**The Secret River Study Guide**

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Published in 2005, [The Secret River](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-secret-river) is the first book in a trilogy by [Kate Grenville](http://www.gradesaver.com/author/kate-grenville) that tackles the morally complex history of the colonization of Australia. The Secret River emerged out Grenville's research into her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, who served as the model for [William Thornhill](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-secret-river/study-guide/character-list#william-thornhill). Solomon Wiseman was a lighterman on the Thames in London until he was arrested and deported to the convict colony at New South Wales for stealing valuable timber. Like William Thornhill, Soloman Wiseman built a thriving business in Australia and acquired great wealth. Drawing on the life of Soloman Wiseman and records of the conflicts between the settlers and the Aborigines, Grenville tells a sweeping story of a man determined to shed his past and build a new life for his family in the daunting landscape of New South Wales.

In The Secret River, Grenville explores the destructive clash of civilizations that occurred during the colonization of Australia. She tells a compelling story about the initial encounters between the Aborigines and the white settlers and the competing claims to the land that eventually lead to the violent dispersal of the Aborigines and the foundation of modern Australia. The Secret River is part of a new trend in Australian literature that explores the nation's controversial and often ignored convict past and marginalization of the Aborigines.

in Searching for the Secret River, Grenville recounts the creative process of taking historical facts and turning them into fiction. The book is part memoir, part research record, part creative writing manual. The book provides great insight into every aspect of the germination and writing of The Secret River.

The Secret River was an international bestseller and won several high profile awards, including the Commonwealth Prize for Literature, the Christina Stead Prize, and the Bookseller's Choice Award. The novel was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. The Secret River is included in the curriculum of numerous schools and universities in Australia.

**Clash of Civilizations**

[The Secret River](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-secret-river) explores the clash of civilizations that began when Captain Cook first stepped foot on the land that become known as Australia. Throughout the novel, Grenville juxtaposes British and Aboriginal understandings of several important social concepts: personal property, clothing, hunting and farming, family relationships, and relationship to the natural environment. The incomprehension with which each culture regards the other leads to the majority of conflicts in the novel. The British concepts of private property and settlement, backed up by the guns and might of the Empire, eventually win the battle between the two civilizations.

**Aboriginal Culture**

Grenville presents Aboriginal culture as a lost idyll. Although the novel focuses on William's journey from the gutters of London to Australian gentry, Grenville places almost equal weight on the Aborigines and their way of life. She is careful to refute the label of savage that the settlers give to the Aborigines. Grenville conveys the richness of their culture and their deep attachment to the land. She contrasts the over-consumption of Western civilization with the Aborigines' understanding of the delicate balance of nature. Grenville suggests that the white settlers could have learned much from the Aborigines and, by extension, that the modern world with its disregard for the natural environment should open its eyes to the wisdom of native peoples.

**Alternative Path of Australian Development**

Grenville sets up two paths to the development of Australia, embodied in the characters of [Smasher Sullivan](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-secret-river/study-guide/character-list#smasher-sullivan) and [Thomas Blackwood](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-secret-river/study-guide/character-list#thomas-blackwood). Smasher Sullivan represents the path of racial, social, and physical domination of the Aborigines that the British did follow in their colonization of Australia. Thomas Blackwood, on the other hand, represents the choice of peaceful co-existence that was originally available to the British colonists if they had not been blinded by racial prejudice and greed. Grenville gives the reader a glimpse of the possible development of future generations of Australian through the character of Dick.

**Social Hierarchy**

The theme of social hierarchy and its levels of power runs throughout the novel. Beginning with William's first visit to Christ Church through to the placement of the stone lions on the gateposts of Thorhnhill's Point, Grenville explores the impact of social ranking on individual development. The humiliation that William experiences as a waterman in London marks his character for life and informs the choices he makes throughout the novel. He craves the thrill of wielding power over another person. For William and the other settlers (the majority of whom are convicts), their status as white men gives them permission to look down on other human beings (the Aborigines), for the first time in their lives. Their treatment of the Aborigines is informed by their understanding of how one should treat a racial and social inferior.

**Self-Creation**

The story of modern Australia is essentially a story of self-creation. The convicts sent from England were given the chance to receive a full pardon and start their lives over. The Secret River tells the story of [William Thornhill](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-secret-river/study-guide/character-list#william-thornhill), one of those first settlers who arrived in New South Wales as a convict and an outcast and who eventually carved out a place for himself in Australia's incipient ruling class. The structure of the novel reflects the importance of this theme. Grenville opens the novel not with William's youth in London but with his first night in New South Wales. She ends the novel with William sitting on the veranda of his grand house, Cobham Hall. He has re-written the story of his life both physically and metaphorically.

**The British Class System**

The Secret River examines how the harsh British class system of the 18th and 19th centuries condemned people like William to a life of crime. Grenville exposes the harsh choices that people of William's class faced in order to survive. It was not a question of good or bad but of starvation or theft. In her chronicle of William's life in London, Grenville wants the reader to understand that the convicts who first settled modern Australia were not bad, just desperate. Australia has chaffed under its moniker as a land of convicts since its inception. Grenville's empathetic account of William's life represents an attempt to embrace Australia's convict past and give it a human face.

**The Disorientation of the Immigrant**

Through the character of Sal, Grenville explores the disorientating experience of the immigrant. While she works hard and rarely complains, Sal has a difficult time settling in to their new life in Australia. The very trees with their greyish leaves tell her she is no longer at home. Sal feels the wild continent pressing in on her from all sides, and she misses the smells and sounds of London. While William thrives in the new land, Sal finds it harder to adjust because she did not suffer the same level of humiliation as William. Sal clings on to her memories of Britain, recreating her life in London as much as possible. Grenville uses Sal to explore the persistence of British culture in Australia and the lingering concept that Britain was Home.

"It was easy to wish to belong in this house, number 31, Swan Lane. Even the name of the street was sweet. He could imagine how he would grow into himself in the warmth of such a home. it was not just the generous slab of bread, spread with good tasty dripping: it was the feeling of having a place. Swan Lane and the rooms within it were part of Sal's very being, he could see, in a way no place had ever been part of his."

p.17

The house on Swan Lane holds tremendous sway over the young William Thornhill. It represents everything that he does not possess: abundant food, warmth, love, and security. In contrast, William and his siblings are literally starving, their hunger made worse by the bitter wind that blows through the open windows. William believes that the Middleton's own the leasehold on the house, and he dreams one day of living in a place that no one can take away from him. He dedicates his life in Australia to acquiring his own Swan Lane and attaining the security he has always craved. This need for security holds more sway over William than even his love for Sal. As illustrated by his participation in the attack on the Aborigines, William is willing to kill to ensure its continued existence.

"He had a sudden dizzying understanding of the way men were ranged on top of each other, all the way from the Thornhills at to the bottom up to the King, or God, at the top, each man higher than one, lower than the other."

p.26

William is shocked to hear Mr. Middleton, who he holds in great respect, spoken to so informally by the lords at Waterman Hall. In William's world, Mr. Middleton stands at the top of the ladder; he has a stable business, a house, ample food, and an apprentice to do all the hard work. However, Mr. Middleton is merely a waterman in the eyes of those who control the trade on the Thames, a minion forced to plead his case before he can be assigned an apprentice. William yearns to be free of the shackles of his lowly position. He wants to be treated as equal. His experience as a lighterman, ferrying members of the gentility across the Thames, reinforces his feeling of bitterness. Therefore, William is fiercely attracted to the opportunity to create a new life in Australia, the freedom to become one of the men at the top. When William is assigned two convicts as indentured servants, he enjoys the feeling of no longer being on the bottom rung of society.

"There were no signs that the blacks felt that the place belonged to them. They had no fences that said this is mine. No house that said, this is our home. There were no fields or flocks that said, we have put the labour of our hands into this place."

p.93

This quotation demonstrates the abyss separating the Western understanding of ownership from the Aboriginal conception that they and the land are one. The British colonists saw no reason not to take land and resources that had not been claimed by either public or private ownership. They took the absence of permanent structures and tilled fields to mean that the Aborigines had not invested in the land. In the tradition of the Protestant work ethic, a people that did not labor on the land or develop its resources were not considered to own that land. Merely existing on a piece of land was not enough to warrant the respect of British law or traditions. The Aborigines, on the other hand, lived in harmony with their environment. Until the colonists arrived, the question of ownership of the land and its fruits was irrelevant. The land existed, and so did they. What the land provided, they ate. They felt the firmness of the land beneath their feet and knew that it belonged to them, and that they belonged to the land.

"Ain't nothing in this world just for the taking ... A man got to pay a fair price for taking. Matter of give a little, take a little."

- Thomas Blackwood

p.104

This quotation from Thomas Blackwood represents the central dilemma that William faces as he tries to ensure the long-term viability and prosperity of Thornhill's Point. Blackwood refuses to elaborate on his advice, leaving William to try and work out just how much to give and how much to take. Based on their experience with Scabby Bill, William and Sal initially believe the Aborigines on Thornhill's Point can be bought off with a bit of food. Unable to understand the Aboriginal languages and blinded by racial prejudice, the British colonists believe that the Aborigines are savages who can be bought off with trinkets. When the clan of Aborigines sets up camp at Thornhill Point, William gives them their own space. The clan and the Thornhills live side by side. However, William knows that he will have to draw the line at some point and evict the Aborigines if he will ever be able consider the land his own. William struggles with the moral dilemma of taking Blackwood's advice and learning to live with the Aborigines or following the popular tact of running them off the land, thus providing him with the wealth and security that he so craves.

"He let himself imagine it: standing on the crest of that slope, looking down over his own place. Thornhill's Point. It was a piercing hunger in his guts: to own it. To say mine, in a way he had never been able to say mine of anything at all."

p.106

When William first sees the stretch of land on the Hawkesbury river that he wants to claim as his own, he realizes that he can finally gain the security that comes with ownership of land. He and Sal lost the house on Swan Lane because Mr. Middleton did not own the house outright. William wants something that no one can take away from him. He wants the pride and social standing of a landowner, even if that land has yet to be developed. William knows that by establishing Thornhill's Point he is leaving behind his past as a lowly lighterman and taking the first step to building a solid and secure life for his family in Australia.

"He wished he could explain to her the marvel of that land, the way the sunlight fell so sweet along the grass. But she could not imagine, did not want to. He saw that her dreams were small and cautious, being of nothing grander than the London they had left. Perhaps because she had not felt the rope around her neck. That changed a man forever."

p.111

William's dream of Thornhill's Point creates the first divide in his relationship with Sal, who wants only to return to the familiar streets of London. Sal finds herself unable to settle among the foreign trees. At both the settlement in Sydney and at Thornhill's Point, she does not venture outside the compound. At Thornhill's Point, she does not enter the forest or explore the river. Grenville writes that Sal barely looks at the wild forests beyond her threshold. Sal clings to her memories and is determined to return home. Because Sal had a relatively comfortable and happy childhood, she believes that they can return to their familiar life in London. William's experiences with hunger, poverty, and near-death killed his desire to return to his childhood home.

"Sal made a place she called the yard, a patch of earth that she scraped and swept until it was smooth. Within its boundary she made something domestic: the fireplace, ringed with stones ... the water barrel filled from the rivulet, a slab of log laid on a couple of stones that did duty as a table. She cooked and washed and swept, and sat on a log to mend children's clothes or grind up the hominy, just like any other housewife. Beyond the yard she went only for a call of nature, and did not dally."

p.149

Sal finds the wild expanses of Australia intimidating, and she longs for the familiar routines of her youth. Sal's yard symbolizes the division between the wilderness and the savages (the Aborigines) and civilization. Swept clean, the yard is devoid of the nature surrounding her. Sal carves out a space for herself in which she recreates her former life. Even when William becomes a rich man, Sal insists that a high wall enclose their villa, separating her from the foreign land outside.

"... the blacks were farmers no less than the white men were. But they did not bother to build a fence to keep the animals from getting out. Instead, they created a tasty patch to lure them in. Either way, it meant meat for dinner."

p.229

After the Aborigines lure kangaroos to the area near their camp site with fresh shoots of grass, William begins to rethink his assumption that they are lazy nomads. He realizes that while his family works all day, they have little to show for it. The Aborigines gather wood and food in a relaxed, unhurried manner, and they are the ones with fresh kangaroo meat for dinner. William begins to understand that their way of life is well-suited to their needs. For the first time, he sees that there can be more than one way of structuring a society and inhabiting a land.

"They was here, Sal said. Seeing the place had made it real to her in a way it had not been before. She turned to Thornhill. Like you and me was in London. Just the exact same way."

p.287

When the Aboriginal clan finally moves on from Thornhill's Point, Sal ventures into their camp for the first time. She sees their huts and the carefully swept floor of the camp and realizes that it was a real home to them. Just because they do not wear clothes or cook familiar food does not mean that they have not created a home in the same way she creates a home for her family. While Sal had previously wished the Aborigines would go away and leave them alone on their land, she now understands that Thornhill's Point and all of New South Wales is their home. Just as she wants to return to her home in London, she knows that the Aborigines will return to their home on Thornhill's Point. This realization only reinforces her desire to leave Thornhill's Point and widens the divide between her and William.

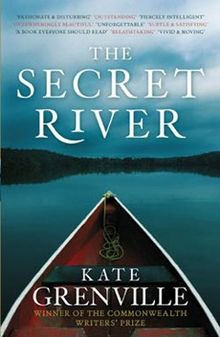
"No man had worked harder than he had done, and been rewarded for his labour ... He would have said that he had everything a man could want ... But there was an emptiness as he watched Jack's hand caressing the dirt. This was something that he did not have: a place that was part of his flesh and spirit. There was no part of the world that he would keep coming back to, the way Jack did, just to feel it under him."

p.329

William is now a rich man with 300 acres of land. The settlers' attack on the Aborigines pushed them onto the government reservations and opened the area for extensive colonization. Long Jack was injured in the attack, but he survived and periodically returns to Thornhill's Point to sit at the site of their former camp. He speaks to no one and accepts no handouts. He merely sits on the ground, visiting his land. Long Jack's presence undermines William's claim to the land and calls into doubt the Western conception of ownership. While William holds the deed to the land, Long Jack claims it as his spiritual home, as a part of himself. As a lower-class boy in London and a transplanted settler in Australia, William has never felt that sense of belonging. His land may give him wealth, but it does not provide him with the spiritual strength that Long Jack draws from the land.

**The Secret River by Kate Grenville Analysis for Year 11 English 2017**

Posted on [**February 3, 2017**](http://englishtutorlessons.com.au/secret-river-kate-grenville-analysis-year-11-english-2017/) by [**Margaret**](http://englishtutorlessons.com.au/author/admin/)



For students studying Year 11 Mainstream English in 2017, *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville will be studied under Area of Study 1, Unit 1: Reading and Creating Texts.

All pages numbers referenced in this brief analysis are taken from the 2013 edition of *The Secret River* by The Text Publishing Company (front cover shown above).

**Genre and Historical Setting of *The Secret River***

*The Secret River* is a historical fiction novel with the characters’ stories told within the larger context of the social, cultural and political surroundings of the early colonial settlement of NSW from 1806 onwards.

Each of the 3 landscapes in the text traces protagonist William Thornhill’s life from London, Sydney and Thornhill’s Place and the different kinds of conflict that arise.

The narrative is a story of colonisation, identity and the relationships between settlers, the land and the Aborigines – it’s a story of belonging, ownership and ultimately the bloodshed that results when a people is displaced.  In *The Secret River*, the land represents money and a future for the characters of English descent which contrasts sharply with its meaning for the Indigenous Australian characters.  For the Indigenous Australians the land represents their capacity to survive in the present, their future and their past.

The setting of colonial NSW becomes important to the main characters that are caught up in the historical narrative of the settlement and conflict.  It is from Part 2 ‘Sydney’ to Part 6 ‘The Secret River’ that we witness the most obvious conflict between the Indigenous Australians and the white characters.  It is in this colonial setting of NSW that we see William Thornhill’s inner conflict through the complexities and challenges he faces and the extent to which conflict is all consuming.

**Structure of *The Secret River***

Grenville adopts a traditional realist structure and framework of the narrative which is strictly chronological.  The novel is broadly divided into three main sections: those that deal with the characters’ experiences in London, Sydney and Thornhill’s Point.

**Prologue: ‘Strangers’ =** William Thornhills first encounter with Indigenous Australians

**Part 1: ‘London’ =** William and Sally’s earliest life in London

**Part 2: ‘Sydney’ =** Transportation to Sydney, colonial settlement in NSW 1806

**Part 3: ‘A Clearing in the Forest’ =** The Thornhills move from Sydney to settle Thornhills Point

**Part 4: ‘A Hundred Acres’ =** Potential for violent conflict with the Indigenous Australians becomes increasingly prominent as the settlers realise the Aborigines are not leaving the land.

**Part 5: ‘Drawing a Line’ =** The conflict between the settlers and the Indigenous Australians reaches the point where the Governor issues a proclamation that the settlers should shoot the black natives.

**Part 6: ‘The Secret River’ =** The incidents of theft and violence between settlers and Indigenous Australians climaxes in the poisoning at Darkey Creek and culminating in the massacre at Blackwood’s place.

**Epilogue” ‘Thornhill’s Place’ =** The epilogue is set 10 years after the massacre and it is pervaded by a sense of remorse by William Thornhill.

**Relationship between Conflicts of Space, Place & Identity**

The novel has important conflicts of space, place and identity and the relationship between the three which allows distinct comparisons to be made.  It is also important to note that intrinsic to these ideas is the notion of culture, especially the cross-cultural conflict that Grenville is primarily concerned with.  The division of the novel into these sections is clearly differentiated by location which is an important reminder that place is a significant factor in this text.  The structure of the novel also reminds us of another important theme – the importance of a sense of belonging.

**Language and Dialogue of *The Secret River***

Grenville’s prose is designed to complement the historical setting with her characters adopting some phrases and words from the settings both in England and Australia.  Instead of using quotation marks for dialogue, Grenville uses italics so that her characters speak within the text instead of traditional line breaks.  Some of the terminology that Grenville uses was common to the era and often reminds the reader of the cultural background of the characters.

It is an interesting point with the dialogue that Grenville chooses not to use any Aboriginal languages in *The Secret River*.  Unlike her other novel *The Lieutenant* where interactions with Aboriginal characters were given in traditional Indigenous language of the Eora people, *The Secret River* is spoken through William Thornhill in English.  Therefore the focus is on Thornhill’s point of view and readers have no real access to the understandings and perspective of the Indigenous Australians in this text.

A significant distinguishing factor between the white settlers and the Indigenous Australians is not just in the lack of dialogue for the Aboriginals but their lack of names.  William Thornhill is given his surname as his identity but the Indigenous Australians are named by their appearance “old grey beard” and “the younger one”.  The difference in ways of naming highlights the ignorance of the English characters as well as allowing them to be detached from the characters that they are harming.

**The Significance of the Title**

The title could mean symbolically a river that has held secrets or aspects of Australia’s history hidden.  It could also refer to undercurrents in personal relationships.  The actual river is the Hawkesbury north of Sydney where Broken Bay hides the entrance and is the ‘secret river’ where William Thornhill finds his land.

**Themes, Issues and Ideas in *The Secret River***

1. **Home and Belonging =** are constant themes from Thornhill’s childhood in London to his old age in NSW. The need for a home and a sense of belonging are universal in the text implying that the values of love and personal identity are universal human values.  Through his love for the land Thornhill develops his own identity as “something of a king” (p.314) – a man with a home to which he can belong and in which in turn belongs to him.
2. **Ownership =** what defines ownership is a major theme in this novel. It is actually the question of ownership that lies at the bottom of the conflict between the settlers and the Australian natives.  The English believed that by “marking” a piece of property with a crop they made it theirs.  The natives, on the other hand, had free rein of the land for decades before Australia was claimed for England.  They saw the settlers as taking over land that had been theirs for centuries.
3. **Conflict =** this theme is developed in a variety of forms as between racial groups, between individuals, within families, between beliefs and actions, between dreams/aspirations and reality and between differing philosophies.
4. **Guilt =** Despite all his success, Thornhill began to feel a sense of unforgiving guilt for his treatment of the natives. He is considered the richest man in the area, a dream desired since he was a child in poverty.  Yet his accomplishment came at a cost, for his family and himself.  He no longer spoke to Dick and his relationship with Sal grew apart.  Furthermore, Thornhill’s unresolved conflict with the natives is conveyed through his encounter with Long Jack.  He and Sal offer Jack help with food, clothes and utensils in hope of reconciliation between the two.  Jack slapped his hand on the ground and declared “This me, he said.  My place” (p.329).  In the end Jack ‘‘… never put on the britches or the jacket … the clothes lay out in all weathers decaying into the dirt” (p. 328).  The exaggeration of time interpreted through the words ‘never’ and ‘decaying’ forebodes that the time for reconciliation has yet to come for Thornhill.
5. **Clash of Cultures =** the clash of civilizations that began when Captain Cook first stepped foot on the land that become known as Australia. Throughout the novel, Grenville juxtaposes British and Aboriginal understandings of several important social concepts: personal property, clothing, hunting and farming, family relationships, and relationship to the natural environment.  The incomprehension with which each culture regards the other leads to the majority of conflicts in the novel.  The British concepts of private property and settlement, backed up by the guns and might of the Empire, eventually win the battle between the two civilizations.
6. **Aboriginal Culture =** Grenville presents Aboriginal culture as a lost idyll. Although the novel focuses on William’s journey from the gutters of London to Australian gentry, Grenville places almost equal weight on the Aborigines and their way of life.  She is careful to refute the label of savage that the settlers give to the Aborigines.  Grenville conveys the richness of their culture and their deep attachment to the land.  She contrasts the over-consumption of Western civilization with the Aborigines’ understanding of the delicate balance of nature.  Grenville suggests that the white settlers could have learned much from the Aborigines and, by extension, that the modern world with its disregard for the natural environment should open its eyes to the wisdom of native peoples.
7. **Social Hierarchy =** the theme of social hierarchy and its levels of power runs throughout the novel. Beginning with William’s first visit to Christ Church through to the placement of the stone lions on the gateposts of Thorhnhill’s Point, Grenville explores the impact of social ranking on individual development.  The humiliation that William experiences as a waterman in London marks his character for life and informs the choices he makes throughout the novel.  He craves the thrill of wielding power over another person.  For William and the other settlers (the majority of whom are convicts), their status as white men gives them permission to look down on other human beings (the Aborigines), for the first time in their lives.  Their treatment of the Aborigines is informed by their understanding of how one should treat a racial and social inferior.
8. **Self Creation =** the story of modern Australia is essentially a story of self-creation. The convicts sent from England were given the chance to receive a full pardon and start their lives over.  *The Secret River* tells the story of William Thornhill one of those first settlers who arrived in New South Wales as a convict and an outcast and who eventually carved out a place for himself in Australia’s incipient ruling class.  The structure of the novel reflects the importance of this theme.  Grenville opens the novel not with William’s youth in London but with his first night in New South Wales. She ends the novel with William sitting on the veranda of his grand house, Cobham Hall.  He has re-written the story of his life both physically and metaphorically.
9. **The British Class System =** *The Secret River* examines how the harsh British class system of the 18th and 19th centuries condemned people like William to a life of crime. Grenville exposes the harsh choices that people of William’s class faced in order to survive.  It was not a question of good or bad but of starvation or theft.  In her chronicle of William’s life in London, Grenville wants the reader to understand that the convicts who first settled modern Australia were not bad, just desperate.  Australia has chaffed under its moniker as a land of convicts since its inception.  Grenville’s empathetic account of William’s life represents an attempt to embrace Australia’s convict past and give it a human face.
10. **The Disorientation of the Immigrant =** through the character of Sal, Grenville explores the disorientating experience of the immigrant. While she works hard and rarely complains, Sal has a difficult time settling in to their new life in Australia.  The very trees with their greyish leaves tell her she is no longer at home.  Sal feels the wild continent pressing in on her from all sides, and she misses the smells and sounds of London.  While William thrives in the new land, Sal finds it harder to adjust because she did not suffer the same level of humiliation as William.  Sal clings on to her memories of Britain, recreating her life in London as much as possible.  Grenville uses Sal to explore the persistence of British culture in Australia and the lingering concept that Britain was ‘Home’.
11. **Fate vs Free Will =** at first the poor life in London disempowers Thornwill but as he gets older he sees things happen to him independently of his choices. Ending up in NSW he tends to base his behaviour more on the idea of fate.
12. **Alternate Path of Australia’s Development =** Grenville sets up two paths to the development of Australia, embodied in the characters of Smasher Sullivan and Thomas Blackwood.  Smasher Sullivan represents the path of racial, social, and physical domination of the Aborigines that the British did follow in their colonization of Australia.  Thomas Blackwood, on the other hand, represents the choice of peaceful co-existence that was originally available to the British colonists if they had not been blinded by racial prejudice and greed.  Grenville gives the reader a glimpse of the possible development of future generations of Australians through the character of Dick Thornhill.

**‘Guilt’ in Grenville’s Trilogy**

Grenville’s *The Secret River* (in 2005) was the first in a trilogy: it was followed by *The Lieutenant* (in 2008), and *Sarah Thornhill* (in 2011).  The theme of all three novels is guilt—the guilt of white Australia at its treatment of Aboriginal people.  Guilt poisons William Thornhill’s life, and that of his daughter, Sarah Thornhill.  In *The Lieutenant*, Daniel Rooke, based on the historical William Dawes, avoids guilt only by disavowing (to his face) the governor’s orders to capture and kill six of the local Cadigal people.

**The Message of *The Secret River* – It’s Relevance in Australia Today**

On first reading the text focus of *The Secret River* is its exploration of the conflict between convict William Thornhill and the local Dharug people – whose land he tries to settle on.  But on closer examination it seeks to make a deeper point, about the relationship of Australians to the past – in this case to the Aboriginal people who were here so long before us.  The climactic event of *The Secret River*, a massacre of Aborigines on the Hawkesbury River that, in the book’s chronology, is placed at some point around 1814, is intended to place readers in the reality of a situation that we know happened in many places in Australia’s early history.

Actress Ningali Lawford-Wolf explained that “This country has a black history and how they came to be here was through massacres”.  Director Neil Armfield of The Sydney Theatre Company said that the tale of racial divides are, in many ways, still present today.  “That’s the contradictory reality that we’re still living, that actually all First Nation people are dealing with – that there are two different notions of possession” Mr Armfield said.  Trevor Jamieson, a renowned Aboriginal actor, explained there are vivid similarities between past issues and those bubbling today.  Adapting the text for the stage as a play, writer Andrew Bovell, said “I don’t think we can understand who we are as a people, unless we understand who we were”.

**Comparisons with *The Secret River* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness***

It seems obvious that Grenville drew heavily on Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* when she developed her protagonist William Thornhill in *The Secret River*.  In *Heart of Darkness*, protagonist Marlow acts as an impartial observer of the effects of the ivory trade in Africa.  His journey into the heart of Africa reflects his symbolic discover of his own self and human nature.  In effect Marlow sees the ‘heart of darkness’ (greed and evil) found in all men and suppresses this urge but others like Kurtz succumb to them.

When Marlow discovers Kurtz he has become so ruthless and greedy that even the other managers are shocked.  He refers to the ivory as his own and sets himself up as a primitive god to the natives.  He has written a seventeen-page document on the suppression of savage customs, to be disseminated in Europe, but his supposed desire to “civilize” the natives is strikingly contradicted by his postscript, “Exterminate all the brutes!”  Marlow is careful to tell his listeners that there was something wrong with Kurtz, some flaw in his character that made him go insane in the isolation of the Inner Station.  But the obvious implication of Marlow’s story is that the humanitarian ideals and sentiments justifying imperialism are empty, and are merely rationalizations for exploitation and extortion.

Similarly, in *The Secret River*, William Thornhill battles with his own conscience when facing challenges to decide on the ‘right’ course of action.  When faced with the poisoning of an entire camp of Aboriginal people at Darkey Creek culminating in the massacre of the Aborigines at Blackwood’s place, William weighs up his own safety and Sal’s happiness against his dislike for Smasher and his methods.

At the end of the novel William still feels regret at his involvement in the massacre so that readers gain the feeling that there is no satisfactory and lasting resolution to the conflict.  In this last section of the novel titled ‘Thornhill’s Place’ it is bitterly ironic as no amount of clearing, building, fencing, planting and killing of Aborigines will ever see Thornhill at peace with his surroundings.  Sitting on the bench at Cobham Hall where he could overlook all his wealth Thornhill felt that “… should have been the reward.  He could not understand why it did not feel like triumph” (p.334).

**Both Texts Question “Who owns what?”**

Both authors, Grenville and Conrad, highlight the controversy between the imperialistic attitudes of the English towards the natives in terms of possession of land with the same question “Who owns what?”  In *Heart of Darkness* British colonists saw no reason not to take land and resources in Africa that had not been claimed by either public or private ownership.  In *The Secret River* the white settlers were quite clear on the concept of “who owned what” in NSW: “There were no signs that the blacks felt the place belonged to them.  They had no fences that said *this is mine*.  No house that said, *this is our home*.  There were no fields or flocks that said, *we have put the labour of our hands into this place*” (p.93).  It was only Blackwood, a man of compromise who warned Thornhill against ‘taking up’ the land he obviously coveted.  Living in apparent harmony with the Aborigines, Blackwood advised Thornhill from the outset “When you take a little, bear in mind you got to give a little” (p.169).