

Power and race in the secret river and rabbit-proof fence



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“ The problem of half-castes is simply not going to go away”

“ The bodies lying like so much fallen timber”

Both the novel ‘ The Secret River’ written by Kate Grenville and the film ‘ Rabbit-Proof Fence’ directed by Phillip Noyce showcase themes of social and racial prejudice and powerlessness in a colonial Australia setting. The two highlighted quotes are indicative of the hierarchy prominent within the society, in which the caucasian race maintains control over the Aboriginal people, constantly utilising zoomorphism in their own dialect to dehumanise them and build apathetic natures that assist in their destruction of the aboriginal communities through violent means. These prominent themes are not only deeply interconnected but serve as the primary source of conflict in both texts; groups such as the Aboriginal people are left powerless as a direct consequence of the institutionalised racial prejudice induced by the caucasian settlers. In the film, it is the powerful Mr. Neville, ironically titled ‘ Chief Protector of The Aboriginals’ that admits “ The Problem of half-castes is simply not going to go away”, embodying the popular attitude at the time, the utter disrespect towards those born of mixed races, blatantly disregarding them as a problem and being primarily concerned with his reputation as opposed to fulfilling his supposed purpose. In ‘ The Secret River’, William Thornhill and his fellow settlers constantly display a blatant disrespect towards the Aboriginal Australians, erupting in a war between the two groups in a desperate battle for power and possession of land.

‘ The Secret River’ utilises the first-person perspective of William Thornhill, who, like the boats that make his livelihood, serve as a vessel to explore the

various social and power dynamics in Colonial Australia, especially in regards to race. Throughout the novel, the language is used to reflect the way in which Aboriginal people are viewed from caucasian members of the community, often described using adjectives applicable to nature and animals such as “ lying like so much fallen timber” and “ like a butterfly on a leaf”. The narrator mirrors the perspective of the European settlers, they see the Aboriginals as subhuman, below them, and this is further reinforced by their behaviour and prejudice that contaminates the majority of the population’s ideals. Smasher Sullivan, for example, is an extreme representation of this racism, indulging and taking pride in sociopathic actions, including brutal murder, due to pure spite of this race. This racism is reflected in ‘ The Rabbit-Proof Fence’, albeit on a smaller scale, but again, is alluded to by the institutional treatment of aboriginal people and both subtle and overt racism. Again, those of the caucasian race treat the Aboriginal girls as subhuman, the titular fence, whilst being used to prevent the movement of animals, also oppresses the girls and forbids them from escaping, showing that, similarly to the novel, are seen as no more than animals, a point emphasised again by their being kept in a cage. Furthermore, the racism is shown to exist in all facets of life, even when a white woman donates clothes to the struggling girls, she remains distant and refuses to touch them, carelessly and heartlessly throwing objects at them. This shot is presented to the audience through a low-shot, a common technique used by the director to represent the power of certain characters, the majority of which are white male characters.

In 'Rabbit-Proof Fence' directed by Phillip Noyce, camera angles and techniques are employed in a variety of methods to demonstrate power and powerlessness. In the beginning sequences of the film, wide angles exemplify the wild and innately free nature of the Australian bush, powerful in natural terms, whilst drawing thematic parallels to the use of low-angle shots, drawing attention to another form of power, one channeled into one person. The first white characters we see are viewed through this perspective, we, with the other characters, look up at the men as they sit atop their horses. Hence, the low-angle shot becomes a symbolic motif, representing power and constantly reoccurs throughout the course of the film. The power of the white man is embodied through the aforementioned Mr. Neville, who is consistently and almost exclusively viewed from this low-angle. He exerts this power over the powerless, demonstrated through their orderly structuring of the Moore River Settlement, which draws a stark comparison to the unruly bush that the girls travel deeper into, away from the control and oppression of others. The imagery of nature and theme of power are evident both in the film and the novel. The groups of Aboriginal people and European settlers seem to constantly be at war, with the settlers living under a pretence of safety as a consequence of their assumed advancements in technology. They believe they hold the power, however, this idea is constantly challenged in the Aboriginal peoples constant displays of force, such as surrounding the Thornhill's house in spears and the ever-present "outrages and depredations". The Aboriginal people are powerful in the bush through their connection to the land whilst outsiders are not; The European soldiers for example, are the victims of the bush whilst the

Aboriginals are able to manipulate it to their advantage.

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Both of the quotes are indicative of the prominent themes that permeate each text equally. Racial and social hierarchy and prejudice, power, powerlessness, they're all connected and represented in both the novel and the film. They are both shown using parallel techniques, with the only noticeable difference one may notice to be the perspective of which they are told and time between the events of the narrative and the event that caused them to transpire, ie. the invasion of Australia.