Pair 7
The Longest Memory by Fred D’Aguiar
Black Diggers by Tom Wright

Teaching notes prepared by Ross Huggard
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Teaching notes prepared by Ross Huggard
Edited by Marion White

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**Pair 7: The Longest Memory and Black Diggers**

*Teaching notes prepared by Ross Huggard*

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**Introduction**

These two texts are set in different eras, countries and circumstances, the novel in the southern slave state Virginia at the turn of the eighteenth century, the play in early-twentieth century Australia and Europe in World War I. In both texts, the social marginalisation of a controlled underclass is an issue. The injustice of prejudice and maltreatment is seen in the states of the Deep South where slavery was viewed by those in control as justifiable and acceptable. In Australia, forced and underpaid labour, and dispossession of Aboriginal people along with their resistance to it, have not always been widely recognised. Abuse of both African-American slaves and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was accepted by many and seen as economically essential. Both texts explore long-term racism and invite readers to reflect on how lasting and socially-ingrained racist attitudes can be.

Themes such as dispossession, denial of human rights, forced labour, lack of education, misuse of religion, and the role of memory and forgetting in the formation of identity, are connected in these texts not only to time and place, but also to race and skin colour. The texts reveal that enslavement is typically both physical and psychological. This is well shown by contrasting Old Whitechapel advocating ‘a simple lesson in obedience’ (p. 12) for his wayward son, Chapel, with Nigel’s plaintive refusal to participate in the ANZAC Day service in 1951, ‘I don’t want to join in. I don’t belong.’ (p. 96).

In modern-day Australia, the apology to the Stolen Generation in 2008 by the Rudd government was an important historical moment. Archie Roach, the Aboriginal singer, writer and activist, commented of the Rudd apology:

> it’s an apology not just for me, but for my mother and for my father and for my children who carry the burden of what happened to us stolen kids.

In the USA, slavery was abolished after the Civil War, the so-called Jim Crow laws of the early twentieth century were eventually overturned, and racial segregation was outlawed in 1965.

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**Activities**

- Research the history and geographical location of ‘slave’ and ‘free’ States in the Union, from the 1776 American Declaration of Independence to the 1861 Civil War. Read the Declaration. What hopes might it have given to African-American slaves?
- When was slavery abolished in places other than the United States, such as the West Indies? Who were the abolitionists and what price did they pay for their activities?
- When was the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed? In groups, discuss the thirty Articles in the Declaration and try to summarise them down to five or ten—are you able to?—if not, why not? What retrospective comment does the Declaration make on the themes, ideas and issues portrayed in these two texts?
The Longest Memory

Features

Multiple narrative voices

The distinctive structure of Fred D’Aguiar’s novel shows that the experiences of slave and slave-master on the Whitechapel plantation in Virginia are interdependent. Indeed, in his poetic use of imagery, D’Aguiar refers to such a notion:

What began as a single thread has, over the generations, woven itself into a prodigious carpet that cannot be unwoven. (p. 33).

The diverse voices also enable the reader to perceive that in any version of history there are inevitable gaps, especially where there is pain and suffering involved, as in this case of not only slavery, but also sexual abuse, brutal killing and fratricide. D’Aguiar has himself alluded to the need to recognise such ‘absences’ from historical records as evidence that the mere act of remembering can be painful. Hence the significance of the two bookend sections of the novel: Old Whitechapel’s initial ‘Remembering’ must ultimately give way to ‘Forgetting’, since ‘Memory is pain trying to resurrect itself.’ (p. 138).

The sequence of thirteen numbered chapters provides a woven narrative:

• Whitechapel presents the horror of his situation and his complicity in his son’s death.
• Mr Whitechapel reacts to the bitter reality of the whipping of Chapel, which threatens his perceived humane treatment of his slaves.
• Sanders Senior’s rape of Cook and the ensuing procreation of Chapel further complicates this history.
• Cook’s boundless love for old Whitechapel is juxtaposed with Sanders’s abuse.
• Chapel provides his assessment of his parents and the power of literacy.
• This is juxtaposed with the cynicism of the Plantation Owners and the labelling of hypocrisy which Mr Whitechapel so abhors.
• Lydia’s fascination with the young Chapel then weaves the narrative in an entirely different way, given she is the Plantation Owner’s only daughter, bred to be a true Southern Belle, who finds herself drawn to a forbidden love-interest through the exquisite imagery of Shakespeare.
• The bitter reality of the world of the Deep South runs counter to this dreaming of ‘star-cross’d lovers’, and the essential injustice of slave ownership is portrayed via Editorials from The Virginian.
• The hopes of the young generation for a better world are contrasted with the brutal whipping death of Chapel.
• The perpetrator of his half-brother’s death adds a final bitter thread when he looks upon the inert body of old Whitechapel as the end of an era.

Shifting form and voice

D’Aguiar captures a range of perspectives on the violence of slave ownership through shifts in voice, focus and form. In ‘Remembering’ and ‘Forgetting’, a stream of consciousness captures old Whitechapel’s bitter recollections and sense of futility: ‘I forget as hard as I can.’ (p. 2). The voice is clear and sharp, not the ungrammatical colloquial language an illiterate slave would have used. Similarly in Chapter 1, Whitechapel’s poetic language and imagery convey the horror of being obliged to watch his adoptive son being whipped to death:

That’s when I learned how to live without being hurt by life (p. 5).

In contrast, Chapter 2 captures the powerful voice of Mr Whitechapel remonstrating first with Old Whitechapel and then with his two slave overseers. This represents the rationalising justification of white control in the Deep South:

We must not allow this trade to turn us into savages…God should guide us in our dealings with slaves as he counsels us in everything else. (p. 35).

Sanders Senior’s diary entries from a generation before provide personal musings about one son, Sanders Junior, and insights into his guilt about the other, Chapel. He acknowledges old Whitechapel’s nobility and the fact that:

He has more blood in Mr Whitechapel’s stock of slaves than there are slaves unrelated to each other. What if they turned against us all? (p. 45).

Chapters 4 and 8 allow the reader to enter the mind of the victim of rape, Cook. As with Whitechapel, we hear her voice in crystal clear, correct English. In Chapter 4, her initial rejection of Whitechapel turns to boundless pride:

Whitechapel is my life … There is no earthly way I can match his love. (p. 55).

The only chapter devoted purely to Chapel, Chapter 5,
is written in verse, symbolising his literary skills and the emotional complexity and sensitivity of his insights. His (adoptive) father may be 'the oldest man in the world' yet his mother 'is an angel without wings'. He acknowledges the path his father has chosen, of 'reason'. He recalls his wonderment at receiving the gift of literacy from Lydia, despite it being 'forbidden', and of their emerging love. After being punished by her father, Chapel and Lydia continue their secret liaisons:

We speak from memory: What she has remembered from books for me, What I have composed in my head for her (p. 62).

The final words of Chapel's chapter evoke his desperation as they helplessly watch the death of his mother:

With her gone nothing could keep me there. 
Father, I am running. I feel joy; not fear. 
(p. 64).

Chapter 6 evokes the inner disquiet Mr Whitechapel feels as he forces himself to confront his greatest critics, his fellow plantation owners, who are also members of the exclusive Virginian Gentleman's Club: ‘…to face the ridicule of my peers’. (p. 65). The reader listens to the ensuing bitter dialogue, with their sarcastic judgments pitted against his attempts to justify his position: ‘I promote the teachings of Christ and practise slavery.’ (p. 71). They take the opposing stance, ‘You can't mix God with the slave business. God is for us, not them.’ (p. 73). They seemingly applaud the whipping death of Chapel, ‘… your boy, dead from the whip, shines brightly.’ (p. 71). However, it is the revelation of Whitechapel's loyalty that reinstates his self-esteem; he is toasted and concludes, ‘At last, I am without shame. My name is restored to me.’ (p. 78).

Such hard-nosed pragmatism is counteracted in Chapters 7 to 10 with the emerging relationship between Lydia and Chapel, the metaphoric representation of the quintessential Shakespearean lovers, Romeo and Juliet. D’Aguiar symbolically demonstrates the power of learning and literacy and the way it can ennoble humans. In the midst of this growth, Cook, in Chapter 8, secretly observes Chapel reading to Lydia and concludes with bursting pride that: ‘My son can open a book and sound like the master.’ (p. 85).

In Chapter 11, the biting voice of the editor of The Virginian passes judgment on social events, including rejecting the notion of an egalitarian world where all races mix equally:

There is no sight more perfidious than that of a white woman with a black man. (p. 120).

Another generation of Whitechapel’s long line is captured in Chapter 12, that of his great granddaughter (note the typographical error in the title) who ultimately discovers his dead body. As the reader hears her stream of consciousness, it becomes apparent that the sound of the whipping of Chapel resonates across Whitechapel’s whole family, so that ‘nightmares’ replace her ‘dream about Africa’ (p. 127).

Significantly, the final voice is Sanders Junior, the perpetrator of his own half-brother Chapel's brutal death. In gazing upon the dead form of Whitechapel, he is ironically admiring, concluding 'If you were white, I would have wanted you as my father.' (p. 134).

Irony and imagery

The inherent hypocrisy which is the hallmark of slavery provides innumerable ironic situations in the plot, including:

• Lydia, the daughter of a plantation owner, in teaching a black slave to read, is told she has ‘done him the gravest injustice’ (p. 88).

• Whitechapel takes actions which he believes will best protect his son, but they lead directly to his son’s death.

• Chapel is murdered by his own half-brother

• Mr Whitechapel believes ‘my Christian beliefs are still absolutely true’ (p. 69) despite being a slave owner.

• The Editor of The Virginian asserts that Lydia (‘Miss L.’) in loving a black man ‘will have been the mistress of her own fate’ (p. 121) which is precisely what transpires.

• As Lydia and Chapel fall into their forbidden love, they memorise the significantly titled Paradise Lost; Chapel searches for Paradise (freedom) but doesn’t achieve it.

• Chapel labels his father ‘catalysis’ – one incapable of change – yet after Chapel’s death, he does change.

• Sanders Junior, the half-brother and killer of Chapel who refused to listen to the pleading of Whitechapel and even struck him, discovers his dead body, proclaiming, ‘If you were white I would have wanted you as my father.’ (p. 134).

• Whitechapel’s remarkable longevity becomes a source of bitterness, as opposed to wonderment, since his is the deepest grief, given the fact that he has the longest memory, both personal and collective. In this respect, Whitechapel becomes the physical representation and embodiment of the collective horrors and injustices on the Whitechapel plantation.
Imagery that portrays the poignant misery of a life in slavery includes: ‘sour-face’ (p. 6); ‘my memory is longer than time’ (p. 26); ‘what began as a single thread has, over the generations, woven itself into a prodigious carpet that cannot be unwoven.’ (p. 33); knot-making; ‘the story of two star-crossed lovers’ (p. 60); ‘all my life two pots are never empty’ (p. 83); ‘my son can open a book and sound like the master’ (p. 85); ‘…she insists that I actually shuffle along with my Shakespeare volume balanced on my head’ (p. 91); ‘we talk about our life in the North’ (p. 102); ‘Chapel, you will write verses and make our lives and the lives of our children rich’ (p. 123); ‘a pot on the fire…gives off a smell and pepper and spices that turn my mouth into a spring’ (p. 124); ‘curled up like this, tight as a nut in a shell’ (p. 129).

Non-linear structure
The non-linear structure reminds the reader that history involves perspective mixed with memory. By placing the pieces of the puzzle together, the reader traverses a journey from 1711, when Whitechapel was captured and enslaved in Africa at the age of 10, to 1790 and the birth of Sanders Junior, the birth of Chapel in 1798, Lydia (at 15) writing to The Virginian in 1810, the death of Cook in June 1810 and that of Chapel and the death in 1811 of Whitechapel. Like D’Aguiar’s metaphor of a woven carpet or series of entwining threads, these elements do not go neatly one way, but rather are a ‘woven complexity’ (p. 33).

Activity
• How does the novel’s structure convey to the reader the idea that the slaves suffer most in a society that condones slavery, but ultimately everyone suffers and the whole society becomes brutalised?

Ideas, issues and themes
The primary focus of the novella is the lasting negative impact of slavery as legislated and practised in the States of the Deep South prior to the Civil War. D’Aguiar, through the use of multiple narratives and imagery, explores a range of associated ideas, issues and themes:

• Slavery is a form of total dehumanisation. ‘Ownership’ of other human beings necessarily involves denying the humanity of those slaves, subjugating them and using force to control them. But it also morally damages the slave-owner and slave-controller.
• Fear rules the lives of slaves and slave owners alike. Slave owners become brutal and unyielding in their responses to those who are deemed a danger, and slaves are powerless in a system where power is wielded through brutal punishments. The scars generated by slavery are emotional and personal as well as social.
• Slave ownership is based on the idea that one race is superior to another, on the grounds of skin colour or religion or education or background. This idea corrupts the society which harbours it.
• Ideas, on the other hand, are also the most potent means of exacting societal change.
• Slavery is a denial of natural justice because the people who are ‘owned’ are not treated as fully human. They are denied the liberating power of education, especially reading and writing. Enslavement of the mind is as dangerous as that of the body.
• This text shows that women are equal to men in their capacity to analyse, reason and think. But in the hierarchical society of Virginia just after American Independence, white women had lower status than white men, and black women were even lower in status than black men.
• Memory, both individually and collectively, is a powerful—and a political—force; it can be useful and/or painful, for individuals and for society. Forgetting can be useful for both individuals and a whole society, but also damaging.
Black Diggers

Features

Multiple voices—historical background

As explained in the Foreword to this contemporary Australian play, the scenes, or vignettes, are based on the historical record of Indigenous servicemen who fought in World War 1 (1914-1918). The play thus seeks to redress the intentional omission in most, if not all, historical accounts of the War, of those Aboriginal men who ‘volunteered to fight for the newly formed country called Australia’ (p. 4). It also shows parallels between Aboriginal resistance to dispossession and Australia’s involvement in WW1.

In a review of Black Diggers by Paul Daley (The Guardian, 14/1/14) he notes the inescapable irony, namely that for the Aborigines, whose land had been ‘stolen and people massacred after British colonisation’ and who had no voting rights or recognition in the Australian constitution:

it became possible to find emancipation of sorts by joining the 1st Australian Imperial Force and fighting under the British flag against the Germans and Turks.

As the playwright Tom Wright further observed in a 2014 interview:

for many of the black servicemen in the first world war it was the first time that the colour of their skin had actually started to fade away.

Act Two opens with an Aboriginal digger recounting his World War 1 memories, after the next great world conflict, at Glebe in 1949. He proclaims:

...in the army, you earn your way...you are forged into something...not white, you're not erased of your past...you realise 'I belong'...Curse war, but bless it for it brought me into the fold (p. 67).

[So] the same bloke back in my home town who would once cross the street or chuck me out of the pub, was shaking my hand and looking after me (Wright, quoted by Daley).

A similar dark irony is apparent when the war hero, Mick, is to be dispossessed of his own land by a 1917 Federal government act and he is defended by a fellow white farmer:

Do you know who this is? This is a serious war hero, this is Mick Dempsey, he killed two dozen jerries with his bare hands! (p. 74).

Wright’s play is not a full historic account, but a series of vignettes which bluntly present aspects of Australian racism, and of Australia’s larger act of ‘forgetting’—or ignoring—Aboriginal dispossession. The heroic and patriotic actions of black diggers were met, not with praise, acceptance and egalitarianism, but with marginalisation, maltreatment and rejection.

Historical sequence

The play covers a period of time from 1887 to 1993 in which five eras, with concomitantly changing attitudes, are shown in five parts.

Pre-Nation

The play opens with an 1887 massacre in north Queensland, a stark reminder of why some historians refer to colonisation as genocide. This massacre relates to the history of Douglas Grant, who becomes Nigel in Black Diggers. Harry’s observation that ‘no-one knows what it’s about’ (p. 18) emphasises Australia’s great distance from Europe and its wars, in contrast with Australia’s own ‘war’ on its Indigenous peoples.

Enlistment

Aboriginal men volunteering in Brisbane know the Queensland government will control their wages, hence reference to ‘the protector’ (p. 21). The Recruiting CPL’s assertion to Ern ‘you’re not a citizen’ (p. 22) is a biting reminder that Aborigines were not citizens until 1949. The official designation ‘substantially European’ (p. 23) reveals entrenched exclusion of Aborigines, as does the 1915 radio broadcast which assumes all soldiers are white:

these gallant figures...the greatness of the White Man, rendered greater still by peril...to define what it is to be a man, an Australian man... (p. 26).

Theatre of War

This section of Act One (pp. 28-65) forms the inner core of the play. A genuine camaraderie that ignores old racial boundaries is seen to grow between the soldiers; Ern is told
'If we both get home, you'll be walking into the front bar, mate' (p. 35) and Harry 'You're as good as a white man' (41). Mick is annoyed at the racist attitude towards him of black Trinidadians, themselves marginalised as 'ammunition haulers' by the British (p. 36). With more pressure at home in 1917 for men to enlist, Bertie says 'They need me…For the first time, they need us. Changed the rules, make it easier for aborigines they reckon' (p. 40). The ghost's account of his transition from shearer to soldier hero with a DCM, 'only aborigine to get one in the whole war', is the moral heart of this section: 'Even the officers looked at me with new eyes, the half-caste was rising in estimation' (p. 47). At Pozieres in 1916, Mick’s quip ‘Warrior blood in my veins…Long line of fighters. My ancestors.’ (p. 49) reminds the audience it’s a fallacy that Aborigines acquiesced in the take-over of their country after 1788. As historian Henry Reynolds (1981) noted: Nor were the blacks a particularly peaceful or passive people as conventional studies often suggest. Frontier conflict was apparent in almost every part of Australia.

The irony that as POW, Nigel finds himself once more designated according to his skin colour is obvious: ‘no-one mentioned the colour of my skin from the day I enlisted.’ (p. 55). Indeed, an Indian asks him, ‘they have Africans in Australia?’ (p. 56) to show that awareness of the very existence of Aborigines was limited. We then hear the conversations between recuperating Aboriginal soldiers in 1918, pondering how they will be treated upon their return to Australia: They won’t forget you mate. You’ve fought for the King for Country. For our country. For Australia. (p. 58).

Return

Act Two opens with the voice of an Aboriginal returned soldier in 1949, after the conclusion of an even bigger world conflict. He presents a soldier’s remembrance—‘thank God for the Army’ since it enabled him to conclude ‘I belong’ (p. 67)—which is genuine and moving, but ironic in view of what follows. Archie, a true war hero, has to talk his way into the RSL on Anzac Day in 1932, proving the old prejudices still remain. Even more poignantly, Mick, another war hero, finds himself, along with other battling Western District farmers, faced with the prospect of his land being requisitioned by the government for ‘discharged soldiers’. Not only is he personally entitled to such land, but also, his ‘grandparents were moved [there] because they were in the way’ (p. 74). So, the theme of Aboriginal dispossession is repeated. As Mick bitterly notes:

Four years I spent in uniform…and now I get back and you say that a stroke of the pen has just swept aboriginal land off the map? (p. 75).

Elsewhere, at a Queensland cattle station in 1920, Archie discovers that the old racist ways are totally unchanged. The vignette with Ern and Norm reveals the physical and mental costs of the Great War and how such ‘black diggers’ have been denied the treatment afforded to other war veterans: They painted my colour back on the day I got off that boat’ (p. 79). The seven letters which ‘fall from the sky’ (p. 83) capture all the bitter realities confronting so many of these ‘black diggers’ post-war: we know our boys went with our white Australian brothers to give their blood to protect our freedom and privileges from German oppression. We are shocked indeed to think any person should wish to take our few poor privileges away… (p. 84).

Legacy

The tragic image of Nigel wearing a sandwich-board advertising ‘TARZAN THE APE MAN’ in George Street Sydney (p. 90) echoes his father’s explanations in the Australian Museum in 1895 ‘Look, a chimpanzee. They are our closest relatives.’ (p. 20), and the German Professor’s measuring of his cranium to ‘draw up a bigger picture of what is noble and what is…weak, in the human races’ (p. 60).

The short final section acts as an epilogue. An old Aboriginal soldier in 1956 muses upon what this has all meant for him. In one sense, he muses that these war experiences are akin to the seventeen pieces of metal shell casing that painfully are pushed out of his body, his ‘iron harvest’ (p. 92). He notes that on Anzac Day he ‘just felt about as lonely as a black bastard can feel’ (p. 93). Two poignant epitaphs are the hymn ‘Recessional’, a poem written by Rudyard Kipling in 1897, and the Remembrance Day eulogy to the Unknown Soldier delivered by Prime Minister Paul Keating in 1993. The play ends with Nigel’s words, ‘I don’t belong’ (p. 96), and The Last Post.
Dramatic features of the play

Representational characters

Wright’s play presents semi-archetypal characters. Using fragmentary records, interviews and documents, he provides the audience with glimpses of the experiences of ten Aboriginal soldiers, from their own perspectives and the comments and observations of others: Nigel, Archie, Harry, Laurie, Mick, Bertie, Tommy, Ern, Bob and Norm. Some appear only periodically and others repeatedly, notably Nigel, Harry, Ern and Mick. Through the characters, we gain an insight into Aboriginal experience in the different States and in urban and rural settings.

Vignettes rather than full scenes

As Wesley Enoch explains in his Foreword, the play is presented as sixty ‘fragments of story mixed with emotional responses’ (p. 5). This approach is similar to D’Aguiar’s narrative, in that it forces the audience or reader to fill in the gaps. Sometimes the gaps we fill in, in both texts, are historical. One example of this is our need to recognise that this war changed the previous rules of warfare with its new forms of technological horror; the term ‘shellshock’ was generated in the Great War and, as this play graphically shows, often left horrific psychological scars.

Letters, speeches, sound, songs, hymns, verses

Staging effects such as the sound of gunfire, drums, radio broadcasts, hymns, songs and voices from loudhailers, operate as legitimising sources of accuracy, and also provide key symbols for aspects of the main ideas and themes in the play. Hymns capture the values of the time and reflect the fact that soldiers’ sacrifices were validated by religious beliefs. Speeches both real (p. 95) and fictional (pp. 66-67), and the soliloquy (pp. 91-93), reflect the solemn, dignified mood of a remembrance day or a secular sermon.

Letters, both real and fictional, are a significant staging element in the play. Letters are public records as well as insights into private feelings and reactions. They form a key aspect of the documentary research, as well as sharing diverse voices and perspectives.

The three letters from Archie to Aunty May reveal the ways in which the brutal realities of warfare impact on one man, Archie, on the notorious Western front from 1915 to 1918. The audience hears the transition from his wistful recalling of ‘the light on the lakes, and the pelicans coming in’ (p. 28) to the gruesome attempted suicide he witnesses, ‘but he hasn’t got a face Aunty May’ (p. 52) and thirdly to the bloody battlefield of Amiens, when he asks his aunt to explain the Bible passage, ‘And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not’ (p. 62). The letters are testament to the psychological traumas of war, and to the need of men such as Archie for specialised psychological support after the war, support which most men did not receive. Instead, as we see at Bertha Downs station in 1920, Archie is again relegated to the bottom of an unjust social order:

As far as I’m concerned you’re still the boy who used to shut his lip and do as he was told … Who put these bloody ideas in your head? (p. 76).

Bertie’s letter to his mother, as he desperately tries to return to Australia in 1917, begs her ‘to get in touch with the protector’s office’ (p. 57) and shows that the paternalistic treatment of Aboriginals was demeaning.

The seven letters that ‘fall from the sky’ in the vignette ‘Correspondence’ (p. 83) plead in different ways for ‘justice’ for the returned Aboriginal soldiers. They address government authorities in different States and show that control over Aboriginal people was very different from the treatment of white citizens. This is summed up eloquently in the final missive:

We do not want to remain humble and servile to the Aborigines’ Protection Board. Therefore, why not offer to every faithful ex-service aborigine…equal rights with the white community? (p. 84).

The last letter excerpt is addressed to a newspaper Editor from the educated pen of Nigel, in response to an infamous massacre of Aborigines in the Northern Territory. His vitriolic tone, with references to ‘appalling brutality and savage butchery’ (p. 88), is made even more bitter by his allusions to the sacrifice of black diggers such as himself.

Activities

• Read the poem ‘Mental Cases’ by Wilfred Owen. To which characters in the play might verse 2 refer? Read poems by Oodgeroo Noonuccal such as ‘The Dispossessed’. In what ways are her contentions similar to ideas in the play? Listen to the hymns or songs on pages 17, 31, 34, 51, 64, 68, 80. What do they show about individual or social values?

• How does the play’s structure enable Wright to convey the paradoxical idea that, for the black diggers, the War was both reconciliation with their oppressors and reinforcement of their dispossession and subjugation?
Ideas, issues and themes

An important theme of the play is the active involvement of Indigenous soldiers in World War 1. The audience sees that Aboriginal soldiers, like their white comrades, suffer fear and misery in war, although they were motivated to volunteer by a similar sense of adventure, bravery, and desire for acceptance. War is a socially levelling and equalising experience for all those involved. The play portrays, in fact, glimpses of the egalitarianism that Australians are known for; within the theatre of war, Aboriginal soldiers were accepted by their white counterparts and often admired for their bravery.

But the soldiers’ experiences also serve to highlight the injustices of each State’s Protectorate system, and the casual and institutional racism that humiliated, marginalised and demeaned the black diggers upon their return. The system of ‘Aboriginal protection’ was originally humanitarian, but had become by the early twentieth century a system of enforced compliance and denial of equal rights. The play shows how Aborigines became increasingly compliant and acquiescent to their unjust and racist treatment over time, and how compliance and marginalisation became their shared memory. Racist attitudes are seen to become embedded in society over time. The play shows that such attitudes can be long lasting in their impact on both the individuals and the society.

Some Aboriginal men desired to gain social acceptance by volunteering to fight in World War 1, but the racism that confronted them was entrenched and unchallenged, and only the most persistent managed to enlist. After the war, prevailing white attitudes failed to adjust even when the sacrifices of Aboriginal servicemen were known. Acts of gross injustice were perpetrated against these men, such as denying them the soldier-settler blocks that other soldiers were granted.

The play shows some of the ideas about phrenology and race that had gained currency at the time, and that led to the atrocities in Germany in World War 2. Anthropological assumptions about alleged characteristics of race, and about the idea that white-skinned people were somehow superior, are discredited by the evidence, in this text and everywhere. The treatment of Australian Aborigines was for a long time predicated on grounds of racial and cultural superiority of whites, but the play acknowledges the significant changes in Australia since the 1960s.

The play shows the camaraderie of war to be a great equaliser and explores the issue of education as the most important means of redressing racism and generating social justice and equality for all.

Nigel’s story opens and closes the play, and draws our attention to the issue of identity. His character is based on a famous Aboriginal soldier, Douglas Grant. The real Douglas was adopted by a Scottish taxidermist, was well-educated and articulate and was indeed examined by German doctors as an anthropological curiosity. As the fostered son of white immigrants, he was accepted socially, but his mixed identity did not make for an easy life. His foster mother, Elizabeth Grant, recalled:

He was very conscious of being black...He would never have contemplated marrying an Aboriginal woman, and his pride or his principles wouldn’t allow him to become too serious about white girls.

A brave soldier, he was wounded in the first battle of Bullecourt in 1917 and captured by the Germans. He was greatly valued by his fellow soldiers. Indeed, in a German prisoner-of-war camp, where his skin colour defined him, it was Douglas who supervised the distribution of Red Cross comforts to Indian and black South African prisoners of war. His skin colour, private school education and Scottish accent made him something of a celebrity, or a curiosity, amongst the Germans.

On return to Australia, the real Douglas, like Mick in the play, was refused one of the soldier settler blocks offered to returned soldiers. As the official record of the Australian War Memorial observes, ‘the equality he had experienced while serving with the AIF ended on his return to civilian life’. The Australian Dictionary of Biography notes, ‘Despite his acceptance of white culture, in later life he suffered rejection and frustration on account of his race. He was nonetheless an exceptional man.’

By the late 1920s he became very outspoken about the black cause, and started to write about it. The catalyst was the Coniston massacre, where thirty-one central-Australian Aboriginal men, women and children were killed in a reprisal attack led by a white Gallipoli veteran, George Murray. In the play, Nigel writes a vehement letter to the editor in 1929 about this horrific event, saying: ‘...there seems a strange silence, a lack of curiosity, and a peculiar lack of courage. Surely we did not go through the mud and blood of a foreign fields to continue a darker purpose at home?’ (p. 88). He was to write later of what he saw as the three main curses of white settlement on the aboriginal people: rape, liquor and disease. In real life, as in the play, he increasingly turned to alcohol and was often drunk and dissolute. Interestingly, one white person with whom Grant became friends at the end of his life was the great Australian poet and raconteur, Henry Lawson, another man cursed by alcoholism.

As in the play, the real Douglas ended up by the 1930s in
Callan Park Mental Hospital, both as a clerk and a resident. He died alone in a repatriation hospital in 1951 (as in the play) at the age of only 65. His life is bitter testament to the whole premise of the play, that the ‘black diggers’ were not only treated unjustly but were unable to prosper, as they had whilst risking their lives for a system which, ironically, was biased against them. This remains the ultimate irony in the story of these Aboriginal servicemen.

Making meaningful connections

Historical and social contexts

These two texts are about a society in which one group of people dominates or controls, or ‘owns’, another group, thus denying rights to which every individual human should have access: the right to equal treatment, liberty, education and dignity within their society. Citizens’ rights and responsibilities should be reflected in a system of law and government that is reasonable and just, but when some are denied citizenship, or when slavery is accepted, an unjust society results. The texts share these thematic similarities, but the historical and social context of each text is entirely different.

Slave overseer and Protector of Aborigines

To control and regulate a system of legalised slavery, as is apparent in The Longest Memory, or to maintain dispossession as seen in Black Diggers, there are key officials, the Slave Overseer (and his deputy) in D’Aguiar’s novel, and the government Protector of Aborigines in the play. Sanders Senior and his son Sanders Junior (who inherits the job from his father) control the slaves on the Whitechapel Plantation, forcing them to work by administering punishment to those slaves deemed unruly or who have run away. They have the power of life and death, and the backing of State legislation. As the Editor of The Virginian notes:

The trouble with a dead runaway, however brutal the means of death, is… that the next slave soon convinces himself that he can evade the hounds and the whip and the chains. (p. 108).

In Black Diggers, the system of control which operated upon generations of Australian Aborigines was a protectorate system. The state government ‘Chief Protector’ was the legal guardian of every Aboriginal child in Western Australia up to the age of 16 years with the power to remove Aboriginal children from their families and place them in Homes or in ‘service’, a form of low-paid work. As in other States, these children became known after the 1990s as the Stolen Generation. In the first of the letters which fall from the sky in the section ‘Correspondence’, an Aboriginal serviceman pleads:

I always thought that fighting for our King and country would make me a naturalised British subject … with freedom but they place me under the act and forced me onto a settlement like a dog. It seems as if the Chief Protector thinks that returned soldier doesn’t want justice… (p. 83).

Comparison of features

Multiple voices

Both D’Aguiar and Wright capture the complexities of race relations by using multiple voices. These narrative voices present differing perspectives and views, not only on the actual events, but also on the attitudes which underpin actions and reactions.

Most importantly, the language and imagery used by different individuals provides an awareness of their world-view and background, and how situations impact upon them. In D’Aguiar’s novel the reader enters the mind of each character through its multiple narratives; similarly, the audience of Black Diggers enters the mind of ten Aboriginal men through their words or inner musings.

Role of memory

The Longest Memory and Black Diggers seek to distil collective memory by personalising the impact and representation of the two different social settings. Moreover, just as the bookends of the novel are ‘Remembering’ and ‘Forgetting’, with Whitechapel’s ultimate release from the horror of his memories only coming through his death, so too the 1951 end of the play shows Nigel as a man who can only live through a haze of memory to conclude ‘I don’t belong’. As Enoch notes in the Foreword to the play, this reconstruction of different elements of ‘truth’ is also an attempt to rekindle collective memory. So, if the scenes in Black Diggers are perceived to be symbolic memory, so too the fictional events in The Longest Memory may be construed to be representational memory.

Letters, diaries and editorials

In both texts, pure narrative and direct speech are interspersed with other elements. In particular, other forms of writing are utilised in each to enable a sense of authenticity and context. We see the inner thoughts and feelings of people in their diary entries, poems and personal letters, as well as the logic and reasoning in their letters to the editor and editorials. These different forms of writing also reflect the focus on literacy in both texts.
Comparison of ideas, issues and themes

Racism and racial hierarchy

In both texts, the reader/audience is confronted by racist actions and unjust treatment of blacks by whites. The notion of racial superiority, whereby skin colour correlates with intellectual and moral capacity, is a form of justification for both slavery in the American Deep South and the marginalisation of Aborigines in Australia. The subjugated people are treated as ‘uncivilised’ or sub-human. This is shown when the Aggressive Private attacks Harry on the ship over to the war saying:

Upside down when a coon thinks it’s all right to look me in the eye and touch the same metal plate…as a white man. I don’t know who you are boy, but you’ve got gumption… (p. 30).

It is also seen in the assertion, ‘you’re as good as a white man, Harry’ (p. 41). Black volunteers could enlist only if they were ‘subtly European’ and not ‘very strongly aboriginal in type’ (p. 25).

Implicit in the actions and words of the Plantation Owners portrayed in The Longest Memory is that they, as whites, are racially superior to the slaves, although Mr Whitechapel differs in arguing that slaves are not sub-human, ‘they’re people like us’ (p. 68). In Black Diggers, the audience hears a 1915 broadcast asserting: ‘The greatness of the White Man, rendered greater still by peril…’ (p. 26). Later the audience witnesses Nigel being treated as a ‘non-white prisoner’ (p. 55) by his German captors. When Nigel is examined by a German Professor to generate ‘records for Berlin…of all the races of humanity, measuring the cranium and so on’ (p. 60), the fraudulent pseudo-science of Phrenology is exposed. The notion of a racial hierarchy, a belief in what is allegedly ‘noble and what is…weak in the human races’, was evident in the practice of slavery and culminated most shockingly in Germany in the Second World War. The concept of a so-called master race derives from 19th century racial theory, which proposed a hierarchy of races based on darkness of skin colour, as developed by Gobineau. His view, further refined and developed under the Nazis, was that both the Australian Indigenous people and equatorial Africans were at the bottom of this hierarchy. So, here also is a curious and uncomfortable parallel between The Longest Memory and Black Diggers.

Subjugation and compliance

In both texts, blacks are seen to be subservient to whites. In The Longest Memory, Old Whitechapel notes that the slave ‘who learns through observation’ (p. 14) consequently ‘lives longer…and earns the small kindness of the overseer and the master’ (p. 15). He is indicating that the whole system of slavery requires subservience of manner and approach for the slave to survive. Sanders Junior remarks over the inert body of Old Whitechapel, ‘I wouldn’t want to live so long as a slave.’ (p. 133). Indeed, his naming by the current Mr Whitechapel’s father, ‘the clever one his daddy named after himself’ (p. 74), is a blunt and uncompromising statement of ownership and entitlement of one human being over another. The rejection of this sort of relationship lies at the heart of the tragedy surrounding Chapel and his search for ‘Paradise’. Lydia also refuses to accept the principle of slavery due to her love of Chapel, instead asking, in a letter to the editor of The Virginian, ‘would [it] not be more profitable to pay blacks for their work instead of keeping them as slaves’ (p. 114).

In 1920 at Bertha Downs, Archie tries to stand up for his co-workers but, as Aboriginal workers are expected to be servile and compliant, even if they have fought for all the people of the country so bravely in World War 1, he is told:

As far as I am concerned, you’re still the boy who used to shut his lip and do as he was told. Ever since you came home you’ve been the worst kind of black, an uppity one. (p. 76).

By labelling the manly Archie as ‘boy’, the station manager is using the same demeaning language as used of slaves in the Deep South. Likewise, Nigel’s letter to the editor about the 1929 Coniston massacre of aborigines asks: ‘Surely we did not go through the mud and blood of foreign fields to continue a darker purpose at home?’ (p. 88).

In Black Diggers, Ern is told ‘…you’re not a citizen’ (p. 22). Australians were all British subjects until 1949, when everyone became a citizen, but it was only after the referendum of 1967 that Aboriginal people were counted in the census. Despite the recruiting sergeant’s confusion, Ern manages to establish his identity as a man fully fit to be a soldier.

Identity—Nigel and Chapel

The racist idea that human character and intelligence are connected with appearance is now discredited. Humans all have similar characteristics, a fact which Shakespeare immortalised in Shylock’s famous words, ‘If you prick me, do I not bleed?’ The term ‘race’ sometimes refers simply to a persons’ identity—their culture, place of origin, upbringing, religion, education.

In Black Diggers and The Longest Memory, Nigel and Chapel have mixed identity—Nigel because of his upbringing and education, Chapel because he had a white-skinned father and a black-skinned mother. Nigel’s education could have led to him sharing the identity of his adoptive parents, but his skin
colour affected how others treated him, and ultimately he identifies himself as Aboriginal.

Chapel may have looked sufficiently ‘black’ to be kept with the slaves, but he had been fathered by a white slave overseer. Even though slaves and ‘owners’ were supposedly kept apart, mixing was not uncommon—see for instance the contentious story of Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States, and Sally Hemings—but in a slave system it caused particular, and long-lasting, tensions.

Both Nigel and Chapel were given that greatest of all gifts for advancement—literacy. Both have to cope with their double identity and yet feel out of place. Both have a sense of the ‘white’ and ‘black’ aspects to their personalities and interests. Both are lovers of literature and especially Shakespeare and poetry. Both are prolific writers and skilled wordsmiths, writing poetry and prose with serious messages and social critiques. Both find themselves out of place in a world that refuses to equate black skin with the legitimate accessing of learning, literature and real knowledge. Both are ultimately destroyed by the racist social or regulatory system in which they live and seek acceptance. Both recognise that blacks have been overtly disadvantaged by white authorities in control and have sought to protest and lobby for a new social order based on equal opportunities. Both were ultimately lonely and isolated.

**Dispossession**

In both texts, racist attitudes underpin ideas about ownership, land and property. Black slaves in the Deep South were originally forcibly removed from their African homeland, their ancestry and culture denied in a system where they were ‘owned’ as property and considered sub-human. In *The Longest Memory*, Whitechapel’s Great granddaughter attempts to gain an insight into her heritage. However, his view was that ‘Africa was his past and not [hers] and if anyone attemps to gain an insight into her heritage. However, his view was that ‘Africa was his past and not [hers] and if anyone had the right to dream about it, he did and he chose not to’ (p. 125).

In *Black Diggers*, dispossession from land is at issue in the Victorian Western District in 1922 when ‘a serious war hero’ (p. 74), Mick, is blithely told by a public servant that ‘under the Discharged Soldiers’ Settlement Act of 1917’ his farm is to be summarily ‘acquired’. He asks the official ‘how many aboriginal ex-servicemen have been given a settlement?’ which goes to the ironic and racist heart of the matter. Mick indicates that this land is ‘an Aboriginal community’ and that ‘Our grandparents were moved here because we were in the way, and probably their parents before them going back to the first cursed moment white men wandered into our lands’ (p. 74). He concludes, ‘Four years I spent in uniform…and now I get back and you say a stroke of the pen has just swept aboriginal land off the map?’ (p. 75). The dispossession that took place after 1788 are mirrored by this post-War dispossession.

**The individual in society—duty, obedience, discipline, punishment, service**

The black soldiers fought in World War 1 for the British Empire and the new nation Australia on the assumption that their duty was to follow orders without question. Similarly, the African slaves worked to maintain the wealth and power of their white ‘masters’ in Virginia; a wise old slave such as Whitechapel, writes the Editor of *The Virginian*, ‘instructs … young slave children…about the duties of obedience a slave owes to his master and in discipline and hard work’ (p. 109). Autocratic dominance of the master-owner and a willing subservience on the part of black slaves is presumed.

In *Black Diggers*, the volunteer soldiers determined to enlist need to subvert racist rules just to join white soldiers at the front. Work in the army brought them a measure of acceptance: ‘Curse war, but bless it for it brought me into the fold’ (p. 67). But after 1918 their service for King and country is ignored and overlooked, as Norm asserts: ‘They painted my colour back on the day I got off that boat’ (p. 79). Whilst the literal and metaphoric ‘bit of shell casing’ (p. 92) may lie beneath the skin, it must painfully emerge and bring with it a realisation that acceptance will be limited to the mateship of ‘ex-servicemen (who make them) more than welcome…any day’ (p. 72).

**Role of religion**

The treatment both of enslaved black Africans in Virginia and indigenous Australians was based on ostensibly Christian principles. However, Christian principles were corrupted by ideas of a connection between skin colour and moral virtue, and by using religious belief to justify control-by-violence:

> You can’t mix God with the slave business. God is for us, not them…They can borrow our God if it will make them good. But if God doesn’t work, bring back the whip and the rod. (p. 73.)

Indeed, some even argued that firm and unyielding treatment was needed to enable the souls of blacks to be ‘whitened’.

On the other hand, the texts show that both slaves and indigenous people adopted Christianity themselves and often practised its principles more truly and sincerely than their ‘masters’. Thus, In *Black Diggers* when Bertie and Tommy see a fellow black digger’s dead body, Bertie recites the Lord’s Prayer in an attempt to maintain dignity and religious observance (p. 45) and Archie looks to his Auntie’s Methodist
religion and the scriptures for consolation and support (pp. 28, 62).

It was their religious belief that motivated many (white) abolitionists and troubled many slave owners. Mr Whitechapel, who wrestles with his religious belief and tries to be a benevolent Plantation Owner, reasons:

We must not allow this trade to turn us into savages. We are Christians. God should guide us in our dealings with slaves as he counsels us in everything else. (p. 35).

Compliance and nobility of spirit

In both texts, the reader/audience observes a seemingly incomprehensible compliance in much of the behaviour and actions of blacks, despite their wrongful treatment. This reveals an exceptional nobility of spirit. Indeed, as the reader recognises in The Longest Memory, Whitechapel’s unwavering dedication to duty ultimately leads to the re-capture and brutal whipping to death of his beloved only son, and also to rejection by his own offspring, and to intense self-loathing. This is also seen in most of the returning ‘black diggers’.

Where there is an attempt at rebellion or non-compliance— as with both Chapel and Nigel—the outcome is tragic and ignoble.

Mr Whitechapel, in demonstrating his own form of non-compliance with his fellow Plantation Owners, represents the nobility of spirit of all those abolitionists who suffered for their views.

Denial of human rights

In both texts, there is a systemic attempt by those in power, as individuals and as a society, to deny a voice or any expression of human rights to those who are subjugated. The black slaves and the black diggers are denied the rights which their fellow human beings enjoy.

Hopes and dreams

Characters in both texts hope to enjoy loving relationships; Chapel and Lydia dream about their relationship even though their society specifically forbids it. For slaves, ‘paradise’ is their hoped-for freedom; they dream about not being owned. Aboriginal diggers dream about owning their land, and hope the equality they have enjoyed while in the army will extend to their life after the War.

Key passages for close study

Passage 1

Denial of human rights, race and power

The Longest Memory, 9: ‘Lydia’, p. 87-88, from ‘… At what point do I stop hearing the words and listen to the voice’ to ‘Chapel is in trouble because of me …’

Black Diggers, p. 36, from ‘1917. Ypres’ to ‘The bombs and gunfire start up again.’

In what ways are Mick and Lydia similar? The desire to learn, to work, to love, and to live well, is common to all human beings. When education is denied, the resulting institutionalised ignorance is a means by which one group of people maintains control and power over another group. Similarly, denying people the right to love where they choose (as is done to Lydia), to work to their full capacity (‘the poms won’t let them fight’), or to be free of racial stereotyping (the Trinidadians are stereotyping Mick) are ways of unjustly maintaining power over others.

Passage 2

Education

The Longest Memory, 5: ‘Chapel’, p. 59-60, from ‘…then she opened the rose’ to ‘I said it was a mighty waste of a good head.’

Black Diggers, p. 88, from ‘1929. Forest Lodge, Sydney’ to ‘He must be doing all right for himself, mustn’t he?’

In these two passages, the basic human right to be literate, to learn to read and write, is at issue. Slaves were violently denied that right. Why were they denied education? Why does Lydia teach Chapel to read and write? If he had lived, what would he have achieved with this skill?

Nigel’s education should lead to him ‘doing all right for himself’, so why does he ultimately fail to achieve? In what ways are Nigel and Chapel similar?

Passage 3

Dignity, nobility of spirit

The Longest Memory, 6: ‘Plantation Owners’, p. 68, from ‘The roars – louder than you anticipated – take an age to quell.’ to ‘…your tobacco pouch like reins as you try to find your feet.’

Black Diggers, p. 81, from ‘1935. A country cemetery, pauper’s grave’ to ‘He looks around. Throws a clod of earth on the coffin, hurries away.’
Mr Whitechapel and the other plantation owners have different attitudes to being slave-owners. What are the different attitudes, and why do the plantation owners mock Mr Whitechapel?

The Minister treats Tommy with dignity, even in death, despite the fact that others had not. (Refer to page 50 for Tommy’s war story.)

What similarities (and differences) can you see between Mr Whitechapel and the Minister?

**Passage 4**

**Hopes and dreams**

*The Longest Memory*, ‘Forgetting’, p. 135, from ‘This is what I imagine saying to him’ to ‘A dream of love, desire, but a dream all the same…’

*Black Diggers*, p. 55, from ‘1917. Zössen POW camp’ to ‘Do you mind, sir? I’m from Australia.’

Whitechapel expressed love for his son by wanting to keep him alive with lessons in reality, but his son dreams of love, or the love he thinks he can have. A German prison guard exhorts non-whites to throw off the ‘oppression’ of being British, yet Nigel dreams of regaining the freedom he had, or thinks he had, in Australia.

Compare the ways in which characters in the play and the novel are cheated of their hopes and dreams, and how this idea is presented.

**Passage 5**

**Forgetting and remembering**

*The Longest Memory*, ‘Remembering’, pp. 1-2, from ‘I never knew crying could take over a body so’ to ‘I forget as hard as I can.’

*Black Diggers*, p. 96, from ‘1951 Callan Park’ to ‘The Last Post is heard. END.’

Compare how and why characters in the play and the novel want to forget, or try to drown their memories.

**Passage 6**

*The Longest Memory*, ‘Great granddaughter’, p. 125, from ‘Africa is not for you,’ to ‘so why should anyone else.’

*Black Diggers*, p. 46, from ‘A Ghost’ to ‘the Somme that is, not the McIntyre.’

Whitechapel was adamant that a slave survives by forgetting his/her past identity and by his compliance; but his young great granddaughter disagrees with him and believes that reclaiming her heritage is the way forward for her. An old Aboriginal digger-ghost recalls how his strong sense of identity, place and heritage enabled him to be a brave Australian soldier who was awarded a medal and was ‘King of the battalion’.

These two passages contain ideas, themes or issues that are at the heart of each text. Identify those main ideas; in what ways are they different? In what ways similar?
Key quotes

Racism and racial hierarchy

I told my son that we are different from slaves in intelligence and human standing before God. (*The Longest Memory*, p. 39, Sanders Senior)

There is no sight more perfidious than that of a white woman with a black man. (*The Longest Memory*, p. 120)

Slavery is a long day of the master over the slave and of nights turned to days. (*The Longest Memory*, p. 137)

Picaninny, Professor …. Full-blood, too. Unusual. Perfect specimen ...

(*Black Diggers*, p. 14)

RECRUITING CPL …you’re not a citizen (*Black Diggers*, p. 22)

VOICE: The greatness of the White Man, rendered greater still by peril, fighting not just for God and Empire, but to define what it is to be a man, an Australian man…

(*Black Diggers*, p. 26)

FIRST WHITE SOLDIER: You’re as good as a white man, Harry. (*Black Diggers*, p. 41)

Race and identity

The child is dark and according to Whitechapel will become as dark as the lobes of his ears …. He resembles my son in all but colour. (*The Longest Memory*, p. 52, Sanders Senior)

SECOND INDIAN: They have Africans in Australia? (*Black Diggers*, p. 56)

EDITOR: This is good. He can’t be an aborigine…Damn good turn of phrase for a darkie. No-one’s going to believe it. …He must be doing all right for himself, mustn’t he? (*Black Diggers*, p. 88-89)

Power and subjugation

What if they turned against us all? (*The Longest Memory*, p. 45, Sanders Senior)

Miss L. wondered if it would not be more profitable to pay blacks for their work instead of keeping them as slaves… (*The Longest Memory*, p. 115, *The Virginian*)

As far as I am concerned, you’re still the boy who used to shut his lip and do as he was told. Ever since you came home you’ve been the worst kind of black, an uppity one. (*Black Diggers*, p. 76)

You can’t come in here…you’re not a citizen. (*Black Diggers*, p. 22)

Hopes and dreams

My son, whose dreams were such that he argued his children would be free. (*The Longest Memory*, p. 21, Whitechapel)

Were he to write me a verse every day for the remainder of his life, those verses would amount to one bucket from an ocean of his deep feeling for me. (*The Longest Memory*, p. 103, Lydia)

BLOKE WITH A GLASS OF WINE:

…I am a dignity perhaps no-one was going to let you have back home. But in the service, you are forged into something…you realise, ‘I belong’… Curse war, but bless it for it brought me into the fold.

(*Black Diggers*, p. 67)

MICK: For you the war’s over. What’s starting to dawn on me is that, for us, it’s never going to end. (*Black Diggers*, p. 75)

ARCHIE: I thought things would change after the War. (*Black Diggers*, p. 77)

NORM: They painted my colour back on the day I got off that boat. (*Black Diggers*, p. 79)
The individual in society — duty, obedience, discipline, punishment, service

‘Too many instances of runaways not being found’, were Mr Whitechapel’s words. Too expensive. Too much of this planted seeds of discontent on the plantation which sprouted anarchy. The next man to leave the plantation without due authority to do so would be made an example of by a public whipping. (The Longest Memory, p. 131, Sanders Junior)

The white man needs us coloured boys now… You see the world’s turned upside down. (Black Diggers, p. 31)

BERTIE: I’m going to be a fighter too. For us but not just for us. For Australia. (Black Diggers, p. 39)

RSL SECRETARY: We don’t see the skin, we see the service. (Black Diggers, p. 72)

Role of religion

We must not allow this trade to turn us into savages. We are Christians. God should guide us in our dealings with slaves as he counsels us in everything else. (The Longest Memory, p. 35, Mr Whitechapel)

I promote the teachings of Christ and practise slavery. (The Longest Memory, p. 71, Plantation Owners)

TOMMY: Can you hear me? Get me out, get me out! (Black Diggers, p. 50)

MINISTER: We knew him as Tank Stand Tommy. He had a name … He was acquainted with death, he had glimpsed the darkness. (Black Diggers, p. 81)

ARCHIE: Dear Aunty May, In John’s Gospel it says ‘And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.’ What does that mean? (Black Diggers, p. 62)

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while life shall last,
And our eternal home. (Black Diggers, p. 51)

Education

For a slave to know how to write and read. I said it was a mighty waste of a good head. (The Longest Memory, p. 60, Chapel)

Books will only bring you trouble. Books will only increase the number of things you have to worry about. (The Longest Memory, p. 86, Cook)

Lydia is subjected to the ‘education’ for young ladies, but this too is a form of subjugation: ‘I try to object but she insists that I actually shuffle along with my Shakespeare volume balanced on my head.’ (The Longest Memory, p. 92, Lydia)

The father said it filled a slave with discontent when he can read about the world but must live on a plantation as a slave and see nothing of that world. (The Longest Memory, p. 117, The Virginian)

EDITOR: This is good. He can’t be an aborigine… Damn good turn of phrase for a darkie. No-one’s going to believe it. …He must be doing all right for himself, mustn’t he? (Black Diggers, p. 88-89)

Dispossession

He said Africa was his past and not ours. If anyone had the right to dream about it, he did and he chose not to, so why should anyone else. (The Longest Memory, p. 125, Great granddaughter)

MICK: Four years I spent in uniform, all of us ready to make the sacrifice. And now I get back and you say a stroke of the pen has just swept aboriginal land off the map? (Black Diggers, p. 75)

I am bound for the promised land
I am bound for the promised land;
Oh, who will come and go with me?
I am bound for the promised land. (Black Diggers, p. 80)

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Comparing through listening and speaking activities

Class discussions

• Identify the change that is seen in Whitechapel after the death of Cook and of Chapel. Compare this with the views of the Aboriginal returned soldier who speaks in Glebe in 1949 (pp. 66-67).

• Compare Chapel’s poetic descriptions of his world with Nigel writing to the editor about the 1929 Coniston massacre. Describe and compare the changes and transformations that Chapel and Nigel go through, and their ultimate destinies.

• Examine how Mr Whitechapel rationalises the compatibility of his position as a slave owner and a Christian. Analyse the mindset of others in the slave trade—how do overseers and other Plantation Owners justify their treatment of slaves? Compare these attitudes with the Manager of Bertha Downs station in 1920.

• Compare the self-righteous, racist attitudes of the Editor of The Virginian with the Sydney editor’s views in 1929. Are there differences between the legacy of slavery and the legacy of Australia’s State protectorate systems?

• Explore the impact of the non-linear structure of The Longest Memory on the reader, as opposed to the fragmented but time-connected and essentially sequential approach used in Black Diggers.

Trial

The Plantation Owners, Sanders Senior, Sanders Junior and the Editor of The Virginian, along with the military authorities of 1914 and the ‘Protectors’ in two Australian States in 1900, are retrospectively accused (in a present-day court) of having acted in ways that are contrary to the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights. Conduct the prosecution and the defence. What similarities and differences between the two texts are highlighted by this activity?

Conversation pairs

After acting a short conversation between characters, discuss what differences or similarities between ideas, themes or issues in both texts have emerged.

• Decide on a backstory for the character of Lydia, who is transformed from the ‘big sister’ of Chapel into his ‘star cross’d [would be] lover’. Decide on a backstory for Nigel’s adoptive parents. Act out a
conversation between Lydia and Nigel’s (adoptive) mother.
• Act out a conversation between Mr Whitechapel and the Minister who buries Tank Stand Tommy.
• Bertie, Harry, Laurie, Archie, Mick are all affected by the War. Select someone to play the part of each character; try to be clear about where each character lives, and then decide on a reason for all of them to meet at, say, an Anzac Day ceremony in a capital city. Script short conversations between them, in pairs. Then select one of these characters to have a longer conversation with the Ghost of Chapel.

Debates
These could be paired debates, with two students taking the opposing points of view; they should base their argument entirely on examples from the two texts.

These two texts show that:
• Forgetting can be better than remembering.
• Education for everyone is the only way to combat racism.
• There are more differences between Australia and the United States of America than similarities.

Comparing through writing activities
• Write a short essay comparing Chapel in The Longest Memory with Nigel in Black Diggers, focusing on how both, caught between racial barriers and the education which should have helped them to advance their lives, ultimately cannot overcome the racist pressures which surround them.
• Develop a comprehensive table to identify significant similarities and differences between the two texts. You could construct a column each for: idea/issue/theme; text 1 example; text 2 example; quotes.
• Write a paragraph comparing Lydia’s lack of racism (explain why this is ironic, given her lineage and background) with the views of the Ghost (pp. 46-48) in Black Diggers.
• In a group, construct a mind map that shows how ideas in the two texts are portrayed through the Correspondence letters in Black Diggers (p. 83-84) and the Editorials of The Virginian. Ideas that might be conveyed in these formats: role of religion, racial separation and stereotyping, use of power to subjugate others, resistance to domination, dispossession, education.

• You are writing a blog about your reading experiences. Post an entry in which you review the two texts, comparing the ways in which the vignettes of The Longest Memory interrelate and connect, with the ways in which the threads of personal stories of the Aboriginal servicemen in Black Diggers build a narrative.

Planning a comparative response
A comparative response ‘explore(s) the meaningful connections between two texts’ based on close analysis including ‘the interplay between character and setting, voice and structure and how ideas, issues and themes are conveyed.’ Such ‘ideas, issues and themes…reflect the world and human experience.’

To plan a comparative response, students need to:
• Review both texts closely, clarifying and comparing the significant structural and stylistic features of each.
• Clarify the significant ideas, issues and themes in each text and then compare the treatment, focus and positions presented in each.
• Consider significant and meaningful connections between the two texts.
• Identify significant and meaningful connections between the two texts.
• Consider significant and meaningful connections between the two texts.
• Identify core textual elements, including character, setting, voice and structure, which should potentially be meaningfully compared between the two texts so as to make astute comments about the ideas, issues and themes raised and advocated.
• Identify potentially parallel quotations which might be used from both texts as supportive evidence.

Sample topic
Compare the ways in which The Longest Memory and Black Diggers explore how racial prejudice affects relationships and people.

Suggested steps to planning:
• Identify the central ideas, issues, themes raised in the selected topic and reflecting on how and where these are presented in each text.
• Consider the extent to which each text approaches these ideas similarly or divergently.
• Identify specific textual elements from each text which might best be examined and would facilitate meaningful comparison.
• Determine which characters from the two texts
would be most meaningfully and productively compared and contrasted.

- Contrast the overt brutality of Virginia with the more subtle attitudinal prejudice experienced by Australian Aborigines. Brief mention could be made of the fact that whilst the American Civil War did end slavery and the world of Southern plantations, race continues as an explosive issue in the USA today, and World War 1 did not obliterate racism and prejudice against Aborigines in Australia.

Sample introduction

Both for Fred D’Aguiar and Tom Wright, the pervasive impact and influence of prejudice must be recognised, acknowledged and ultimately broken. Both writers perceive the racial divide, based upon the colour of one’s skin, to have directed and determined events and relationships over an extended period of time, albeit in different locales. In The Longest Memory, the reader is transported to Virginia in the early 19th century, where the whole economic system centring on the wealth of white controlled plantations, required abundant compliant black slaves. In contrast, in Black Diggers, the audience comes to recognise the longterm anti-Aboriginal prejudice which has dominated since white settlement in Australia. Whilst the American Civil War of the 1860s may have overturned slavery, the overt system of prejudice, World War 1, and the voluntary participation of Aboriginal servicemen, failed to remove prejudice from Australia. Both texts demonstrate that when relationships are dictated by matters of race, the ensuing imbalance of power will create an irrevocable divide and lasting tension. So, for D’Aguiar and Wright, it is essential that such prejudicial attitudes, and their racist applications, must be systematically broken and disallowed for justice to occur for all. Otherwise, the lasting collective memory will be ‘pain trying to resurrect itself’ and a strong sense by blacks that ‘I don’t belong’ will continue unchallenged.

Sample plan

- In both texts, the pivotal idea of prejudice, as reflected in overt racism, predominates. The black/white racist divide exists despite the very different time periods (early 19th century Virginia and 1887-1993 in Australia).
- However, whilst D’Aguiar shows a world where such prejudice is officially sanctioned and legislated in a system of slavery, Wright presents a less overt system which is both attitudinal and supported by governmental regulations and laws.
- The focus is on perceived racial superiority and difference, and how these attitudes are used to justify treatment of slaves and Aboriginal people and to establish long-lasting racist attitudes in society. Compare the skilful literary talents acquired by both Chapel and Nigel and the reactions to their capacity by those whites in positions of power.
- The use of a shifting narrative voice in each text is important in revealing the different impact of such prejudice on both the victims and perpetrators. Focus on how this narrative voice enables us to appreciate its impact on the characters. Explore the vignette approach used in Black Diggers and how each personal thread becomes entwined through the experiences of World War 1, just as Mr Whitechapel perceives the symbol of an entwined thread as a carpet.
- Compare the attitudes and perspectives of both sides of the racial divide: cluster this exploration so that slave overseers, plantation owners and the Editor are compared with settlers, army officials, station managers and government officials. Also compare Whitechapel and Archie; Chapel and Nigel; Lydia and the Schoolmaster.
- Compare the ways in which hypocrisy is portrayed in both texts; the whites assume positions of superiority and yet are prepared to directly benefit from the hard work and actions of the blacks.
Comparative essay topics

1. Compare the perspectives presented in The Longest Memory and Black Diggers about the ownership of land.
2. ‘Since we so readily enter the minds of the characters in The Longest Memory and Black Diggers, we are better able to appreciate the impact of treatment based on race.’ Analyse and compare the ways in which each text presents power imbalances based on race.
3. ‘The hardest element to overcome in combating racism is the entrenched ideas that have justified it.’ Compare how the two texts The Longest Memory and Black Diggers portray the entrenched ideas that are used to justify racism and unequal treatment.
4. Compare the ways in which individual and collective memory affects the lives of characters in The Longest Memory and Black Diggers.
5. Compare the ways in which both the best and worst elements of human character emerge from the experiences presented in The Longest Memory and Black Diggers.
6. Compare the impact of one group of people assuming mastery over another, both on attitudes and lives in The Longest Memory and Black Diggers.
7. ‘To bring out the potential in humans, education is essential.’ Compare the perspectives presented in The Longest Memory and Black Diggers about education. Support your comments by analysing the ways in which each text presents these ideas.
8. ‘The longer racism prevails, the harder it is to break.’ Compare the perspectives presented in The Longest Memory and Black Diggers about this view. Support your comments by analysing the ways in which each text presents these ideas.
9. To what extent is dispossession the main historical factor behind the mistreatment presented in The Longest Memory and Black Diggers?
10. ‘Belief and hope can sustain people even when in dire circumstances.’ Do you agree that this idea is presented in both The Longest Memory and Black Diggers? In your argument, provide examples of hopes and beliefs from both texts, comparing how these are portrayed and whether they do support the characters who hold them.
11. Discuss and compare the use of letters and editorials in the two texts.
12. Discuss and compare the role of religion in the two texts.

References


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