CHARACTER PROFILES

Major Characters

Nigel

Nigel is the little Indigenous boy rescued by the taxidermist in the first scene, however we do not learn that his name is Nigel until the fifth scene.

In the fifth scene is it revealed that Nigel has been raised by the taxidermist, but he is also aware that he has aboriginal parents.

In the fifteenth scene Nigel has been separated from his regiment and joins five other soldiers in their dugout. He is accepted by the men and he points out the irony of one of the men being called Darky.

Nigel, who has been given the nickname Snowy, ends up captured by German soldiers in the nineteenth scene.

We see Nigel in the Prisoner of War (POW) camp in scene twenty-nine. He has been placed in a camp for non-white prisoners. He says this is the first time anyone’s mentioned the colour of his skin since he joined the army. While in the camp, an anthropological professor seeks out Nigel so he can record his measurements. Nigel obliges and also sees it as an opportunity to help out the Indian prisoners for whom it is against their faith to eat pork.

In 1929 Nigel wrote a letter expressing his concern over the lack of outrage at the massacre of Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory last year. However, it is the opinion of the newspaper editor that is more resounding, the editor focuses on the fact that Nigel, while being Indigenous, is educated and articulate and therefore “...must be doing all right for himself.” (Pg. 89).

Three years after writing the letter to the newspaper Nigel is working as an advertising sandwich board – his life is not going well and he is clearly drinking. At the end of the scene Nigel apologises to his dad. He is clearly embarrassed.

At the end of the play Nigel is in a hospital for the insane. There will be a service tomorrow, but he does not want to attend because he does not feel he belongs.
Harry

We first meet Harry in the second scene of the play, where he and a group of friends are given an “earful” from a retired schoolmaster about the risk of their country being overrun by foreigners if they do not join the fight. Harry points out the irony in the old man’s rant.

After the rallying march Harry and his friends learn about how the war started from Harry’s Mate. In this scene Harry is again a bit of a larrikin and after his mate has explained the situation in Europe he states that, “Yeah, no-one knows what it’s about.” (Pg. 18).

In the twelfth scene Harry is on a ship in the Indian Ocean on his way over to Europe. He goes to sit at a table to eat and is greeted by an aggressive private who does not see Harry as equal. When the private goes to put Harry “in his place” the other soldiers step in defend Harry, beating up the aggressive private. Harry is left feeling confused.

Harry articulates that he hopes life is different when he returns home and that the other white soldiers will have a drink with him.

When begging on the street for money in 1949, Harry is recognised by Stan, a man who he served with. Stan helps Harry out by giving him some money to get back on his feet. This supports Harry’s hope when he returned home that the soldiers would still be mates.

Ern

Ern is one of Harry’s mates from the second scene of the play, however we do not learn his name for another two scenes. We do not learn much about him in this scene either.

In the sixth scene of the play Ern is explaining to Norm and Bob how army pay is paid straight to the men instead of going to the protector first.

In the seventh scene Ern is trying to enlist. At the first recruiting hall he is rejected for a “Deficient Physique...Reason: Of Strongly Aboriginal Appearance.” (Pg. 23). He tries again and at a different recruiting hall and this time he is permitted to join. He passes the physical and is given a uniform, which doesn’t fit.

In the ninth scene Ern, Bob and Norm notice that they are being treated differently now that they are wearing the Australian Army uniform.

Ern ends up talking to an Australian who was from the same town, Perce Hourigan. Perce’s parents owned the Antrim Arms and his father had kicked his father out of the pub a few times.
Ern is starting to get frustrated at the lack of conclusions being reached in the war – they gain some territory and then they lose some territory. This frustration is evident again when he is in hospital with Bob and Norm. He hopes that things will be different when they get home, otherwise their sacrifices would have been for nothing.

In 1939 Ern is struggling; his arm has been amputated, his remaining arm has the shakes and he is suffering from nightmares.

Ern gives his medals to an RSL member so they will be looked after, as no-one is his family is interested and they are likely to get lost.

In 1956 Ern is reflecting on his life and he realises that trying to forget the war only made things more difficult for him and that it was not until he attended the ANZAC Day march and caught up with his comrades that he was able to start living again.

Bob

Bob is one of Harry’s mates from the second scene of the play, however we do not learn his name for another two scenes. We do not learn much about him in this scene either.

In the sixth scene Bob and Norm are complaining about how inconsistently their pay is received from the protector.

In the seventh scene Bob is trying to enlist. At the first recruiting hall he is rejected for “No White Parentage.” (Pg. 23). At the second recruiting hall he is accepted and provides a false name. The uniform he is given doesn’t fit.

In the ninth scene, Bob, Ern and Norm notice they are being treated differently now that they are wearing the Australian Army uniform.

Bob has ended up injured and has a bandage around his eyes. He is worried he will be forgotten about when he returns home because he will be unable to work.
Norm

Norm is one of Harry’s mates from the second scene of the play, however we do not learn his name for another two scenes. We do not learn much about him in this scene either.

In the sixth scene Norm and Bob are complaining about how inconsistently their pay is received from the protector.

In the seventh scene Norm is trying to enlist to join the army. He is rejected for having “Flat feet (Aboriginal)” (Pg. 23). At the second recruiting hall he is accepted and enlists using a false name. He receives his uniform, which doesn’t fit.

In the ninth scene Norm, Ern and Bob notice they are being treated differently now that they are wearing the Australian Army uniform.

Norm is hospitalised in scene thirty-one. While the conversation around him is serious, he adds a comedic element because he is unable to hear.

In 1939 Norm is struggling. He learns of Ern’s nightmares. He reflects that while he was in the army he was equal to everyone else, but that everything changed once he returned home. “They painted by colour back on the day I got off that boat.” (Pg. 79) demonstrates how Norm feels about things once he’d returned home.

Archie

We first meet Archie when he is writing a letter to his Aunty May when he is waiting to cross to France. In this letter we learn that he is a Christian and that there are many others in the army as well. His letter is innocent and reveals his desire to return home safe and soon.

Archie’s second letter to Aunty May is not as positive as his first. He is clearly experiencing shock as he describes how a boy accidentally shot himself in the face.

In Archie’s third letter we start to see that Archie has not recovered from the shock of seeing a man shoot himself in the face. This letter is brief and he is questioning a piece of gospel.

Archie kills an enemy soldier in a hand to hand fight. It is a brutal fight but eventually he stabs the man and watches him slowly die.

Archie is asked to shake Mick’s hand before they disembark. The handshake is a symbol of the equality Indigenous soldiers generally experienced during the war and their hope that it will lead to a change in relations at home.
On ANZAC Day in 1932 Archie is refused entry into a pub. It is not until the RSL Secretary instructs the pub owner that any man wearing medals and rosemary is to be permitted entry to the pub that the day is about recognising the service.

In 1920 Archie is trying to improve the working conditions for the workers on a cattle station. The overseer is not interested in making changes and is annoyed that Archie would even ask for them. Archie isn’t even supported by the other workers; they think that he’s changed.

Laurie

We first meet Laurie when he is on a boat landing in the Dardanelles. He points out the irony at his arriving in a foreign country without being invited. Laurie prays before he gets out of the boat.

In the fourteenth scene, Laurie is on a reconnaissance mission with two other white soldiers. They believe he has extra skills and senses that make him able to see in the dark and track the enemy better. Laurie is surprised they think this, as he grew up in an inner suburb of Sydney. In this scene we see Laurie’s sense of humour.

Laurie’s faith becomes apparent again when he is in Palestine. He recites bible passages with a British Captain. He is in awe of being in a sacred place and at the thought of walking the same places that the Lord has walked.

When Laurie returns home he is barely recognisable, he has lost so much weight. However, his appearance isn’t the only thing that has changed, when he speaks his mate doesn’t understand some of the words he uses – this indicates that perhaps it’s the soldiers who have changed rather than the people at home.

In 1937 Laurie is working in a church, he is collecting the hymn books after a church service. When he is recognised by a man as someone who served in the war he tells the man that he prefers not to remember that part of the world and instead focuses on a better one.
Mick

We first meet Mick in the eighteenth scene. He is in the army and sees four West Indian ammunition haulers walking past. The haulers insult Mick, calling him an Australian nigger and accusing him of not washing, so he punches them all out.

Mick kills five German soldiers after one stops walking to pick something up. He goes into shock, saying that he comes from a long line of warriors.

When Mick arrives home from the war he is with Archie. Before they disembark the ship he asks Archie to shake his hand and to promise that things won’t go back to how they were before.

In 1922 Mick speaks out at a public meeting from the Soldier Settlement Commission about how Indigenous returned servicemen are still fighting for equality even though they were equal while they served. He is clearly frustrated and disappointed.

Bertie

Bertie is only fifteen and wants his mother to lie about his date of birth so he can enlist in the army. We first meet Bertie in the twentieth scene when he is trying to convince his mother and grandfather that things have changed and that if he goes to war he will be equal to the white soldiers.

When Bertie encounters his first dead Indigenous soldier he doesn’t know what to do. He is worried that the young man’s spirit will not be able to make its way home surrounded by foreign plants and animals. This highlights the importance of the land in Indigenous Australian culture.

Bertie is starting to freak out about being in the war. He is in serious shock and is not coping with the situation.

When Bertie is writing a letter to his mum we see that he is still struggling with the war. He wants her to write to the protector’s office and tell them about his real age.

When Bertie is discharged from the army, because his real date of birth has been discovered, he is unable to speak. He is clearly shocked and relieved. When he finally returns home he is still unable to speak. He does not talk to his mum, instead he stands almost at attention holding the lock of Frank’s hair. The war has clearly changed Bertie.

Eight years after the end of World War I Bertie still is not communicating. He still stands to attention and does not speak. He also still holds onto Frank’s hair.
Tommy

An Indigenous soldier who is with Bertie when he sees his first dead Indigenous soldier. He cuts the lock of the dead soldier’s (Frank) hair and gives it to Bertie to look after in an attempt to get the young man’s spirit to follow him home.

Tommy ends up buried alive in a pocket of air after a large explosion. When he is rescued the men don’t realise at first that his skin is dark and they continue trying to scrape him down.

Tommy is buried in 1935. His service is not attended by anyone and the minister reveals that very little is known about the man. It was not until they recovered his possessions that they learned that he had served in World War I and that he had been buried alive for three days – perhaps explaining why he was no longer able to sleep within walls.

Minor Characters

Settler, Boundary Rider, Stockman

These men are all from the first scene of the play. They are responsible for the attack that has just occurred on an Indigenous camp. They have found a young boy, who they call a picaninny, and they are debating how to get rid of him.

Taxidermist

The white man who rescues the little Indigenous boy who was found after his mother had been shot.

The taxidermist raises the little boy, who has been named Nigel, as his own. Nigel calls the taxidermist Father.

Retired Schoolmaster

Decides to “give an earful” to a group of young Indigenous men about joining up to fight in the war. He fails to see the irony in his rant about how the boys will feel, “...if swathes of Mahommenan Turks or creeping armies of sausage-breathed Huns over-ran our country, imposing their foreign ways, interfering with our women.” (Pg. 16)
One of Harry’s mates

Contributes two lines to the scene, but demonstrates how little the young men know about the war that is happening on the other side of the world.

Harry’s mate appears again two scenes later where he reveals he knows a lot about the war in Europe. He explains to the boys the tensions that have been growing in Europe for the last forty years, since the end of the war between France and Prussia.

Recruiting Sergeant (first recruiting hall, scene seven)

Does not believe Ern is serious about enlisting to join the army and then passes him over to a recruiting corporal to make the final decision.

Recruiting Corporal (first recruiting hall, scene seven)

Handballed Ern when he is trying to enlist. When he realises Ern is Aboriginal he tells him he cannot enlist because he is not a citizen. He rejects Ern, “Reason: Of Strong Aboriginal Appearance.” (Pg. 23).

Recruiting Sergeant (second recruiting hall, scene seven)

Isn’t too sure what to do when Ern and his mates arrive to enlist, “I’m sorry son, I have no idea what to do with this. With you…” (Pg. 23). He then consults with others about what to do.

Clerk (second recruiting hall, scene seven)

The Clerk is the main reason the boys are allowed to enlist. The Clerk believes that, “If they’re willing to get up off their backsides and show a bit of pluck then they’re white enough for me.” (Pg. 24).

Aggressive Private

The aggressive private is on a ship in the Indian Ocean on his way over to Europe. When Harry tries to sit at the same table as him he becomes aggressive and tells Harry that he is not equal. Believing he has the support of the other soldiers the aggressive private goes to attack Harry, but the other soldiers do not agree with his opinion and beat him up instead.

First White Soldier

Believes Laurie has special skills when it comes to tracking the enemy and that is why he gets sent on so many reconnaissance missions.
Older Soldier (Wal Jeffries, ‘Judge’)

The older soldier is the first to “ignore” the fact that Nigel is Aboriginal and introduces the rest of the men. He is also willing to make a joke of the situation when he tells Nigel that one of the men is called Darky.

Voice in the dark (Perce Hourigan)

Talking to Ern about the song Sandy Maranoa when they find out they grew up in the same town. Perce’s parents owned the Antrim Arms. Perce tells Ern that if they get home he will be allowed to drink in the front bar.

Trinidadian

Calls Mick an Australian nigger.

Bertie’s mum

Agrees to write a letter to say that Bertie was born in 1898. She is reluctant to write the letter but already knows that if she doesn’t her son will find another way to enlist in the army. Before writing the letter she reminds Bertie about how he feels every year when the Narrandera show comes to town and he isn’t allowed in – she explains that his being in the army will be just the same and that he still won’t fit in.

When Bertie returns home she is excited to see her son, but she does not understand that he is suffering from shock and that the war has changed her boy.

Eight years after Bertie returns home his mum understands that her son will never return from the war, that he has been changed forever.

Bertie’s grandad

Doesn’t understand why Bertie wants to fight for the country, when they’re been fighting for country for years. He also does not know what Australia is – this highlights not only the newness of the nation, but also that is was not a concept that everyone was aware of or believed in.

Draws a metaphor between how the bush no longer regenerates after a bush fire and Bertie being unable to return to his normal self after the war.

First White Soldier

Tells Harry that he’s as good as any white man.

A Ghost

The ghost’s story highlights the connection Indigenous people have to the land and how his spirit will roam the foreign country forever. While the ghost is a minor character, his message is significant.
Indian Prisoner of War

Does not understand that Nigel is not British.

Third Indian

Understands that while the Indian soldiers will only be British while they are under British rule, Nigel will always be an Australian.

Discharging Officer

Tells Bertie that they have received a letter revealing his real date of birth and that he will be transported home. He also tells Bertie that he has been “snatched from the jaws of death.” (Pg. 63).

Bloke with a glass of wine

The man with a glass of wine in scene thirty-eight is a returned soldier from World War I. Despite the horrors he experienced he is grateful for the war: it made him someone. The war allowed him to identify as Indigenous and as Australian.

Laurie’s mate

When Laurie returns home his mate doesn’t understand what he means when he says he’s been “wretched”.

Cellarman

Refuses to allow Archie to drink in the pub on ANZAC Day because he isn’t allowed in the front bar any other day of the year.

RSL Secretary

Convinces the cellarmen and pub owner to allow all returned servicemen to drink in the front bar, regardless of their skin colour.

Public Servant

Speaking at a public meeting about the resettlement of land for returned servicemen. He is clearly there to deliver a message and does not understand the concerns of the locals or know the answers to their questions.
Manager (overseer)

The overseer on a cattle station. Is not interested in discussing the improvements Archie wants to see made to working conditions.

Old Hand

One of the workers at the cattle station. Does not support Archie’s fight for equality. He believes that Archie has changed and sees himself as being better than the others.

Minister

Delivers Tommy’s burial service.

Stan

Served alongside Harry in the war. Helps Harry out financially in 1949 when he is clearly in need. Has also obviously helped Harry before as well when he helped him find some work. His final sentence, “We that are left, grow old” (Pg. 86) an extract from The Ode, reflects that even those who survive the war still face challenges as they grow old.

Churchgoer

Recognised Laurie as a soldier who served in Palestine. He understands when Laurie tells the man he chooses not to think about that world and instead thinks about a better one.

Editor

Assumes that because Nigel can write he “must be doing all right for himself.” (Pg. 89).

Relationships between Characters

The relationships between the characters in a play do not develop the same way as they do in a novel – in a play you rely on the information that is presented to you and there is little opportunity for the backstory to be told.

In Black Diggers the play is structured as a series of separate events, while they may be linked in idea they are not linked in content or character, and therefore it is difficult to analyse the relationships between the characters. In individual scenes we can see the relationships that exist between the characters, but the characters in one scene may not appear together again in the play. Therefore, the relationships between the characters have been categorised and briefly listed, however this list does not contain every relationship.
Mateship
Nigel is accepted by a group of men, when he cannot find his regiment. He is accepted when they give him the nickname ‘Snowy’.

Harry, Ern, Norm and Bob are mates from before the war and are still friends after it.

Archie and Mick become mates while they are serving in the war.

Bertie and Tommy become mates while they are serving in the war. They both experience a horrific incident where they see an Indigenous soldier killed and try to work out a way to bring his spirit back to Australia.

Unequal relationships
The aggressive private believes that he is above Harry, because Harry is Indigenous.

Harry and Stan’s relationship is unequal because of the circumstances that the men are in. Harry has not been able to benefit from being a returned serviceman as much as Stan has. Harry is embarrassed when he meets Stan while begging for money. Stan gives Harry some money to help him get back on his feet, but this is his attempt at equalising their relationship.

Ern’s relationship with Perce Hourigan (voice in the dark), prior to the war was unequal because Ern would not be allowed to drink in Perce’s parents’ pub. However, Perce tells Ern that he’ll be welcome after the war, moving their relationship to being more equal.

Norm identifies how when he was wearing the Australian Army uniform he was treated the same as every other soldier, but that once he returns home it’s like his colour has been painted back on. This demonstrates that it doesn’t matter what happened in the war, the inequality that existed before the war would return at its conclusion.

Archie is disowned by his mates from before the war, because they think he’s changed.

Archie is not permitted to enter the pub on ANZAC Day until the RSL Secretary intervenes and convinces the cellarmen and publican to allow Indigenous returned servicemen the right to drink.

Laurie’s relationships with his mates has changed after the war, they don’t understand some of the things he is saying and think that he’s changed.

In the eyes of the West Indian ammunition haulers Mick is inferior to them.
Mick is frustrated at the fact that Indigenous soldiers are not entitled to the same things as white returned servicemen at the conclusion of the war.

**Family**

Nigel and the taxidermist have a father son relationship. The taxidermist is Nigel’s “adoptive” father.

Ern’s family do not seem to be interested in his military history. He does not trust them to look after his service medals and thinks they will end up losing them.

Throughout the play Archie writes a series of letters to his Aunty May. We do not learn much about their relationship, but Archie’s letters seem like those that a son would send to his mother.

Bertie convinces his mother to write a letter lying about his age. She knows that if she doesn’t he will only find another way to enlist and at least this way there is a chance he’ll be looked after. When Bertie returns from the war his mother understands that she has actually lost her son to the adult world.
THEMES AND ISSUES

Inequality

Inequality is quite easy to identify in the play *Black Diggers* as the Indigenous characters are clearly treated differently to others, in most situations. Inequality was one of the reasons why the Indigenous men enlisted in the Australian Army in the first place, as they believed that if they fought for the country their own treatment would have to improve at the conclusion of the war.

In the majority of cases, the Indigenous soldiers were able to overcome the inequality they had experienced their entire lives, as soon as they put on the Australian Army uniform. Ern, Bob and Norm comment as such in the ninth scene, “1915. Queen Street.” There were still some instances of inequality while the Indigenous soldiers were serving, however they were not as common place as they had been before the war.

Once the soldiers returned home, however, the equality experienced during the war was quickly lost. Indigenous soldiers were not granted the same benefits as other returned servicemen, such as land benefits, and struggled to return to their old lives.

A desire for change

For many Indigenous men their main motivation for enlisting in the Australian Army was their desire for change. They strongly believed that by fighting for the new nation, Australia, they would be able to improve their position in society and gain fairer treatment for themselves and other Indigenous people. Their desire for change was so strong that they were willing to risk their lives to achieve it.

The Indigenous soldiers genuinely believed that their desire for change would be met at the conclusion of the war, but unfortunately their desire remained and often became a point of difference between them and those who didn’t serve. Archie, for example, continues to fight for fairer working conditions on the cattle station but those who he works with do not support his desire and would prefer he just did as he was told.

Once the soldiers returned home from war their desire for change only grew stronger: this was when they expected to see the benefits of the commitment they’d made to their country. However, their expectations were not met and this made life more challenging for them. For example, Tommy no longer fit in to society as he was expected to, but no one knew why that was. Instead of helping him, Tommy was left to his own devices, where he became an alcoholic and slept under a water tank.