

Remembering babylon



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1. Significance of the two prefatory quotes:

Malouf's choice in prefatory quotes at the beginning of *Remembering Babylon* are significant in revealing the way in which he wishes to establish the tone of the novel and allow for the reader to reach a place of greater psychological understanding so that they are able to make meaning of the text.

In the first, "Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not", taken from a poem by William Blake, Malouf is putting to the reader the question of whether Gemmy has reached a place where he can find redemption (Jerusalem) or entered a world of brutality and cruelty (Babylon). By putting forward this question, Malouf is inducing the readers to begin a more emotionally and ethically deep state while reading the novel, so that the ideas he is presenting are better understood and so that Malouf is able to take his readers to a more spiritually revealing level of consciousness.

In *Remembering Babylon* Gemmy represents the unknown when he is firstly found by the Aboriginals, "What was it? A... creature of a kind they had never seen before...? A spirit...?", and then again when he crosses the fence, the physical division between the Settler's and the Indigenous people, "... a human that... had been changed into a bird.... and now, neither one thing nor the other was hopping and flapping towards them out of a world over there...".

Readers can see that in both cases, Gemmy is a source of mystery and confusion; however it is the Aboriginal people who accept Gemmy and are willing to teach Gemmy their way of life, in contrast to his harsh and wary

toleration by those in white society. This society is representative of Blake's 'Babylon', a place of discord, confusion, enslavement and despair, whereas the Aboriginal tribe who takes Gemmy in holds a very distinct sense of tolerance, peace and love (Jerusalem).

This sense of the Indigenous society being representative of Jerusalem is reinforced when, at the end of the novel, Gemmy seeks redemption with the Aboriginals after experiencing the brutality of the white society's Babylon, and returns to them in body, spirit and soul. It is therefore evident that this quote holds a significant amount of sway over the psychological level that the reader is on when beginning the novel, and therefore determines their interpretation of the ideas and meanings that Malouf conveys later in the novel.

The second prefatory quote, " Strange shapes and void afflict the soul.... etc" is a poem written by John Clare which is used by Malouf as a comparison to the plot and main ideas presented in the novel in an attempt to prepare the reader mentally so that they are able to fully comprehend the text and take the appropriate meanings from it. In the poem, Clare presents a world in chaos with the " world on fire" where " smoke seas roll". The first line of the poem, " Strange shapes and void afflict the soul" can be linked to the plot of Remembering Babylon where Gemmy and the Aboriginal people are considered to be the " strange shapes" who " afflict the soul" of the Settlers who fear them and the air of the unknown that accompany them.

This could also be reversed, as the Indigenous people may also have viewed the white settler's as " strange shapes", and this is supported by their

reaction to their discovery of Gemmy when they assume he is " a spirit... come back from the dead". " Shadow to the eye", puts forward some of the key ideas in the novel, as it may be representative of the Aboriginals, who the settler's sometimes think of as " shadows" because of their fluid movements. The poem goes on to use apocalyptic type imagery which describes Australia's scorched landscape, " a world on fire", and puts forward the idea that this place is a world of chaos and is morally devoid and barren.

Clare uses other imagery to this effect, such as " Shall make sun dark and give no day", which Malouf is able to use as a way of conveying the Absolute Dark, and the idea that there is a dark " thunder cloud" between the land and " Heaven" and the sun, in order to convey to the reader that there is no sunlight in this place, there is no happiness and there is no good; this is a place that God does not see. This quote therefore is also extremely significant in preparing the reader for the journey that they are embarking on whilst reading the novel and allowing them to be psychologically ready to understand Malouf's ideas concerning the Settler's and their treatment of the Aboriginal people, as well as Gemmy, as a result of their fear of that which is unknown to them.

2. Chapter titles in relation to theme

Chapter 15 - Shards of my nightmares

Chapter 16 - 'Object' of my affection

Chapter 17 - Playground rules

Chapter 18 - Hope for a future all too far away

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Chapter 19 - Becoming clean

Chapter 20 - Will you remember me?

3. " Gemmy is both symbol and character"

Gemmy is a symbol in that he is a physical manifestation of everything that the white Settler's fear to become, whilst he is a character who the reader is able to watch evolve emotionally and spiritually throughout the text in order to reach an understanding of his own identity. As a symbol Gemmy is regarded as an object of fear and curiosity. He is proof, as the settler's see it, and a justification of their fears of the Aboriginal people, because of Gemmy's loss of his white heritage, of his civilisation, of " it". Gemmy is also a beacon of equality in that if he is able to cross over between the two different societies, then, in essence, they surely cannot be that different from each other. Gemmy is representative of everything the settler's fear to become and as a result he is rejected and alienated in their society. As a character, Malouf uses Gemmy as a portal into both worlds; that of the Aboriginals and the world of the settlers, and because of this, readers are able to gain a deeper understanding of the novel.

4. Psychological profile of two significant characters:

Janet McIvor is a character in Remembering Babylon whose position in society is constrained by her gender and who challenges society through her defiance of gender stereotypes. Her oppression manifests itself as a number of epiphanies which prove to be a catalyst for her mental and spiritual development throughout the novel. "... when the hard crust lifted, to

discover... another skin, lustrous pearl... might have belonged to some other creature altogether... if all the rough skin of her present self crushed and came off, what would be revealed, shining in sunlight, was this finer being that had somehow been covered up in her." Janet's longing to break free of the restraints that society has placed upon her becomes clear through these epiphanies, where the 'creature' underneath (her true self) is far more extraordinary and exquisite than her outside shell - the mask that she is forced to wear. This shows that Janet is oppressed by the narrow minded and Eurocentric views of the settlers. Through her epiphanies, Janet becomes closer to a higher power and therefore is able to see the world in clearer light and with more understanding, making her less prone to judgemental behaviour and prejudice over race.

In the first moments that the reader is introduced to the character of Lachlan Beattie he is running wild with his imagination, " Cold air burned his nostrils, snowsqueaked underfoot; the gin he carried... hung heavy on his arm." This establishes psychological indications of the characteristics that he may possess as he develops. He shows arrogance as a key part of his personality and a need to be highly thought of by the adults and his peers, " For a moment back there, seeing himself as these grown-ups might see him, a mere kid... he felt a wave of anxiety at how shaky his power might be". This need for power manifests itself in reality at the end of the novel when the reader sees that Lachlan has become a somewhat powerful politician. .

5. Significance of Mr Frazer's notebook

In Remembering Babylon, Mr Frazer's notebook plays a crucial part in allowing Mr Frazer to act as Malouf's mouthpiece in conveying the idea of hybridity between the natives and the settlers, and in enabling readers to understand the purpose of the novel. The notebook allows for the expression of a post colonial attitude towards colonisation, where Malouf presents the concept that if the settlers were to stop exploiting the land and trying to make it habitable, they would see that it already was and could instead integrate themselves into the native society, " We have been wrong to see that... only by... sowing with the seeds we have brought with us, and by importing sheep, cattle, rabbits... can it be made habitable.

It is habitable already." With their " English eyes", the first settlers only saw that they needed to shape Australia into a new England. Malouf is suggesting that colonisation fails if you attempt to make a country (England) on top of another country (Australia) and that they should stop looking for what they are expecting to see, and open their eyes to the wonders that Australia has to offer.

It is this attitude, he suggests, that prevents the settlers from adapting to the native way of life; " We must rub our eyes and look again, clear our minds of what we are looking for to see what is there." Through this, Malouf is conveying that the settlers are pompous and arrogant to think they could simply impose themselves upon the land, when they should have adapted to it instead.

There is also a significant amount of implied criticism in the notebook where Mr Frazer states, " The children of this land were made for it", allowing the

reader to Malouf is trying to say that the Aboriginal people belong, whereas the settlers do not. This line of thought provokes the reader to form an opinion over who is entitled to the land. Later, Mr Frazer goes to Governor in order to appeal to him to acknowledge these ideas, however his intentions are completely misunderstood by both the Governor and the Premier, " Had he made himself so unclear?", and this is an attempt to convey to the reader that the settlers of the time may have had some very genuinely post colonial views and ideas.

However these were prevented from becoming a reality by the British government and the bureaucracy of the time, because of their complete self-involvement and lack of regard for anything that does not affect them and their progress. This idea is put forward to support the ignorance of the English settlers. Mr Frazer's notebook, therefore, plays a very significant role in conveying several key themes and ideas in the novel which in turn allow for the reader to gain a deeper and more complete understanding of the novel by forming their own opinions of these ideas.

6. Language is a recurring motif

Remembering Babylon is based almost completely around the concept that language is identity - without it we cannot truly belong. Malouf puts forward the concept that everyone is defined by their language and, by extension, their associated culture. This idea is expressed in the text through three distinctly different forms; the written word, the power of language and the wordless communication that occurs on a different, more spiritual, level of consciousness.

In the text there are several different examples of written communication, the most prominent of which are Gemmy's life story and Mr. Frazer's letter to the Governor. These examples are used by Malouf as a warning that the written word should not be considered as reliable or accurate as other forms of communication. In the case of Gemmy's life story, George Abbot alters Gemmy's words as he is writing them down, "... he had introduced into what he had set down a phrase or two of his own... this scrap of mistruth", signifying to the audience that just because a piece of 'history' is written down does not necessarily mean that it is the truth, and that perspective and translation may also have an effect on the final product.

Mr. Frazer's letter to the Governor was in relation to his ideas of how the settler's should work to adapt to the land instead of imposing themselves on it, however these ideas are completely misunderstood by the Governor and the Premier, who end up offering Gemmy a job in response, " Had he made himself so unclear?" Readers are able to understand that that the written language is discouraged by Malouf as a vehicle for miscommunication, shown through Abbot falsifying Gemmy's story and the misunderstanding with relation to Mr. Frazer's letter. The manipulation of Gemmy's story fits the Eurocentric agenda as it parallels the theft by the settlers of Aboriginal land in the novel.

Malouf suggests that the power of language lies in its ability to determine how we make meaning from what we see and experience, that we are defined by it and will be rejected from any society that does not support and accept that language. This is true for Gemmy, as he is never fully accepted by the settlers because of his inability to speak the language. Through this, <https://assignbuster.com/remembering-babylon/>

Malouf suggests that language is culturally restrictive and that it is so powerful that it has the ability to alienate those who cannot or will not adopt the language. This draws a link between language in the text and its ability to control identity and purpose.

The wordless, spiritual communication represented by the epiphanies experienced by some characters such as Jock and Janet are able to strengthen their individuality and allows for, Janet especially, the development of their own identities that are not moulded by the expectations of society.

Through this, characters are able to develop a new level of understanding, where they are able to rise above the prejudice of the petty and those who have a weak sense of identity and who use the settlers' fear of the Aboriginals and Gemmy as a way to connect with them for a sense of inclusion and purpose. This is demonstrated in the text by Andy McKillop, "He was determined not to be ignored. He had a savage need to convince people of things; but had first, he knew... to convince them about himself." The power of wordless, spiritual communication therefore plays a significant role in conveying the link between language and identity through epiphany.

7. Symbolism

Malouf uses symbolism frequently in Remembering Babylon, and to great effect. His use of symbolism is significant in showing the ways in which the settlers attempt to create and maintain a sense of control and psychological superiority over the Aboriginal people, as well as to show how many of the characters in the novel are able to achieve a clearer understanding of the

world through an epiphany, bringing them to a new level of spiritual and emotional clarity. Examples of this can be seen through the symbolism of the stick that Lachlan uses as a gun when he first encounters Gemmy, the bees and the fence.

Remembering Babylon is very much centred around the theme of racial superiority. Readers are able to gain an understanding from the novel that this superiority does not truly exist, but that the settlers are determined to hold on to any power they have over the Aboriginals in an effort to maintain control. This is demonstrated through the stick that Lachlan uses as a gun when he first encounters Gemmy and the symbolic nature of what the stick represents. Lachlan imagines the stick to be a gun, and therefore an emblem of power and authority.

This action is representative of how the settlers 'imagine' their power over the Aboriginals in the same way that Lachlan pretends that the stick(equality) is a gun(power and superiority), whereas in reality the settlers are equal to the aboriginals, in the same way that the 'gun' is simply a stick, which holds no commanding power. By imagining that the stick is a gun, Malouf is suggesting that the power and superiority that the settlers(Lachlan) have over the natives(Gemmy) is simply a psychological manifestation of the Eurocentric views that they have been brought up to believe are a reality. In essence, this one action is symbolic of how the settlers' superiority over the Aboriginals exists only in their minds and has no realistic basis.

This is done in an attempt to maintain order, as Lachlan imagines the stick as a gun, he is able to maintain control of the situation. Readers understand

that Gemmy is aware that the stick is not really a gun, though it may still be used as a weapon, " It had taken him only a moment of course to see that it was just a stick, but that did not mean it was harmless", much like how the psychological beliefs of the settlers could have violent and brutal consequences in the physical realm. This is symbolic of the way that the Aboriginal's are aware that there is no real divide between themselves and the settlers as human beings; however they cooperate with the settlers in order to allow them the idea of control, as Gemmy does with Lachlan, which in turn allows for the Aboriginals to continue their lives in a peaceful manner. The stick therefore is a significant and powerful symbol of the settlers' false power, and this symbolism allows for the interpretation by readers of the theme.

The bees in Remembering Babylon are emblematic of a perfect civilization, where all parts of the society work together as a collective for the good of the collective. The nature of the bees can be linked to the nature of the Aboriginal people, who have a system of hunter gatherers who work together for the good of the tribe. This relationship can also be shown in that the bees will not harm a human unless they feel threatened in some way, much like the Indigenous people would not attack the settlers unless they are provoked.

However, as can be seen in the text, Mrs. Hutchence, despite relaying this information to Janet, did not entirely believe it herself, " She saw then... that though her own faith had been absolute, Mrs. Hutchence's had not." This is also figurative of the settler's view of the Aboriginals; that they may attack at any moment, without warning and without provocation, and that, despite

the McIvors' insistence that Gemmy is not a threat to the community, many of the settlers are still reluctant to believe them and regard Gemmy as a threat.

In the novel, the fence is representative of the dividing line between the Absolute Dark and civilization. This line is clear and definitive, clearly a physical depiction of how the settlers believe that there is a clear and distinct hierarchy between them and the Aboriginals, and this is founded by their belief in white supremacy. The fence is the dividing line between the barbaric and unknown darkness of the Aboriginals and the bright, civilized and safe world of the settlers. It provides a psychological boundary as well as a physical one that separates the Aboriginals from the settlers and allows them the pretence of safety and superiority over them. This physical boundary highlights the need for the settlers to extend this idea of superiority into the physical world through the fence in order to reinforce their unwavering belief that there are no similarities between themselves and the Indigenous people.

8. Literary Techniques used to convey values and themes

Malouf uses a number of literary techniques throughout Remembering Babylon that aid in the passage of values and themes to the reader. Several of these techniques are more effective in conveying values and themes; these include Malouf's use of imagery, point of view and style.

Remembering Babylon has an omniscient narrative, and therefore the reader is able to look through certain characters' perspectives. They are able to see Sir George's grandeur expectations or Lachlan's youthful view of the world,

as in each chapter the narration is filtered through a particular character's perspective. Malouf may have elected to write his novel in the third person as a way to provide different views on certain situations in order to help the reader gain a more complete grasp of the significance of particular events.

Third person narrative makes it easier for the reader to understand the transformation of each character in the novel and the profound ways in which Gemmy has influenced their lives, whether it be to bring out the best in them as human beings, or the worst in them through their fear of change and the unknown.

Malouf's style is unique, and one of the most potent literary techniques is his restrained writing. This style of writing uses the power of suggestion, which allows the reader to form their own opinions on certain events and ideas in the novel. The most obvious example of this may be Mr. Frazer's visit to the Governor's house where he misunderstands the situation unfolding around him with the Governor's wife and the Premier.

As a result of Mr. Frazer's misinterpretation of the situation, the audience is not given a clear understanding of the event; however this allows for reader interpretation and is forced to form their own ideas about what has occurred. Another such example of this style of writing is evident in chapter two of the text, when Gemmy is washed up onto the shore. Malouf has no way of knowing what the Aboriginal people would have been thinking, as he is not an Aboriginal himself and has never experienced their way of life, however Malouf uses this technique to suggest many things about their thoughts of Gemmy.

Imagery is a very prominent technique used by Malouf in Remembering Babylon and can be seen when Gemmy is visited in the settlement by the two Aboriginals, "... as he recognised one and then another feature of it, the site of old happenings... felt the energy flow back into him, and saw... how weak he had grown in these last months... the land up there was his mother... it belonged to him as he did to it...".

This use of imagery demonstrates how Gemmy views the land the way the Aboriginals do - as his 'mother', a living organism to be taken care of and nurtured. Imagery is used by Malouf as a way of showing the audience the differences in perspective of each of the characters in that not all of them would view the land the way that Gemmy does, and this therefore leads into the theme of how the settlers try to change the land. Gemmy does not understand this, as changing the land to him would be like trying to change his mother. In this way, Malouf is showing the audience the effect that a different upbringing can have on our perception of the world around us.

9. Malouf's sympathies

Malouf conveys sympathy towards both the Aboriginals and the Settler's throughout Remembering Babylon. It is obvious that his favour lies with the Indigenous people, as can be seen in chapter two, where Malouf reveals the good nature of the Aboriginals through their partial acceptance of Gemmy after he is washed up on the shore. The tribe who took him in treated Gemmy more like a human being than any of the settlers did throughout the entirety of the novel.

However, it can also be seen that Malouf has sympathy for the settlers as well, and this is shown through the characterisation of the McIvors. This is done as, if Malouf were to generalise all of the settlers and to provide the reader with evidence only to support their negative nature, audiences would assume that the settlers were 'evil' and incapable of human emotions such as kindness and compassion. However, Malouf realises that the settlers are human beings with real emotions and that, while they have been wildly misled by their forefathers about their superiority over other cultures, are not truly evil.

Obviously, the vast majority of the settlers stick to their stubborn refusal to accept Gemmy and all that he represents, which is done sometimes out of fear, and sometimes out of malice and contempt, however, some, such as the McIvors and Mrs. Hutchence, who despite being trapped in a society with very prominent Eurocentric views, are able to grow and rise above this, though they still have their reservations. If Malouf did not do this and instead was to generalise all the settlers, presenting them to the reader as the 'evil' of the story to be hated without question or complaint, he would in essence be conveying the same attitude that the settlers have towards the Aboriginals, by assuming that they are all to be hated and feared, and that there could not possibly be any remnants of goodness in them.