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The Longest Memory is a novel about freedom and enslavement, parents and children, the nature of trust and loyalty and of the power of memory. Told in a fractured narrative style, The Longest Memory examines three generations of slaves and slave-owners and the nature of the relationships that develop.

CONTEXT AND AUTHOR

Author: Fred D’Aguiar
Born in London in 1960 to parents from Guyana, South America, Fred D’Aguiar has forged a career as an academic, poet, playwright and novelist. He spent the first twelve years of his life in Guyana before returning to London at the age of twelve.

D’Aguiar first found fame as a poet, with the publication of his collection Mama Dot (1985). He has continued to publish poetry throughout his career, including critically acclaimed works such as Bloodlines (2000) and Continental Shelf (2009).

In 1994, D’Aguiar published his first novel The Longest Memory (1994) which was widely praised. His most recent novel Children of Paradise was published in 2014.

Author’s context
Fred D’Aguiar’s experiences in Britain, Guyana and the United States led him to consider the legacy left by slavery on those cultures. As a young author with Guyanese heritage, he was interested in examining his contemporary world by examining the past that had influenced it. In an interview he put it this way:

‘Young blacks my age at the time, writers, people from the street who didn’t even care about writing, articulated their kind of rage about that past. And a lot of their relationships in the present seemed to be governed by this history. People won’t let them forget it. You are still a nigger or a wog just because an ancestor was once owned by someone.’

It also reflects his interest in writing as a craft. D’Aguiar experiments with narrative, style, language and form. He uses the genre of historical fiction but uses it to explore his idea that ‘one way of looking at the present and trying to make sense of it would be to actually come through the past, partly because each generation needs to examine those problems themselves just to get the right nuance’.

The novel, therefore, is informed by ideas about race issues and the past that concern D’Aguiar on a personal as well as a sociological level. He is interested in the after-effects of colonisation as well as slavery. D’Aguiar refers to a saying of Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o, whose work he describes as ‘cathartic’ and an act of ‘decolonising the mind’.

Historical context

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, over fifteen million Africans were uprooted from their homelands and forced into slavery in European colonies across the Americas. This trade in human beings, known as the transatlantic slave trade, was the greatest forced migration in history, and is remembered for its brutality. It is estimated that 1.5 million people died on the ships used to transport enslaved men, women and children across the Atlantic Ocean, with many more dying within a year of their arrival in the United States. The cruel treatment they experienced both on the journey and during their lives as slaves was a product of racist beliefs that held African people to be subhuman and therefore beyond the laws of morality.

By the time of the American Revolution in 1776, there were more than half a million slaves in the former British colonies, which went on to become the United States of America. The new nation’s Declaration of Independence stated that ‘all men are created equal’, yet it relied on slavery for its economic development. It was in the southern states, sparsely populated and reliant on the large scale production of cash crops such as tobacco, sugar and cotton, that slavery became embedded in the social, economic and political life of the nation. While slavery was abolished in the more prosperous North, by the turn of the nineteenth century, slaves made up forty per cent of the population in the South. This split between North and South over the ‘slavery question’ festered for decades, eventually leading to the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1860.

Slave and non-slave states in the United States in the 1820s as defined by the Missouri Compromise. The Missouri Compromise was a decision made by the United States Congress in 1819, when Missouri requested admission to the Union as a slave state. An amendment drew an imaginary line between slave states and free states.
Slavery was by nature brutal and dehumanising, but the experience of slavery differed by region, historical period and individual context. Slaves on small farms were more likely to work side-by-side with their owners, increasing the chances that they would be treated with some modicum of decency. On the large plantations that dominated the Deep South, the plantation owners delegated the management of slaves to overseers who were more likely to act with cruelty towards those under their control. Slaves in the field performed back-breaking labour with minimal food, housing and clothing. House slaves in general, performed lighter duties and were better provided for. Punishments were cruel, and legal protections scant, with laws in some areas actively discouraging humane treatment of slaves. Those laws that enshrined minimal protections for slaves were rarely enforced, effectively giving slave owners permission to treat their slaves as they liked.

**STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS**

**Genre**
The *The Longest Memory* is historical fiction. It tells the story of characters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The author has researched the period and the details and setting are historically representative. It is, however, also a way for D’Aguiar to explore the nature of historical narrative. D’Aguiar is interested in the gaps and absences of historical narrative. In an interview he claims ‘that act of recuperation through narrative and description – where there is silence it gives voice, where there was an absence it fills in an absence – can also be the job of fiction.’

**Story**
A chapter summary of the book follows.

■ **REMEMBERING**
At the close of his long life, Whitechapel reflects on the nature of life and remembrance.

■ **1. WHITECHAPEL**
- Whitechapel, a very old slave, tells the story of the event that changed his view of life – the death of his son.
- He reveals that he has outlived two wives and has twelve daughters and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.
- His second wife and their son die within a day of each other.
- Whitechapel puts his faith in the plantation owner and reveals the whereabouts of his son, who has run away from the plantation.
- The overseer and the deputy administer 200 lashes of the whip as punishment, against the owner’s instructions. Whitechapel’s son dies as a result.
- Whitechapel is regarded as a traitor to other slaves from that moment on.
- He reveals his belief that there are two types of slave: ‘the slave who must experience everything for himself before coming to an understanding of anything and he who learns through observation’.
- Whitechapel himself has been an obedient slave, while his dead son was a rebel.
2. MR WHITECHAPEL

- Plantation owner, Mr Whitechapel returns to the chaos that has followed the death of Chapel.
- He emphasises his respect for Whitechapel while castigating Sanders Junior and the deputy for defying his instructions.
- It is revealed that Mr Whitechapel tries to bring Christian ideals to slave-ownership, and he faces criticism from other plantation owners.
- He inadvertently reveals to Sanders Junior that Chapel was Sanders Junior’s half-brother.

3. SANDERS SENIOR

- The action moves back to January 1796 and changes from direct narrative to a series of diary entries.
- Sanders Senior’s mourning for his wife and his sexual obsessions are revealed, as is the guilt he feels about his wife’s death in childbirth – an event he feels unable to tell his son about.
- He hires Cook, who is aged somewhere between 15 and 22.
- Sanders is attracted to Cook, but during the year she becomes engaged to Whitechapel.
- On Christmas Eve, Sanders Senior rapes Cook.
- On the first of January 1797, Cook and Whitechapel are married.
- On January 9th, Sanders Senior rapes Cook again.
- Mr Whitechapel becomes aware of the rapes and Sanders is forced to apologise to Cook and Whitechapel. He is fined for the offence.
- In February, Cook is revealed to be pregnant and the child is suspected to be Sanders Senior’s.
- A runaway is flogged and dies.
- Mr Whitechapel’s respect for Whitechapel is revealed throughout the chapter.
- A wife is found for Sanders Senior to allay rumours around the plantation that Cook’s child is his not her husband’s. Sanders Senior’s new marriage is unhappy.

4. COOK

- Cook tells of the aftermath of her rapes and of her respect and love for her husband.
- She reveals that she rejected Whitechapel at first.
- She lauds him as a ‘gentleman’, a man of honour and integrity and reports that he has the respect of his owner.

5. CHAPEL

- Chapel tells his story in verse.
- He talks of his parents and the way in which he was raised – and how different his upbringing was to other children on the plantation.
- He reveals memories of playing with Lydia as a child, their growing friendship and how he learned to read with her.
Knowing: Black Diggers

TOM WRIGHT

Black Diggers is a play that premiered in 2014. Made from a series of connected vignettes based on true stories, Black Diggers reflects on the experiences of Indigenous Australian soldiers before, during and after the First World War. The play highlights the ironies and injustices experienced by Indigenous Australian soldiers during this period, and the fact that Indigenous Australian soldiers were only considered equals when fighting for a country that did not consider them citizens.

CONTEXT AND AUTHOR

Context

Long before the 1967 referendum, which voted to include Indigenous Australians in the census, Indigenous Australian soldiers had served in a number of wars for Australia. As Wesley Enoch’s director’s notes attest, ‘Despite limited social standing, appalling living conditions and lack of human rights, Indigenous men enlisted.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>War</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Boer War</td>
<td>1880–1881</td>
<td>Transvaal, South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Boer War</td>
<td>1899–1902</td>
<td>Transvaal, South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First World War</td>
<td>1914–1918</td>
<td>mainly Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second World War</td>
<td>1937–1945</td>
<td>Europe, Southeast Asia, Middle East, Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation of Japan</td>
<td>1946–1951</td>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean War</td>
<td>1950–1953</td>
<td>Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malayan Emergency</td>
<td>1950–1960</td>
<td>Malaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesian Confrontation</td>
<td>1963–1966</td>
<td>Indonesia, Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are counted as Australians</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Gulf War</td>
<td>1990–1991</td>
<td>Iraq, Kuwait</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>2001–present</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Gulf War</td>
<td>2003–present</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacekeeping</td>
<td>1947–present</td>
<td>worldwide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

■ Indigenous Australians at war
Indigenous Australians were usually subject to subtle and overt forms of racism, and the Armed Forces provided Indigenous Australian soldiers with a taste of a more equal society. In Australia, they were restricted from voting, buying property and even from entering public bars. Often they worked for lower wages and were prevented from marrying non-Indigenous partners. In the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) they faced the same hardships and challenges that their colleagues endured. On the battlefield they experienced the same conditions and camaraderie, as they faced the possibility of death at any given moment. However, as Dr David Williams has noted in his research for the play, 'when they came back home they were shunned, their sacrifices ignored and their families oppressed even further by the government.'
Comparing: *The Longest Memory* and *Black Diggers*

There are different kinds of comparative questions and different ways to approach them. This section will help you develop an understanding of how to use a range of strategies when planning your essays about *The Longest Memory* and *Black Diggers*. These strategies, or graphic organisers, such as Venn diagrams, scales and data charts are especially useful tools in assisting you to explore the similarities and differences between the texts.

**TYPES OF QUESTIONS**

There are three types of questions:
- the themes, issues and ideas
- the social, historical and cultural context
- the genre and style.

Common words used in essay questions include the following.
- *Discuss*: Debate the arguments for and against the topic backing up these ideas with selected evidence from the text. Provide a conclusion.
- *To what extent*: Assess the evidence in your text that would support an argument. Also look at alternative explanations.
- *Do you agree?*: An opinion is being sought as to the extent to which the statement or quote is accurate. Evidence should be provided to support or contend the point of view.
- *Quotations*: Essay questions that use quotations are a way to delve into the issues embedded in a text. You should make reference to the quote and the ideas that it raises.

**Theme questions**

Themes are prominent, recurring ideas that pervade a literary work. Theme questions ask us to consider any ideas common to both texts. Both *The Longest Memory* and *Black Diggers* explore themes related to:
- power
- race
- memory
- the importance of names
- Christian values and beliefs
- equality
- shattered dreams
- love.
Cultural context questions
Cultural context questions ask you to consider the cultural backgrounds against which the texts are set, the events in history that shape the texts, and the social worlds that both texts reflect.

Genre questions
Genre questions consider the similarities or differences in the structure of each text, and how and why the authors conveyed their ideas in certain ways.

THE COMPARISON

How to compare
The following section shows you a number of ways to compare the two texts. A variety of methods have been used, such as tables that allow you to chart and track data and graphic organisers that let you see quickly the links and variations.

In a comparison essay, you must critically analyse any two texts pointing out their similarities and/or differences. It could also be called a compare and contrast essay. Your task could be comparative only (looking only at similarities), contrasting only (pointing out the differences) or both comparative and contrasting.

Theme
You should never limit your scope of ideas to those in a textbook or to those discussed by your teachers. The table below shows how you can break open some thematic ideas to consider a broader scope of ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Concepts within theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Identity, social place, belonging, culture, marginalisation, oppression, pride, prejudice, colonialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Leaders, opportunism, moral justice versus legal justice, homogeneity versus pluralism, tyranny, conformity, use and abuse of power, protectionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>Haunting memories, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, flashbacks, power of the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of names</td>
<td>Identity, inclusion and exclusion, cultural imperialism, family links and traditions, ownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian values and beliefs</td>
<td>Double standards, patriarchy, strength, succor and reassurance, charity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>Ideal, mythology, dream, desire, suppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shattered dreams</td>
<td>Broken promises, reality, maturity, power imbalances, repression by dominant social ideologies and structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Love versus passion, friendship, sacrifice, patriotism, family devotion, romance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

■ Common themes in both texts