

'THE SECRET RIVER': A YEAR 12 VCE ENGLISH EXAM ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL BY KATE GRENVILLE

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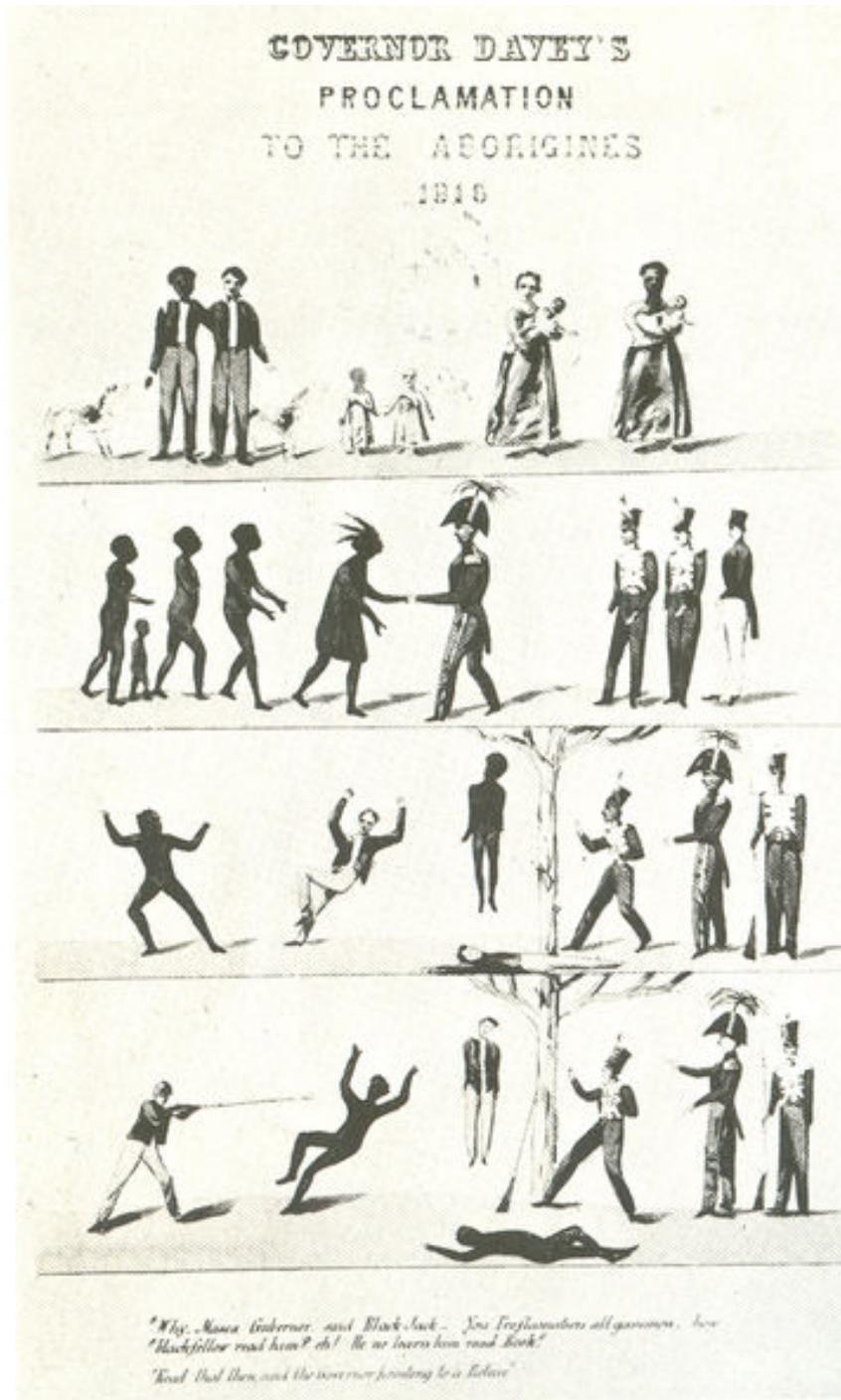


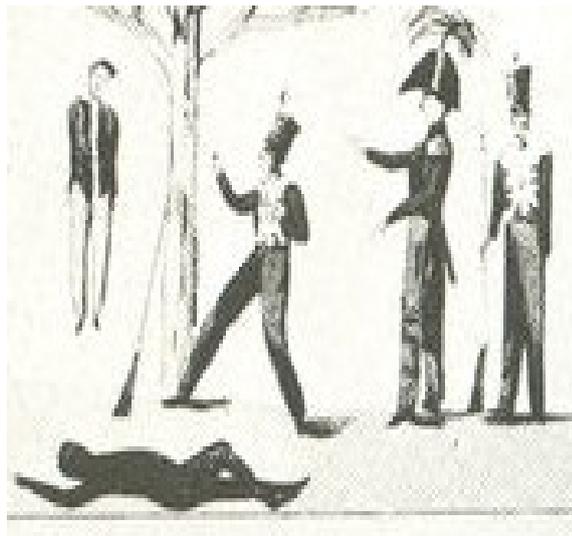
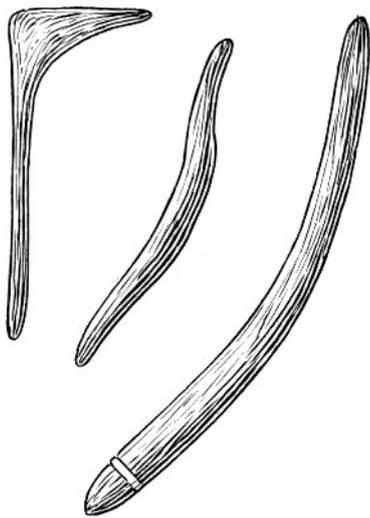
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Section B essay:

Why conflict happens is less important than how it affects people.'

The reason conflicts occur between people is not as important as the outcomes those conflicts have on people. That is because people are the inevitable casualties of conflicts that often are generated by misperceptions. This can be seen to be demonstrated in the novel, 'The Secret River,' by Kate Grenville. Here there is a misperception between the white colonial Europeans and the indigenous people of Australia. The indigenous people seem willing to share the land with the white Europeans if they will coexist as they have for 40,000 years, as evidenced by the settler Blackwood who has had a family with the Aborigines. However, the white colonials seem unwilling to co-operate with the Aborigines in a cultural or legal sense. They declare the land empty and ride roughshod over the rights of the indigenous people and pointlessly spoil the environment. Soon there is conflict between the two groups that only has negative consequences for both. Both sides could have easily co-operated and prospered in their cultural meeting. However, the result of the conflict is death and, later, a denial of history itself. This demonstrates that why conflicts occur is less important than the way it affects people involved. Whatever the reasons conflicts occur, they can end in death and denial of history.



Conflict happens for many reasons and people can find any reason for conflict. However, it is how these people are affected by these diverse conflicts that really matters. An example of this is the racially-motivated conflict in Australia at the time of the novel's setting. Each side of the racial divide had much to offer the other. The settlers were wearing heavy clothing in oven-like slab-bark huts. They did not know how to coexist and husband the environment like the Aborigines did. The settling Europeans could not find their way in the bush and were frightened of the Australian bush. This is seen when Thornhill stands in his doorway of his daub hut at night and is terrified by the awfulness of the environment – its expanse and all devouring darkness. This is reflected in other Australian writings such as 'The Drover's Wife', 'The Bush Undertaker' and 'Rats' by Henry Lawson where the stark, uncommunicative and isolating Australian bush literally drives Europeans insane. The Aborigines, although supposedly primitive and also fearful of the night, have coped with the environment for 40,000 unbroken years. They have much they can trade in knowledge and skill to the Europeans. Likewise the Europeans have technology and medicine they can trade with the indigenous people.

Yet racially-motivated conflict intervenes and divides these two peoples that could benefit so much from each other in the cruel Australian environment. Blackwood, the white settler, shows that some can cross the racial divide by marrying into an Aboriginal family. He shows that there can be peaceful coexistence between white and black.

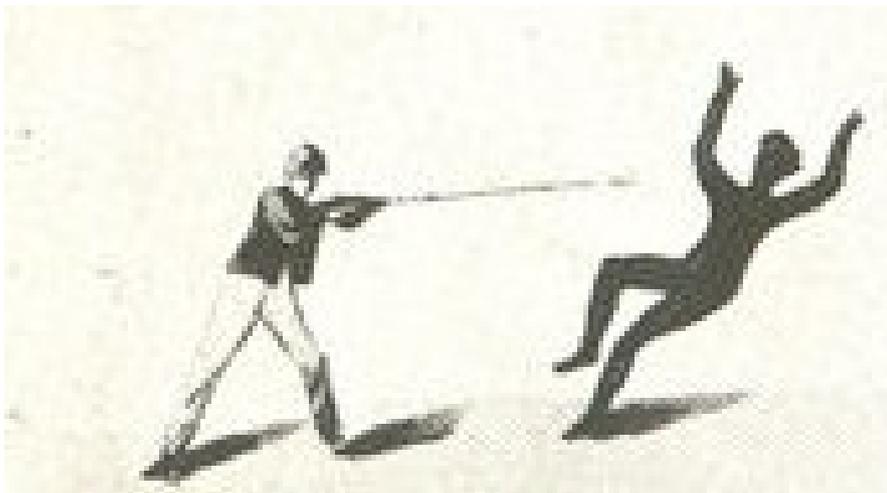
However, most of the settlers are as fearful and distrustful of the indigenous people as they are of them. The grievances that spark the conflicts are many on both sides. The settlers think the indigenous people are spearing their livestock and deliberately ignore their fences. The Aborigines set bush fires that threaten to burn the settlers' crops when the Aborigines know this is the only way to germinate certain seeds in the Australian bush. Meanwhile, most of the Aborigines see the settlers as invaders. They shoot the Aborigines arbitrarily and poison the drinking pools. The settlers spread disease, infection and alcohol. The settlers subdivide and fence off the lands that are the traditional nomadic paths of the Darug people.

Conflict results and as it can be seen there are many reasons for it. Yet it affects everyone negatively. The racial and territorial war between the blacks and whites costs both sides lives. While the indigenous people have the weight of numbers and the terrain to their advantage for now, the settlers have muskets that can kill at a further distance than that of the Aborigines' spears. The Europeans destroy local wildlife and flora with poisons in an attempt to wipe out the traditional owners of the land. The clumsy Europeans destroy the carefully woven fish traps of the indigenous inhabitants of the river bank.



The fact that both sides of the racial divide can assist each other but instead dissolve into conflict demonstrates that the reasons for this conflict is not as important as the effects it has. Both sides could co-operate and live peaceably in co-existence. Instead they are divided and conquered by their fears and the environment that is their true collective enemy. The relationship that Blackwood has proves that coexistence is possible but instead conflict has disastrous results for all sides. Raiding from both sides begins cumulating in a potential massacre against the Darug by the colonists. This will not only have the effect of killing off the final remnants of the Darug people, the original inhabitants of the Hawkesbury and basically an inoffensive people, but will isolate the colonists further in the wilderness without help. It will also have the effect of turning the colonists into mass murderers and thieves and eventually spark the 'history wars' in modern Australia that Kate Grenville, the novelist, herself would be caught up in.

It can be easily seen that the reasons for the racial and territorial based conflict in Australia at the time of the novel were hollow. Racism soon falls away as both Blackwood and Thornhill discover when they co-operate with the Aborigines. The same occurs for the Aborigines who are willing to coexist and tolerate the new settlers. The shameless grab for land by the British is obvious in today's context and is equally seen as hollow as a reason. Only the effects of this conflict upon the peoples of Australia are real and apparent. Large numbers of the indigenous people are wiped out through disease and the gun. The landscape is poisoned by the settlers. New forms of alien agriculture and cloven-footed animals are forced onto the eroding environment. The effects are long-lasting. Even today Australians, both indigenous and non-indigenous – must battle the 'history wars' where the existence of these supposed massacres against the blacks are intensely debated. Massacre deniers like Keith Windschuttle criticize people like the author of 'The Secret River', Kate Grenville, for making up the past about the atrocities committed against the Aborigines by the whites. This is known as the 'black armband view of history'. In this way the fictional account of Grenville demonstrates how these actual massacres scarred Australia's history right up until now with the existence of these deniers like Windschuttle.



Hence the secret of 'The Secret River' by Kate Grenville is that wide spread massacres of Aborigines took place in the early colonization by the British and is denied even today. Why these conflicts and massacres took place is not as important as the affect it had upon people – both then and today. The secret massacres which are still unspoken today in modern Australian society made mass-killers and thieves of the early settlers. It exterminated the Aborigines. It also left a longer legacy that persists to today in the 'history wars' over the denial of whether these conflicts and massacres ever took place in the first place. The effects on people, rather than why the conflicts happen, are more important since they represent an alteration of history. It is widely known that racial and territorial divides provoke most conflicts – it is the effect it has on both sides of people that is important. This is because it produces the conditions for death and the denial of the past.

“In conflict there are no winners, only losers.”

In conflict there are no winners, only losers. This is especially true of Kate Grenville’s novel, “The Secret River”. However, it is also representative of a wider truth that has come about as a result of European colonization of Australia. The racial conflict during the convict period of Australia’s history (1788-1848) was vicious for both sides. It left no winners, only losers. Some commentators on Grenville’s novel (which is based upon historical fact) have criticized her for being too negative in her views on Australian history. There were 750,000 indigenous people in Australia in 1788 compared to the population of 480,000 of today. Thousands were killed through shooting and poisoning like what happens in Grenville’s novel. This dispossessed the indigenous people of their land, the settlers of their self-respect and, of Australians of today, their dignity. Therefore there are no winners in conflict, only losers.

In racial conflict no one is triumphant, there are only the vanquished. Grenville reveals a deeper truth to this in her novel. Both whites and blacks were killed in massacres as portrayed in Grenville’s fictional text. Water sources and food left out for the Aborigines were poisoned just as she fictionally recounts. Yet just as there is the killed so there are the killers. If there are winners, they have lost their souls.

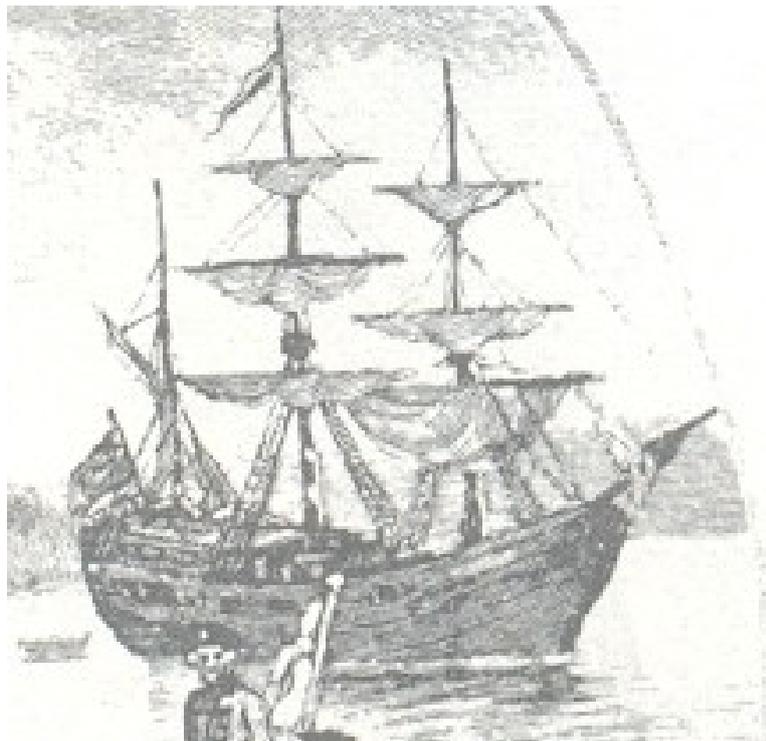


The whites are ultimately losers in the division between cultures. This division is reflected in acts like the emblem that Grenville’s character, Thornhill, inscribes into the very earth. This quartered square (also the character symbol for ‘farm’ in Chinese) that he draws like a magic symbol of the white man represents the subdivision of the land into fallowed and cropped areas surrounded by fences. This sign represents a brand that he will stamp upon the environment through fire and physical power with his plough and deforestation. In the end, the white convict-come-settlers divert too much water for their unproductive crops that they irrigate from the banks of the Hawkesbury River where the nomadic and now displaced Darug people once fished. Also, the whites lose the battle against the climate and the bush which Thornhill (himself a metaphor for nature – literally a ‘thorny hill’ or prickly obstacle) feels is like a vast beast which he is a small insect upon. He feels as though he is a parasite on the landscape while the blacks they are driving out coexist with the landscape. When Thornhill encounters the Aboriginal man outside his pitiful shack at Thornhill’s Point, he appears to blend with the very darkness and bush itself. By not learning from the blacks and instead by

killing them off, the whites make terrible agricultural decisions about the rivers and soil that has had consequences until today.

The white settlers lose any right to stewardship of the environment and land by seizing it through force of arms and abusing it with European agricultural methods. Their foreign crops are not suited to the land, including cotton and wheat that demand a lot of water. To grow these crops the land must be cleared, prepared and fenced, preventing the passing of nomadic tribes who have been travelling these unmapped paths for time immemorial. To prevent animals like kangaroos and possums from spoiling the crop by eating it, the whites lay out traps, poisons and active hunt the Aborigines totem animals.

Characters like Smasher Sullivan or Thornhill have either lost or may potentially lose their Christian humanity through their racism and the yawning starkness of the soulless and alien Australian bush. Sullivan regularly beats up the local Aborigines and already seems devoid of a Christian nature (although it must be remembered many of the settlers were rough convicts that had done their time as Thornhill had). However, Thornhill is in threat of losing his immortal Christian soul that he clings to through his actions towards the indigenous people. This basic formative Christian background is something he clings to in times of danger. When confronted with the black man outside his shack, Thornhill cries, "Damn your eyes, be off ... Go to the Devil". It is as if he is damning a servant of the Devil that has come to claim his soul. Yet Thornhill loses his own immortal soul by involving himself with the settlers who slaughter the blacks.



The indigenous owners of this *Terra Nullius* ('Empty Land') are ultimately losers in the conflict between themselves and the European settlers. They are forced out from their nomadic and adaptive lifestyle of movement by subdivision of land by the British settlers. The settlers seize the Hawkesbury River and the area around it which are the traditional hunting grounds of the Darug people for 40,000 years. The indigenous owners demonstrate that they would communicate and co-operate with the settlers as they do with the settler Blackwood and Mrs. Herring (an actual historical person who lived in the area). Yet the Aborigines chances of sharing technology with the settlers are smashed when the settlers turn against them. In the resulting frontier conflict, both sides are the ultimate losers in terms of culture and humanity as a result of the fighting.