

The novel *The Secret River* by Australian author Kate Grenville serves as a honest look into the colonisation of Australia and the consequent mistreatment of Indigenous Australian persons. The novel deconstructs fallacious beliefs about the Native Australians, and similarly untrue myths about the first settlers. It explores the binaries between the Indigenous peoples and the European Settlers and rewrites important misconceptions in order to shed some light onto the reality of what truly took place during the colonisation of Australia. Grenville constructs a window into the past, and explores the egoistic and hedonistic values and ideologies of Europeans, and their aversion to the 'otherness' of the Indigenous Australians. *The Secret river* challenges and reevaluates the fictitious myths surrounding the falsely 'valiant' Colonists and the subjugated and misrepresented 'other' Indigenous Australians, and retells the narrative in a truer and more confronting way.

The novel is written from the perspective of a inexperienced English settler and his narrow-minded cultural frame of reference. It has many post-colonial themes, particularly evident in the 'them verses us' stance of the intolerant English-men in regards to the Australian natives. Throughout the entire book, the ignorant white settlers frequently refer to the Indigenous Australians as 'savages' to easily differentiate themselves from the 'other' that they believe is uncivilised and considerably less humane than they believe they are. This kind of behaviour is deeply rooted in confusion and apprehension; the new settlers represent the fear of the unknown that was widespread and very prevalent during the colonisation of Australia, and the abhorrent distaste for anything they deemed as 'other'. The Indigenous characters are often likened to an infestation of pests by the colonists, that someone ought to "sterminate(exterminate) them." Characters like Smasher and Spider are exemplary examples of the quintessential bigoted settler, heinous and unreasonable with a inflated sense of superiority and predomination. The lack of understanding, and the lack of an attempt to understand pushes them to write the Indigenous people off as not people at all; undeserving of civility and consideration, despite the likeness the Indigenous Australians share with the Settlers. The novel examines indigenous tradition and customs more thoroughly than other texts written from the colonists' perspectives, highlighting the similarities and consistencies between the two opposing societies that are often left not

widely addressed. *The Secret River* tackles the unjustified post-colonial fears that the Settlers harboured towards the ‘otherness’ of the Indigenous Australians and rewrites chauvinistic national myths spread by the colonists that appear in discourse about Indigenous Australians even in modern day Australia.

The characters in the story play a vital part in the deconstruction of racial stereotypes. The novel’s main character is William Thornhill, and it is his thoughts and emotions that paint a picture of the events that transpire in the novel. He progressively becomes one of the most unlikable characters in the story, though this isn’t apparent at the start of his character arc. We meet Thornhill at the beginning of his journey, in the squalor of London, where even his name is “common as dirt”. These humble beginnings motivate his eagerness to succeed in life, his need to be someone *important*. His overzealous obsession with having the wealth and respect he saw the gentry of London possess causes him to appear ironically weak, exceedingly susceptible to other’s opinions of him. In trying to impress people like Smasher and Spider in order to gain acclaim, both of whom suffer the same deluded ideas about acquiring admiration, he loses himself and his honour. There are various recurring symbols and motifs that appear frequently throughout the book that further evidence Thornhill’s character devolution. Thornhill is always surrounded by water; he works on a boat in London, travels across the sea in a ship, and owns and rows his own boat in Australia, the same one that enables him to travel to Hawkesbury River, where the climactic massacre takes place. The water provides a sense of familiarity, linking the three stages of Thornhill’s life and personas together, and serves as a constant reminder of who he is and what he’s come from, changing from a sympathetic struggling thief to an unscrupulous pseudo- ‘gentleman’. The lion statues too serve as a reminder of the unsavoury way Thornhill achieved his boyish dreams, as they looked so fearsome at Christ Church, but they end up looking like more like a “domestic type of creature,” at Cobham Hall.

Thornhill is childish and petulant, losing his temper when his fragile beliefs are threatened, evidenced when he beats his son Dick for pointing out the efficiency of the Indigenous Australian’s farming methods in comparison to their own.

Whenever an Indigenous person is compared to a white settler in the book, the reaction is usually very hostile and belligerent; this is often because the Indigenous people are seen as primitive and animalistic. However, the Indigenous characters in the book consistently demonstrated behaviour that suggests otherwise. When faced with dangerous or fear inducing situations, they react stoically and calmly, which is juxtaposed with how violently and impetuously the Settlers behave. Though the Aboriginal people are voiceless in the novel, the representation of their cultures and traditions is at the forefront. While different as a whole, we see many similarities between English customs and Indigenous ones. Sal, observes this when she takes notice of the Aboriginal women's house-care routines - "even got a broom to keep it clean, Will. Just like I got myself." If the Settlers were to face the harsh truth that the Indigenous people were just like them, their treatment of them would be regarded barbaric and the guilt would consume them, much like it did to Thornhill at the end of the book. The characterisation of Thornhill and other aggressive colonists show how the Settlers could be considered the primitive ones, despite the misconception that Aboriginal people had rudimentary practices.

The story is almost entirely set in Australia, and the land functions as almost a character in and of itself. It's described to have an imposing sort of sentience that is seen by Thornhill as simultaneously foreign and opportune. The land is personified to be old, unchanging, yet Thornhill and the other settlers go on to disturb the tranquility, digging up the mud and soaking it with blood and violence. The country is almost antagonistic in nature towards the Settlers, as they are often left frustrated and irritated when their crops neglect to flower due to the coarse and rough conditions of the climate and the dirt. This description of the unrelenting and unforgiving environment is far removed from how in sync Australia is portrayed to be in regards to the Indigenous Natives. They cultivate plants that always flourish, and are never starved for meat as their hunting methods, though frowned upon and thought to be primitive by the Englishmen, are much more successful than the Settlers'. The Indigenous Australian characters in the book break down and deconstruct misleading stereotypes that they did not farm, instead stating that "the blacks were no less farmers than the white men were." The

efficiency and accuracy with which they hunt can also be juxtaposed with the brash, obstreperous way Thornhill attempts to hunt; with a gun, an inexperienced hand and a misguided feeling of power. He always seems to fight against the land, whereas the Aboriginal people appear to be finely in tune with it. He has to struggle, do unspeakable things in order to claim what he falsely believes is his, but the indigenous people enjoy the luxurious benefits of living in Australia for Australia, whereas the Settlers try to enjoy Australia by painting England on top of it. The erasure of Indigenous culture is often justified by the fictitious 'fact' that Indigenous people didn't demonstrate any claim to the land, that they were uncouth people who were indolent and remiss. But the idle description of Aboriginal people was created by frustrated settlers, from a limited angle that had been tinged and distorted with bitterness and anger.

The novel "*The Secret River*" tackles and breaks down common tropes about Indigenous Australians that are still commonplace today, proving unfair stereotypes about Indigenous Australians inability to farm and animalistic behaviour to be wrong and unjust. It also comments on the crude way in which the Settlers behaved, and how in reality the Aboriginal people appeared to be far more clever and civilised than the convicts, crushing racists myths.