these characters feel as if they have been fixed in their place by a superpower" (410). This suggests that unseen forces—such as social pressure or quiet expectations—can influence people's paths more than they realize. Instead of pursuing fulfillment, the characters seem to settle into lives shaped by circumstances beyond their control.

The existing scholarships on *Last Orders* have explored the novel from diverse perspectives, including troubled histories, death, despair, and other themes. However, little attention has been given to how the novel's personal and collective narratives intersect to challenge dominant cultural and ideological metanarratives. This study addresses that gap by

approaching the novel as a work of postmodern historiographic metafiction—an approach that foregrounds the interplay between historical representation and fictional construction. Accordingly, this research is guided by the following questions: In what ways does the novel's narrative structure reflect the characteristics of historiographic metafiction, and how does it use memory and individual narrative to interrogate metanarratives of humanism, Christianity, and colonialism? To address these questions, the study sets forth two primary objectives: (1) to examine the novel through the theoretical lens of historiographic metafiction as a postmodern narrative mode, and (2) to explore how personal and collective memory operate as a critique of metanarratives. This analysis draws on key features of postmodern historiographic metafiction, particularly the novel's intertextual and self-reflexive elements, to demonstrate how Swift's narrative blurs the boundaries between fiction and history.

Regarding delimitation, this study focuses on a close textual analysis of the novel, with particular attention to how the novel engages with cultural and historical metanarratives. It does not explore other dimensions of the characters' lives—such as economic conditions, class, or gender—in depth, except where they contribute to broader symbolic or thematic concerns. Moreover, the analysis is theoretical and interpretive. It does not incorporate empirical methodologies, such as reader responses, surveys, or interviews, which could offer insights into the reception and impact of the novel across diverse readerships.

The following section describes the theoretical framework used in the analysis, arguing that *Last Orders* not only challenges dominant metanarratives but also affirms the value of multiple, localized, and fragmented narratives in shaping historical consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, Jean-François Lyotard's notion of postmodernism as an incredulity toward metanarratives, and Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. The primary focus is on postmodern historiographic metafiction, particularly its core features—intertextuality and self-reflexivity—and its function in challenging and deconstructing dominant metanarratives.

Postmodern Historiographic Metafiction

Historiography refers to the writing of history and, more specifically, to the politics involved in that process. Metafiction, on the other hand, denotes literary texts in terms of their nature and status as fiction. Therefore, when these two merge, what appears to be fictional becomes real, and what is recorded as history or events as fact turns out to be fiction. This duality of fact and fiction opens up a new possibility of paradox inherent in textual representation and raises the issue of validity in such texts. As Linda Hutcheon notes, postmodernist approaches "confront the paradoxes of fictive /historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 106). Historiographic metafiction, in this sense, merges fact and fiction. For Linda, postmodern novels accommodate both 'truths' and 'other truths,' rejecting the binary of true versus false. Therefore, history does not just present facts—it manipulates them, blurring the line between what actually happened and what has been shown while documenting them. As Linda indicates, "[f]iction and history are narratives distinguished by their frames, frames which historiographic metafiction first establishes and then crosses, positing both the generic contracts of fiction and history" (109–10). Thus, postmodern historiographic metafiction destabilizes dominant metanarratives through intertextuality and self-reflexivity, while simultaneously opening up multiple interpretive possibilities. Intertextuality, as one of the basic tenets, is a critical approach that derives the meaning of a text and its relation to other texts. Linda further reiterates that postmodern fiction is embedded in historical discourse:

"The intertext of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both world and literature" (124). Intertextuality brings the past into the present by reusing and reimagining older stories or events, indicating how they still matter in today's world. As Linda notes, "[i]t offers a sense of the present of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces—be they literary or historical" (125). This process "demands the reader [for] not only the recognition of textualized traces of the literary and historical past but also the awareness of what has been done—through irony—to those traces" (127). Similarly, Graham Allen illustrates how text becomes intertext, interweaving meaning between and among texts. Graham notes that "[m]eaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext" (1). Thus, such blending of intertextuality fictionalizes historical events and figures or historicizes fictional representation, prompting readers to reflect on the text's meaning critically. Similarly, another principle of postmodern historiographic metafiction, self-reflexivity, refers to a text's self-awareness. Linda argues that self-reflexivity challenges "our entire concept of both historical and literary knowledge, as well as our awareness of our ideological implication in our dominant culture" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* x). Linda notes that when stories reflect on how they are made, they make us question what we believe about history, literature, and the cultural ideas we take for granted. Postmodern narratives often highlight their fictionality, undermining fixed meanings. As Linda observes, some texts use self-reflexivity to "raise the issue of how the intertext of history, its documents or its traces, get incorporated into such an avowedly fictional context, while somehow also retaining their historical documentary value" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 97–98). Self-reflexivity operates on two levels: "towards the events being represented in the narrative and towards the act of narration itself" (72). Therefore, a story not only shows us what happens but also draws attention to how the story is being told. Thus, self-reflexive texts also blur the line between fact and fiction while drawing attention to their narrative construction.

Critique of Metanarrative

Postmodernism influences social, aesthetic, economic, and political thought by both breaking from and continuing modernist traditions. It offers a radical critique of philosophy, representation, and grand narratives. Supporting this, Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as "an incredulity towards metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the science: but that progress in turn presupposes it" (xxiv). For Lyotard, knowledge is not fixed but shaped by historical, social, and cultural shifts. In the post-industrial era, belief in absolute truths has eroded. He writes, "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (37). Knowledge, he argues, has become commodified, displacing universal narratives and making space for localized ones. Similarly, Orientalism, as a discourse rooted in colonialism, functions as a grand narrative that is often demystified in postmodern texts. As Linda Hutcheon states in "Circling the Downspout of Empire," colonialism employs metanarratives to justify domination through "irony, allegory, and self-reflexivity that it shares with the complicitous critique of postmodernism, even if its politics differ in important ways" (171). Therefore, if colonialism and postmodernism share the same rhetorical tools, then the political impact of those tools depends on how and why they are used. This challenges the idea that specific narrative techniques are inherently liberatory or oppressive, depending on context and intent. As in *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains that colonial power operated by "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient... was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (11). In Said's views, colonial power is

maintained not just through force, but through controlling narratives, representations, and knowledge systems that shape how the world is understood. Thus, Lyotard's critique of postmodernism, Hutcheon's postmodern poetics, and Said's analysis of Orientalism offer a critical framework for analyzing historiographic metafiction and its interrogation of historical and fictional "truths."

Methodology

This article's analytical and interpretative paradigms rely on qualitative content analysis to examine *Last Orders*. As a content analysis, this article uses textual analysis as a methodological tool. In a qualitative study, as Klaus Krippendorff denotes, content analysis is understood as a research technique to make "*replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter)*" (24). Here, the term "content" refers to texts "meant to be read, interpreted, and understood by people other than the analysts" (38). Complementing this, in my article, I apply textual analysis as a systematic method for interpreting meaning from the novel. As Alan McKee explains, "A text is something that we make meaning from" (4), and Krippendorff denotes it as "works of art, images, maps, sounds, signs, symbols, and even numerical records may be included as data—that is, they may be considered as texts" (24–25) and "textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world" (McKee 1). In this study, the novel is the primary text in which the narratives of four central characters—Ray, Lenny, Vince, and Vic—about their relationship with Jack Dodds constitute the content. Through interpretation, I explore how the novel presents a postmodern perspective on death and mortality, interrogates grand narratives, and critiques metanarratives like colonialism. In the process, two interrelated themes emerged from my analysis—postmodern historiographic metafiction and the critique of metanarrative—both of which are examined in detail in the discussion section.

Discussion and Analysis

Last Orders looks at how the past affects people's lives, mixing real history from postcolonial Britain with the personal stories of its characters. Their memories and experiences overlap, showing how individual lives connect with the bigger picture of national history. Instead of offering one fixed version of the past, Swift shares each character's views using first-person narrative. This section analyzes the novel from the perspective of historiographic metafiction, incredulity toward metanarratives, and a critique of Orientalism, thereby discussing two dominant themes: historiographic metafiction and the critique of metanarrative.

Historiographic Metafiction in the Novel

The novel situates itself within a broader literary tradition by drawing upon intertextual references and embracing key elements of postmodern historiographic metafiction. As Graham Allen states, "Texts, whether they be literary or non-literary, are viewed by modern theorists as lacking in any kind of independent meaning" (1); intertextuality involves shaping a text's meaning through other texts. Similarly, the novel echoes allusions to earlier works, including Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1988), and most notably, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), to name a few. Like *The Canterbury Tales*, *Last Orders* follows the journey of pilgrims. However, this is not a traditional religious voyage; rather, it is a secular journey undertaken by the four characters who lack religious faith. They are merely fulfilling their friend's final wish. These postmodern pilgrims seem to have largely forgotten the symbolic importance of Canterbury Cathedral. Vic's comments on Lenny's behavior during the trip indicate that they do not regard the place with religious reverence. Vic comments: "He has got himself a guidebook, biggest, flashiest one he could find. *Wonders* SCHOLARS: *Journal of Arts & Humanities* Volume 7, No. 2, August 2025 [pp. 60-69]

of *Canterbury Cathedral*. ... as if he doesn't want to look at the Cathedral, just the guidebook, giving us snippets, as if we can't make a move till, we've had lecture" (196). Vic's remark humorously critiques not only Lenny's performative or formal approach but also frames the trip as a scripted tour rather than a moment of reflection. The emphasis on the Cathedral guidebook thus illustrates the core principles of intertextuality at work in the novel. Thus, by portraying the characters' visit to *Canterbury Cathedral* as a material journey, Swift reflects the postmodern loss of religious faith through references to classic literary works.

In addition to this, the novel employs intertextual techniques to fictionalize actual historical events and figures. Swift traces such events with the help of the memory of fictional characters, which come back and forth in the narrative sequence. Lenny narrates Vince's history, tracing the consequences of World War II. As he notes, "Then there was the war. Bombs dropping on Bermondsey and one of 'em drops on your ma and pa's old home, but that's a different story, because there's another bomb which drops on the house where the Pritchett family has just had a new arrival, called Vince. ... It was June '44- a flying bomb. ... And it was five years to the month since June was born" (42). These references to bombing, years like 1944, exemplify how personal memory and fictional narrative are intertwined with real historical incidents of the Second World War, allowing Swift to explore how individual lives are shaped and contextualized by collective trauma. Though these lines reveal Vince and June's personal story, they also indicate the situation of contemporary times during World War II. Furthermore, Vic remembers what Jack said on his deathbed at the hospital, "You know what today is? First of June.' I shake my head. He says, 'June's birthday. June's fiftieth birthday. First of June 1939" (83). The references to 1939 and 1944—marking June's birth and Vince's orphanhood—highlight a future deformed by war and personal trauma. Thus, the characters in *Last Orders* carry emotional wounds shaped by loss and the long shadow of World War II. Swift weaves their personal histories with real events. Thus, using postmodern techniques like self-reflexivity, the novel questions how memory and history are constructed, showing that both personal and collective narratives are fragmented and open to reinterpretation.

Self-reflexivity represents the postmodern culture of auto-referentiality, and such a tendency has been strategically used in the novel to show the artificiality of art or the fictional aspect of his work, apparently, and helps to discard the willful suspension of disbelief. The novel is predominantly narrated in the first person through the shifting voices of several characters. In most places, the author does not explicitly state that his work is a fictional text. Instead, the novel explores some of the fictional aspects of the text through the first-person narratives of the characters. As Linda indicates, postmodern fiction directly connects self-reflexivity with difference by linking narrative techniques and language (*The Politics of Post Modernism* 70). Supporting this, the novel's central characters reflect on their personal lives while commenting on the universal experience of death. Regarding this reflection over the personal account, Vic states how the life of a living being and that of a dead person blur as: "But Jack's not special, he's not special at all. I'd just like to say that, please. I'd just like to point that out, as a professional and a friend. He's just one of the many now. In life, there are differences, you make distinctions, it's the back seat for me from now on. But the dead are the dead, I've watched them, they're equal" (143). In the memory of Jack, Vic's self-reflective statement criticizes the aftermath of Jack Dodds's death, even his own, and the reality of all humans. Vic ponders that even if one is dead and all vanishes after someone's death, all human reality comes to the same end and assimilates into the sea. Vic refers to the fact that in the end, all human lives—no matter how unique—end the same way and fade into something larger and unknowable, like the sea.

Moreover, the postmodern novel attempts to make the reader an active and reflective

component in the meaning-making process. As a postmodern writer, Swift wants to make the readers not passive receivers but expects them to engage actively within textual circumstances. In the novel, Vic's remarks are an invitation to readers who have been addressed as 'you': "I want to say, I know about this, in a small way, I know about what you fear. ... But I know about the dead, I know about dead people, and I know that the sea is all around us anyway. Even on land we're all at sea, even on this hill high above Chatham where I can read the names. All in our berths going to our deaths" (125). Swift states his views but, at the same time, invites postmodern readers to critique, question, follow, or reject Swift's claim in a self-reflexive manner. There are other instances of self-reflexivity in setting, epilogue, tone, and voice, and even in the use of language. For example, *the epilogue* states, "*But man is a Noble Animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave*" (Swift). In a self-reflective way, the epilogue shapes the text's overall meaning. Such an epilogue suggests the purpose of the author in writing the text. Since self-reflexivity remains the basic feature of postmodern historiographic metafiction, the novelist employs this style to show that narrative in postmodernism is not just about facts; it is shaped by who is telling it, how it is told, and what the reader brings to it. By using the self-reflective style, Swift lets readers take part in shaping the meaning, encouraging them to think, question, and even challenge the metanarrative as it unfolds.

Critique of Metanarratives in *Last Orders*

As Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives and views knowledge as historically, socially, and culturally constructed, this section examines how Swift employs those elements in critiquing the metanarratives like humanism, Christianity, and colonialism. One of the basic metanarratives Swift dismantles is the very essentialist notion of humanism. Humanism is a philosophy that has faith in grand narratives like freedom, universality, essence, and dignity that oppose, as Tony Davis puts it, "ignorance, tyranny, and superstition" (4). This view posits that there is an essential human nature and a set of defining human features that are innate, universal, and independent of historical and cultural differences. However, the novel tries to establish that the human-centered systems of norms and values are based on the fallacy of essentialism. Lenny's following statement exemplifies the way humanism is critiqued in the novel: "I reckon every generation makes a fool of itself for the next one. Vince had his own ideas about Dodds and son, but it was stretching it, even so, to do what he did, to sign up for five years just I keep out of Jack's reach, just at the time when every kid his age thinking sweet jeans there wasn't no call-up any more" (44). As humanism often assumes, individuals, regardless of time or place, are guided by reason, autonomy, and shared moral values. However, Lenny's reflection "every generation makes a fool of itself for the next one" emphasizes historical and generational critique over such universality. It suggests that what one generation sees as meaningful or rational is often seen as meaningless or false by the next. Hence, the novel reveals that the concept of what it means to be human is not fixed but evolves with time, place, and experience, challenging and dismantling any fixed, universal metanarrative of humanity.

Additionally, Swift deconstructs the metanarrative of Christianity. Unlike the sacred notion of traditional Christian pilgrimage, the novel offers the secular journey of postmodern pilgrims who have lost faith. The mourning of Jack's death is sunny. Though the travelers' journey leads them to Canterbury Cathedral, the sanctity of the place fails to stir any devotion within them. Vic, Vic's wife, states, "as if he doesn't want to look at the Cathedral, just the guidebook, giving us snippets" (196). These travelers visit with the help of a tourist guidebook to recall the religious history embedded there. Such representation is not only a satire for postmodern pilgrims but also a critique of the fundamental values of religion. Ray

indicates the shallowness of their religious conviction as, "it's a big building, long and tall, but it's like it hasn't stretched up yet to its full height, it's still growing. It makes the cathedral at Rochester look like any old Church and it makes you feel sort of cheap and tetchy. Like it's looking down at you, saying, I'm Canterbury Cathedral, who the hell are you?" (194). The cathedral mocks them rather than welcoming them. Swift unfolds how religious structures have lost their symbolic and moral authority.

Swift dramatizes the decline of the colonial metanarrative through the fading image of an agent of colonial authority. Colonialism constructs a grand, idealized vision of itself, promoting civilization and progress through Western dominance. However, postcolonial thinkers challenge this notion by revealing its biased foundations. In the novel, Ray refers to Jack with symbolic names like "Big Boy" (12) and "Master Butcher" (28), while Vince calls him "Big Jack" (34). Terms like "Big" and "Master" evoke the colonial binary of master vs. slave, dominance vs. subjugation. Though Jack does not directly belong to the colonial class, he serves as its working agent, and by portraying his death, a figure representing the laboring hands of colonial authority, Swift underscores the disintegrating image of the colonial metanarrative. Jack's own words, "it's all down to wastage" (285), suggest the erosion and futility of colonial legacy. Additionally, Ray and Lenny's remarks, "[i]t was coming up to last orders" (6) and "you're an old man now, Big Boy" (12)—further emphasize the fading presence of colonial authority. Thus, Swift affirms the death of the colonial metanarrative through Jack's symbolic demise.

Conclusion

This article examines Graham Swift's *Last Orders* as a postmodern historiographic metafiction. Swift dramatizes both the personal stories of the characters and the contemporary historical context. His use of intertextuality and self-reflexivity marks the novel as a postmodern historiographic metafiction that critiques metanarratives prevalent in humanism, Christianity, and colonialism. Through the characters' critiques of essential human nature as a universal truth, the novel challenges the foundational assumptions of humanism, suggesting that truth, meaning, and reality are relative rather than absolute. Furthermore, by tracing the journey of four 'postmodern' individuals—Ray, Lenny, Vic, and Vince—Swift exposes the emotional and spiritual void left by the absence of faith, meaningful relationships, and moral grounding. As they travel to Canterbury Cathedral, their struggles with jealousy, dishonesty, and detachment reflect the erosion of religious values and ethical frameworks in their lives. Moreover, Jack's death signals not only the end of the British Empire but also the unraveling of metanarratives rooted in emancipatory myths of British colonialism. Overall, this study highlights the elements of postmodern historiographic metafiction in critiquing metanarratives related to humanism, Christianity, and colonialism. By challenging these grand narratives, readers are encouraged to develop a critical awareness that reveals the emptiness of traditional ideologies and underscores the importance of what Lyotard calls the petty or local narratives found in the diverse realities of human experience.

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