Section 3: Comparison

IDEAS, ISSUES & THEMES

Trauma

Key quotes

"... bits of your humble narrator were splattered over that damp soil and specks of me dribbled back through the wood into the river." (Ghost, Black Diggers, p.48)

"... the war was on one hand the worst thing on earth ... But on the other hand, it made me, and it made us, for better or for worse." (Bloke with a Glass of Wine, Black Diggers, p.67)

"I don't want to remember. Memory hurts. Like crying." (The Longest Memory, p.2)

"Death has always been there." (The Longest Memory, p.137)

Both texts suggest that trauma can change a person and have a lasting impact. A variety of traumas is represented across both texts, including:

- loss (Whitechapel's loss of his son, and Lydia and Chapel's loss of the freedom to be together in The Longest Memory; Bertie's loss of innocence, the soldiers' loss of mates in war, and Indigenous soldiers' loss of respect on their return home in Black Diggers)
- physical pain and trauma (the fatal whipping of Chapel in The Longest Memory, affecting not only Chapel but also those who love him; the physical injuries sustained during battle in Black Diggers)
- violation (the rape of Cook in The Longest Memory; the massacre of Indigenous communities in Black Diggers)
- death (see further discussion below).

Each of these examples of trauma results in lasting distress for the individuals directly involved, as well as for those around them and, in some cases, subsequent generations. As The Virginian states, when white masters rape African slave women, only 'sad if not disastrous outcomes' can result (p.110). The specific example referred to by the newspaper editorial is the rape of Cook, which led to Chapel's conception and had long-reaching traumatic consequences, including Sanders Junior unknowingly killing his own half-brother. However, the statement could equally well apply to the other traumatic events in these texts, such as the opening massacre in Black Diggers or the physical battles that leave surviving soldiers like Ern, Bob and Norm maimed for life. By showing how broadly and deeply events such as rape and war affect individuals and communities, the texts show that the 'disastrous outcomes' of trauma shape many lives and are extremely difficult to redress.

Death

Death is ever-present in both texts, whether it is of those who are close to the central characters (such as the deaths of soldiers in World War I or the death of Cook), or of the central characters themselves (Chapel, Whitechapel, Tommy). Death may end an individual's trauma and suffering, but it can dramatically increase suffering for those left behind. Whitechapel is devastated by the loss of his beloved wife, Cook, soon followed by the death of his son. He no longer knows how to function in his world with this level of sorrow and pain, and wants to 'forget as hard as I can' (p.2). In turn, his death brings regret and sorrow to Sanders Junior.

In Black Diggers, death is, perhaps surprisingly, less prominent. Bertie is one of the few characters to be traumatised by the deaths of those around him. There are deaths in the trenches, such as Frank's and the Austrian soldier's, but these are minor characters and the audience is not positioned to feel a strong connection with them. Rather, their deaths are almost anonymous – like that of the Unknown Soldier (p.95) – and serve as a reminder of the indiscriminate violence of war.

Survival

In fact, in Black Diggers it is the survivors of war who suffer most. Each of the central characters struggles after the war, beset by physical and psychological injuries that will likely never heal. The trauma of living in Black Diggers is as inescapable and painful as the experience of death is in The Longest Memory. An example is Archie's story about Ollie Thomas, who after a suicide attempt is 'still alive ... he hasn't got a face but he's still alive Aunty May' (p.52),
with the implication that being alive and so disfigured is far more difficult to comprehend and accept than if he had succeeded in killing himself.

Healing
Although both texts include many traumatic events, there are hints that healing is sometimes possible, and that care and compassion can mitigate the effects of trauma. For example, in Black Diggers Nigel survives the massacre of his community thanks to the intervention of the Taxidermist (p.14), while the RSL Secretary overrides the racist attitudes of the Cellerman by asserting that Archie and ‘anyone else with medals and rosemary’ are ‘more than welcome’ in the pub (p.72). In The Longest Memory, the words of Sanders Junior near the end of the novel show a level of respect and affection for Whitechapel that he had previously been unable to express.

Both Wright and D’Aguilar suggest that healing and progress are possible, even when traumatic experiences are common. However, in their texts these positive incidents and behaviours are minor and rare elements of the plots, suggesting that trauma is often more powerful than any human capacity to overcome it.

Loyalty, obedience and authority
Key quotes

‘He lost a son in deference to authority.’ (The Longest Memory, p.77)
‘Whitechapel... loyal beyond the requisition of duty.’
(The Longest Memory, p.78)

‘Thank God for the uniform and the chance to serve.’
(Blow with a Glass of Wine, Black Diggers, p.67)
‘I always thought that fighting for our King and country would make me a naturalised British subject and a man with freedom but they place me under the act and forced me onto a settlement like a dog.’ (First Letter, Black Diggers, p.83)

In The Longest Memory, one of the clearest representations of the idea of loyalty is the central character, Whitechapel. He is respected for his long service and obedience to the Whitechapel plantation; he is commended posthumously for knowing his ‘place’ in the plantation (p.132); and he believes that ‘a slave could live a good, long life if he worked hard’ (p.13). While he is esteemed for this quality, D’Aguilar’s representation of such obedience to authority is not simple. For Whitechapel, it is his very loyalty that leads to his son’s death, as he feels compelled to tell Mr Whitechapel of Chapel’s escape, and requests punishment in order to dampen his son’s spirit of resistance. Similarly, Sanders Junior kills his own half-brother as a result of following the rules absolutely. Through these events, the text suggests that blind loyalty and obedience may not be ideal qualities in all circumstances; but that the best course of action will be informed by knowledge, understanding and compassion.

Black Diggers, similarly, questions unthinking obedience and conformity. A very significant context for this play is the military, in which loyalty and obedience to authority are fundamental to success and survival. Nevertheless, the play implicitly questions the value of unwavering loyalty. The young men, for instance, enlist and go to war without fully understanding the reasons for the war or what is at stake. While many cope with this uncertainty and lack of agency in the trenches, following orders as they must, they experience acceptance by their non-Indigenous peers for the first time. When they return home they resist submitting to various authorities who fail to recognise their military contributions: the Station Master, the newspaper journalists, the Soldier Settlement Commission. In this way, the audience is positioned to share the soldiers’ sense of injustice, and the authority figures are subtly critiqued.

Race, equality and discrimination
Key quotes

‘When they look at you, they cannot see the Australian.’ (Indian, Black Diggers, p.56)

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

‘They may be inferior but they’re people like us.’
(The Longest Memory, p.68)

‘They are, quite literally, not like us. They do not feel what we feel.’
(The Longest Memory, p.106)
Both texts present multiple perspectives on race and racial equality. The overarching theme in each is that discrimination limits the ability of individuals to achieve in all areas of life – financially, materially, socially and personally. The central ideas in each text reflect this concern. Wright’s motivation for his script was to present the untold stories of Indigenous men who fought for Australia in World War I but whose contributions and sacrifices were often unrecognised on their return, and who continued to be marginalised and denied basic rights. D’Aguilar, on the other hand, writes about the experiences of African Americans who were enslaved by white settlers in the United States. Both texts contain many white characters who express a belief that individuals from other races are inherently inferior; and both texts strongly condemn such unjust views and treatment.

In addition, both texts present white characters who resist such practices, and who question the status quo. These tend to be characters with whom we are encouraged to empathise (such as Lydia in *The Longest Memory* and Stan in *Black Diggers*). Through these characters, as well as the central black characters such as Chapel and Nigel, the texts demonstrate that racism and discrimination are worth fighting against and that to complacently accept inequality is morally wrong.

*Black Diggers* portrays a number of young Indigenous soldiers who are discriminated against, particularly on their return from a war where most of them were accepted by their fellow soldiers. One after another, the characters suffer as a result of inequality and discrimination, despite the kind intentions of men such as Stan and the RSL Secretary. A scene showing this very clearly is the conversation between Harry and Stan (p.86): the vast gap between their experiences is conveyed by every aspect of the exchange. To emphasise their differences, Wright utilises theatrical techniques such as costume (Harry is a ‘dero’ while Stan wears a suit), stage directions (Harry is ‘ashamed’ and Stan ‘embarrassed’, and their awkward dialogue is littered with pauses) and allusion (Stan’s final line is ‘we that are left, grow old’). Together, these techniques present a scene in which two men – once friends and equals in the trenches – now encapsulate postwar racial inequality.

In *The Longest Memory*, racial inequality and discrimination are equally central to the plot. One of the most positive relationships in the play (even though we know from the beginning it is doomed) is between Chapel and Lydia, who both hope for a world less dominated by difference. Mr Whitechapel, too, feels there is something morally wrong with the practice of slavery and

‘there has to be another way to organize the economy’ (p.74). Unable to fight against discrimination despite feeling that human rights are contravened by slavery, Mr Whitechapel experiences an internal tension: trying to fit in with his peers and the wider society while staying true to his own beliefs and moral convictions.

In both texts, the setting is an important tool for communicating ideas about racial discrimination and equality. In *The Longest Memory*, for example, although the Whitechapel plantation is in the firmly segregationist South, the temporal setting broadens the perspective. At this time (the early 1800s) the North was opposed to slavery, and some in the South were beginning to question it, too. This provides a context for Lydia’s beliefs and her willingness to stand up for them, as she does in her letters to The Virginian. In *Black Diggers*, the military setting enables Wright to show that although Australian society in the early twentieth century did not regard Indigenous men as the equals of white men, within the army they were generally treated as equals. This highlights the hypocrisy of Australian society in accepting Indigenous service but refusing to improve the rights of Indigenous people.

**Youth, naivety and ageing**

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<td>‘You’re a boy ... You’ve barely seen the sun rise. Your muscles fail after an hour’s work. And you reckon ... Suddenly you’ll be a man ...?’</td>
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<td>(Mum, <em>Black Diggers</em>, p.38)</td>
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<td>‘You know, when you’re young and you can’t get a handle on the big things, things that are bigger than you?’ (Old Soldier, <em>Black Diggers</em>, p.91)</td>
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<td>‘My memory is longer than time. I want to forget.’</td>
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<td>(<em>The Longest Memory</em>, p.26)</td>
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<td>‘It is the young, after all, who hold dominion over the future.’</td>
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<td>(<em>The Longest Memory</em>, p.117)</td>
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*The Virginian* states that there are ‘certain advantages that go with being young, namely an unmitigated idealism’ (p.117). Several characters in both texts illustrate this idea, including Lydia and Chapel in *The Longest Memory*, and many of the young soldiers in *Black Diggers* – particularly Bertie. Both texts chart journeys of young people faced with the disillusionment that accompanies growing up.
For Lydia, the experience of becoming 'a woman' (p.92) is largely enforced by her family, who change their behaviour towards her and demand that she change hers. Although she welcomes the changes that allow her relationship with Chapel to develop on new emotional levels, she largely resents having to grow up and change her worldview and behaviour in accordance with the expectations of her society. She has no desire to be visited by the stream of suitors her parents approve, and would prefer to remain in the relative safety of her family home. Yet, at the same time, she yearns to escape from this restrictive world in which she is not free to be with her love. This contradictory experience of transition from youth to adulthood is a common one, and is echoed in Chapel's growth too, though his is represented more by his intellectual development. For him, too, there is freedom in youthful idealism, conveyed strongly through his poetry in Chapter 5, although in the end his idealism causes his downfall when he is punished for escaping.

In *Black Diggers* the disillusionment that accompanies growing up is powerfully illustrated by Mum's empty showgrounds analogy, which Bertie later appropriates to communicate his desperation for a discharge. Naive and idealistic, young Bertie believes in a future his family can't even conceive, and feels that in the army he can contribute to society. But his mother is more cautious and argues that going to war will end the joys of his youth. In her analogy, he will return to a life as empty as the showgrounds after the Show has packed up: 'that's what this war will be like for you. There's no fancy land at the end' (p.40).

In addition to exploring the challenges of the transition from youth to adulthood, both texts also include characters who have reached later stages in their lives, illustrating that the transitions of age continue to have high personal costs. Memories of the past become more painful, loved ones die and age precludes the pursuits and pleasures of youth. The most obvious example is Whitechapel, perceived by his son to be 'the oldest man in the world' (*The Longest Memory*, p.56): he has outlived his first master, has become frightened of his grandchildren, misses his wife and son and looks forward to the day when he dies — when he will be no more and glad because of it (p.12). Age and the memories of younger days bring him only sorrow, hinting at an underlying theme in the novel: that youth is the prime of life.

*Black Diggers* echoes this idea too, in that the soldiers are energetic, idealistic, strong and healthy young men. Yet in their later years they are lonely, poor, wounded and confused about the society into which they cannot seem to fit.

Interestingly, while these events, characters and relationships illustrate the pain, loss and compromise that come with transitions from youth to maturity and then old age, in both texts the structure complicates this seemingly natural progression. The *chronology* in each narrative moves backwards as well as forwards, in both large and small distances and in irregular patterns. This structural technique suggests that while growing up may bring disillusionment and loss, it also brings the benefits of being able to reflect on and learn from the past, as Lydia shows in her letters to *The Virginian*.

**Religion**

*Key quotes*

> "I have heard about these places all my life. Sacred places." (Laurie,
> *Black Diggers*, p.53)

> "You can't mix God with the slave business. God is for us, not them." (The *Longest Memory*, p.73)

Religion is a significant element of the societies depicted by *Black Diggers* and *The Longest Memory*, but neither text makes an explicit judgement about the role of religion in individuals' lives. Rather, both texts present religion as an incidental yet important part of characters' lives, offering the possibility of solace and comfort without being integral to their behaviour or relationships. More broadly, religion belongs to the text's wider social and cultural contexts that help to shape identities and beliefs.

In *Black Diggers* the references to religion tend to be isolated and specific to certain characters:
- A hymn is sung to baby Nigel at the end of the first scene, welcoming him to life with his non-Indigenous father.
- Archie makes a point of mentioning, in his first brief letter home, that he prays regularly and has found a Methodist community (p.28).
In the first scene of combat, Laurie prays (Job 10:22 and Psalms 23:3); later he is overwhelmed to find himself in the Holy Land (p.53). Finally, he seeks solace in the church as an usher at Sunday service, avoiding his past (p.87).

Bertie, lacking traditional knowledge about what to do when an Indigenous man dies far from home, turns to a familiar Bible verse (the Lord's Prayer) as the only way he knows to commemorate a death (p.45).

In *The Longest Memory*, religious beliefs inform the characters' views in more significant and powerful ways. Mr Whitechapel expresses confidence that 'God should guide us in our dealings with slaves as he guides us in everything else' (p.35) – religion is a part of his family's everyday life and Mr Whitechapel can safely assume that his audience (in this case Sanders Junior) will share his religious values. Even Sanders Senior – whose behaviour the text does not present as admirable – indicates his religious beliefs through his language. His very first sentence begins, 'My wife, God bless her soul' (p.36), and when he teaches his son about slaves he refers to a religious hierarchy of human value: 'we are different from slaves in intelligence and human standing before God' (p.39).

Lydia, who in other ways questions the existing values of her society, accepts and endorses Christian beliefs. Her secret reading life and relationship with Chapel is bound by religion; as Chapel puts it, she 'called The Bible ... And said swear to God' (p.59). The language of religion comes naturally to her and Christianity provides a habitual way of understanding the world (p.88).

The editorials from *The Virginian* also suggest that Christianity is the accepted frame of reference for moral and ethical considerations, especially for its slave-owning readers. The first begins with a matter-of-fact statement that violence against slaves is not 'incompatible with Christianity' (p.104). Its discussion of Christianity (p.111) is not about whether to follow the religion, but rather about how to evaluate and even legitimise the practice and ideology of slavery, while adhering to Christian principles.

These examples show religion as an unchallenged presence in the characters' lives. *Black Diggers* does not offer any contrasting views – Archie does ask a question about the interpretation of a passage (p.62) but he is not challenging the Bible or the Church, merely seeking understanding. On the other hand, *The Longest Memory* offers several subtle questionings of the role of Christianity.

Specifically, Mr Whitechapel stimulates a discussion in the Gentleman's Club about the extent to which Christian teachings might endorse or undermine the men's treatment of slaves, asking them 'what about goodwill to all men?' (p.73). Gently, in the same way as he feels unsure about whether the Club is where he belongs, he questions the value of a religion that men draw on in support of the inhumane treatment of other humans. For Mr Whitechapel, the deliberately cruel treatment of slaves requires some owners to 'hide [their] beliefs' (p.71), yet these beliefs are also his, and they offer him little comfort following Chapel's death.

In this way, without undermining the role of religion in the central characters' lives, D'Aguier encourages the reader not to take religion at face value but to reflect on the ways in which it can be deployed by the dominant groups of a society in the defence of self-interest.

**Belonging**

*Key quotes*

'They remind themselves you are one of them, however far you may have strayed.' (*The Longest Memory*, p.67)

'You walk through the front doors as if you are home ... Dust between those boards is yours as well as your father's ... Home, the boards chatter, welcome home ...' (*The Longest Memory*, p.67)

'... maybe in those hideous moments in hell on earth, maybe on parade, maybe with mates, I don't know – you realise, "I belong".'

(Bloke with a Glass of Wine, *Black Diggers*, p.67)

'But this is our land. It was a mission and then our community.'

(Farmer, *Black Diggers*, p.73)

Characters in these texts frequently struggle to find a sense of belonging within their communities and environments. The struggle to belong sometimes occurs because individuals do not feel that their own values and beliefs accord with those widely held in the society around them. At other times, it results from external pressures being placed on individuals, requiring them to adopt certain beliefs or attitudes before they can be accepted by a community.

In many cases, these two factors combine to create a state of tension within individuals. In *The Longest Memory*, for example, Lydia and Chapel
become desperate to travel to the North, where their relationship may be accepted by society in a way that is impossible in the South. After learning to read and write, and falling in love with Lydia, Chapel is no longer content to accept the restrictions of being a slave; emotionally and intellectually, he no longer feels he belongs to his community. Once his mother dies, he desires only to flee.

Mr Whitechapel negotiates much internal conflict about his place among the Virginian plantation owners. While he feels his heritage and status situate him in this society, his beliefs about slaves’ essential humanity and the need to treat them with respect are at odds with the beliefs of those around him, causing him much distress.

In *Black Diggers*, the Indigenous men’s desire for acceptance by society is not fulfilled, even after they have enlisted and fought for their country. Archie struggles with the fact that he is not accepted on the station in the same way as he was accepted in the war. Harry and Tommy both end up homeless, unable to match society’s expectations of Indigenous men; they seek a social status, free from discrimination and prejudice, that approximates what they experienced in the war. Em suffers nightmares, unable to settle back into life in Australia without the past haunting him: ‘nothing has felt as good’ since he returned from the war (p.79).

These struggles to fit in are not restricted, in either text, to major characters, nor to one particular race or gender, suggesting that both authors consider belonging to be a central human issue and challenge.