

The Secret River Study Guide

The Secret River by Kate Grenville

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Plot Summary

Sent to Australia because he tried to steal from his boss in London, William Thornhill became one of the first settlers in the Australian wilderness in the novel "The Secret River" by Kate Grenville. The novel describes the conflict between the earliest settlers of the country and the natives of Australia as they clashed for ownership of the land. Themes include ownership, racism, social class and hope.

Thornhill grew up poor but dreamed of a better future. He thought he was on his way to this better future when Mr. Middleton took him on as an apprentice as a waterman. He completed his apprenticeship successfully and married Sarah "Sal" Middleton, his childhood sweetheart. His father-in-law gave Thornhill his own boat as a wedding gift. Things were going well for the new couple until both Mr. and Mrs. Middleton got sick and died. Their care used up all of the money the two had in savings. Their property, including the boat Mr. Middleton had given Thornhill, had to be sold to pay their remaining debts. As a result Thornhill had to go back to working for others and was unable to make a living for his family. He was caught stealing in an attempt to feed his family and was sentenced to death by hanging.

Thornhill received a pardon for his crime and was allowed to go to Australia to serve his sentence. After one year of service with his wife as an overseer, Thornhill earned his ticket of leave allowing him to work for whoever he wanted. He eventually partnered up with Thomas Blackwood an old friend from London who transported crops and supplies to and from the settlers along the Hawkesbury River. Thornhill fell in love with a piece of property he saw along the river during his first trip. He convinced Sal they could earn enough money to return to England if they claimed a plot of land and farmed it.

Once they were on the land in the wilderness, the Thornhills were regularly threatened by the natives who once had freely roamed the land. Although other settlers abused and even killed the natives, Thornhill just wanted to be left alone. Even though he wasn't purposefully cruel to the natives, they came and stole most of his corn one day. After he and his workers ran them off, they returned that night and set fire to what was left.

When he was asked to assist a group of men going to ambush a camp of natives Thornhill agreed to go along and help. He knew his life would never be the same after he stooped to the level where he would help kill other human beings. After the natives were cleared from the area Thornhill and his family became successful on their land in Australia. They became the gentry they'd always dreamed of being in London. Even with his prosperity, Thornhill still used his telescope to scan the woods looking for the natives that once called that land their home.



Strangers — Part One: London p. 40

Summary

In the section “Strangers,” William Thornhill walked outside the hut he had been assigned in the prison colony of New South Wales. His wife and two babies were sleeping inside. He felt tears coming to his eyes because he knew his old way of life was over. As he looked into the darkness a naked black man with a spear emerged from it. He yelled at the man, telling him to be off. The man parroted his words back to him. Thornhill stood his ground and the man disappeared.

Part One opens with a description of Thornhill’s childhood. He grew up in a tiny crowded room. He was always hungry. Every member of the family had stolen at one time or another so that the family could eat. His first memory was of the snarling lions in front of Christ Church that frightened him. His sister, Lizzie, was more of a mother to Thornhill than his real mother. He was always cold. He and his younger brother had to share a blanket. His mother and sisters sewed shrouds for a funeral home while his father worked where ever he could. At five years old, Thornhill began going with his father to collect dog poop to sell. He remembered watching his mother steal books.

He grew up feeling a rage that was almost a friend to him. The other boys knew not to mess with him, but he did have friends. One friend was Dan Oldfield who shared the roast chestnuts he stole. Collarbone, who liked Lizzie, was another friend. Lizzie’s friend, Sal, became like a sister to Thornhill. Her father was a waterman. Thornhill liked to watch Sal’s face. He liked that he could be himself around her.

Thornhill’s mother became sick. Her dreams were haunted by the lions on the gateposts at Christ Church. After she died Thornhill took a clot of dirt to the church and threw it at one of the lions. He felt satisfaction every time he saw a bit of dirt that never washed out of one of the lion’s nostrils. Thornhill’s Pa died shortly after. Because his other brothers had left, leadership of the family fell to Thornhill. He began doing any jobs he could pick up but especially enjoyed working at the docks. He learned to steal but not get caught during his first experience when some men broke open a barrel of brown sugar. The men were not caught, but Thornhill was whipped.

When winter came and the river froze over there was no work for Thornhill. Mr. Middleton saved the family when he took Thornhill on as an apprentice. After working seven years as an apprentice he would be a freeman. Mr. Middleton was a good boss. Thornhill learned the tricks of the trade as well as the ways in which the gentry would try to trick him. One incident in particular made an impact. A man accompanying a woman wearing green silk slippers made a point to tell the lady not to expose her legs to Thornhill. She seemed to be making just as big an effort to entice Thornhill by showing her leg.



Thornhill and Sal spent Sundays together. She taught him how to write his name. He soon realized he loved her. They would go to the yard of Christ Church to have time alone together among the tombstones. The two were married the same day that Thornhill was freed from his apprenticeship. Mr. Middleton gave him a boat as a wedding gift. When they were alone together Sal would tell Thornhill stories about Cobham Hall where her mother had worked as a servant. They both made up stories of what their futures would be like. He began hauling loads of coal and timber, and got his brother Rob to help him. After they'd been married only a year William Thornhill Jr., called Willie, was born.

Analysis

The first thing that the reader should note about this story is that it is based on historical fact even though the characters and the lives they lived were created by the author. During the time period in which Thornhill lived, overflow prisoners from England were shipped to Australia to serve their prison sentences. Because Australia was believed to be largely uninhabited and was surrounded by oceans, it was believed to be the ideal place to dump wrongdoers.

The opening section of the novel "Strangers" foreshadows that Thornhill and his family will wind up in Australia, and that they will be sent there because he had been arrested for a crime. The tension that is described when Thornhill came face-to-face with an aborigine gives the reader an idea about the major conflict that will develop in the course of the story. Notice at this point Thornhill missed his way of life in London. He was sad because he believed that life was over.

Social class is a major theme in this novel. The theme is addressed right away when the author described the Middleton family as being a step above Thornhill and his family on the social ladder. Thornhill saw a different side of social standing when he went with Mr. Middleton to become his apprentice. When he heard those men call Mr. Middleton by his first name he realized that the men were a step above Mr. Middleton on the social ladder. "He had a sudden dizzying understanding of the way men were ranged on top of each other, all the way from the Thornhills at the bottom up to the King, or God, at the top, each man higher than one, lower than another" (p. 26). Note in this quote that Thornhill believed that he and his family were at the bottom as far as social class went. He saw the highest social class as being a tie between the King and God.

Notice that while Thornhill was noticing the differences in social standing he also noticed that even those who had more money were not necessarily happier or more honest than the poorer people. For instance, even though Sal's family had heat in their home with glass in the windows and a constant supply of food, the family was sad. There was a feeling of sadness in the house because they'd had only one child who had lived. Also notice that once Thornhill began working for the gentry, people who had more money than he, he realized they were just as likely to try to cheat him as poor people. One man promised to pay Thornhill during a return trip but never showed back up for the return trip.



Another theme that is opened in this section of the novel is that of ownership. There are two instances that Thornhill witnessed the benefit of ownership. One of these was the feeling he got when he saw Sal in her home. He felt her home was part of her being, a feeling that he had never experienced. Thornhill hoped he would experience this feeling of ownership, having a place he could feel was part of himself. A side of ownership that is not as positive is the gentleman's attitude that he owned the lady who wore the green silk slippers. Thornhill felt the man did not love his lady, only that he felt that he possessed her.

Hope is another theme that is introduced in this section of the novel. Regardless of the poverty and want of his childhood, Thornhill believed he could work hard and make a better life for himself. At the close of this section of the novel Thornhill seemed to be on his way to the new life he hoped for himself and his new family. The reader knows, however, that something happened to land Thornhill in prison in Australia.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss social class as it has been presented in the novel thus far.

Discussion Question 2

How does the opening section of the novel, "Strangers," color the way the reader interprets the information given in the first part of this novel?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the way London is portrayed in this section of the novel.

Vocabulary

miasmas, stagnant, vertiginous, gullet, victualler, trestle, urchins, consolation, hovel, swarfings, hogsheads, abomination, gimlet, lee, vouch, impertinently, tyrant, gentry, dallied, cozened, prentice, plaintive, enigmatic, plummy, frivolity, inept, furbelow, punnet, hospitable, wherry, saucy, prodigious



Part One: London p. 40-72

Summary

The year that Willie turned two, there was a bad winter in London. It was almost a relief for Thornhill when the river finally froze over and he was able to stay out of the cold. It was also that month that his world came apart. Lizzie grew sick with an inflammation in her throat. Medicine to help her was expensive and did not work. A short time later Mrs. Middleton injured herself in a fall on the ice. She lay in bed in pain unable to eat. Doctors couldn't seem to find what was wrong with her. One day Mr. Middleton went off to get a treat he thought she might eat. She refused that delicacy, like all the others before it. Mr. Middleton told Sal and Thornhill he'd fallen into a snowdrift and gotten snow in his boots. At the apothecary the snow had melted and his feet were wet the whole way home. He grew sick and feverish. He died a week later. When she learned of her husband's death Mrs. Middleton stopped speaking and turned away from her family. She died soon afterward.

Between costs of doctor bills and medicines for both the Middletons their savings were gone when they died. Thornhill learned they had not owned their house, only leased it. Their furniture was sold to pay the bills. Thornhill's boat was repossessed because he could not prove it was a wedding gift. Sal handled the loss of their station better than Thornhill. She went out looking for a cheaper apartment for them to live in. They finally lived in a place called Butler's Buildings with a horrible smell and only a pile of rags as a mattress. One day Sal stole a pair of eggs from a store. Then they were almost caught stealing a chicken from the yard below their room's window.

With no boat of his own, Thornhill could only work on those owned by other men. Men in Thornhill's position, with a wife and child, could not live on what he earned as a waterman. For that reason, many watermen became thieves. Some, like Thornhill's friend Collarbone, were caught stealing and sentenced to death by hanging. Even with his lack of money Thornhill and Sal paid some money to the executioner to make Collarbone's death clean. It didn't work, however, and Collarbone hung for a time before he died. Thornhill told Sal, however, that Collarbone's death had been clean.

Thornhill was a cautious thief. He was employed by Matthias Prime Lucas who did not allow his employees to get away with anything. Thornhill had several men upon whom he depended, and knew the value of a night with no moon. One of this friends told him about a load of expensive Brazil wood. Sal had told him just that morning that she was going to have another baby. He pulled his smaller boat up to the ship that carried the wood. He planned to steal it. Things went wrong from the beginning. Rob wasn't where he was supposed to be. As his boat was loaded Thornhill was almost afraid his friend had gotten his information about the Brazil wood wrong. Then Lucas had the wood brought from out of the boat's cabin and put his mark on it. As the wood was loaded, Thornhill had a brief moment when he thought he should not go through with his plans to steal the wood.



When night fell and he was able to guide his boat to the dock to unload his skiff was where he'd left it. He called for Rob but didn't get an answer. He'd finally decided to do the work himself when Rob came. As they began to move the lumber Thornhill heard feet on the dock and Lucas' voice calling him. Lucas grabbed for Thornhill but missed. When Thornhill and Rob pushed their boat away from the dock one of the pieces of wood slid off. Lucas and his men were following Thornhill and Rob. Even as fast as he rowed Lucas and his foreman Yates caught up with them. Rob fell overboard and drowned. Thornhill begged Yates to have mercy on him. Yates jumped off his boat back onto his own, allowing Thornhill to get away. A reward of ten pounds was put out for Thornhill's arrest and he was found.

Sal came up with a story for Thornhill to tell the judge but when he was before the man he forgot it. Mr. Lucas, the lawyer who was to speak for Thornhill, took that stand and insisted it was so dark that Lucas could not have recognized Thornhill. The judge did not accept the defense and ordered Thornhill to be hung. When Sal came to see him after he was condemned, he could tell she had still not given up. She told him he needed to get the man who crept from cell to cell on ruined legs to write a letter for him to Captain Watson. He traded his greatcoat to the man for the letter. The information in the letter was passed all the way up to Lord Hawkesbury who had the power to grant Thornhill a reprieve. Sal read the letter to Thornhill. It was apparent she didn't think it would do any good. She told Thornhill there was a man who wanted to hire Willie as a chimney sweep. Willie was scared of the dark, closed spaces. Sal knew she would have to go on the streets and sell herself as a prostitute.

One day the prison guard called for Thornhill. He read a letter stating that Thornhill had been pardoned on the terms that he would spend the rest of his natural life in Australia. Sal and the baby would be allowed to go with him.

Analysis

This is a major section as far as plot development goes. It is in this section that Thornhill committed the crime that got him sent to Australia as a prisoner. Although it seems that the reader would not be able to sympathize with a criminal like Thornhill, the author had given him life circumstances to which most anyone can relate. Thornhill fell on hard times because of sickness in his family. Both his mother-in-law and father-in-law had gotten sick. Their sicknesses wiped out all of their savings. Because Thornhill could not prove that the boat he'd been given was a wedding gift it had to be sold in order to pay the debts incurred by his in laws. Without his own boat, Thornhill could no longer earn enough money to support his wife and baby. In order to make enough money to feed his family Thornhill felt that he had to steal. Because Thornhill was doing what he had to in order to support his family, the reader does feel sympathy for Thornhill and the situation in which he had found himself.

This section is significant because it paints a picture of a man in despair. Even before he was put in jail, he imagined himself giving up on life. The only thing that kept him going was Sal. He had never dreamed that he would work as hard as he had and wind



up back where he started. He compared the room in Butler's Building with the one in which he had grown up. He felt even more like his life was going backward when Sal began having to steal eggs. It was when he was in jail and unable to work that the family's situation became even more dire. The only hope for income for the family included options like hiring Willie out as a chimney sweep or Sal becoming a prostitute.

Remember that the author has already included the description of a hanging. Collarbone was caught stealing and sentenced to be hung. Even though Thornhill paid the executioner for an easy death for Collarbone, the money didn't do the trick and Collarbone suffered instead of his neck breaking cleanly. Thornhill has to have this image in his mind as he heard that he would be killed by hanging. Notice, however, that when he was given the option to be taken to Australia, the jailer told Thornhill he could still accept the sentence of being hung if he wished.

Notice in this section of the novel a couple of interesting habits the writer has style-wise. First, notice that quotations are not in quote marks but instead indicated by use of italics. This is also the case for any written words such as the letter that the handicapped man wrote for Thornhill. Also notice the way the writer will spend several long paragraphs describing a situation — such as the situation in which Sal found herself after Thornhill's arrest — then will sum up the idea presented in those long paragraphs in a single pointed sentence. For instance after it was described how Sal would have to go into prostitution in order to support her family the author sums up the situation by saying: "Sal had committed no crime, but she was sentenced, just as surely as he was." (p. 69)

Discussion Question 1

Can you empathize with the circumstances that led to Thornhill's downfall? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Given the choice between death or being sent to live in Australia, which do you think you would choose? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think someone told Lucas and Yates about Thornhill's plan to steal the Brazil wood? How do you think they knew to be at the dock just when Thornhill was loading the lumber into his own boat?



Vocabulary

apothecary, obstinacy, tenements, arrears, indignation, abstemious, pelted, totted, restive, pious, roguery, scrupulous, chivvied, bollard, athwart, repetition, turnkeys, languid, semaphore, corpulent, enumerated, spawned, reprieve, clemency, persiflage, brazen



Part Two: Sydney p. 75-93

Summary

The author describes how 18 years before Thornhill was brought to New South Wales the land was claimed as part of Great Britain. Its purpose was to be a prison. When Thornhill was brought up from the hold of the boat he was blinded by sunshine and noise. In the confusion his name was finally called and he was put into Sal's custody. They were assigned a hut and given some food and blankets. Thornhill sat outside his hut and wondered why the landscape was so different in Australia from London. When he work in the morning, he wondered if the exchange he'd had with the black man that night had really happened.

Thornhill found a job quickly working on the boats for Alexander King transporting casks of liquor from the ship to another bay so they weren't checked by customs. Thornhill sometimes stole from these casks. King didn't seem to notice. After twelve months, Thornhill would have the opportunity to apply for a ticket of leave, giving him his freedom to work for whom he wanted or to settle a piece of land as long as he didn't leave the colony. Thornhill soon did well enough with his rum business that he and his family moved to a bigger hut. Sal split this hut into two rooms and used one as an inn. They saved their money up in box and talked about their future. They'd seen other people who had started out as felons doing well for themselves in Australia, even receiving their pardon. They imagined earning enough to go back to London where they would be members of the gentry.

Even though Thornhill could imagine himself back in London, Sal was always startled by the landscape and animals of Australia. She particularly disliked the trees which she wondered why they weren't green, like trees should be. Instead she believed they were shaped oddly and looked half dead. Hot weather came at Christmas and was not like the heat in London. Sal had brought with her a broken piece of roof tile she found by the Pickle Herring Stairs the day before she left London. She promised herself she'd take the tile back there one day. It was with that promise to herself in mind that she named their inn the Sign of the Pickle Herring.

The black men who lived in Australia were described as being of two sorts. One was like Scabby Bill who hung around and begged from the white people. The scars on Scabby Bill's chest fascinated Thornhill because they seemed to be a sort of language. The other blacks in the area were the invisible type. These people didn't appear in the settlement and rarely even to those who traveled outside the settlement. Those blacks didn't plow fields or build houses or make any of the other traditional markers that they believed the land belonged to them. Thornhill heard rumors of white men being speared by black men. He never shared these rumors with Sal. She read about them, however, in the settlement newspaper.



Analysis

The major purpose of this section of the novel is to introduce Australia as a prison state, one of the themes of the novel. The English government had the idea that they could send their prisoners to Australia to do the work of farming and settling that country. That way the prisoners wouldn't be killed or remain dependent on the state. They would be serving a useful purpose but wouldn't be able to hurt anyone because there were only other prisoners. There was no need for bars or cells because Australia is an island. There would be no way for the prisoners to get safely back to civilization without having a large ship and a good supply of food. Consider that it was a nine month journey for Thornhill and his wife to travel to Australia from England.

Notice also in this section that Thornhill was considered one of the lucky prisoners because he was assigned to his wife as his master. This turns on its head of the typical husband and wife relationship of the time with the husband as head of the household. Those charged with doling out the prisoners to their masters had some fun with the Thornhills' situation when Sal claimed Thornhill was her husband, saying that he was not assigned to her. Notice that the author notes that after being in Australia for one year they could apply for a ticket of leave. These tickets basically gave them the status of free men. They could work for whomever they wanted or they could claim their own property.

An interesting point is made in this section of the novel that adds to the theme of ownership. The author describes the invisible black people who inhabited the land. What seems most significant is that although these people lived on the land and depended on it for their livelihood, they had not put down any signs of ownership. Of course these "signs of ownership" are defined by European terms. They believed in order to "own" a property a person had to grow crops on it or build a house on it. The blacks had done neither of these things indicating to the English people that they had not claimed the property as their own.

The Thornhills seem to be putting back together the fragments of hope they had left in this section of the novel. Although they had been cast out of their beloved England and were trying to become accustomed to the landscape of an unfamiliar country, they were doing well for themselves. Notice in this section that they both dreamed of being able to save enough money so that they could go back to England and live as gentry.

The theme of racism is touched on in this section of the novel. The major racial slurs come from a man and woman who come to visit the Thornhills their first night in Australia. The man told Thornhill that he needed to watch out for the "savages" and that those people liked to eat children. Note the area's newspaper also carried stories of men who had been speared to death by these black people.



Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the “prison” of Australia with the prison in which Thornhill was held in London.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the two different kinds of black people the author describes as living in Australia. How are the visible and invisible blacks different?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the significance of the name of the inn run by Sal. What do both of the Thornhills dream they’ll eventually have the money to do?

Vocabulary

sardonic, victuals, ingenious, pannikins, clout, querulous, diffidently, punctiliously, ventilation, tankard, livid, pungent, dirge



Part Two: Sydney p. 93-124

Summary

While Thornhill was working for Mr. King, he met up with Thomas Blackwood, an old friend from the Thames. Blackwood had his own boat, his pardon and was doing well for himself despite being a criminal sent to Australia from London. Blackwood had named the river down which he sailed with loads of crops to market the Hawkesbury River. A year after he arrived in Australia, Thornhill got his ticket. At that time in his life he had three sons. Willie, Dick and the baby, Bub, who was sickly. Three years after Thornhill arrived in Australia he decided to stop working for Mr. King because the man seemed to be getting suspicious of Thornhill now that he had a new clerk who kept close tabs on the amounts of liquor they were transporting. Not wanting to be sent to Van Diemen's Land, Thornhill decided to move on to another job. He got a job with Blackwood.

Thornhill was frightened his first time out on the ocean as the boat rose and fell with the swells. Blackwood guided the boat into the mouth of the Hawkesbury, a river hidden to people who didn't know where it was. When they entered the river Blackwood told Thornhill the blacks were all around, watching them but that they wouldn't let themselves be seen if they didn't want to be seen. Blackwood pointed out the homestead of Smasher Sullivan who burnt oyster shells for lime. He said Smasher also participated in mischief. Smasher saw Blackwood on his boat and attempted to pull alongside in his skiff. He was talking about teaching a thief a lesson. He held up a pair of hands cut off at the wrist. Blackwood did his best to ignore the man but cursed him before pulling away. He and Thornhill both used a telescope to see into the woods where Smasher had hung a black man. Blackwood warned Thornhill that there was nothing in the world that was there just for the taking, that people had to learn to give a little and take a little.

Blackwood also told Thornhill about the place he had claimed for himself. He told Thornhill how he'd come to own the property and even name it after himself. As they continued down the river Thornhill glanced a piece of ground that seemed to him to be the shape of his thumb. He fell in love with it. Blackwood saw him looking at the point and told him that land was not any good. Even though Blackwood seemed to be telling him to choose another spot of land, Thornhill couldn't get his mind off that particular point.

Thornhill told Sal about what he'd seen during his trip when he returned the first night. He waited several months before he told her about his idea of claiming land for himself. Sal argued she thought they were doing well for themselves where they were. When he pushed her, she refused to go with him. Even though he let the subject drop, Thornhill continued to think about the land he considered his own.

Blackwood told Thornhill about his plans to retire. He planned to be sure Thornhill got his pardon before he retired and disappeared. After Thornhill got his pardon, he knew



he'd have to find another job with Blackwood going out of business. He decided to buy his own small boat. He was surprised when Sal suggested he borrow enough money from Mr. King to buy Blackwood's boat Queen. While she was thinking about quickly earning money to go back to London, he was thinking about using the river trade as an excuse to set up a base on the river. Once they bought the boat they renamed it the Hope and Thornhill had a red stripe painted on it in honor of Sal's father. Willie began work as his father's apprentice. Thornhill was driven not only by the need to repay his loan but also his desire to change the path of his life. A new boy, Johnny, had been added to the family. Sal was pregnant again. He decided to try again to introduce the idea of land to her. He asked her to give him five years. She agreed as long as it was just for five years.

Analysis

Thornhill made big strides forward for himself in this section of the novel. The section ends with Sal agreeing to live five years with him in the Australian wilderness, a major decision for a woman with four small children and one more on the way. Thornhill had earned his pardon and borrowed money to buy his own boat. The only thing that seemed to bother him about the Australian wilderness was the blacks who lived there.

Thornhill learned through Blackwood that it was easy to own land in Australia. All he had to do was till up a plot of ground for crops, build a hut and name it. In this way Thornhill could own his own property, just like Blackwood did. Also along the idea of ownership was Sal and Thornhill's decision to buy Blackwood's boat. They rename it after the boat owned by Sal's father and even paint it similarly. This ownership gave Thornhill opportunities to make money that he had never had before.

Significant in this section of the novel is Blackwood's advice to Thornhill about the blacks. First, he told his friend that if the blacks didn't want to be seen, they wouldn't be seen but that they watched and tracked the movements of the whites. He warned Thornhill that living in the wilderness and getting along with the natives was a matter of give and take. In fact, he told Thornhill this several times. He warned Thornhill that if he didn't give and take, the blacks would kill him.

Notice that Blackwood seemed to be giving Thornhill a hint about the land he believed Thornhill had chosen for himself. He told Thornhill the land was no good but didn't tell him why. He only suggested that he choose another plot of land followed by his vague advice of give and take.

While Blackwood seemed to have a relaxed attitude about the blacks and didn't seem to fear them, other residents of the wilderness were more set against the natives. One of these men was Smasher who rowed out to Blackwood's boat bragging about how he had cut off a black man's hands for stealing from him and then had hung the man in a tree. Smasher's bragging made Blackwood angry. Notice also that when Thornhill directly questioned Blackwood about the "outrages and depredations" (p. 95) done by



the black men Blackwood did not respond. Thornhill, however, had heard reports of these men robbing huts, burning crops and killing men.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the interaction between Smasher and Blackwood.

Discussion Question 2

Consider Thornhill's dream from Sal's point of view. Would it scare you to move into the wilderness? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

How have the Thornhills' lives improved since they were forced to go to Australia? Do you think they would have had the same opportunities back in England?

Vocabulary

legitimate, absconders, depredations, fastidious, flayed, privily, jovial, coddling, bulbous, giddy, raucous, compose, moll



Part Three: A Clearing in the Forest p. 127-159

Summary

As they sailed toward their new home, Sal sat turned watching the settlement at Sydney disappear from sight. She was holding the family's newest baby, a girl named Mary. He loved Sal for the steel she had in her. Dick asked Thornhill if the savages would try to eat him. Thornhill thought of the gun that he had wrapped up in a piece of canvas. He'd bought it just in case but didn't believe he'd really be able to shoot anyone. Thornhill had to fight the tide to get the boat to land. When he did land on the property he wanted, he jumped from the boat and had to struggle through mud to get to dry ground. He used the heel of his boot to draw a square in the ground signifying it was his.

Thornhill and the older boys got the tent pitched and persuaded Sal to come out of the boat. When he suddenly realized how hard life in the wilderness would be for Sal, he thought it was impossible. He tried to explain to her how it was just like their own River Thames before London was founded. Sal agreed it was, except they weren't in London. Gathering her strength, she asked for the drink of tea he said he'd made. They ate and drank around a fire that night. He held Sal that night until she stopped shivering and went to sleep. Even though Thornhill felt the place was his, the wind seemed to be saying that it wasn't.

Thornhill, Willie and Dick went the next morning to plant their corn seeds. He and the boys spotted a dug up spot in the ground but Thornhill decided the damage had been done by moles or wild hogs. They set to work and by the afternoon they had a square where they could plant their corn. After he sent the boys to the tent for the seeds, he noticed he was being watched. The black men holding spears were there. They spoke to one another in their different languages. The older black man made chopping motions and pointed toward the daisies Thornhill and the boys had pulled from the ground. Sal looked out of the tent and saw them. She sent the boys with food as she had done with Scabby Bill. They wouldn't take the food but the older man grabbed the spade and was walking away with it when Willie tried to stop him. Thornhill shouted out "no" and went to the older man. He slapped his shoulder changing the tone of the confrontation. The younger man grabbed his club. Thornhill heard spears fitted onto throwers in the woods. The man dropped the spade and walked off. The younger man slapped Thornhill just as Thornhill had done to the older man. His words and gestures clearly were meant to tell Thornhill to go away. His face was angry. When Thornhill woke the next morning and went outside the tent he discovered that the natives had shot spears all around it. Those spears were still sticking up in the ground like saplings. Willie saw what had happened. Thornhill told him that if the natives had wanted them dead they would have killed them. He asked Willie not to tell his mother what the blacks had done.



Thornhill and Willie planted the corn seeds even though they doubted they'd grow. Sal busied herself sweeping out a piece of land she referred to as the yard. She made a fire ring and even fashioned a table. On a tree near the tent she began marking off the days. In two weeks the corn Thornhill and the boys planted began to sprout. He knew it was time to dig up a bigger plot. They hadn't seen any blacks since the first day, but knew they were being watched. Thornhill finally took time out to climb the ridge on his property. He noticed a picture scratched into the rock. At first he thought it was a fish but as he looked more he realized it was the Hope. He was angry, realizing he and his family were not alone even though they hadn't seen any blacks.

Thornhill was in the process of building his hut when Smasher came for a visit. After the children left to play he told stories of the blacks until Thornhill asked him to be quiet. He told them how a gun, a whip and his dogs, who were trained to go after the blacks, were good things to have around. Thornhill began making suggestions it was time for Smasher to leave. After he'd left, Sal made Thornhill promise never to do the things that Smasher said he'd done.

Analysis

Notice in this section the tradition of the marking of things to show ownership. Just as Lucas had pressed a square into the pieces of Brazil wood that Thornhill would later try to steal, Thornhill used the heel of his boot to draw a square in the ground on the Australian property he wanted to own. This square in the dirt, his mark, signified to him that he owned the property. Notice that the blacks had also made marks in the property. On a rock that sat on a ridge they'd chiseled a picture of the Hope, the boat that Thornhill sailed. They also disturbed the ground on the piece of property that Thornhill wanted hoping that he would accept that as proof that someone else had already claimed it. Because the blacks had not made the plot into a perfect square and because they had not dug it up as one might have done for planting, Thornhill believed their digging in the ground could be disregarded as a symbol of ownership.

In sections leading up to Thornhill's claiming of his property as well as his time on the land there have been a variety of suggestions made that he shouldn't choose to settle on that particular piece of property. First, Blackwood told him the land was no good. Now, he's had an encounter with the natives in which they have told him that they want him to go away. The land around his tent was riddled with spears, a sign to Thornhill and his family that they could be killed at any minute. There are additional hints included by the author foreshadowing that things will not turn out well for Thornhill on his new property. For instance even as Thornhill tried to enjoy the pride of ownership as he laid on his land, the author indicated that the wind blowing in the trees said that all was not as well as he believed it was.

Notice the difference between the attitudes the Thornhills had toward the blacks and the attitude that Smasher had toward them. Smasher seemed totally against the blacks. He hated them. He had guns, whips and dogs to fight them off. The Thornhills, on the other hand wanted the blacks to leave them alone. They were more scared of them than



anything. When Thornhill was confronted by the blacks, for instance, he tried to be jovial and joke with them. Sal tried to make them happy by giving them food but it was clear they didn't like what she offered them.

Also in this section of the novel notice Thornhill's line of thinking when he saw that someone else had already dug up part of the land he wanted. Even the boys realized it had been dug up by a human hand but Thornhill denied to them and to himself that it had been a human who had done the digging. He reasoned that if it had been dug up by a human they would have dug a neat patch and thrown the weeds to the side. He didn't believe it was the blacks who had done the digging because they didn't believe in planting in order to supply themselves with food for the next day. From what he'd heard, they just took food where they found it. He believed that was why they were called savages.

Discussion Question 1

What did Thornhill mean when he considered the idea that Sal had traveled a greater distance from Sydney into the wilderness than from London to Sydney?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the confrontation between Thornhill and the blacks. What did they seem to be trying to tell him? When did the "discussion" go bad?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the significance of the picture of the Hope that the natives had drawn in the ridge above Thornhill's property.

Vocabulary

palaver, contrary, convalescent, rueful, reproach, imbecile, jovial, fastidious, recede, rivulet, dally, brackish, canted, resonance, indignation, dandy, embarked, pungent



Part Three: A Clearing in the Forest p. 159-186

Summary

The hut was a challenge for Thornhill but he had it finished within five weeks. There were gaps between the sheets of bark that had to be stopped with mud to keep the snakes from getting in the cabin. The Sunday after they moved into the hut neighbors came to visit. Among them were Smasher and Sagitty Birtles. Sagitty told stories about how his things, including his wheat, were constantly being stolen by the blacks. He indicated he'd taught them a lesson after his wheat was stolen. Spider Webb told how the blacks had cut the skirt off his wife while she was sick in the hut. Spider referred to the black as vermin. Loveday, who believed himself a gentleman, said the natives had speared him in the backside one day when he was relieving himself. There was woman, Mrs. Herring, who came. She was the closest the area had to a doctor. She told the Thornhills she let the blacks take what they wanted and turned a blind eye. Blackwood even came. Even though Thornhill had told Blackwood he might visit him someday, Blackwood had seemed to discourage the idea.

Blackwood talked to Thornhill, mentioning that there were few daisy yams left where Thornhill had planted his corn. He told how the blacks had given him some when he first moved to the wilderness. He explained that when Thornhill dug them up and let them die, it meant the blacks went hungry. Sagitty grew angry at Blackwood's suggestion Thornhill should have left the daisies for the blacks. Blackwood said there had been a decision made by the Governor that there would be no more whites settling past the second branch. Sagitty called him a liar. When Smasher shouted out that all the blacks did was to steal from honest men, Blackwood pointed out that Smasher was not so honest. Before he left, Blackwood reminded Thornhill he had to work things out for himself but that he had to give a little to take a little.

Thornhill received word that he'd been approved for two convict workers. It was the first time he'd left his family unprotected. When he arrived in Sydney at the transport boat Thornhill felt he was on the other side of the convict world until he came face-to-face with Captain Suckling. Although that man had lost his fortune, he had no criminal background and let Thornhill know that he remembered when Thornhill had come as a convict.

When he was finished choosing, Thornhill felt he'd gotten the best of a bad lot. One man was named Ned. The other was Dan Oldfield who reminded Thornhill how they'd been friends in London. He told Dan to refer to him as Mr. Thornhill from that point forward. When they arrived at home, Sal suggested he call her Mrs. Thornhill. Thornhill was quickly frustrated by his convicts because Dan seemed to be considering the possibility of running away while Ned was a useless worker. It took them all day to add a lean-to onto the hut so they would have a place to stay.



In the heat of the summer, Sal came down with milk fever. Mrs. Herring tended to her but Thornhill was afraid she would not survive. He sent for a real doctor but that doctor would not come. He said it was too far out but Thornhill believed it was because Sal was the wife of a former convict. Meanwhile, Sal seemed afraid she'd be buried in Australia. She wanted to be buried facing north, toward her home. Finally, Sal began to improve and get well. The first thing she asked was if he had been making the marks or if he'd lost track of time.

Analysis

Notice in this section the different stances that Thornhill's neighbors had taken in dealing with the blacks. Sal had spoken with Mrs. Herring who chose not to interfere with the blacks. If they wanted something from her she gave it to them. She knew that in her situation as a single woman she was not prepared to fight against them. Smasher and Sagitty, however, took a different view. They fought against the blacks with everything they had. They would not give the natives anything and punished them if they were caught stealing.

Taking a different stance in his relationship with the blacks, Blackwood had made friends with the native people. He continued to tell Thornhill that in order to take a little he had to give a little. Although Thornhill never understood what Blackwood was trying to tell him it seems obvious to the reader that Blackwood was telling him that if he wanted to take from the natives, he had to give them something in return if he wanted to stay on peaceful terms. Notice particularly the mention of the daisy yams that were disappearing quickly as Thornhill put in his crops. Notice also that when Blackwood came to the housewarming party at the Thornhill's property that the dog trained to go after blacks had to be tied up because it would go after Blackwood. This will be significant later in the novel.

Also significant in this section of the novel is Thornhill's experience when he went to Sydney to pick up the convicts that had been assigned to him. He knew the man who captained the boat that brought the convicts had both made his fortune and had lost that fortune. Regardless of his bad luck, this man still pointed out the Thornhill that he remembered him from one of the prisoner transports. He acted as if he were socially more acceptable than Thornhill simply because Thornhill had once been convicted of a crime. It was at this point in this life that Thornhill realized he and his family had no future in England because he was a convict.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think Blackwood meant by his advice to Thornhill that he had to take a little and give a little?



Discussion Question 2

What happened during his trip to Sydney to get his convicts that made Thornhill realize that he and his family would have no future in London?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the differing attitudes toward the blacks as expressed by Thornhill's neighbors.

Vocabulary

sagacious, oblivion, disperse, placket, gaunt, enamored, smarmy, dory, berthed, mustered, bollard, peevishly, taint, presume, tyrant, pious, pronouncing, poultices



Part Four: A Hundred Acres p. 189-215

Summary

Life was improving for the Thornhills. The children were flourishing. River business was good. Troops had been stationed to patrol the river settlements. He still heard news in the new townships of outrages committed by blacks. One day when he returned home from a river trip Willie came running to meet him agitated because the blacks had come. Willie pointed out smoke where they had set up camp. Sal gave him some food and tobacco to take to the blacks but Thornhill thought better. He said if they kept giving them things there would never be an end of it. Sal agreed because Dan was listening, waiting for them to disagree. Thornhill said he would go down and talk to the blacks.

Two women and a child were in the camp when Thornhill walked up. He didn't see them at first and they didn't pay any attention to him. When the woman did speak it seemed she was telling him he should go back the way he came. When Thornhill did turn, there was a group of black men standing behind him. The oldest man came up and put his hand on Thornhill's arm. Thornhill could feel his authority. The man walked to the fire and picked up a handful of daisy roots. He ate one and offered one to Thornhill. Thornhill nodded and the man nodded back. Thornhill realized there had been a conversation and that he had agreed to something but wasn't sure to what he had agreed.

Even though he told Sal the blacks would soon be gone, they continued to stay in their camp. Thornhill recognized a few of the men and referred to them by names he made up for them. He watched one day as a group of women interacted with Sal in the yard. Sal laughed as she talked to and made fun of the women knowing they couldn't understand her. Ned and Dan, who were standing behind Thornhill, were mesmerized by the women's naked bodies. Sal exchanged her bonnet with the women for one of their wooden dishes before they left. She was proud of the deal she'd made and agreed with Mrs. Herring that there was no need to fight with the blacks.

Three weeks after Thornhill had talked to the blacks and had told Sal they'd soon be gone, they were still camped out on Thornhill's land. She'd talked to Mrs. Herring who said the blacks often stayed more than they left. Sal suggested that Thornhill ask Blackwood for advice on what they should do about the blacks. When he arrived at Blackwood's place he could see that Blackwood had not cleared the land as the others had done. Blackwood met him, his words indicating he wasn't happy to see Thornhill. Thornhill told Blackwood he had a group of blacks that were camping next to him. Blackwood suggested they have tea. Thornhill thought he could hear sounds of voices and dogs barking in the distance but wasn't sure. Blackwood described how the blacks one day had come to him asking him to leave. They made it clear to him they'd let him stay if he stayed on the beach. He repeated his advice to Thornhill that he had to give a little to take a little.



Thornhill was sure he heard a voice calling out. Blackwood spoke in the black's language and a black woman came out. She had a mixed race child with her. Blackwood told Thornhill he had discovered the blacks were quiet and peaceful. He also said he'd told the woman that Thornhill wouldn't say anything about what he'd seen. Sal agreed with Thornhill that Blackwood's case was different from their's. He was no more help to them than Mrs. Herring.

After eight-year-old Dick finished his chores he began wandering the land. Thornhill saw him once playing with the native children. He didn't tell Sal what he'd seen but Bub did tell on his brother one day after he saw him playing with the black children. Thornhill was sent to get Dick. Dick was entranced, watching the man Thornhill called Long Bob start a fire using two sticks. Thornhill talked to the man, telling him that the white men would clear him and his kind out. The man didn't understand. He only laughed. The children laughed also. Thornhill felt they were mocking him.

Analysis

In this section of the novel the blacks set up an encampment close to Thornhill's property. Thornhill tried to talk to them but their lack of a common language was frustrating to both sides. Remember in the previous section that Blackwood had told Thornhill that the natives depended on the roots of the daisies, which Thornhill had dug up out of the patch where they grew, for food. Because Thornhill had destroyed the daisies, the blacks had lost part of their food supply. When the blacks tried to communicate with Thornhill the older man had also pointed out those same daisies to Thornhill. It was as if he were repeating what Blackwood had said. The blacks depended on the roots of those flowers for food. Thornhill nodded at the men as if he understood what they were trying to say to him when in reality he didn't have any idea to what he was agreeing.

Meanwhile, Dick began developing friendships with the black children. He was entranced by the way one of the men could create fire from just two sticks. Notice that Thornhill's anger toward the man and the children came from the feeling that they were trying to out perform him. Even though they were uneducated black men they could create fire from two sticks, something the white man couldn't do. Instead of admiring the blacks for their abilities as his son Dick did, Thornhill felt he was competing with them. He didn't see any way that the two types of people could live at peace on the same land. Even though the black man didn't understand what Thornhill was saying, Thornhill was telling him that his people would be wiped out by the whites.

Sal and Thornhill went both to Blackwood and Mrs. Herring for advice about their situation. Because she was a widow, Mrs. Herring gave the black people whatever they asked for. Sal and Thornhill decided their situation was different and that they shouldn't be forced to give to the blacks every time they asked, just as if they were paying rent for their property. Blackwood, meanwhile, had a black woman who was acting as his wife and even appeared to have a child by Blackwood. When Sal heard about that she realized Blackwood couldn't give them good advice on how to handle the problem



either. They decided they were going to have to come up with their own way to deal with the blacks.

Adding to the theme of racism in this section of the novel is the observation that Thornhill made when he was watching the black man make the fire from two sticks. He realized that even though these men had skin that was darker than his, they were still men with the same constitution and make up as he. He saw how similar they were to him.

Notice also in this section that Dan and Ned believed the blacks were lower in the social scheme of things even than they were. However, when they saw the naked black women this belief that the black women were below them didn't stop them from getting sexually excited about the women.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think the blacks were trying to say to Thornhill when he went to visit them at their camp?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the "arrangement" Blackwood had made with the blacks. What would it have meant for him if Thornhill told others that Blackwood had a child by one of the black women?

Discussion Question 3

The blacks seem to mean the Thornhills no harm. Why does it bother them so much that they are camping so close by?

Vocabulary

frugal, decreed, languid, vile, brusque, empathic, translucent, vehement, potent, tautly, incongruous, obliged, askance, shrewd, obstinate, dregs, vague, moniker

Part Four: A Hundred Acres p. 215-234

Summary

Sal tried to explain to Dick why he shouldn't go around with no clothes on even though the natives did so. Thornhill beat Dick with his belt when Dick talked back to his father telling him that the natives could light a fire with no flint and didn't hoe corn all the time but still ate. Thornhill knew Sal disapproved. She reminded him after the children went to bed of the way they used to run around when they were children. He decided to take Dick with him on the boat from that point on to keep him out of trouble. The next day Thornhill found Dick trying to start a fire with two sticks. He helped the boy but wasn't able to start a fire the way the black man could. He suggested Dick get the man to show him again how it was done. He cautioned him not to tell his mother.

Near the end of January the blacks lit a fire and moved it down the slope burning off the grass. The Thornhills watched but didn't understand what they were doing. When the blacks finished burning a path they went back to their camp. The Thornhills wondered if the fire were a threat. Shortly after there was rain and then the weather got warm again. New grass began to grow on the burnt areas tempting the kangaroos. The blacks began killing these kangaroos for meat. Thornhill tried to shoot a kangaroo with his gun but had no luck. Thornhill took a small bag of flour and traded it with the blacks for the foot of a kangaroo. The family was only able to drink the soup made from the tough, sinewy meat.

Of all his jobs Thornhill disliked most picking up lime from Smasher. When he pulled up the man was burning oysters for lime. Not just shells, the meat was still inside. He'd once been awed by the number of oysters in the area but as he considered how quickly Smasher was burning them up, he wondered. As they were loading the last of the barrels on Thornhill's boat, a black man appeared. He had a few oysters with him. He showed them how the oyster was good to eat and offered them one. He motioned to the fire angrily. Smasher went after his whip. The man stood his ground the first time Smasher hit him with the whip. The second time he grabbed the lash and held it for a minute before going to his canoe. Smasher went for his gun but missed the man. Smasher turned his anger on Thornhill, accusing him and Blackwood of cozying up to the blacks. Thornhill realized Blackwood's arrangement wasn't as private as he thought it was. Smasher warned Thornhill he'd be killed by the blacks one day.

Analysis

The conflict between Smasher and the blacks is apparent in this section of the novel. In their eyes, Smasher was destroying their land. He was chopping down and burning timber for his fires. Worse was that he was taking live oysters from the river and killing them for lime. Notice that even Thornhill did not seem to approve of the way that Smasher was burning the live oysters. At one time he'd thought the area had such an



abundance of the huge oysters that he wondered if they could ever be all eaten up. When he saw what Smasher was doing he wondered if he wasn't wrong. When the black man came to "talk" to Smasher he used the same techniques that had been used with Thornhill. He demonstrated to Smasher that the oysters were good to eat and then showed he was upset by the way Smasher was destroying the food source.

Notice that Smasher dealt with the man first by hitting him with the whip and then going after his gun. Even though Thornhill had done nothing to encourage the blacks Smasher turned on him yelling that he was encouraging them. Smasher seemed to think that residents like Thornhill and Blackwood who did not openly and actively fight against them like he did were encouraging them.

In this section of the novel Thornhill begins to appreciate the blacks' way of life - something his son, Dick, has already noticed and begun to appreciate. Thornhill noticed they didn't work as hard as the white people for what they ate. They instead used techniques like the clear burning that would result in fresh growth, bringing the kangaroo to them. Because the aborigines worked only to supply their needs and did not labor for prosperity or money they didn't have to work as hard as the white men did. Notice also that Thornhill realized the blacks didn't seem to have the same social divisions like white people did. He believed they all lived like gentry.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Smasher's way of dealing with the blacks with Thornhill's confrontations.

Discussion Question 2

Do you think the black were trying to send Thornhill a message when they gave him an inedible part of the kangaroo? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Dick's acceptance of and friendship with the blacks. Should his parents take a lesson from him?

Vocabulary

balustrade, respite, brusquely, canted, peremptory, uncompromisingly, pantomiming



Part Five: Drawing a Line p. 237-254

Summary

Blacks began to gather in the encampment near the Thornhills' house. The family was nervous. Even though he knew neighbors were waiting for him to come and haul their potatoes, Thornhill put off his trip. Thornhill had gone once to the ridge that overlooked the blacks' camp. There were more than forty black congregated there. That night the sounds of clapping and singing came from the camp. Dan and Ned both believed the sounds indicated the blacks were coming to get them. Willie spoke up in words Thornhill thought Smasher or Sagitty might use telling him they needed to take care of the blacks. Dick, however, believed there was no need for a gun.

Needing to get away from the fear in the hut Thornhill went to see what the blacks were doing. When he saw the way their bodies and faces were painted, it occurred to him that they were doing a war dance. He noticed the man dancing seemed to be telling a story to those watching. He remembered the man dancing was the one he'd hit the first day he met them. He realized he'd made a major mistake by criticizing the elder.

Back at the hut the people inside were panicky. He took the gun, loaded it and then fired a warning shot out a window. He noticed, however, that the blacks had continued singing and clapping despite the noise of the gun. The singing and clapping went on all week. Then the crowds of black people left leaving only those who were there originally. Even so, the Thornhills remained uneasy. Thornhill bought three more guns, knowing that having only one was foolish. Thornhill cleared a space around the hut far enough that a black would have to come out into the open to throw a spear at them.

Thornhill went to Smasher's house to see about getting a dog. When Smasher tried to haggle the price of the dogs Thornhill threatened to leave. Smasher agreed to the price but told Thornhill he had something to show him. Inside the dark hut Smasher showed him a black woman he had chained there. Smasher said he and Sagitty had sex with her. He offered the woman's services to Thornhill. Thornhill was sickened by his own thoughts and angered when Smasher asked if Thornhill was too good for a black woman when even Blackwood was sleeping with one. Thornhill left without buying any dogs. He felt that because he hadn't done anything to help the woman that Smasher was abusing, he was part of that evil.

Analysis

Tension builds in this part of the novel as the Thornhills believed that the blacks would soon be coming for them. In his attempt to protect his family and his property Thornhill bought more guns and cleared more of the land. Despite the stress with the blacks Thornhill thought to himself how much he still liked the place where he was living.



Smasher caused problems for Thornhill in this section of the novel. Thornhill went to Smasher hoping to get a pair of dogs to keep the blacks away. Instead, Smasher made fun of Thornhill's fear. Even though he probably knew it would upset Thornhill, Smasher showed him a black woman he had kidnapped and was keeping as a sex slave. Because he had considered Smasher's offer, even though it was almost against his will, he thought he was just as guilty as Smasher. He believed he shared in Smasher's evilness because he had done nothing to help the woman.

Notice that the plot of the novel is working more and more toward Thornhill's inner battle. He wanted to be left alone. He wanted to make a good life for himself and his family. He had nothing against the blacks but he didn't want them threatening him and his family. His circumstances are pushing him toward making a decision. In this section it seems like he's moving toward fighting against the blacks instead of trying to live peacefully with them. At the same time, however, Thornhill isn't the same kind of man as Smasher. He doesn't have it in him to be intentionally cruel to the blacks.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the gathering the blacks had. Do you think their singing and dancing was war related? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What is your opinion of Thornhill's attempts to prepare for an attack by the blacks?

Discussion Question 3

Consider Smasher's attitude toward the blacks. How do you feel about his attitude?

Vocabulary

recoil, imperative, deft, reminisced, consolations



Part Five: Drawing a Line p. 254-272

Summary

When Thornhill returned home Smasher, Sagitty, Twist, Loveday, Mrs. Herring and Blackwood were all gathered there. There was fear on Sal's face when she told him the blacks had gotten Spider. One man had distracted Julia Webb while the others had stripped all of Spider's corn. Sagitty said they'd stolen four bags of wheat from him and that they were asking for trouble. Finishing the story about Spider, Smasher said the blacks had threatened Spider with a spear and had taken everything of worth that they had. Spider had decided to leave and go to Windsor where he would open a public house and sell liquor. Mrs. Herring warned Smasher that he and Sagitty were headed for trouble. Smasher bragged about killing two blacks near his place. Thornhill thought Smasher was trying to provoke Blackwood. When he mentioned he had killed two more of the blacks Blackwood yelled at Smasher telling him that one of the blacks was worth ten of men like Smasher.

In the year of 1814 it seemed every farmer with a crop had an encounter with the blacks. Many gave up meaning Thornhill didn't have much business. He was glad because it allowed him to keep an eye on his own property. Military action had finally been ordered against the blacks. Captain McCallum came up with a plan to trap the blacks near Darkey Cove but was outsmarted by them. His men were instead trapped there by the blacks. Three of the soldiers were killed and four injured.

In his next move His Excellency posted a proclamation in the newspaper. Thornhill's neighbors gathered at Thornhill's hut to have Loveday read the proclamation. The proclamation indicated the land owners should first ask the natives civilly to leave their property. If the natives did not leave the land owners had permission to drive them out by force. Mrs. Herring asked for the paper. She and Sal read over the article making sure that Loveday had read it correctly. Smasher was angry because he didn't think he needed permission to take care of the blacks. He threw a pair of ears onto the table. Sal picked it up. She ordered Smasher out when she realized what it was. Blackwood rushed across the room and grabbed Smasher by the neck. He held Smasher up by the neck and hit him, telling him that he deserved what he was getting. Blackwood punched him in the face twice before he dropped the man. Smasher was angry. He told the others that Blackwood would regret what he had done. They would all regret it, he said.

That night, Sal suggested they go. When Thornhill said he wouldn't go back to London and be a lighterman again she suggested they open an inn again in one of the townships. Thornhill tried to convince Sal that if the blacks were going to hurt them, they would have already done it. He asked her to go along with his plan to stay there five years. She did ask that he keep Smasher away from them, as she was afraid he'd cause trouble for everyone.



Analysis

Tension continued to build as the blacks attacked the settlers more and more often. The military was called in but had no success against the blacks. In fact, the blacks outsmarted the whites and trapped them. Instead of bonding together against the natives, the settlers were divided in their attempts to fight off the natives. They fought against each other with their differing ideas of how the blacks should be handled. Smasher was on one end of the scale as he believed that the blacks were worthless and that he should be allowed to poison them all, just as one would do to rats or unwanted insects. The usually calm Blackwood was driven to anger when Smasher talked about the best way to cook the head of a black man.

Thornhill had tried to protect Sal from a good deal of the things he'd heard about the blacks. The men brought the terrible stories that he hoped that she would never hear right into the house. Because of these stories, Sal asked Thornhill to give up the land that he owned and of which he was so proud. She saw more promise for them in going back to a city or settlement where they could reopen their inn. Notice that even though Thornhill and Sal disagreed on whether they should stay on their farm or leave, they did agree there was trouble coming and that Smasher would probably be the one who would cause it.

Discussion Question 1

If you were Thornhill, would you want to stay on your land or leave before trouble started?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think of Smasher's comment that he didn't need to government's permission to get rid of the blacks on his property?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the encounter between Smasher and Blackwood.

Vocabulary

porous, capering, denuded, subsistence, sable, indolent, profane, embodied, ingenious, explicit, detachment, ambiguous, sanguinary, animosity, dour



Part Six: The Secret River p. 275-299

Summary

About a week after the proclamation Thornhill stopped on impulse at Darkey Creek. There was nothing moving at the blacks' camp. Then Thornhill looked inside one of the humpies and saw a black man and woman. They were both dead. There were more bodies when he began looking. He heard groaning and found a boy who was still alive. Thornhill brought the boy a cup of water but he couldn't keep it down. He knew the people had been poisoned. He got back in his boat and went away. He believed it was Sagitty who had poisoned the people.

The next morning Dick came running to tell his father the blacks were picking their corn. He got his gun. He grabbed one woman and tried to pull her away. Another hit him in the head with a stick. At that point he began to fight in earnest. Dan and Ned came running. He pointed the gun at two of the men who came toward him, ordering them to leave. They all ran away with the exception of the man that Thornhill called Jack. Thornhill shot at Jack but missed. Meanwhile, Dan had gotten hold of a 12-year-old black boy. Dan wanted to keep the boy but Thornhill ordered him to set the child free. He tried to convince his scared family that the blacks were gone for good. They brought in as much of the corn as they could that night. Thornhill sensed Sal was not happy with him. He told her that if he had not done something they would have taken all the corn. It was the end of the day before he realized that her fear had changed into anger.

Thornhill woke to the smell of smoke. The blacks had set fire to his corn. His hard work had once again been destroyed. He walked to the hut where he saw Sal standing in the doorway. She walked past him down the path the women had used. Thornhill tried to make her go back to the hut but she said since the blacks had come on their property she was going to go on theirs. She looked at their camp grounds. The way they lived there just like she and Thornhill had lived in London. She asked why Thornhill had never told her about the way they lived before. She realized they were taking land away from the blacks that had once belonged to them. She also told Thornhill she believed the blacks were still there, watching them. She knew they would come back and kill them. Sal told Thornhill they had to get the family on the boat and go. He considered leaving and going back to the life they had dreamed about in London. Sal told him she could be packed in an hour. He was suddenly angry because he, like Smasher, realized the blacks had done no work at all on the land. For this reason he believed they had no right to lay claim to it. When Sal continued to insist that they go Thornhill lifted his hand to her. He knew at that moment that she didn't recognize the man who had taken her husband's place.

The argument was interrupted when Dan came running telling them he saw smoke coming from Sagitty's place. Sal busied the children collecting their belongings. She told Thornhill to go help Sagitty but that as soon as he got back she was going to leave even if he wouldn't. When they arrived at Sagitty's place they saw that a hole had been



smashed in his boat and broken his oars. His corn was burned as well as his hut. The dog's throat had been cut. Sagitty lay behind a water barrel with a spear in his stomach. He was still alive but Thornhill knew he wouldn't live long. Thornhill hoped the man would die but he didn't so he had Dan and Ned help him get Sagitty into the boat to go to the hospital. He survived the boat ride to the hospital but died when the spear was removed.

Thornhill, Dan and Ned went to Spider's public house The Maid of the River for drinks. Men began coming in, discussing what had happened. When Smasher showed up he took over the story adding false details. Even so, Thornhill thought that there was nothing as bad as what had really happened to their neighbor. Spider told the men that they had to deal with the blacks. Smasher began talking about the camp of blacks who lived at Blackwood's place. He said they could be there by the end of the day and take care of them first thing in the morning. The group, more than any one individual, agreed on what they had to do. Smasher told Thornhill they had to have the Hope to get to Blackwood's property. Dan suggested to Thornhill that if he were able to get rid of the blacks, Sal might stay. Even though he didn't think it was worth getting his wife to stay, Thornhill agreed to help the men with their plan.

Analysis

The tension between the settlers and the natives comes to a head in this section of the novel. The attacks on the settlers by the natives as described in newspapers have been happening closer and closer to the Thornhills home and to people they know. The newspapers, of course, don't cover the stories of the atrocities done to the natives by the settlers. Sagitty's act of poisoning a large group of the natives was never mentioned.

after Thornhill's corn was destroyed and Sagitty was killed with a spear the settlers decided they needed to send a message to the natives. Notice how it was decided by consensus to ambush the blacks living near Blackwood's property. Thornhill was the only one who really had to make an individual decision because Smasher told him they would have to use the Hope in order to get to Blackwood's property. Thornhill didn't want to have to use violence against the natives. He couldn't imagine shooting anyone with the gun he'd gotten to protect himself. Even as he said yes to the idea of helping with the ambush Thornhill knew that Sal might not stay even if the blacks were gone. At the same time he felt he had enough of a chance that she would stay that he decided to go along with the men and help in the ambush.

The question of ownership is a major factor in the conflict between the settlers and the Australian natives even though it is never directly referred to as such in the novel. Each group saw ownership of the land from its own point of view. Sal was the only one who was able to see the situation from the point of view of the natives. When she walked into their camp and saw how they had prepared a home for themselves just like she had prepared a home for her family she understood they had lived on that land for generations. Just as Sal had been forced to leave her childhood home after the deaths of her parents and was forced to leave the city in which she had grown up when she



was sent to Australia with her husband, Sal realized that the native people of Australia were being forced out of the only home they knew. The men, however, didn't see it that way. Because the blacks hadn't worked to build houses, plant crops or "improve" the land, they felt the natives had no claim to it. Additionally, the natives had no government to back them up in their claims of ownership and no papers to state they owned the property. The white settlers believed the country was "owned" by England and that since the government of England had told them they could claim 100 acres of property for themselves they should be able to do so without having to give any consideration to the native people.

Considering this argument, the natives have been committing more and more "outrages and depredations" including the attack on Sagitty and the destruction of Thornhill's corn. taken on their own these attacks appeared unprovoked. The reader knows, however, that there have been some incidents that have precipitated these attacks. Sagitty poisoned a large number of blacks who camped on his property. Thornhill destroyed the daisies that were a source of food for the natives.

Hope is another theme discussed in this section of the novel. When Thornhill saw how the blacks had set fire to his corn he felt the hope that he had for his new life in Australia fading away. The blacks had destroyed much more than just corn. They had destroyed his future prosperity. They had also sealed Sal's fear because their actions had been intentional ones set on destroying something that belonged to the Thornhills. After Sal saw in person that they blacks were capable of destroying their property she no longer had any doubts that they were also capable of hurting or killing her family.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the interaction between the boy that Dan caught and Dick.

Discussion Question 2

Do you think what was done to Sagitty was done in retaliation because he poisoned some of the natives? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Thornhill think he will be a different man after the ambush on Blackwood's property? Why does he think the ambush is so life altering?

Vocabulary

pungent, buttress, weft, plausible, avid, imploring, eloquence



Part Six: The Secret River p. 299-310

Summary

In this section of the novel the men take the Hope down the river to Thornhill's property. They waited and slept, planning to attack at first light. Thornhill considered that what he was about to do would change the course of his life. He thought about the story they would need to tell anyone who asked what happened at Blackwood's property. He believed that even though what they were doing was wrong, no one would question or find fault with their actions. As he prepared himself mentally for the attack Thornhill thought of Sagitty in his dying moments.

The men snuck up on the camp of blacks when the dawn began to break. Thornhill imagined blacks at his back and spears being thrown at him. A gunshot woke him from his fears and he believed he saw a black in the woods. It was only a tree. The others were shooting towards the humpies. The fight is detailed as the surprised blacks tried to fight back against the settlers. Blackwood ran from his cabin telling Smasher to get away from the people. Smasher flicked his whip at Blackwood and hit him in the eyes. With his hands over his eyes Thornhill tried to get up but fell. He continued to shout "no."

Thornhill watched as Whisker Harry, the elderly native, threw a spear at Smasher. The spear hit Harry's target. Harry stood there and watched. Thornhill raised his gun and shot him. The man slowly fell over. The area was suddenly quiet. Thornhill looked at all the dead bodies spread around him.

Analysis

The novel climaxes in this section of the novel as the settlers ambush and kill all of the black people camped out at Blackwood's property. Smasher is among those killed in the confrontation. The settlers caught the blacks by surprise and wiped out even the women and children. The gore and force of the battle is described in detail. As Blackwood tried to stop the attack he was hit in the face by Smasher's whip and blinded. Even though Thornhill had thought he would never be able to use the gun on another human, he was able to kill Whisker Harry after he saw Harry hit Smasher with a spear.

This attack on the blacks is the ultimate show of racism and hatred. The English government had allowed the settlers to protect themselves from the blacks if they came on their property in a threatening manner or if they showed force against the whites. This attack doesn't seem as if it were being done as an act of self defense as much as a downright intent to rid themselves of the blacks. It is noted in the novel that the whites didn't think much about their actions because they knew the government would not ask any questions about the attack.



Discussion Question 1

Do you think Smasher's death was deserved? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think the settlers were justified in their attack on the natives? Discuss your opinions.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the symbolism in the stand off between Whisker Harry and Thornhill.

Vocabulary

dispersed, imploring, colossal, impaled, contorted, pulsated



Mr. Thornhill's Villa

Summary

Ten years after the ambush the settlers have had no more trouble from the blacks. Thornhill had increased his property by taking over what had once belonged to Sagitty. He continued his trade by water and had a second boat built for his son, Willie, to captain. The Thornhills are considered something of royalty in the stone house that they had built on their property. Even though Sal and Thornhill had built to house to the specifications of their dreams, it didn't seem to fit together quite right with the front door too wide and the steps too small. The house was built on the spot where the natives had drawn the picture of Thornhill's boat the Hope.

They knew they were not going to return to London even though Sal sometimes still talked about going home. For the most part their children had been born in Australia and considered that place their home. Thornhill tried to make Sal as comfortable as he could in that land. She had girls to help with cooking and cleaning, and the comfortable furniture she'd dreamed of. He allowed a garden wall to be built and Sal to attempt to cultivate an English garden in the Australian heat. They'd even planted poplars to remind Sal of London but most of those trees had died in the heat. Thornhill had his portrait hanging in the parlour of the house. The first portrait he'd had painted was hidden as the artist had painted the book Thornhill was holding upside down. In the portrait he chose to display Thornhill as holding a spyglass and had an odd, baffled look on his face.

Sal had read the article in the newspaper about what happened that morning at Blackwood's property. Thornhill noted to himself it wasn't exactly true but wasn't exactly untrue either. When he had returned home after they'd cleaned up the camp Sal had been ready to go. He had promised her there would be no more trouble with the blacks. She'd told him that she hoped he hadn't done anything bad on her account. Thornhill tried to persuade her he hadn't but he noticed that she watched as he washed his hands over and over.

Sal had unpacked their things and they'd gone back to normal. She had a final baby named Sarah but whom they called Dolly. Sal forgot to make her tally marks on the tree while Dolly was sick. She never returned to the habit. Even though they were still a loving couple, Thornhill felt there was something that had come between them.

Blackwood still lived at his place on the Hawkesbury River. He was blind in one eye and could see only shapes of light and dark from the other. Thornhill took him supplies but Blackwood never spoke to him during those visits. Dick had left his family to live with Blackwood soon after the ambush. He took over Blackwood's still. On his trips down the river Dick would stop and visit his mother but would never stop if his father was home.



Long Jack was the only black left living in the area. Sal and Thornhill tried to care for him. Thornhill was frustrated because Jack wouldn't take the food and clothes that were offered to him. He thought how happy he would have been if someone had offered him food and clothes when he was so hungry and cold as a child. One day when Thornhill had tried to get Jack to come to their house for food Jack refused telling Thornhill that his camp was his place. Thornhill realized the land was part of Jack's spirit the way that no land would ever be for him.

Thornhill spent his evenings sitting on his front porch. Sal came and sat beside him asking if he was still watching. She reminded him of their spitting contests when they were little and told him how wonderful she always thought he was. When she went in the house he used his spy glass to scan the woods and cliffs for black people, wondering if there were still any living out there. Even though he thought he should feel proud of what he had made for himself, Thornhill felt as if he were being punished.

Analysis

The timeline of this concluding section of the novel is different from that of the rest of the novel because it is not linear. The opening section is set ten years after the ambush on the blacks. The remainder of the section fills in the blanks between the ambush and the time period ten years later. This section does fill the reader in on some information critical to the story line. For instance the reader knows from the start of this section that Sal stayed with Thornhill in Australia. The reader also knows they haven't had any trouble with the blacks since the ambush. The reader also knows that the Thornhills have done well enough for themselves that they have been able to join the ranks of gentry.

There are several significant scenes in this section of the novel. The first is that between Long Jack and Thornhill. Jack had been injured in the ambush but had not died. Even though the other blacks had chosen to stay away from the area, Jack had hung on to what he referred to as "my place" (p. 329). Remember back before Thornhill had even been accepted as an apprentice by Mr. Middleton he had longed for a place that he felt was part of his heart and soul. He'd felt envious of the way Sal felt her home was part of her being and wanted to understand that feeling for himself. Even though he has the deeds for more than 100 acres of property, Thornhill still doesn't understand how land can become a part of a person's soul. He still doesn't have that connection with his own property. He was angry at Jack not so much because he wouldn't take the help he and Sal were offering but because even as simple as Jack was, he understood a concept that had stayed outside Thornhill's grasp.

Another significant scene in this section is the hand washing scene. The symbolism is similar to other characters who compulsively wash their hands. It was an attempt on Thornhill's part to wash away his guilt. He would not tell Sal exactly what happened at Blackwood's property but the reader gets the idea as she watched Thornhill wash his hands over and over that there was some guilt of which he was trying to rid himself.



Notice also in this section of the novel that even though the Thornhills had made the fortune they hoped to make for themselves, what they had wasn't quite right. The door and steps were out of proportion. The lions that Thornhill ordered for his gateposts were not the threatening species he'd wanted. The portrait he had painted of himself was even unusual and wound up looking like a man who was baffled by what life had sent his way. Both Sal and Thornhill seem uneasy in their roles as gentry. It is almost as if they are afraid something might happen to take it all away. Notice, for instance, that the house was built so that it was a fortress against the blacks. The land was cleared to the point that no one could have snuck up on the property. It was almost as if they were still expecting retaliation. Along these same lines, notice that Thornhill continued to scan the cliffs and woods for blacks. It is indicated that Thornhill wished that Sal would ask him what he was looking for, but she never did.

Finally, both Thornhill and Sal seemed to feel they needed to make amends. Sal turned Long Jack into her project. She tried to get him to dress and eat in the way the white people did but she was never successful. He preferred to stay with his ways even though he did sometimes come to the Thornhills' home to beg for food. Blackwood seemed to be Thornhill's chosen project. Blackwood's vision was almost completely ruined the night of the ambush. For this reason Thornhill would take Blackwood supplies and talk to him but Blackwood never spoke to Thornhill in return. To make matters worse for Thornhill one of his sons had gone to live with Thornhill shortly after the ambush. Dick had always sympathized with the blacks and had made friends with them. He chose to live with and take care of Blackwood, the only other person who had appreciated the natives and their culture.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the statement made by Dick when he went to live with Blackwood.

Discussion Question 2

What did Jack understand about the land that Thornhill did not?

Discussion Question 3

How much of what happened at the ambush do you think Sal knew about? Why do you think it remained an unspoken topic between the two?

Vocabulary

convoluted, recluse, eminence, interlopers, astringent, begrudge, parody, placid, tripos, excise, ingratiate, scoundrel, affray, piously, penance, ramparts, mirage



Characters

William Thornhill

William Thornhill is the main character of the novel. He was born to a poor London family. The family never had enough to eat. They were always cold. Thornhill learned early how to steal and not get caught in order to provide food for his family. Through his childhood of poverty Thornhill dreamed that his life would improve if he worked hard. He believed his dream was coming true when Mr. Middleton, the father of his sweetheart, took Thornhill on as an apprentice. After Thornhill finished his apprenticeship he married Sal, Middleton's daughter. Middleton gave Thornhill a boat of his own as a wedding gift. Although Thornhill was not rich, he worked hard and made enough to support his family.

Thornhill's dream fell apart when his in-laws became sick and died at the same time. The Middletons' medical bills depleted their savings and the furniture from their house had to be sold in order to pay all of their bills. Even the boat that had been given to Thornhill was sold because Thornhill couldn't prove it was a wedding gift. Thornhill was left in the position where he had to work for other people and was not able to make a living for his family any longer. He went back to stealing in order to make ends meet. He was caught during one of his theft attempts and sentenced to die by hanging.

With the help of his wife, Sal, Thornhill applied for and received a pardon from his death sentence. He and his family were sent to Australia, an isolated country owned by England that was being used as a prison for nonviolent criminals. Although Thornhill at first believed his imprisonment in Australia put him in a completely hopeless situation, he soon came to realize how much opportunity there was in that country. The only problems Thornhill faced in Australia was his wife's desire to go back to London and the natives of Australia who had begun to attack the settlers.

Thornhill does eventually become a prosperous waterman in Australia. His success in Australia, however, hinged on his decision to help clear the area of the Australian natives. Thornhill had not wanted to fight with the aborigines. He'd wanted to claim his one hundred acres and be left alone. The people from whom he took the land would not allow that to be. The settlers and natives had clashes over ownership of the land that often turned bloody and sometimes resulted in deaths of people from both sides. It was after the natives set fire to Thornhill's corn and then killed Sagitty, a neighboring settler, after destroying his small farm, that Thornhill allowed himself to be persuaded to join the war against the natives. Thornhill and his neighbors cleared the area of a settlement of natives in a bloody battle. Even after Thornhill made a name for himself in Australia he still used his telescope to scan the woods for natives. He felt guilty for what he had done to the natives and it seemed as if he was always waiting for these people to take their revenge against him.



Sarah “Sal” Middleton Thornhill

Sal was the only child of Mr. and Mrs. Middleton. She was Thornhill's childhood sweetheart. Sal was devoted to Thornhill and stuck with him even through their descent into poverty and his arrest. She fought to have him pardoned from his death sentence. Even though she didn't want to leave London, the only home she'd ever known, she went to Australia with him and served as his prison guard.

Sal again put her faith in her husband when he persuaded her to live with him in the Australian wilderness. She had hoped they could earn enough money to move back to London where they could live like gentry. Thornhill told her they could make more money by moving to the wilderness. She believed him and followed him.

She showed her spirit by making the best of her time in the wilderness. It was not until the natives burned their corn that Sal told Thornhill they had to leave. She attempted to give Thornhill an ultimatum. She told him that she would leave and take the children regardless of whether he came or not. Apparently, Thornhill managed to convince her things would change in Australia because she stayed.

Thornhill never knew how much she knew about ambush he had participated in against the Australian natives. The reader also does not know how much Sal knew about the ambush. Even though she'd wanted to go back to London, Sal did the best she could to bring London to Australia. She seemed reasonably happy with her house with a London-style garden wall. She even attempted to try to grow the plants and trees with which she was familiar with in her native city even though those plants did not do well in the heat of Australia.

Thomas Blackwood

Thomas Blackwood became a friend of Thornhill's during their time as watermen in London. Blackwood was also sent to Australia as a convict. He arrived in Australia before Thornhill and had already earned his pardon and settled in the wilderness when Thornhill arrived. After he'd lived in Australia several years Thornhill began working with Blackwood on his river trade business.

Blackwood introduced Thornhill to the Australian wilderness. He helped Thornhill get his pardon and taught him how to claim his own property in the wilderness. Thornhill chose a piece of property for his own from which Blackwood had tried to warn him away. Blackwood warned Thornhill that when dealing with the natives he need to give a little in order to take a little. Thornhill was never sure what Blackwood meant.

Blackwood had embraced the blacks and their culture, and had learned how to live peacefully with them. He even had a black mistress and a child by that woman. The other settlers in Australia, like Smasher and Sagitty, thought that Blackwood was a traitor. It was after Thornhill and Sagitty's properties were damaged by the blacks that Blackwood's property was ambushed and the blacks living there were killed.



Smasher Sullivan

Smasher Sullivan was one of the settlers who staked a claim along the Hawkesbury River. He was very openly and violently opposed to the natives. Blackwood showed a dislike for the man when he first introduced Thornhill to the land along the Hawkesbury River. Smasher showed the two how he had cut the hands off one of the natives he caught stealing from him. Smasher had hung the man's body from a tree near his home. Smasher trained dogs to attack the natives. Thornhill went to Smasher to get a few of the dogs for protection but changed his mind because he was so disgusted when Smasher showed him a black woman he had chained in his cabin whom he used as a sex slave. Smasher was killed when he was hit by a spear during the ambush against the blacks who were camped out on Blackwood's property.

Captain Suckling

Captain Suckling was the man who piloted the boat that transported Thornhill and his family to Australia. Suckling had also piloted the boat that brought the convicts to Australia from whom Thornhill was able to pick the two men who would work for him. Thornhill knew that Suckling had made his fortune and lost it. He believed this would make the man less haughty. Instead, Suckling made a point to tell Thornhill that he remembered him from one of the prisoner transports.

It was after his meeting with Suckling that Thornhill realized his past conviction would haunt him the rest of his life. He knew that no matter how hard he worked or what he made of himself he would never be able to overcome the stigma of having once been a convict. Suckling helped Thornhill to realize that he and his family would never have a future if they returned to London.

William "Willie" Thornhill

Willie Thornhill was the oldest son of William and Sal Thornhill. He joined his father in his waterman's business. Willie eventually graduated to piloting his own boat. Willie was the only one of Sal and William's children who was born in London and remembered that city at all. Even though he was only a child, Willie had adopted his parents' fear of the Australian natives. He often encouraged his father to use the gun against the natives or show it to those people, a sign that he believed force was the answer to the problem they were facing. His character was in direct opposition to Dick's character because Dick saw the beauty in the natives' way of life and had made friends with them.

Dan Oldfield

Dan Oldfield was one of the two convicts that Thornhill was allowed to use as a servant. Oldfield had been a friend of Sal and Thornhill in London. He had shared with them the roasted chestnuts he had stolen. Despite this old friendship, the Thornhills insisted that



Dan treat them as he might any other master and mistress. Dan seemed resentful of the Thornhills. Thornhill suspected the man was thinking about running away and warned him that they were surrounded by wilderness for miles. Dan's role in the novel ends after he is pictured killing the baby during the ambush. It is assumed he left the Thornhills when his time of service was completed.

Sagitty Birtles

Sagitty Birtles was one of the settlers along the Hawkesbury River. He, like Smasher, openly disliked the Australian natives. He seemed to follow Smasher actions and mimic Smasher's opinions. Thornhill suspected it was Sagitty who poisoned the blacks who had camped near Darkey Creek. Shortly after these blacks were killed, Sagitty's crops and hut were set on fire. He was speared by one of the natives. Even though Thornhill and some other settlers got Sagitty to the hospital before he died, Sagitty died when the spear was removed.

Whisker Harry

Whisker Harry was the older aborigine that Thornhill saw the first full day he was on his Australian settlement. During their first confrontation Thornhill had hit Harry on the shoulder. It was not until much later that he realized Harry was an elder who was deeply revered in the aboriginal culture. It was at that time that Thornhill knew that he'd been wrong to treat the man with such carelessness. During the ambush at Blackwood's property Thornhill shot and killed Whisker Harry after Harry killed Smasher with his spear.

Long Jack

Long Jack, who was at one time called Long Bob by Thornhill, was one of the natives who stood out to Thornhill. He was one of two men who had approached Thornhill the first day on his settlement when Thornhill was getting ready to plant his corn. Jack was the one who Dick was watching make a fire with two sticks when Sal sent Thornhill to find the boy. Jack was one of the few that survived the ambush at Thomas Blackwood's property. He continued to live in the area. Sal tried to take care of him, but he refused her kindnesses.

Rob Thornhill

Rob Thornhill was Thornhill's brother. Rob was strong but was not very smart. He often helped Thornhill with his jobs on the river. Rob was supposed to help Thornhill the night that Thornhill stole the Brazil wood. Rob showed up late. It was shortly after Rob arrived at the dock that Lucas and Yates got there as well. Rob drowned when he fell out of the boat when Thornhill tried to get away from Lucas and Yates.



Mr. Richard Middleton

Mr. Richard Middleton was Sal's father. He agreed to take Thornhill on as an apprentice. After Thornhill finished his apprenticeship Middleton let Thornhill marry his daughter, Sal. He also gave Thornhill his second best boat as a wedding gift. Thornhill got sick when he walked in the cold in wet boots to the apothecary to get a treat he believed his sick wife might eat. His sickness actually caused him to die more quickly than his wife.

Dick

Dick was Sal and Thornhill's second son. He was born during the voyage to Australia. Whenever he got the opportunity Dick would sneak off to play with the native children. He developed a relationship with the blacks and learned to appreciate their way of life. After the ambush against the natives who had been living on Blackwood's property Dick went to live with Blackwood.

Spider Webb

The man known as Spider Webb was another settler along the Hawkesbury River. He named his claim "Never Fail" which turned out to be ironic since he eventually gave up on his claim to open a pub in a nearby city. Spider decided to give up on his own property when the natives tricked his wife and stole his corn.

Ned

Ned was one of the convicts that Thornhill had gotten to help him on his settlement in the Australian wilderness. He wasn't terribly intelligent. His one talent seemed to be handling a gun. Ned stayed with the Thornhills and worked for them even after his term of service was completed.

James "Bub", Johnny, Mary and Sarah "Dolly" Thornhill

These four children were the youngest of the Thornhill children. They were all born in Australia. Unlike their two older brothers, these children did not have major roles in the novel.

Collarbone

Collarbone was a friend of Thornhill. He was sentenced to die after he was caught stealing. Thornhill paid for Collarbone's hanging death to be done cleanly but Collarbone was still allowed to suffer.



Yates

Yates was the foreman who worked for Lucas. When Yates got in the boat with Thornhill after Thornhill stole the lumber, Thornhill begged Yates to let him go free. Yates allowed Thornhill to go free that night but he was found and arrested later by bounty hunters.

Lord Hawkesbury

Lord Hawkesbury was the man who gave Thornhill the pardon from his hanging death and allowed him to be sent instead to Australia. The river on which Thornhill and his family eventually lived was named after Lord Hawkesbury.

Alexander King

Alexander King was the man for whom Thornhill worked when he was first sent to Australia. When he decided to buy Blackwood's boat, Thornhill borrowed the money for the purchase from King.

Scabby Bill

Scabby Bill was the black man who hung around the Thornhill's hut in New South Wales. Although Sal was unhappy to move into the Australian wilderness, she was not sad to say goodbye to Scabby Bill.

Lizzie Thornhill

Lizzie Thornhill was Thornhill's older sister. She took care of Thornhill when he was growing up. She was more of a mother to him than his mother.

Mr. Matthias Prime Lucas

Mr. Matthias Prime Lucas was the man for whom Thornhill worked for a short amount of time. Lucas caught Thornhill trying to steal several pieces of Brazil wood from him.



Symbols and Symbolism

Steeple

The steeples in London, which looked down on everything in the city, represented God to Thornhill. It seemed to Thornhill that these steeples were always watching him.

Lions on the Gateposts

The lions on the gateposts at Christ Church were a symbol of Thornhill's mother and of his earliest memories. When Thornhill built his house in Australia he ordered lions to sit on the gateposts but they wound up looking less ferocious than the ones Thornhill remembered from Christ Church.

Dogget's Badge

Thornhill won this Dogget's Badge in a rowing competition. It symbolized that he was the strongest and best rower.

Brazil Wood

It was when Thornhill tried to steal this Brazil wood that he was caught and arrested for theft. This Brazil wood actually symbolized a turning point in Thornhill's life because it was when he tried to steal it and was caught that he was sent to Australia, where his luck began to turn around even though he had a conviction in his past.

Woolen Greatcoat

Thornhill traded his woolen greatcoat to a handicapped man who could write a letter for Thornhill requesting pardon. It was a hard trade for Thornhill to make because he knew that if he didn't have the coat, he would never be able to work on the river again. The coat represented Thornhill's ability to work.

Ticket

This ticket of leave symbolized to Thornhill the freedom to work for whomever he wanted and to even own land if he wanted to do so.



Clay Roof Tile

Sal had picked up this piece of clay roof tile the last day she was in London. She kept it with her as a symbol of London and of the promise that Thornhill had made her that they would go back to London.

A Gun

This gun was a symbol of Thornhill's possible need to protect himself when he moved his family to the Australian wilderness.

A Dug Up Square

A dug up square of ground on a piece of property, usually planted with a crop, was a sign that property had been claimed.

A Tree

It was on a tree near the hut in which the Thornhills lived that Sal kept a running tally of the number of days that they had spent in the wilderness. She was counting the days until they had spent five years in Australia and could return to London as Thornhill had promised her they could.

A Picture of the Hope

The blacks had scratched a picture of the Hope into a rock overlooking Thornhill's property. Later, when Thornhill built his house, he built it over this picture. It was a symbolic overcoming of the blacks and their influence on his family.

The Bench

The bench that Thornhill had constructed on his front verandah was too narrow and not completely comfortable. Thornhill had designed it that way as a form of penance. It also reminded him of the bench on which he sat while he waited for Mr. Middleton to bind him as an apprentice.



Settings

New South Wales

New South Wales was the place in Australia where prisoners from England were transported. It was considered a prison in itself. It was the place to which William Thornhill and his family were transported after he was arrested for theft.

Christ Church

Christ Church is the place where Thornhill had his earliest memory. His mother showed him the snarling lions in front of the church. She'd been punished for trying to touch these lions and had nightmares about them when she was sick. After Sal and Thornhill were old enough they would spend time in the cemetery behind the church.

Swan Lane

Swan Lane was the street in London on which the house where Sal and her parents lived was located.

Mermaid Court

Mermaid Court was the place where Thornhill and his family lived when he was growing up.

Newgate Yard

Newgate Yard was the jail in which Thornhill was held after he was arrested for theft.

Old Bailey

Old Bailey was the court at which Thornhill was sentenced to death by hanging for theft.

Blackwood's Lagoon

Blackwood's Lagoon was the land in Australia owned by Thomas Blackwood. After he quit the packet business he made liquor in a still on this property. Thornhill went to visit Blackwood once and learned his friend had a black woman living with him and a child by that woman. It was later at Blackwood's Lagoon that Thornhill and the other men opened fire on the black encamped there taking revenge for what had been done to Sagitty and the other settlers.



Thornhill's Point

Thornhill's Point was the name of the piece of land that Thornhill chose for himself. Even though Blackwood tried to warn him away from that spot by telling him it wasn't a good place, Thornhill decided to settle there anyway.

Sign of the Pickle Herring

The Sign of the Pickle Herring was the name of the inn that Sal opened in the hut in which she lived with Thornhill and their children.

Never Fail

Never Fail was the name of the land claimed by the man his neighbors called Spider Webb. The name was ironic because Webb and his wife gave up their settlement after the blacks stole their corn as well as everything from their hut.

Darkey Creek

Darkey Creek was the place where the English forces tried to trap the black people. However, the blacks outsmarted the military and trapped them instead. Later Thornhill visited the black encampment at Darkey Creek and learned that all the people there had been poisoned. He suspected that Sagitty was responsible for the poisoning. Thornhill later took ownership of Darkey Creek. He renamed it Thornhill's Creek.

Cobham Hall

Cobham Hall was the name that Thornhill and Sal gave to their house on Thornhill's Point. It was named after the place where Sal's mother had worked before she'd gotten married.



Themes and Motifs

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.

Marking an object to show ownership happens often in the novel. For instance, Lucas put his mark on the Brazil wood in order to be able to prove that it was his. Later on in the novel, all the settlers in Australia had to do was put in a crop and build a hut to mark a piece of property as their own. They did not take into consideration the people who had been living on the land for centuries when they made their choices. Even though the natives attempted to mark the land that Thornhill had chosen as already being owned Thornhill decided this attempt on the part of the natives to claim the property didn't count. Notice the natives had also “marked” Thornhill's property with the image of his boat the Hope. They'd carved a picture of the boat into a rock that overlooked the land. The carving not only let Thornhill know they were there, but also that they knew he was there. When Thornhill built a stone house to replace his hut he built it over this mark of possession the natives had put on the land. It was as if Thornhill hoped by covering up the mark the natives had made he could cover up the fact they were ever there.

Putting physical labor into a piece of property also seemed to be a requirement for ownership as defined in this novel. Thornhill and the other settlers believed that the natives had no right to the Australian wilderness because they did not plant crops or do anything to improve the land. The natives instead ate what the land naturally produced and worked with the land as it was. When the settlers began digging up the plants and burning the oysters the natives relied upon for food the natives tried to communicate with the settlers, demonstrating how they were destroying good food. The settlers had no sympathy for the natives who suffered when their food sources were threatened, but became angry when the natives stole or burned the crops they'd worked so hard to plant.

Social Class

Social class is an important theme in the novel as Thornhill made observations both on the social classes into which the people of London were divided into and the lack of social divisions among the natives. When Thornhill lived in London, social class was an important distinction among the people. When he and his family were sent to Australia



the lines of social class were more blurred. In the natives, however, Thornhill observed those people all lived as if they were members of the highest social level.

One of the first references to social class was made in the novel when Thornhill noted that Sal Middleton's family was a step higher than Thornhill's on the social ladder. It was when Thornhill went with Mr. Middleton to become his apprentice that he realized the men who took care of the bonding were a step even above Mr. Middleton. Thornhill got a picture in his mind of the hierarchy of people beginning at the top with either God or the King and ending with families like his at the very bottom.

When Thornhill began working for Middleton transporting members of the higher social classes across the River Thames, he learned that even though men may be called gentry it didn't make them any better than any one else. Thornhill learned that even though a man had money he was just as likely to cheat Thornhill out of his full fare as a poorer man. He soon became familiar with the variety of ways even the rich had of trying to keep from paying his fair share.

In Australia, Thornhill noticed the lines between the social classes were blurred. He saw a man who had been arrested for theft, just like Thornhill had, who had a successful business and even owned land. That man had been able to move beyond his conviction and make a life for himself in Australia. In a chance meeting with the man who had been the captain of the ship that had brought him to Australia as a convict Thornhill realized he would have no future in London simply because of his past conviction. His best chance for making a good life for himself and his family would require him to stay in Australia.

Notice Thornhill's observations of the native people in Australia. He noticed right away that they didn't work for what they had or worry about money. Instead they were able to spend their days playing with their babies and socializing. The idea that Thornhill took away from his observations was that although the settlers referred to these people as savages, they actually lived more peacefully and fully than the settlers did. They did not judge one another or lord their riches over each other.

Hope

The sustainability of hope is an important theme in the novel. Even after the rough start that Thornhill had in his life and the bad luck he was dealt, he still managed to hold onto hope that he could make a better life for himself and his family. It was in Australia that he and his wife finally turned into the wealthy landowners they had always dreamed they would be.

Thornhill was born to a poor family. The reader should note that when Thornhill first grasped the concept of social status he placed himself and his family at the bottom of the social ladder. Even though he was poor, hungry and cold during his childhood Thornhill always had the idea that he could work hard and make a better life for himself.



He believed his dream was coming true when Mr. Middleton took him on as an apprentice in his business.

After finishing his apprenticeship Thornhill married and was given the gift of his own boat as a wedding gift. This boat was a symbol of the hope that Thornhill had for his life. Because he had his own vessel, he didn't have to work for anyone else. For a while Thornhill was able to support his family easily. Thornhill lost his hope both figuratively and literally when his inlaws died. Because there was no proof that Middleton had given Thornhill the boat as a wedding gift Thornhill's boat was sold to pay his inlaws' expenses. Thornhill found himself in the hopeless situation of having to work for other people again. He even had to stoop to stealing to keep his family from starving. He was caught at one of his thefts and sentenced to death.

While it would seem that it would be hard to recover from the blow of a death sentence, Thornhill's wife held out hope and worked to get her husband a pardon. The pardon was granted. Thornhill and his family were sent to the "prison" of Australia. Once he was in Australia Thornhill quickly began to regather his hope for a good life when he saw other men who had been convicted of crimes living successful lives. Sal placed her hopes in getting to return to London one day but Thornhill thought their best bet was in Australia.

Thornhill's hopes were dashed again when the Australian natives destroyed the crop of corn he had been growing on his newly claimed property. Just as his own boat had once symbolized hope to Thornhill, it was this corn that symbolized his hope that his future in Australia would be prosperous. This time faded hope made Thornhill a revengeful person. He agreed to go along with a group of men who planned to ambush a camp of natives. They killed all of the blacks in the camp. Even Thornhill who had once doubted he could use a gun to kill a man shot one of the natives to death. After the natives were cleared out in this cruel way Thornhill was able to go forward and become a well to-do Australian.

Australia as a Prison State

Significant in this novel is the period of time in which Australia was used as a prison state. It was during this time period that Thornhill and his family were sent to that wild country. Because there was so much overcrowding in the prisons in London the prisoners were sent to Australia. There was no danger of them escaping because Australia was an island. In Thornhill's arrangement, his wife was his prison guard so he had only to answer to her. Had he been hanged in London the family would probably have required government assistance. Because Thornhill was allowed to remain alive, he was able to continue working and support his family, thus keeping them from being a burden to the government.

Soon after Thornhill arrived in Australia he stopped seeing it as a prison and began seeing it as a land of opportunity. To his wife, Sal, it was the opposite. She disliked Australia and dreamed of returning to England. Even as Thornhill saw his dream realized, he knew that life was more and more like life within a prison for Sal. He even



noted her habit of ticking off the days she'd spent in confinement when they first moved to the wilderness. It was indicated this habit was one she shared with people being held in prison.

Sal and Thornhill never left the prison of Australia to return to London. Notice that Thornhill did encourage improvements on the land that reminded Sal of London. They had a garden wall erected and even tried to grow the plants and trees that she remembered from England. When he watched Sal walk among the poplar trees she'd planted he remembered how much she still felt like a captive.

Racism

Because the white settlers treated the black aborigines as a second class because of the color of their skin, racism is an issue to be considered in this novel. The first two people to greet the Thornhills in Australia warn them about the savages who lived in the wilderness. They talked about how these black people liked to kill men and eat children. The area newspaper also carried stories of how these black people killed and terrorized the settlers. The stories set up in the mind of the Thornhills, especially the children, that the black people were to be feared. When they moved to the wilderness, they expressed concern that they would be killed by the black people.

Smasher and Sagitty were among the settlers who were most dead set against the natives. They both enjoyed sharing stories about the terrors the savages had performed. How the savages had tried to steal from them and what they had done to teach them a lesson. Smasher went so far as to capture a black woman who he used as a sex slave. Sagitty poisoned an entire camp of black people, killing them all. Neither of them saw anything wrong with what they had done.

Even though there were many characters who saw the aborigines as less than people because of the color of their skin, there were some who saw them as people despite their color. Blackwood was the character who most completely embraced the culture of the Australian natives. He learned to communicate with them and followed their wishes in keeping his cabin near the riverbank. Others believed that Blackwood encouraged the blacks to attack other settlers because he treated them as he did. In reality Blackwood had learned to appreciate the peaceful culture of the natives. Note that Blackwood had gone so far as to have a relationship with one of the black women and appeared to have a child by her.

Dick, Thornhill's son, also developed an appreciation for the natives. Although they lived a different type of life from the white settlers, Dick recognized they had abilities the whites didn't have. He also liked the way they didn't work themselves to death but instead lived off what they found in nature. Although she was never as strong a proponent as Blackwood or even Dick for the natives, Sal also found a certain amount of similarity between their situation and her own. It was when she walked down to their camp that Sal realized that the natives had roots in that land. They'd lived there for



years and were being pushed out. Sal empathized with the natives because she knew what it was like to be pushed out of a place one loved.

Thornhill was wary of the black people but at the same time he developed a certain amount of respect for their lifestyle. He recognized that their way of life freed them and allowed them to enjoy their lives. He also noticed they did not treat any members of their group any better or worse than others. There were no servants and masters. When Thornhill joined Dick as he watched the black man start a fire with two sticks, Thornhill noticed that the black man was just like him in many ways. "With no one but blacks around him, other than his own son, Thornhill saw that their skins were not black, no more than his own was white" (p. 214). Despite his realization, however, Thornhill was angered enough when his own land was attacked by the blacks that he agreed to go with a group of men and wipe out their camp near Blackwood's property.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is told by a third person omniscient narrator with an emphasis on William Thornhill. The narrator knows and tells all of Thornhill's thoughts and emotions about what was happening to him. As far as the other characters go the narrator does not share insight into their thoughts or emotions. These are shared with the reader only through dialogue. However, there is very little dialogue in the novel. Most of the story is filled with descriptions of Thornhill's surrounds as well as what was what happening to him. What little dialogue is included seems to be used basically to share information and emotions. When it is included in the novel, the dialogue is not enclosed in quotation marks as is customary for dialogue. It is instead written in italics so that it flows in with the exposition.

Language and Meaning

The language is colorful with a good deal of metaphor and simile. The author seems to especially enjoy using simile. One example of the use of this literary technique is the quote: "His life was a skiff with no oar, caught on the tide" (p. 291) An example of a metaphor is found in the author's description of the Australian natives. "He wore his nakedness like a cloak" (p. 5).

Although the author does not try to make up any language patterns for the Australian natives, he does use unique speaking patterns for each of the different characters. Loveday, for example, is the most unique with his scholarly speech and use of an intellectual vocabulary. Smasher lacks intelligence and the way he talks demonstrates his lack of intelligence. Instead of "teaching" the blacks a lesson, for instance, he "learned" them. Blackwood was a man of few words and his quotes are sparse and thinly worded. Blackwood is also uneducated as indicated by his language. For instance he describes his land as being "Away a ways up" (p. 105).

Structure

The 334 pages of this novel are divided into six different parts as well as a short introductory section and conclusion. The story is told in a basically linear fashion. The only exception to this linear timeline is the introduction. The introduction is set the first night that Thornhill and his family spent in Australia. The title "Strangers" can be interpreted two ways. To Thornhill the black man whom he encountered the first night was a stranger. To the natives of Australia the convicts being brought to their land are the strangers.

Each part of the novel is given a label title that gives an idea what section of the story that part will tell. The first section, "London", tells the story of Thornhill's life up to the



time he was arrested and sent to Australia. This is the longest part of the novel at 68 pages. It also covers the longest time span in Thornhill's life. Part Two of the novel describes Thornhill's time in Australia until he persuaded Sal to go with him to claim land in the Australian wilderness.

Part Three details Thornhill's first days on his own land as well as his first encounters with the natives. It covers also the short time Sal was ill with what Mrs. Herring referred to as milk sickness. It ends with her recovery. In Part Four Thornhill was able to go back to delivering goods again because he had two convicts working for him who could watch over his family while he was gone. The blacks were present but hadn't caused any real problems for Thornhill yet. In Part Five Thornhill and his family were scared when a large number of black met near their home. At the conclusion of this section the settlers were given permission to use force against the blacks. It is in Part Six that the blacks burned Thornhill's corn and destroyed Sagitty's place bringing the bad relationship between the two groups to a head. The conclusion describes the prosperity that the Thornhills enjoyed in Australia.



Quotes

There was no need of lock, of door, of wall: this was a prison whose bars were ten thousand miles of water.”

-- Narrator (Strangers paragraph 1)

Importance: Although Thornhill was still considered to be a prisoner, the prison to which he had been transported in Australia had no bars or locks. Australia was an entire land used as a prison by the English government.

They were all thieves, any time they got the chance. The dainty parson could shrill all he liked about sin, but there could be no sin in thieving if it meant a full belly.”

-- Narrator (Part One: London paragraph 35)

Importance: For people in conditions like that faced by Thornhill, they felt that their actions could not be considered sinful if they were stealing so that they and their families could eat.

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.”

-- Narrator (Part One: London paragraph 42)

Importance: Thornhill desired a place that was part of his being, just as he believed that Sal's home was part of her being.

The bench they had to sit on was hard, and too narrow for a bottom, and the cold from the flagstones froze his feet in their wooden pattens, but he felt that on this day his life might lunge forward out of its rotten past.”

-- Narrator (Part One: London paragraph 76)

Importance: Although Thornhill was uncomfortable as he waited for Mr. Middleton to bind him as an apprentice he was happy because he believed it was his first step toward a new more prosperous life.

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

-- Narrator (Part One: London paragraph 81)

Importance: It was when the men who were charged with approving Thornhill as Mr. Middleton's apprentice called Mr. Middleton by his first name that Thornhill realized that all men were arranged differing levels of social class.

It was in that month of the freeze, with no money coming into any household by the river, that Thornhill's world cracked and broke.”



-- Narrator (Part One: London paragraph 148)

Importance: Despite all the hard work that Thornhill had put into making a better life for himself and his family all the progress he had made fell apart in a surprisingly short amount of time.

Butler's Buildings was what he had known through his childhood. Having once hoped for something better, and been within reach of it, he could not face going back to it."

-- Narrator (Part One: London paragraph 178)

Importance: When he and his family had to move into Butler's Buildings, Thornhill felt as if he had sunk back to the poverty level in which he had lived as a child. It was a place and a type of poverty he didn't want his family to have to experience.

It was like cutting off an arm, for without it he would never live through a lighterman's winter again. But it was a good coat, worth a good letter. And he would never be a lighterman again, unless this man could write the letter that might get him out of this place."

-- Narrator (Part One: London paragraph 289)

Importance: Because he depended on his greatcoat to keep him warm while working on the water in the winter Thornhill hated the idea of having to give it up but he knew that if he didn't get the pardon he was requesting in the letter, he would never work at any type of job again.

He could sell his labour to anyone he chose, or take up a piece of land and work for no one but himself. The only limit to his freedom was that he could not leave the colony."

-- Narrator (Part Two: Sydney paragraph 48)

Importance: After Thornhill was in Australia for twelve months he was eligible to apply for his ticket of leave. Once he had his ticket he could choose the job he wanted to do or even claim land for himself.

Everyone in the colony knew that the Hawkesbury was the place to make your pile — either by farming its fertile land or by trading the grain of those who did — but not everyone had what it took."

-- Narrator (Part Two: Sydney paragraph 97)

Importance: Thornhill began to realize that if he wanted to earn a good deal of money in Australia, it would be by working on the Hawkesbury that he would be able to make it as quickly as possible.

Yet here was Blackwood, a lighterman and convicted lag, no better in any particular than he was himself, owning a stretch of ground. Not simply owning it: naming it after himself!"

-- Narrator (Part Two: Sydney paragraph 151)



Importance: Thornhill's hope for his own future began to grow again when he realized that even though Blackwood was a thief just like he was, Blackwood had turned himself into a successful businessman and even a property owner.

He was proud of the fact that his boys had a blanket each. They did not have to lie awake, as he had done as a lad, waiting for the others to fall asleep.”

-- Narrator (Part Two: Sydney paragraph 185)

Importance: Thornhill was proud of himself because he believed he was providing his children a better life than what he'd had at that age. One of the signs of this better life was that they each had their own blanket and did not have to share.

All this time he had been nursing his secret dream, and it turned out she had been coddling a dream too. Hers had an altogether different end, but the miracle was that it had the same beginning.”

-- Narrator (Part Two: Sydney paragraph 215)

Importance: Thornhill thought that even though the dreams that he and his wife had did not have the same ending, they had the same beginning. He felt he could help mold her dream to match his.

All a person need do was find a place no one had already taken. Plant a crop, build a hut, call the place Smith's or Flanagan's, and out-stare anyone who said otherwise.”

-- Narrator (Part Two: Sydney paragraph 238)

Importance: The procedure for claiming a piece of property in the Australian wilderness is lined out in this quote.

Strictly speaking, this was true, he reminded himself, but in Sal's silence he heard her knowledge that the blacks did not have to be seen to be present.”

-- Narrator (Part Three: A Clearing in the Forest paragraph 5)

Importance: Thornhill told his family members that he had not seen any black people near the property on which they would live. Even as he spoke, he knew that Sal was aware that just because the black people weren't seen, it didn't mean they weren't there.

But being allowed a gun was one of the privileges of a pardon. It was something he had earned, whether he wanted it or not.”

-- Narrator (Part Three: A Clearing in the Forest paragraph 24)

Importance: Thornhill expressed his dislike of owning a gun and doubted that he could ever use it for its intended purpose.

It was not so much a crop he was aiming for, as a message. Like hoisting a flag on a pole.”

-- Narrator (Part Three: A Clearing in the Forest paragraph 99)



Importance: Planting a crop, even a small one, was an incontestable sign that a piece of property had been claimed.

There seemed to be saplings all around the tent, sprung up overnight. It was a sick clench of the belly to see they were spears, sent into the earth hard enough to bury their barbs.”

-- Narrator (Part Three: A Clearing in the Forest paragraph 134)

Importance: After his first encounter with the blacks Thornhill woke up to find the blacks had thrown spears that landed all around the tent in which he and his family lived. He knew they could have killed the family if they had wanted.

See, them yams grow where you putting in the corn, he said. You dig them up, means they go hungry.”

-- Thomas Blackwood (Part Three: A Clearing in the Forest paragraph 243)

Importance: Blackwood tried to explain to Thornhill how his act of pulling up all of the daisy yams on his property because they were a major source of food for the natives.

He could buy the pardon, he could get the land, he could fill his strongbox with money. But he could not buy what Suckling had. No matter how shabby Suckling became, no matter how far gone in drink, he would always be able to hold his head up high, a man who had never worn the stripes.”

-- Narrator (Part Three: A Clearing in the Forest paragraph 272)

Importance: It was when Thornhill went to pick up the convicts he'd been allowed to take on as servants that Thornhill realized that his life would always be tainted by his arrest and charges. Even though he'd gotten his ticket of leave and his pardon, he still was a man who had once been charged with a crime.

He saw what he had never seen before: that there could be no future for the Thornhills back in London.”

-- Narrator (Part Three: A Clearing in the Forest paragraph 286)

Importance: Thornhill knew not only he but also his children did not have a chance for a future in London.

They were simply skins, with the same pores and hairs, the same shadings of colour as his own. If black skin was all there was to see, it was amazing how quickly it became the colour that skin was.”

-- Narrator (Part Four: A Hundred Acres paragraph 163)

Importance: While Thornhill was watching Long Jack make the fire with sticks, he noticed how few differences there really were between them.



In the world of these naked savages, it seemed everyone was gentry.”
-- Narrator (Part Four: A Hundred Acres paragraph 257)

Importance: Social class, which was so important in the world from which Thornhill had come, didn't seem to matter among the Australian natives. Thornhill noticed all the blacks seemed to act like gentry with none of them waiting on or working for the others.

Thinking the thought, saying the words, would make him the same as Smasher, as if Smasher's mind had got into his when he saw the woman in the hut and felt that instant of temptation. He had done nothing to help her. Now the evil of it was part of him.”
-- Narrator (Part Five: Drawing a Line paragraph 103)

Importance: Thornhill believed that because he had seen the woman that Smasher was holding captive as a sex slave and hadn't done anything to help her, he was just as guilty as Smasher was.

Meanwhile half-a-dozen of the others were busy out of sight down in the field, and while Sophia Webb was pressing another doughboy on her new friend they had stripped every last cob.”
-- Narrator (Part Five: Drawing a Line paragraph 118)

Importance: Thornhill was told how one of the blacks had distracted Julia Webb while the others stole all of the corn that her husband had worked so hard to plant.

Another sort of woman would have cried, shouted, forced him in the end to go to Wilberforce. He loved her for not being that woman, but he knew she was right: trouble was coming.”
-- Narrator (Part Five: Drawing a Line paragraph 193)

Importance: While Thornhill was glad that Sal did not throw a fit insisting that they go to a larger settlement to live, he knew that she was right when she warned him that trouble was coming.

Life had been lying in wait for him all this time, waiting for him to trust it again. Now it had pounced, in the form of those black men who with nothing better than a burning stick could destroy all that he had sweated for.”
-- Narrator (Part Six: The Secret River paragraph 74)

Importance: Thornhill felt that life had dealt him another unfair hand when the blacks burnt down the crop of corn upon which he and his family's futures depended.

Then he said, as if it were the least important thing in the world, Only thing is we got to have the Hope to get us up there.”
-- Smasher (Part Six: The Secret River paragraph 155)

Importance: It was Smasher who forced Thornhill to be a part of their plan to execute



the blacks camped out on Blackwood's property by telling him that in order for the execution to take place they had to be allowed use of Thornhill's boat.

The noose would have ended his life, but what he was about to do would end it too. Whichever choice he made, his life would not go on as it had before."

-- Narrator (Part Six: The Secret River paragraph 177)

Importance: As Thornhill waited for their confrontation with the blacks, he knew that what happened that day would change the course of his life and would change who he would be and how he would think of himself for the rest of his life.

But whatever Sal knew, or guessed, was with them and could not be shifted. He had not thought that words unsaid could come between two people like a body of water."

-- Narrator (Thornhill's Place paragraph 56)

Importance: Even though Thornhill and Sal had a prosperous life and continued to live in Australia, Thornhill felt that what he had not told her about what had happened the day the natives had disappeared came between them.