

Compare *Black Diggers* and *The Longest Memory* using the following quotations as the basis for your response:

- 'They need me. They need lads. For the first time, they need us.' BD
- 'I said that in so far as man's labor will always be required in the cotton, corn and tobacco fields I could see no end to slavery.' LM

The dishonour and degradation associated with enslavement inevitably gave rise to contempt for the people who enforced the conditions. The two quotations above show the readers that the racist attitudes prevalent in both societies were shaped by the nations' economies and allowed those in power to maintain their superior status. While Tom Wright's play *Black Diggers* and Fred D'Augiar's novel *The Longest Memory* emphasise the sobering realisation that the black men's loyalty to those in power would not be reciprocated, they also call us to consider how racism continues to seep into modern society.

Both D'Augiar and Wright emphasise the damage caused by each community allowing racial discrimination to be the cornerstone of their society. In spite of the caution of the older generation the younger generations in both texts viewed their future with more prosperity based on the ideal that racial discrimination would be made redundant. Even though Chapel was "born owned by another man", youthful idealism streams through his poetry as he reveals his dreams for a life with Lydia and his search for "paradise". This naivety and desire for "freedom from responsibilities" as well as his failure to demonstrate even "an ounce of" Whitechapel's common sense is what inevitably leads to his untimely demise. A similar youthful enthusiasm for adventure is displayed by Bertie in *Black Diggers* who yearns to "see the world" and "fight for country." However, just as Chapel disregards Whitechapel's advice, Bertie fails to "get a handle on the big things". Bertie's Mum's analogy of the empty showground serves as a rather precise representation of D'Augiar's and Wright's viewpoints regarding the naivety of the Aboriginal soldiers and slaves. Her blunt statement that there will be "no fancy land at the end" foreshadows the disillusionment Bertie and many other young Aboriginal soldiers would face upon return from the war. Just as Whitechapel shows immense loyalty to his White masters, mistakenly expecting a fraction of that kindness to be returned, the Aboriginal soldiers fight in the trenches of Europe with a renewed hope for change, however they return only to discover that for them, the war "is never going to end." Quite simply, both the Aboriginals and slaves were used when "need[ed]" and disregarded when they were the ones in need. In essence, the characters from both texts exhibit a similar sense of naivety in their youth as well as misconceptions regarding those in power.

D'Augiar and Wright suggest that through the consistent dehumanization and domination of the Indigenous Australians and African Americans, the white people in both texts are able to maintain their superior status. In *The Longest Memory*, racism is used to justify and buttress the plantation labor system. Mr Whitechapel's theory that slaves are "blessed with lesser faculties, and therefore suited to the trade of slavery" demonstrates that white Americans conceptualized the African Americans as "inferior" and as outsiders to such an extent that these groups were subjected to lifetime inheritable enslavement and dehumanization that came with the chattel status. The

Taxidermist in *Black Diggers* is seen to share a much similar outlook on the Aboriginals. Although his rescuing of Nigel in the opening scene may, at first glance, seem like an act of kindness, his dialogue of obtaining a “full blood Perfect specimen” and his suggestion that had he “been only five minutes” late, Nigel may have been dead, demonstrates that just like the plantation owners, he too believes that the black people are not capable of tending for themselves, therefore highlighting his dominance, as a white man, over a black child. Both D’Augiar and Wright also demonstrate how those in power instill fear within the oppressed through physical harm. D’Augiar demonstrates that by constantly reprimanding the slaves with symbolic beatings to show the entire plantation how to conform, such as through Chapel’s draconian punishment, the masters ensured that if anyone escaped slavery, they could easily be bought into bondage again. They limited their workers’ mobility and dehumanised them to a status nearly akin to livestock. Their status as slaves did not need to be explained; it was understood, thus paving the way for centuries of slavery in Virginia. An almost identical extreme of racism and dehumanisation is staged in the first scene of *Black Diggers*, where the opening gunfire and screaming, while setting the scene for war, also represents the massacres of the Indigenous Australians; being slaughtered like animals in much the same way as the whip “eating into” Chapel. Not even a hint of human recognition is given to the “picaninny”, rather, just like the nameless slaves who are merely referred to as “mule” or “nigger”, the baby too is given the same status as an animal by simply being called “an abandoned calf” and inhumanely suggesting “the dogs [will] worry about it”. Therefore, both D’Augiar and Wright suggest that the continuous discrimination and dehumanisation of the slaves and Aboriginals in these texts made them inherently subject to inferior status.

Both *The Longest Memory* and *Black Diggers* explore the underlying causes for the racism which has infected both societies, by delving beyond mere innate physical differences and rather highlighting the role of economy in either sustaining or shattering the racist attitudes. In order to keep the “cotton, corn and tobacco fields” thriving in Virginia, it was necessary that the plantation owners ensured they “could see no end to slavery”. D’Augiar demonstrates that slavery was the foundation of the plantation and racism was its fuel. They needed slaves just like Australia needed its Aboriginal soldiers. However the Australians were willing to break the shackles of racism and have “darkies in the same battalions as white chaps” in order to “protect [their] country”. In stark contrast, the plantation owners very well knew that “a slave who has tasted liberty can never be a proper slave again”, and therefore oppressed the slaves and viewed racism as the propeller to keep the economy thriving forward. The matters addressed in the Virginian regarding slavery and the economy, such as the literacy of slaves and “hiring blacks”, provide an insight into the notion that “slavery is a business” and that all decisions are made for the “benefit of the plantation”. Likewise, the Soldier Settlement Scheme in *Black Diggers* makes it rather clear that it was “the overall welfare of [the] returned” white men which was the Australian Government’s main goal. Thus perpetuating dispossession and turning a blind eye to the services of the Indigenous soldiers. Therefore both D’Augiar and Wright emphasise the role of the economy in the discriminatory attitudes of the societies.

Ultimately both texts demonstrate the role of institutionalised racism in allowing those in power to maintain their superior status as well as the importance of economy in shaping the racial values of both societies. Both D’Augiar and Wright also convey that, in essence, the slaves of the Whitechapel Plantation and the Australian Aboriginals were naïve regarding whom they were loyal to as ultimately many of them were not reciprocated that loyalty.

